

Time in the Gutter: A Narratological Approach to the Comics Medium

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Abstract:

In this text, submitted as my master's thesis, I seek to examine the way that narrative in the comics medium is produced from a series of static illustrations and lexia using narratological methods that have either been previously discarded as having little to no value in the study of comics or that have been overlooked. The first chapter of the text, however, is most faithful to the established tradition of comics studies; in this first chapter, I argue that narrative is distributed visually within comics, essentially becoming part of the text's visual field of representation. In the second chapter, I deploy Paul Ricoeur's concept of mimesis to argue that the production of narrative is dependent on the interaction between distinct but related temporal levels. Through the interaction of these temporal levels, which, in comics, rely on the intervention of the visual space of the text, narrative is produced and reproduced by the active participation of the reader, who is responsible for creating connections between textual moments. Finally, in the third chapter, I seek to balance the subjectivity produced by the application of Ricoeur's system to the comics medium by deploying Genette's concepts of order, duration, and frequency in an effort to re-introduce some sense of determinateness and objectivity, suggesting that there are overarching patterns that comics narratives do tend to follow.

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Introduction: Some Problems with Comics Studies

In his 1987 study of the history of the English department and of the establishment of its curriculum, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*, Gerald Graff identifies a problem of patterned isolation within English departments. Graff suggests that this patterned isolation of the English department inevitably leads to the application of a “field coverage” principle and to an attempt to hide debates about what should be included on curriculums and, consequently, in critical discourse. The field coverage principle is evident, according to Graff, in the separation of English literature into historically determined sub-categories of English literature (Medieval, Romantic, Victorian, Modernist, etc.) which are subsequently used in forming curriculums. The problem with this approach to English literature is that it emphasizes the separateness of these historical moments and allows scholars to approach literature with a too specific and too isolated perspective; the field-coverage principle privileges “self-regulation” (xiii Graff) over critical debate. However, while Graff’s work is less relevant to the English department today than it had been 31 years ago, largely because of a critical turn towards various theoretical approaches to literature that can overcome the traditional historical sub-categories (post-structuralism, feminism, post-colonialism, etc.), it is broadly applicable to a newly emerging field of studies: comics studies. Since having grown in popularity in North American academia with the translation of Thierry Groensteen’s *Système de la Band Dessinée* in 2007 and the publication of Charles Hatfield’s *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* in 2005, the comics medium has captured the attention both of scholars of literature and of communications while also beginning to form its own unique field of studies.

With this emergent popularity, however, the problem of “field-coverage” has become a notable issue in the growth and development of critical approaches to the medium. The issue is

compounded, furthermore, by the multimodal nature of the medium, which often comprises some combination of images and *lexia*¹. English critics often privilege *lexia* in their interpretations of comics, which are most often concerned with questions of narrative content. Scholars of communications, alternatively, are interested in the interplay between image and text in an effort to define comics and to describe them structurally, but often neglect content in their pursuit to understand form. Comics studies may, therefore, appear to be the most rounded in its approach, which does balance concerns for both content and form; however, this new field is limited by its self-imposed isolation from other critical discourses. Comics critics, while they may use some interpretive strategies from English and communications, tend to avoid associating the medium too closely with these other fields. This is done largely in an effort to emphasize the uniqueness of comics in relation to other narrative artforms², and to defend the study of a medium that had once been considered juvenile and unworthy of critical attention (Miodrag). The separation and isolation of these critical concerns across three fields, however, is problematic for the growth of comics in academia by limiting critical understanding of both content and form, while also preventing the medium from being defined in its relation to other narrative artforms. The application of the “field-coverage” principle to the comics medium consequently has the effect of rupturing our understanding of the medium and dislocating it from relevant traditions, both artistic and critical, ultimately placing incontrovertible limits on any

¹ I will, throughout this thesis, use the word “lexia” interchangeably with “text.” I introduce *lexia* first, however, because it is generally understood, especially in comics studies, to better describe a broader scope of linguistic phenomena. In both instances, however, I am using the terms to refer to the written language.

² This is particularly true of more typically ‘literary’ artforms, like the novel, to which graphic novels are compared (even the term “graphic novel” is suggestive of some relationship), but to which they are quite dissimilar. There seems to be less concern in comics criticism regarding the comparison of comics with film (both live-action and animated), which is deemed a similar medium because of the separation of the action into individual frames comprised of both verbal and visual stimuli (though the major differences, such as the ability to show movement as opposed to suggesting it, are always noted).

attempt to fully understand the medium as it actually is (as opposed to how it appears through each particular critical lens).

There is an easy solution to the problem of “field-coverage” as it applies to the comics medium, and that is to bring these various fields together into one interdisciplinary critical debate about the medium, allowing the various perspectives and techniques from each field to help re-examine and re-define the assumptions of the others. To this extent, I propose using more traditional models of literary study and bringing them into contact with comics studies and communications studies to examine some of the basic narrative qualities of the medium in a more broadly interdisciplinary way. I should, here, proclaim my critical biases; being the product of an education in English literature, it is to literature (and literary theory) that I turn as the foundation of my interdisciplinary investigation into the medium. Using literature as a foundation does, however, have some important advantages. On the one hand, there are many theoretical approaches to literature that, though they are applicable to comics and can offer important insight into the narrative structure of the medium, have been largely ignored in the attempt to define comics’ structure. On the other hand, the use of literature as a critical foundation offers access to a narrative artform and a cultural tradition that are rarely associated with comics in any concrete way, despite the existence of concrete cultural overlaps between comics and literature. Jared Gardner, for instance, proposes that the development of the comics medium is facilitated by and contemporary with the Modernist novel, whose fragmentary aesthetic provided an apparatus through which responses to both Victorian realism and modernity could be produced (Gardner XI). Furthermore, the marketing of comics as books (graphic novels, comic books), their frequent identification as such in the critical discourse, and

the physical conditions of their publication also suggest some fundamental association between literature and comics.

The use of literary studies as a critical foundation does, nevertheless, also have important limitations that must be overcome in any attempt to apply its theories to the comics medium. The most notable limitation of traditional literary studies to comics is the lack of scholarly discourse regarding images as narrative properties of literary texts. While studies have been conducted regarding illustrated texts, whether pertaining to children's literature or Victorian novels, and commentary has been made regarding features that are prominent in comics, such as speech scrolls in Medieval manuscripts, these studies are not concerned with images as important vehicles for narrative. These images have never been indispensable to the narrative that they support, offering supplementary information rather than producing narrative. For instance, though it may ultimately be perceived differently by the reader with their addition, the actual narrative of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* remains unchanged by John Leech's illustrations. In Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*, alternatively, there are no words, and images are consequently responsible for producing all narrative meaning. While Tan's work is an extreme example, most graphic novels and comics do incorporate both text (*lexia*) and images, it does highlight crucial differences between the specialized approach to images required of comics and the traditional and limited approach espoused by literary studies, which has had no need for a deeper or more specialized understanding of images before comics.

My research, consequently, seeks to analyze the narrative tendencies of comics by adapting the traditional narratological models established by Paul Ricoeur and Gérard Genette to the visual and textual modes of the comics medium. The use of Ricoeur's and Genette's critical models is significant, furthermore, for the strong emphasis it places on the interrelation between

narrative and time, an interrelation that is frequently obscured by the critical turn toward the interrelation of image and word and of space and time as the defining features of comics. The first chapter, however, will focus more stringently on the critical discourse already surrounding comics; it is important, before addressing time in comics, to address the relationship between space, time, and narrative as it is understood by comics theorists to fit within a broader debate about tabular and sequential readings of the medium. To this end, I will be arguing that space and time cannot be conflated in any equal measure (as McCloud argues in his foundational work of American comics' criticism), but that it is narrative that is distilled, even signified, by the visual/physical space of the text. My argument about narrative, furthermore, will be supported by a reading of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* which will attempt to trace the way Spiegelman himself creates a text that highlights the process of visually signifying narrative within the comics medium by metafictionally representing narrative production within his own act of narrative production. More important than the metafictional quality of the text, however, is Spiegelman's awareness of the omnipresent gaps within the comics' narrative and his attempt to use them creatively in the process of producing narrative.

In chapter two, following the critical precedent set by chapter one, I will seek to argue that space, in its capacity to signify narrative, becomes a mediator between narrative and time. To this end, Ricoeur's distinction in *Temps et Récit* between the three mimetic levels surrounding the production and reception of the text (time within the text (1), the configuration of time through the organization of the story into plot (2), and the duration of reading (3)), helps us recognize the necessity of categorizing and organizing the reading experience. His concept of temporal mimesis, furthermore, allows me to suggest that the synchronicity often associated with comics (Thierry Groensteen), and which represents the binary opposite to the sequential

argument (and its time = space construct), is also limited in its attempt to describe comics' narrative tendencies. It is phenomenologically limited because the process of reading necessarily unfolds over time. Thus, while the past, present and future may all be represented in one independent compositional unit, the process of reading that unit is still temporally determined, creating a tension between the synchronic analysis of comics and their phenomenological reception. While the comics' images may exist simultaneously on the page, the reader must choose when and how to read them. This argument will be supported with a temporal analysis of one of Chris Ware's *Quimby the Mouse* stories, which, I will suggest, can be read differently under different interpretations of its intradiegetic temporality. Diegesis, to this extent, will be central to my argument, and a distinction needs to be made between the intra and extradiegetic. The diegesis refers to the internal 'world' of the story and includes everything that is native to that story, such as plot, character, and, most important for my present purposes, time. The intradiegetic, then, refers to those elements that are effectively integrated into the diegesis, while the extradiegetic refers to those elements that are external to the world of the story, though they often still have important impacts on the reading of a story. In comics, for example, the intradiegetic time of the story can be impacted and fundamentally altered by the gutter, which is generally recognizable as an extradiegetic space.

Finally, the third chapter will adapt the structural systems for defining and describing order and duration conceptualized by Gerard Genette in his *Discours du Récit* to the comics medium. If we allow that comics can be read not only as a synchronic collection of images, but as a text that unfolds in and across multiple temporal planes, we can dissect comics structurally to create a sense of objective-subjectivity; we can develop structural models for understanding features of comics that are inherently subjective and that require the intervention of the reader to

produce a completed narrative, giving us tools to discuss and describe features that are inherently and permanently indeterminate. Genette, furthermore, can be easily adapted to this purpose because of the distinction he makes between historical time and narrative time. By incorporating subjectivity into the foundation of his structural approach to literature, Genette's text is naturally more flexible than many other structuralist works and is, consequently, complementary to the subjective and phenomenological approach to reading produced by Ricoeur.

Chapter One: Narrative as Textual Object

While the objective of this text is to analyse the narrative properties of the comics medium through the scope of narratology, it is nevertheless necessary, given comics' sometimes lexicographical sometimes visual processes of signification, to address the semantic properties of the medium; the visual-linguistic hybridity of the comic has produced several foundational debates in comics criticism that, while semantic in nature, determine our understanding of the way comics can, or should, be read. Comics dependence on an inherently fragmentary system of visual signification, for instance, has led critics to debate whether it produces narrative sequentially, in a manner that imitates the narrative processes of the novel, or synchronically. Many Anglophone critics, embracing the tradition established by writer-theorists Scott McCloud and Will Eisner, defend the definition of comics as some form of *sequential art*³. By contrast, most European critics, expanding the theoretical framework established by Thierry Groensteen, suggest that comics narratives are best understood as producing a synchronic "network" of "semantically overdetermined" individual images (Groensteen 18) that rely on the *planche*, the work as a whole, to produce their meaning. Another important semantic debate with consequences for our understanding of comics narrative examines the inherent value and functions of *lexias* and images within the medium; some critics describe a dissolution of semantic barriers and a collapse of the distinction between word and image (Hatfield 36-7), while others, most notably Hannah Miodrag, defend the unique narrative functions of language within the medium and emphasize the distinction between the verbal and the visual (Miodrag;

³ McCloud defines comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in *deliberate sequence* [my emphasis], intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (1994; 9), while Eisner describes comics as a form of *sequential art*, which he defines as "a means of creative expression, a distinct discipline, an art and literary form that deals with the arrangement of pictures or images and words to narrate a story or dramatize an idea" (2006; 5). Many Anglophone critics still use these definitions of comics, or some variation of them, as the foundation of their research.

2013). However, though these debates demonstrate the complexity that can be achieved by comics' semantic system, they do not, because of their concern primarily with semantic issues, identify a narrative center. This first chapter will consequently seek to trace the relocation of narrative from the lexical into the visual space of the text, without denying that *lexias* have a narrative function, and will defend the assertion that 'narrative' becomes a concrete object of visual representation within the comic, aligning questions about comics narrative more closely with the tradition of critical discourse concerned with the medium's semantic system. Ultimately, this chapter will argue that narrative, as a textual property of comics, is actualized by the visual and fragmented organization of the text.

As Hannah Miodrag suggests, however, it would be over simple to claim that "space equals time" (142), an equivalence that has been popularized, particularly in Anglophone comics criticism, by the ubiquity of Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993) as a foundational text of contemporary comics criticism (2013: np). McCloud, in his analysis of comics' narrative structure, claims that "In a medium where time and space merge so completely, the distinction [between them] often vanishes" (102). While there may be a frequent, though not an exclusive, conflation of the terms, McCloud's theoretical model misreads comics' uses of extradiegetic space and, consequently, reveals only a limited portrait of comics' narrative processes. McCloud's use of *closure*, the process of mentally "filling in" the gap between panels, as a means of organizing comics into "a series of juxtaposed images," while useful for explaining *some* of the unique features associated with comics, is limited by its presumption that there is a prescribed order for the process to follow and by its emphasis on the gutter as comics most important gap. Both these presumptions are easily subverted by the violation of the grid and the disruption of the traditional reading order, practices that often suggest both multiple gaps and

points of closure, disrupting the sequentially determinate temporal integrity of the text as described by McCloud. Thus, while narrative becomes an object of representation and can, consequently, be distributed spatially, time is represented ambiguously and plastically on the page (as a compositional unit), and inheres, rather, in the process of reading (More on the temporalizing effect of reading in Chapter 2). Although comics is a narrative artform, its narrative apparatus cannot be described as the simple attempt to diagrammatically represent sequential moments of atomized time across a spatial plane. Rather, this definition is best understood only as a mode of comics writing (Miodrag 149).

While the synchronic approach contradicts conceptions of sequentiality as they have been developed by Anglophone critics, it is not anathema to sequence. Groensteen, even in contradicting Baetens' claim that the publication of comics in book format renders them *monovectorial*, himself recognizes the tension that exists between the text as sequence and the text as network, claiming that

cette disposition [monovectorisée] se trouve toutefois combattue, et dans une certaine mesure neutralisée, par les propriétés que nous avons reconnues aux vignettes. Le réseau qu'elles forment est certes un réseau orienté, puisqu'il est traversé par l'instance du récit, mais il existe aussi sur un mode déchronologisé, celui de la collection, de l'étalement panoptique et de la coexistence, ménageant la possibilité de relations translinéaires et de parcours plurivectoriels. (175)

Groensteen, here, concedes that the identification of comics as a narrative form requires, in some degree, the establishment of order and of a directed reading process, suggesting a sequential relationship between panels (*vignettes*). The key to reading comics for Groensteen is not to deny sequence, but to destabilize it by recognizing the translinear relationship between panels that is

made possible by their visual representation on the two-dimensional page. The persistence of panels within the visual field of perception allows the reader to recognize them as the related units of a network. Because of the paradoxical tension that exists between these methods of reading comics, the most effective reading strategy is the “holistic” reading practice proposed by Charles Hatfield, who, influenced by the theoretical systems of Groensteen and Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle, claims that “[t]he page [...] functions both as sequence and as object, to be seen and read in both linear and nonlinear, holistic fashion” (48). The necessity of this holistic reading practice is particularly evident when multiple diegetic levels of a text are juxtaposed and thrust into a semantically overdetermined relational network. A powerful example of the relational network is the split panel, which usually represents a scene across a single space subdivided into many panels. Despite the division of the image by the gutter, the reader still recognizes the essential unity and completeness of the image.

Paul Karasik and David Mazzucchelli, in their comics adaptation of Paul Auster’s *City of Glass*, invoke the network in their split panel representation of the act of writing. The image is static; Quinn does not move

through the divided space, but is himself divided with the space, giving the composition a voyeuristic undertone, as

though the reader is observing him through a window. This undertone, which is emphasized by the presence of windows and barred doors appearing in the shape of traditional nine panel grids throughout the text, requires the reader to recognize this grouping of nine panels as a distinct and



Figure 1. *City of Glass*. 2004. Paul Karasik and David Mazzucchelli.

complete image. The pages hovering above Quinn's head, which are presented as an archive of his writing and are consequently diegetically removed from the representation of Quinn at his desk, do, however, suggest a sequence. The use of physical pages, as opposed to captions, to present Quinn's writing to the reader evokes the physicality of the process of writing on and of turning the pages. The sequence implied by these actions is emphasized by the alternating perforations on the topmost three pages. The fact that the pages contain text also suggests a sequence (language is always linear). Read from the bottom up, the association of the writing Quinn with the pages that trail behind him also suggests the actual process of writing as his output becomes gradually available to the reader. Yet the reader's expectations are nevertheless confounded even by these traces of sequence. The lexical text is unspecific in identifying an appropriate sequence for the reader to follow. The short remark that each page presents could be organized in any order and would still make grammatical and logical sense. The final two pages, their perforations on the same side, also disrupt the order suggested by the first three. The tension between the series and the network, therefore, remains unresolved. It is important to note, however, that the meaning of this collection of panels is not obscured by the persistence of this tension. The tension, rather, informs the meaning and serves to enrich it. Angela Miller notes that comics "are about frames: frames as ways of narrating and composing time, ways of isolating moments in a temporal continuum, but also as a means of calling attention to how we know things. *We know them because they refer to other things...*" (my emphasis, quoted in Postema 47). The meaning of every individual panel becomes clear not only by considering its relation to

the panels immediately preceding and following it in sequence, but by considering its relation to *every* other panel⁴.

This paradoxical double identity reveals the fragmentary nature of comics; the reader is asked to recognize comics' constituent parts, at once, as both essentially isolated from and essentially integral to the compositional unit. To produce a sense of narrative sequence from the network of available semantic material, the reader must engage in an interpretive activity and consolidate each individual, isolated element to the compositional whole. Philippe Marion describes these contradictory, but necessarily related, tendencies as the *narrative function* and the *panel function*. The narrative function is that which encourages the reader to "glide" past the panel, while the panel function is that which isolates every individual image from the broader whole (retrieved in Mikkonen 82). Marion's functions, though they exemplify the complex nature of comics readership, are, like McCloud's concept of closure, hampered by their isolation of gutters as comics' primary gap. Both Marion and McCloud fail to account for the gaps that exist between text and image (Round), text and text (Miodrag), text and panel (Harvey), and even image and panel (Hatfield; Miodrag). There is, in each of these combinations of semantic materials, a tension between the narrative function of the whole and the elemental function of each constituent part (or element), consequently creating a series of gaps that the reader must "spark across" (Kunzle)⁵.

⁴ For Groensteen, this process of braiding images together transcends the physical organization of comics into various pages, creating a relationship between images that may be separated by comics physical conditions of publication.

⁵ Comics criticism lacks a universally employed theoretical term for the process of overcoming narrative gaps; however, the concept of "sparking across," which is borrowed from an article by David Kunzle, offers a constructive counterpoint to the concept of "filling in," which McCloud associates with the process of closure. Where "filling in" suggests a determinate sequence and privileges authorial intent, 'sparking across' suggests the indeterminateness and variability of comics, emphasizing the importance of the compositional whole to the reading process.

These various gaps enable the layering and multiplication of diegetic levels⁶ in a way unique to the comics medium. Because readers are always aware of the variety of lexical and visual levels of representation, they must persistently and repetitively acknowledge and reconcile both the competing and complementary meanings that can be produced, a practice that highlights the expanded number of diegetic levels represented in the work. Julia Round, for instance, isolates the process of ‘doubling’ as an important aspect of comics’ representation. Doubling occurs when the representation within the image is repeated by or itself repeats the meaning produced by the written text. She provides as an example a scene from *The Killing Joke*. As the Joker ushers Commissioner Gordon into a carnival ride meant to drive him to madness, he also declares: “So when you find yourself locked onto an unpleasant train of thought [...] madness is the only emergency exit” (quoted in Round 79). The resemblance of the carnival ride to a train and the centrality of madness in both word and image cause the visual representation and textual signification to echo each other’s meanings (79). Doubling consequently causes the diegetic levels represented by text and image to merge into a more coherent whole, somewhat obfuscating the gap that must necessarily be breached in connecting text and image. This blurring of the gap, however, is only a semantic illusion. Because the meanings of both textual elements mirror each other, they appear to coalesce. Yet, the very nature of their interaction (as opposed to fusion) presumes their separateness. In the process of doubling, neither word nor image is incomplete without the other or even altered by the presence of the other; the sense of both is immediately clear and their semantic juxtaposition, therefore, only emphasizes their

⁶ “Diegetic,” here, refers to the classical definition of diegesis as narration, not the French definition of diegesis as the universe of the work; these various semantic materials all, in some way, belong to the universe of the work, but narrate and relate that universe differently.

initial meanings. By remaining independent in the production of meaning, they remain semantically independent and represent distinct diegetic levels within the text.



"Now play dead."

Figure 2. "Now Play Dead" by Charles Addams

Equally as interesting as the layering of diegetic levels produced by doubling, however, is the multiplication of diegetic levels that occurs when there is either a relationship of dependence or a tension between the significance of word and image. Where these relationships are produced, the multiplication of diegetic levels is evident in the emphasis that the fusion⁷ of semantic materials places on the gaps that separate them, simultaneously emphasizing

the proximity and distance that exists between semantic materials. In the first instance, while word and image depend on one another to establish a meaning beyond that which is made available by either alone, there is necessarily a moment of delay, while the reader 'sparks across' each in turn, before a new meaning can be produced. Single panel gag cartoons, such as those produced by Charles Addams, offer concise examples of this delayed process of signification. While neither image nor text is semantically incomplete individually (the image represents a completed composition and the words a complete sentence(s)), the punchline does depend on the interaction of semantic materials (Miodrag, 2013: 85). In Addams' "Now Play Dead," the seemingly harmless representation of a man and a dog only becomes menacingly funny when the ironic reality of the situation is revealed by the caption. This comic, furthermore, is particularly

⁷ As was the case with the relationship between panels, the relationship between semantic materials lacks any universally employed theoretical terms. I have, therefore, employed fusion here to propose a productive relationship that exceeds mere interaction (which I have used above to describe the process of doubling) and to suggest the integration of diegetic levels. Fusion, however, is limited as a theoretical term by its inability to also suggest the persistent separateness of these different diegetic levels.

interesting for its incorporation of *lexias* at multiple textual levels. Words not only contribute to the caption, but are also integrated into the visual representation, which further expands the number of diegetic levels by increasing the number of perceptual gaps within the text. The injection of *lexias* directly into the object of representation fractures the image and produces gaps within the image itself, as the reader sparks between the drawing and writing, and between lexical texts, as the reader sparks from one lexical source to the other. This comic, consequently, contains three separate diegetic levels, each of which alters the meaning of the others. In finally combining, they produce a new diegetic level – the cartoon as whole.

A tension between word and image produces a similar process of fusion and also establishes the cartoon as a new diegetic level; however, the relationship between semantic materials is altered. When word and image depend on each other to produce meaning, the apparently fused materials are, nevertheless, always separated by the gaps inherent to comic's narrative apparatus, and they consequently always represent distinct diegetic levels. Where there is a contradiction, however, rather than separating materials that appear semantically proximate, gaps intercede between materials that are seemingly diffuse by emphasizing their visual proximity and drawing them into an *in presentia* relationship (a process that echoes the relationship between panels described by Groensteen). Gaps, in this instance, have a frame like function. Thus, while separate semantic materials still remain distinct, they can also produce a level of significance that transcends their individuality. This is evident, for example, in sequences that represent characters lying. *Lexias* alone, because of their inability to tonally convey emotion, cannot accurately represent a lie without further narration or indication. The fact that a character's declaration is a lie can, however, be made evident from their body

language and expressions. Thus, while the lexical and the visual appear to have a confrontational relationship, a new meaning can be produced by their proximity.

Beyond these gaps, which represent the relationship of words and images, there are also gaps that intercede between lexical sources. The separation between various forms of speech bubbles or between speech bubbles and captions, for instance, can reproduce the relationships described above. Captions can either contradict or emphasize the thoughts of characters, while the speech of one character can either contradict or support that of another. Thought bubbles even create the possibility for character's thoughts to contradict their own speech. In all these cases, however, one lexical source further contextualizes the other lexical sources within its proximity while always remaining diegetically distinct from them. Consequently, one of the most notable aspects of comics' use of *lexias* is that they are never allowed to fully dominate the narrative; their interactions are always moderated by the visual apparatus of the text, and their significance delayed by their separation within that apparatus. Thus, while *lexias* do contribute to the narrative, a fact that often goes overlooked by comics scholars eager to privilege the image, the lexical is nevertheless undergirded and organized by comics' visual apparatus.

A similar tension can, furthermore, also be produced between and within images. Though the image to image relationship represented by the movement between panels has been well documented (and I have alluded to it earlier), some relationships have garnered less critical attention, notably images that transcend the traditional boundaries of the grid and images that are fractured in themselves. Images that transcend the grid multiply diegetic levels by drawing more semantic materials into contact with each other, producing and reproducing new meanings. The opening page of Ta-Nehisi Coates and Brian Stelfreeze's *Black Panther: A Nation Under Our Feet*, in which the kneeling T'Challa is superposed across three vertical panels that run the length

of the page, offers an interesting example. Each panel must be read with the bowed figure in mind, and each panel successively requires the reader to reassess their understanding of the bowed figure as he is cast away from his family, kingdom and path. The image of T'Challa also produces a tension between the present and various pasts. The figures that address him are at a temporal remove, creating a gap between his present moment and each apparent flashback that must be reconciled to properly contextualize the present. In entering simultaneously into both an individual and a collective relationship with each of these past moments the image of T'Challa multiplies the number of diegetic levels by bringing them into contact with one another and creating a semantic nexus around itself. Images that are fractured in themselves, alternatively, multiply the number of diegetic levels by exploiting the tension produced by the gap within the image. The most common example of the fractured image is the split panel (discussed earlier), which produces meaning by artificially introducing gaps into the image, usually to suggest a sense of movement or of passing time.

To this extent and despite the limitations of closure, McCloud's claim that the participation of the reader is necessary for the creation of meaning in comics (68-9) is useful for understanding the process of representing narrative visually. Static images and words can only become integral parts of a single text through the intervention of an active reader who will recognize and overcome the gaps that separate semantic material. Several critics, however, have noted that the process of active reading is not unique to the comics medium, though some still exaggerate its importance (Miodrag 67). Miodrag, Groensteen and Hatfield all recognize Wolfgang Iser's theory of "intentional sentences correlatives" as an important prose theory formalization of active reading that predates the theorization of active reading in comics. The systems of theorists like Roland Barthes, who is cited less often in comics studies for his

narrative system than for his semiotic system, and Jacques Derrida also propose the importance of active reading in prose and poetry. Comics, then, is not unique for its proliferation of gaps; it is unique for its inability to do anything but make these gaps visually available to the reader. While the development of comics is, historically, facilitated by and contemporary with the development of cinema, a medium that quickly became more successful at concealing its fragmentary nature, and the rise of the Modernist novel, which produced fragments as an intentional repudiation of the narrative modes of Victorian realism, comics remains unable to overcome the opacity of its narrative apparatus (Gardner xi). While paratextual in nature, narrative, as both apparatus and figurative concept, consequently becomes a concrete object of representation, always perceivable by the reader and encoded in the semantic material of the text at both the extradiegetic and intradiegetic levels.

This positioning of narrative as an object of representation within both the intradiegetic and extradiegetic space of the text is further emphasized by the inherently self-referential nature of comics' processes of visual representation. Julia Round, adapting the argument about originals presented by Walter Benjamin in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," suggests that "the condition of inauthenticity is made more explicit in comics since, unlike television or cinema screen, what comics offer us is not a created set or disguised location, but a drawn image *that is itself the thing represented*" (83). Comics, for Round, can never refer beyond itself; as a representation without an original, or a medium that captures a reality that never existed, it produces its own alterity. The act of representation, at the level of both the page and panel, becomes a unique act of re-production through which objects and occurrences are always represented anew, and each new re-production is marred by the stylistic choices of the artist(s) and by the gaps that the representation incorporates. Because these gaps,

which are consequences of comics' narrative apparatus, are incorporated into the visual field of representation, they become an integral part of each unique re-production and of each new consequent alterity. Narrative, as both concrete object and conceptual force, therefore becomes encoded in all the diegetic levels of the text, and is signaled by the presence of absences between and within semantic materials. In being visual representations of the narrative apparatus, these absences entice the active participation of the reader in the production of narrative; a comics work signals its own narrativity, which is retroactively inscribed by the reader onto the comic itself.

Barbara Postema, in her analysis of narrative in Craig Thompson's *Good-Bye Chunky Rice*, offers an interesting example of the visual signification of the narrative. In this image,

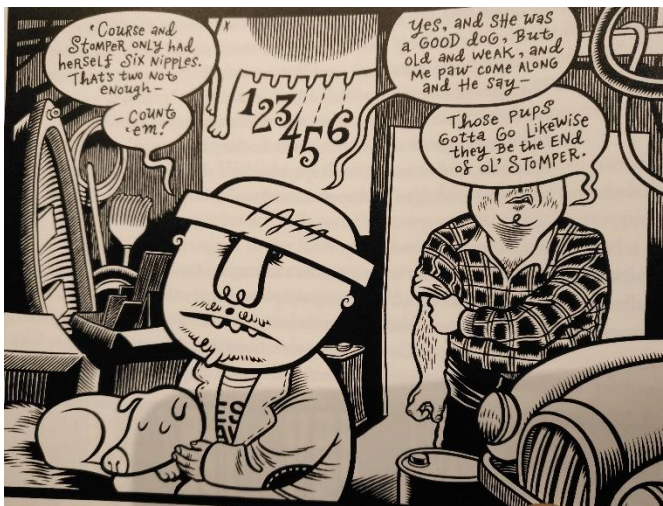


Figure 3. *Good-Bye Chunky Rice* (2005), Craig Thompson.

Solomon's childhood is visually juxtaposed to the present moment; "he is talking to Chunky Rice, but he is holding the dog he had as a child, and he is surrounded by the setting of the past" while being addressed by his father from that past (20). Postema concludes that this juxtaposition of images and words

constitutes a complete narrative within the isolated individual panel. While Postema does not use the language of absence and presence, her analysis does suggest the centrality of absence in the production of narrative. For instance, though it is clear that "the image [...] calls for [a] connection to be made" (20) between the past and present moments represented by the work, narrative, as the actual presence interceding between moments, is absent from the panel. This

absence, in a sense, becomes the only indication that there is a “connection to be made” because of the initial separation to which it subjects the various diegetic levels of the image.

There are two criticisms likely to be made against this argument, the first being that the representations of real events and places do, necessarily, refer beyond comics to produce semantic meaning and the second that absences cannot have semantic value. The problem with the first criticism is that it fails to consider the inherent variability and expansiveness of visual signification both generally and in comics specifically. Despite the use of traditional semiotics in explanations of comics’ processes of visual signification, images function differently than words, a distinction that semioticians often disregard. Barthes, for instance, is mentioned regularly in analyses of iconic signification for his claim, in *Mythologies*, that “[l’]image devient une écriture, dès l’instant qu’elle est significative : comme l’écriture, elle appelle une lexis” (2014; 14). Barthes’ claim and other similar claims expressing the equivalence of words and images have become a commonplace of comics criticism. Yet, such an understanding of iconic representation hampers our understanding of the image by concealing its intrinsic density. While language is limited by “the principle of double articulation” and its “fixed number of phonemes (distinctive phonic units) that makes up a limited pool of morphemes (minimal significant units [...])” (Miodrag 8), the semantic material of the image is potentially limitless and extends the range of possible signification. Individual symbols can blend and separate or expand and contract, and can do so without clearly identifying points of contact between traditional verbal objects of signification. The version of Art Spiegelman that appears in *Maus* is both simultaneously mouse and man. To claim that he is a man drawn to look like a mouse or a mouse drawn to look like a man is to misrepresent the semantic material and to limit the process of visual representation by viewing it through the mechanisms of linguistic signification. The

consequent ambiguity of the image dissociates the drawing of Spiegelman from Spiegelman the author, so that in a semantic sense the drawing relies only on its own representational logic to produce its unique meaning, despite the reality of Spiegelman's presence outside of the comic.

This same representational logic also suggests that absences can accrue semantic value. Unlike linguistic signification, in which the presence of *lexias* is necessary for signification to occur, visual, particularly drawn/painted, representations are not hampered by absences, which are best understood as further extensions of semantic materials. Absences, consequently, are integral to visual representations and, though readers can understand their function, are inextricable from them. In comics, the integration of absences in visual representations is made even more evident by the claim, discussed earlier in this chapter, that semantic materials are held in an *in presentia* relationship. Only by acknowledging absences as constituent parts of the visual representation is it possible to justify the claim that every page represents an integrated compositional unit. The split panel, again, offers a potent example of this phenomena as it pertains to comics. The voyeuristic undertone of Figure 1 (above), for instance, is produced by the resemblance of the gutter to a window frame. Furthermore, while the gutter does separate the image into 9 distinct panels, it can also be read as a kind of splash page, a panel that occupies the space of an entire page. This same relationship, of both proximity and distance, is also repeated at the level of every individual panel. Thus, comics persistently emphasizes and multiplies the number of gaps that must be overcome by the reader.

***Maus*: A Case Study in Visual Narrative**

Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, which was originally serialized in Spiegelman's own *Raw* magazine between 1980 and 1991, revolutionized America's outlook on comics, eventually winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1992. *Maus*' success, furthermore, helped establish the

autobiographical/biographical comic as one of the medium's most important genres. However, while the book may have signalled comics' coming of age, it also polarized critics, some of whom sought to define it as a work of fiction while others, siding with Spiegelman, defended its status as non-fiction. This debate, though, offers only a false dichotomy produced by the general ignorance, in the 90's, of the semantic and narrative techniques of the comic form. There was an inability, by both the defenders and detractors of its status as non-fiction, to come to terms with the hyper-real and diegetically dense network of representations produced by the text. These representations, of events, places and people, preclude any attempt at neatly categorizing the work. The past, the present, the moment of writing, and even the moment of reading are persistently juxtaposed, and each diegetic level becomes inextricably knotted with the others, producing a convoluted tangle of diegetic levels. In this sense, *Maus* represents an effort at historical revisionism, tracing the narrative interplay that exists between the story's frame narrative and its historical narrative and exploring the impact that each diegetic level has on the representation of the others. Consequently, *Maus*, with its temporally dense layering of diegetic levels and its richness of both semantic and formal experimentation, offers a foundational example of the fragmentariness of comics and of the consequent visual representation of narrative as a textual object.

While Spiegelman is fairly consistent in organizing the comic into traditional panels (though he rarely uses a traditional 9 panel grid), his often subtle formal experiments increase and divide diegetic levels in dramatic ways, ultimately emphasizing the archival properties of the network. His use of open panels,



Figure 4. *Maus: A Survivor's Tale V.I - My Father Bleeds History*. Art Spiegelman. Pp.17

for instance, is instrumental in dividing Vladek's biographical narrative from Spiegelman's interview of his father and helps contextualize the relationship that exists between these diegetic levels. Spiegelman only uses the open panel in his representations of the interview and limits his use of the open panel to the pages that represent both the biographical narrative and the interview in the same physical space. Consequently, open panels become a kind of signifier for the interview, visually distinguishing these panels from those that belong to the biographical narrative and allowing Spiegelman to keep these diegetic levels distinct even when they are held *in presentia*. At the same time as dividing them, however, it draws these separate diegetic levels into a specific relationship with one another. Because the open panels are incorporated into the extradiegetic space of the gutter, they visually contain the biographical narrative. In essence, the frame narrative is not only a narrative technique, but also a visual one; the frame narrative literally frames the biographical narrative on the physical page.

The interplay that this interaction creates between the biographical narrative and the interview suggest that the work is at once both biographical and autobiographical. It is biographical in that Spiegelman is reproducing his father's life, and autobiographical in its representation of Spiegelman's own experiences and interactions with his father. It is in the combination of these perspectives that the network of interdependent images becomes an archive. By creating this relationship between diegetic levels, Spiegelman establishes the biographical narrative as a visual suppository of personal and collective memory, personal because they are Vladek's experiences and collective both because they represent the voices and experiences of many and because they become, through their recounting, the collective memories of both Vladek and Art Spiegelman. Figure 4 represents a microcosm of the movement from the personal to the collective. While Vladek, in the context of the interview, opens the page alone,

the episode that he recounts engages Spiegelman's participation in the production of the story, as Spiegelman asks, in the final panel of the page in which both father and son appear, for specific details. His question subsequently dictates the concerns that Vladek's narrative will pursue.

The archival status of the network is further emphasized by Spiegelman's persistent reproduction of historical, albeit sometimes quite personal, documents – photographs, diagrams, comics, etc. – throughout the work. This technique has since become a standard of biographical and autobiographical production in comics; in her analysis of Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, Robin Warhol suggests that “all these representations of items like photographs, maps, letters, and diary pages in *Fun Home* constitute an archive, a collection the archivist (in this case the autographer herself) puts together in an attempt to make a coherent narrative of a life” (2011 5-6). However, this narrative is performed at an extradiegetic level, referring the reader beyond the diegetic levels of the page, images and *lexias*, and towards concrete historical or social

documents, further multiplying the diegetic levels represented in the text (2011 6). Warhol's formulation of the archive is limited only by its failure to take into account the necessarily stylized nature of the reproduction of documents. Because these reproductions are marred by the nuances of style, they also refer the reader back upon the reproductions themselves.

In Figure 5, Spiegelman reproduces a photograph of his mother; however, in remaining consistent with the visual premise of the work, she is represented as a mouse. Thus, while it does in a sense refer beyond itself, it also belongs uniquely to *this*



Figure 5. *Maus: A Survivor's Tale V.1 – My Father Bleeds History*. Art Spiegelman. Pp.17.

specific archive, *this* specific network of interdependent images. Through this uniqueness, the archival material, while it does turn outward, also refers back to itself.

This production of an archive through the frame narrative and the reproduction of documents introduces gaps into the text, revealing the fragmentary nature of the work's narrative interplay. Figure 5, for instance, produces a tension between the frame narrative, the biographical narrative, and the implied extradiegetic production of the text. Like the image of T'Challa, the photograph transcends the traditional borders of the panel, producing a semantic nexus centered on itself; however, because it is a reproduction of an existing document, it also suggests the process of retroactively writing the text. Its superposition on top of the panels suggests its material presence and dominance over them; it is represented as a material reminder of the biographical and autobiographical memories that are being reproduced in the text. By also emphasizing the action of collective remembering, it emphasizes the changeable nature of these diegetic levels as they come into contact. The fragmentation produced by Spiegelman's archival impulse is also evident in the tension that is produced between historical occurrence and Vladek's personal memories. There is a persistent tension, for instance, between Vladek's narrative boxes and the representations of his experiences leading up to and during WWII; the visual representations of historical events are often incongruous with Vladek's own report of his experiences (Postema 2013: 89).

It is useful, in examining the relationship between diegetic levels in *Maus*, to consider the concept of a bleed. A bleed, in audio recording, refers to any additional sounds that are unintentionally picked up by a microphone. While the medium of sound recording may seem distant from comics, the title of the first volume and Spiegelman's frequent use of a recorder in his interviews with his father suggest some relation between these seemingly disparate mediums.

If taken seriously, the bleed suggests that every diegetic level interrupts or alters the representation of the others. The representations of historical moments are interrupted by Vladek's personal narrative, which is itself interrupted by the interview. The analogy, however, can only be taken so far; the addition of images extends beyond the purview of the bleed. The interruption entailed by the bleed, though, remains relevant – Vladek's narrative persistently interrupts the representations of historical moments by physically integrating itself into the representation, while the interview often physically intervenes between and contextualizes Vladek's personal narrative, producing even more gaps in the fabric of the text. Unlike the audible medium represented by the bleed and the tape recorder, however, these interruptions are visually represented within the text, always persisting in the visual field of perception and denying the full integration of diegetic levels.

Because of this persistent tension in *Maus*'s representational network, narrative must be recognized as a visual object of the text, integrated in some way to the archive that is produced by this network. *Maus*, however, is particularly interesting because of its dual status as both biography and autobiography; it is a work that represents its own genesis. In this sense, the text could be defined as metabiographical; it is not only a biography or an autobiography, but the autobiography of a biographical and autobiographical production. Consequently, *Maus* subsumes the extradiegetic elements of the comic – gutters, speech bubbles, narrative boxes, etc. – into its narrative and into its textual archive. The work functions like a narrative palimpsest, each new diegetic level is produced within the diegetic level of its predecessor – the historical representation of Vladek's experiences is produced within the diegetic level of the interview, which is itself produced within the diegetic level of Spiegelman's own autobiography – and subsumes the gaps that inhere in previous representations.

That Spiegelman's autobiographical impulse represents an independent diegetic level is evident in the prologue and in the opening narrational box, which clearly presents the voice of a detached, extradiegetic Spiegelman, narrating from a temporal remove. The prologue, rather than introducing Vladek or Spiegelman, serves to introduce their relationship to one another, contextualizing what will be the focus of the work – the impacts that Vladek's experiences of the holocaust have had on his relationship with Spiegelman. The opening narrational box of volume one places further emphasis on the autobiographical context of the work. This opening box reads: "I went out to see my Father in Rego Park. I hadn't seen him in a long time – we weren't that close" (Spiegelman 11). The use of the past tense establishes a sense of distance between Spiegelman the narrator and Spiegelman the character, while the use of "I" as the first word of text emphasizes the centrality not only of Vladek's experiences, but also of Spiegelman's. This opening narrational box also repeats the framing mechanism produced by the open panels discussed earlier, but with broader implications. Both the opening and closing pages of the first volume contain only panels representing the diegetic level of the interview. On the first page, only Spiegelman's narration is left open to the gutter, while on the last page only a panel representing the solitary figure of Spiegelman is open to the gutter⁸. The opened narrational box and panel visually imply that everything that follows is held between them, contextualized by and belonging to the diegetic level of Spiegelman's autobiography.

Thus, while some have sought to neatly divide the comic into facile categories of past and present, Erin McGlothlin comes nearer the mark when she claims that

⁸ This is actually the only instance in the first volume in which Spiegelman uses an open panel to distinguish between anything other than the interview and Vladek's biographical narrative.

The comic images of *Maus*, rather than clearly marking off the past from the present, contribute to a problem in which the present and the past are intimately interconnected and difficult to separate from one another, for the past is revealed as constitutive of the present, and the present makes demands on the way in which the past is represented” (2003 178).

The relationship that McGlothlin identifies between the past and present, and essentially between the diegetic levels of the text, highlights the necessary representation of narrative as a textual object. The representations of diegetic levels are held together by their presentation within the comic’s archival network of images and *lexias*, and consequently each diegetic level contextualizes the others. Her account neglects only the fragmentariness of the apparatus, which simultaneously guarantees the persistent isolation of every diegetic level. Finally, by recognizing this double motion towards and away from unity, we can recognize the marked presence of narrative traversing the text. Thus, the work, which reads like a narrative Russian nesting doll, represents various narratives at different diegetic levels throughout the text, offering an extreme example of the semantically determinate narrative system discussed earlier in this chapter.

Chapter Two: Temporalizing the Comics Narrative

Because, as I have argued in Chapter One, reducing the role of time in comics to the correlation of space with time overlooks important formal aspects inherent to the comics medium, it is necessary now to concretely define the functions of time in comics narratives and to understand the ability of the resulting temporal model to help constitute these narratives. The present necessity of such an approach is made even more pressing by the lacuna that currently exists in critical approaches to time in comics. Current approaches have been divided along the same binary lines as approaches to narrative. Studies that prize the sequential quality of comics, because of a shared affinity for McCloud's and Eisner's definitions of comics as 'sequential art,' typically persist in suggesting the primacy of a relationship of integration between space and time. Alternatively, studies that are predicated on the French model of comics analysis, studies that traditionally subscribe to a tabular reading of comics, tend to disregard intradiegetic time in favour of a 'reader response' procedure. A consequence of the theorization of this procedure has been that time, as opposed to merging indistinguishably with space, becomes an ambiguous non-entity both within the text and without. When time does form an object of study, its presence and functions are usually implied rather than explicitly described and explored.

In part, the limited presence of time as a critical concern in comics studies can be ascribed to the relative youth of the field; many of the critical works implied by the above-mentioned categories consciously limit their analyses to comics' narrative structures. The work of Hannah Miodrag, for instance, produces a narrative system into which concerns over temporality, both intradiegetic and extradiegetic, could easily be injected more prevalently. Temporal concerns, however, are only of limited interest as she attempts to redress some of the critical missteps perpetuated by early Anglophone comics criticism. Her monograph *Comics and*

Language: Reimagining Critical Discourse on the Form is devoted to an extended criticism of McCloud's assertion that "space = time" and to advancing our understating of comics as a network, under the purview of redefining comics as a unique literary form. While her work is indispensable to the growth of comics studies and time is necessarily implied by the subject of the work, structuralist concerns over narrative, semantic concerns over the image-text relationship, and essentialist concerns over definition are of primary importance and ultimately dictate the parameters of any discussions about time.

While time's treatment as a secondary concern in works like Miodrag's is not pernicious, particularly when considering the necessity of establishing a strong narrative structure upon which comics studies can build, the reluctance of critics to adopt more traditional models of literary and philosophical approaches to time could stunt the growth of the field and even limit our understanding of comics' narrative practices. Groensteen's concept of the network was revolutionary and has increasingly become a staple of contemporary Anglophone comics' criticism (its status in Francophone comics' criticism has been long established); however, it does present important limitations, and these limitations often go unnoticed or undeclared. Even though his narrative system has produced many analyses of comics that rely on the intervention of the reader for producing narrative sequence from a collection of interrelated images, a phenomenological description of this process has remained curiously absent from the field. The most notable exception is the system of *Visual Narrative Grammar* (VNG) established by Neil Cohn. While Cohn's research is a product of psychological, cognitive, and linguistic studies (rather than of a traditional French sensibility), it lends itself particularly well to the tabular model of reading, though it still prizes sequence as an essential component in the process of reading comics. VNG functions by dividing sequences of panels and text into individual

semantic chunks and organizing them within a defined narrative structure, thus allowing the non-linear relationship between them to be inferred and the context remembered (Cohn 307, 2016).

Cohn describes this relationship as part of his continued attempt to develop a grammatical approach to comics' hybrid (or multimodal) semiotic system. Within this system, for Cohn,

narrative structure functions to package semantic information at a discourse level, analogous to the way that syntactic structure functionally packages semantics at a sentence level. Thus, narrative structure is a “macro-syntax” for ordering the semantic relationships often specified by models of discourse coherence. (307)

Further in his essay, Cohn goes on to categorize several different relationships possible between images and between text and image and describes the inferences that would produce an appropriate reading of the interaction between various “interfaces,” both including and excluding their own unique grammar⁹. This system allows Cohn to preserve a sense of sequence, while also allowing him to avoid the problem of linearity that is evident in McCloud's system. The complex relationships that he describes, therefore, rely on a tabular interaction between images as they gradually collect to produce semantic meanings.

The ability of this theoretic model to straddle both poles of the binary separation within the field make it one of the most convincing systems for understanding comics' narrative structures; however, while Cohn does address time in an article written for *Studies in Comics*, he does so only in a limited capacity and primarily to challenge various notions of sequential images. Cohn, like Miodrag, situates his project in opposition particularly to McCloud's system,

⁹ In an asymmetrical verbal/visual dominance, for instance, the verbal/visual element offers supplementary information to the dominant element, which is semantically significant on its own. In Cohn's example, a series of onomatopoeia support sequences from a combat scene. In this example, the “Modality (visual graphic) uses a Grammar (narrative) and controls the meaning (Semantic Dominance), while the other modality (verbal-graphic) plays a supportive role semantically, with no grammatical (syntactic) structures” (311).

and, while he does not use the dominant French model to support his argument, embraces a non-linear and indefinite ‘reader response’ process upon examining the function of time in comics. In this article, Cohn proposes that semantic chunks (like those observed in his discussion of VNG) are temporalized by a hierarchic interrelationship; within this model “panels representing the same time and character should be grouped first, followed by panels at the same time but

different characters, then finally with panels in other times” (142). Importantly, though this system appears

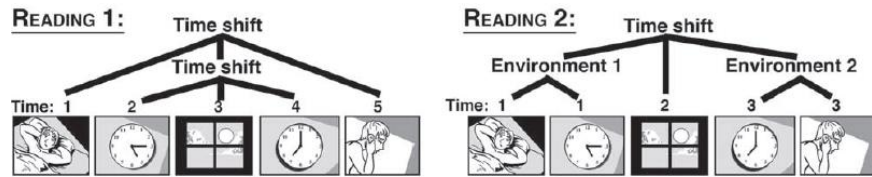


Figure 6: From "The Limits of Time and Transitions: Challenges to Theories of Sequential Image Comprehension, Cohn, *Studies in Comics* 1.1, 2010.

definitively ordered, it still gives rise to ambiguities that could not be accounted for in McCloud’s system, but that are necessarily allowed to exist within Cohn’s system, which resists any easy attempt to equate space and time. Yet, despite isolating a major limitation of McCloud’s narrative system and suggesting the inherently ambiguous and tenuous relationship that exists between space and time, Cohn’s system does little to define and understand the process of reading as a temporal and temporalizing action. As Daniel Punday suggests, the cognitive turn in narrative theory “has tended to emphasize how readers make sense of the text rather than the way that the text functions as an object to be acted upon” (107). While Cohn always recognizes the importance of reading, he never approaches the process as a phenomenological action occurring in time, and never describes the process by which the comics narrative *becomes* (or is made) temporal. It is in an effort to fill this critical gap that I propose turning towards traditional narratological models, particularly that described by Paul Ricoeur in volume one of *Temps et Récit*, and adapting them to the comics medium. Ricoeur’s conception of the relationship between narrative and time in this work lends itself well to the comics

medium because of the centrality of the reader; any narrative, within this model, remains incomplete before being given context by the reader and by an implied pre-narrative tradition (which Ricoeur eventually refers to as *tradio*). While this relationship between reader and text is not unique to Ricoeur, his work is given greater depth by its ambition to describe the relationship between time and narrative and to describe the actualization of narrative in time. Ricoeur's project is, essentially, to describe narrative phenomenologically through the action of reading, and, in this, can be practically distilled to think about the process of reading comics and the reader-response processes that are produced by the medium's semantic ambiguities.

Toward an understanding of narrative: Ricoeur's mimetic project

Ricoeur's project in *Temps et Récit* is ambitious, multifaceted, deeply ingrained in the Western philosophical tradition, and, ultimately, seeks to re-contextualize Heidegger's conception of "being-toward-death" through the production of a phenomenological understanding of narrative. As such, his philosophy is far too broad to rehearse here, though some sketch of his understanding of the relationship between time and narrative is necessary to furthering the proposed discussion of this chapter. Ricoeur opens *Temps et Récit* with an extended discussion of Book XI of St. Augustine's *Confessions*. Richard A. Rosengarten suggests that Ricoeur's decision to begin the text with Augustine's *Confessions* (as opposed to Aristotle's *Poetics*) emphasizes what will become the orienting principle of the text – "the ontology of the *distentio animi*" (171), the distention of the soul. For Augustine, the *distentio animi* is identifiable with the impression that time makes on the soul, an effect that he describes in his project to identify and qualify the passing of time; in essence, for Augustine, the soul becomes distended by the movement of time, and, as such, is the only effective means of identifying the passing of time, something he believes brings him closer to defining time and, by

extension, eternity and divinity. Rosengarten's assertion about Ricoeur's appropriation of the *distentio animi* as an organizing principle, however, is supported by the notable absence of eternity in Ricoeur's reading of Augustine. Ricoeur begins his reading at Chapter 14, 17 with the question: "what is time?" (Ricoeur 22), entirely bypassing the discussion of eternity that opens Book XI. The subsequent reading of the *Confessions* is, consequently, focused almost uniquely on Augustine's attempt to define time aporetically by persistently raising various doubts and objections to each apparent aporia that he identifies (as already existing, either through previous philosophical and theological knowledge or through common sense) or that he himself produces; Ricoeur returns to eternity at the end of the chapter only to propose that Augustine's conception of eternity and its contrast with 'human' time suggests an intensification of our experience of time (22). The first, and most fundamental, aporia that Ricoeur isolates from Augustine's text is the question of time's being or non-being (24); everything that follows – the identification of the *distentio animi*, which is itself a product of Augustine's attempt to measure time – is an extension of the phenomenological basis represented by this initial question. Ricoeur, here, embraces an ordinary language approach to time, contrasting the way we speak about time to the way time is addressed by the sceptical argument. The attempt to define time in this manner, however, leads to an important ontological paradox: "comment concilier la positivité des verbes « avoir passé », « survenir », « être » et la négativité des adverbes « ne... plus », « pas... encore », « pas... toujours »?" (26). Time, it follows, cannot have being if the past is no longer, the future is not yet, and the present is not always (26). This apparent movement between the past, present, and future leads to the identification of a further paradox: "*Comment* peut-on mesurer *ce qui n'est pas*?" (26). Augustine, like the sceptics, assumes that the present is

indivisible and that, therefore, we seek only to measure the past and the future (in ordinary usage, we often speak of the past getting longer and the future shorter).

The opposition of the present to the past and future is, however, resolved by Augustine's formulation of a triple-present. Within this formulation past and future are no longer distinct temporal entities but become modalities of the present; this transformation in their status, for Ricoeur, is characterized by the grammatical shift from noun to adjective. The past, present, and future become the present of the past, the present of the present, and the present of the future. The germs of this formulation are found in the movement away from the question of how we measure the past and future and toward the question of where the past and future are located. Ricoeur, here, isolates Augustine's turn toward memory and anticipation. The past is located in memory as an image engraved on the mind, while the future is an image anticipated, a sign acting upon the mind. Finally, it is through these related notions of location and measurement that Ricoeur approaches the Augustinian concept of the *distentio animi*. Time, as Augustine will prove by considering various notions of movement (astral movements, the trajectory of light from the stars, and the rotation of earth), cannot be identified with movement itself, but, rather, must be regarded as the measurement of movements. In this sense, what is measured and extended is not the movement itself, but the impression that the movement makes upon the soul (44). The clearest example of the distension of the soul that is produced by this process is evident in the act of reciting a poem from memory, as the attention of the speaker is gradually transferred from the whole poem to what is left of the poem. This active transferal of attention transforms the present, which is here identified as the *praesens intentio* (present intention), distending the temporalized mind, as the future is transferred into the past by the present intention until the

eventual relegation of the entirety of what was future into what is now past (Ricoeur 45, Augustine 27, 36).

After having performed this extensive interpretation of Augustine's *Confessions*, Ricoeur proceeds by interpreting Aristotle's *Poetics*, and, while critics have favoured his interpretation of Aristotle as a defining feature of the narrative argument rehearsed in *Temps et Récit*, this interpretation is in fact defined by his preceding discussion of Augustine (Rosengarten 171). Ricoeur, himself, acknowledges his belief that Aristotle's concept of *muthos* (emplotement) offers an exact counterpoint to Augustine's *distentio animi*. Where Augustinian distention of the soul gestures towards discordance, Aristotelean emplotement represents "le triomphe de la concordance sur la discordance" (Ricoeur 66). Rosengarten describes the inversion "as the movement from the accidental to the intelligible, the singular to the universal, the episodic to the probable or necessary" (175). Finally, Ricoeur synthesizes *muthos* with the cathartic effect of *mimesis* to suggest the importance of the reader, concluding that a narrative text is incomplete without the intervention of a reader. The end of a text is, ultimately, the effect it exerts upon a reading audience, and, as such, the culmination of the reading process is actualized at the extradiegetic level and is characterized by the pleasure expressed by the reader at the conjunction through the act of reading of poetry with culture (Ricoeur 102-04).

The eventual product of this interpretive exercise and of the meeting of Augustine and Aristotle in Ricoeur is the formulation of a new mimetic model; however, where Aristotle's formulation of *mimesis* does not address time, the influence of Augustine on Ricoeur re-introduces time into the new mimetic model. Furthermore, mirroring the triple present of Augustine, Ricoeur formulates a triple-*mimesis* (Mimesis I, II, and III) and effectively places various temporal realities into contact with one another, ultimately producing what he believes to

be a constructive circularity. Mimesis I reflects a natural pre-understanding of narrative time by isolating the symbolic, semantic and temporal qualities of action, or more broadly of lived (or experienced) time. Turning toward English philosophies of language, Ricoeur suggests that a symbolic system renders an action readable, and, in turn, this symbolic system implies a set of culturally determined semantic rules that regulate the meaning of certain actions. For instance, a raised arm could, in different contexts, represent the act of saluting, voting, or hailing a taxi (114-15). Most important, however, is the fact that these readable actions exist in and occur across a temporal plane. The combination of the temporal nature of actions with their inherent readability predicts Ricoeur's conception of *treditio* by suggesting that actions naturally lend themselves to and even necessitate narrative production. Lived experience, for Ricoeur, is a manifestation of narrative¹⁰. Mimesis II, alternatively, acts as a mediator responsible for creating a dialogue between Mimesis I and Mimesis III and is temporally characterized by the isolated and limited action of the narrative production. Mimesis II, therefore, while it does represent the present of the text, also represents Ricoeur's concept of *emplotement* – it is the “shaping of events by a plot,” the “configuration” (Currie 31), that implies the causal relationship of events and organizes them into a determinate narrative order. Yet, in keeping with the influence that Aristotle exerts over this mimetic model, the significance of the narrative production can only be completed with its reception in the temporal reality of Mimesis III, which is itself characterized by the time of reading and of the reader. Here, in the act of reception, the circularity of Ricoeur's formulation becomes evident – Mimesis III necessarily leads to a new Mimesis I. Put simply, the reception of the text always produces a new pre-narrative tradition. For Ricoeur, however, this

¹⁰ It is this impulse to categorize lived experience as narrative that eventually leads to Ricoeur's thinking of Heidegger's existential formulation of “being-toward-death” in a narrative, and even literary, sense. While it does not fall within the scope of the present chapter, the ultimate aim of Ricoeur's text is to explore what narrative and literary production can tell us about life, death, and even eternity.

circularity is constructive and is better represented by a spiral than a circle; knowledge, in this mimetic model, is always enlarged by the renewed reception of the text. Mark Currie describes the productivity of this circle as the result of dissimilarity and of a struggle between the writer and the reader, claiming that “[t]his circle is basically hermeneutic in its nature, meaning that it is primarily about our interpretation and our understanding of the action that we encounter in literary fictions and, in turn, about the way that encounter changes our understanding of human action in lived experience” (32).

Philosophy in the gutter: Ricoeur and comics

One of the characteristics of comics most frequently noted by both theorists who prize sequence and those who prefer the tabular approach is the versatility of page layouts. Both, furthermore, agree that connections need to be made between the semantically isolated panels of the text, whether done sequentially or not; as noted in the previous chapter, the reception of the text and images as a coherent narrative is constituent on these connections and the ability of the reader to breach ‘gaps’ in the text. This can, and often does, lead to important ambiguities in the reception of comics narratives, despite a well-established tradition of reading practices (for example, the left-to-right and top-to-bottom trajectory of the “Z” reading pattern). The visual techniques of comics are such that these patterns have become increasingly limited in their capacity to account for all the visual strategies that artists employ, consequently leading to greater interpretive activity from readers. While Ricoeur’s mimetic model was not developed expressly for the interpretation of comics, the phenomenological approach upon which it is founded nevertheless offers a number of interpretive advantages over the theories of contemporary comics theorists. Where the influence of structuralism on many contemporary comics theorists has produced a collective impulse to identify, label, and categorize comics’

visual and narrative techniques, Ricoeur's system places primary importance on the reader and is, therefore, liberated from the rigidities of structure¹¹ and better equipped to explain the process of reading these increasingly structurally ambiguous narratives. By isolating the relationship between Mimesis I, II, and III, it becomes possible to account both for variations in narrative sequencing and for variations in the relationships between semantic materials, a practice that is, in some sense, discouraged by a purely structuralist approach. The relationship of Mimesis II and III is of particular importance to the application of Ricoeur's theory to the comics medium. The non-linear sequencing patterns and *plurivectorial* structure of the medium require the intervention of the reader in the production of narrative. Thus, while the tabular reading suggests that comics can be distinctly non-linear, the necessary intervention of the reader re-introduces sequence as a basic axiom of comics readership. The intradiegetic temporality of the text, by entering into contact with the extradiegetic temporality of the reader and by consequently being submitted to the reading process, necessarily becomes structured by the series of decisions that the reader must inevitably make about the text. The phenomenologically determinate linearity of this reading process (We can think, here, of Augustine's example of reciting a poem from memory and the gradual movement of the future into the past through the present) superimposes sequence onto the tableau represented by/within the text. In short, while the narrative sequences within Mimesis II may not be organized according to a linear temporality, the linear experience of Mimesis III creates circumstances within which the text and its temporal structure can be temporarily re-organized.

¹¹ My suggestion, here, is not that genre, medium, or structure are not important, but that Ricoeur's theory is flexible enough to be adapted to the purpose of interpreting comics; alternatively, the efforts by comics theorists to establish structural models for comics are often too specific and inflexible to account for the growth and transformation of the medium.

The fluidity of this process as it pertains to comics, however, falls beyond the purview of Ricoeur's original formulation of the triple Mimesis. While he does account for the importance of readership and interpretation, the purely textual (language based) materials that serve as the basis of his investigation are ill-suited to the process of re-organization suggested above. The inherent linearity of the written language encourages adherence to a fixed reading order. Only the extreme flexibility produced by comics' fragmentary structure creates the ideal circumstances for this process of re-organization. The divisions within the text represented by the gutter, for instance, disrupt actions and, by doing so, obscure the symbolic and temporal value of these actions, allowing them to be re-defined through reading. In Neil Cohn's example (cited above) both the actions of sleeping and talking over the phone are dislocated, in this case literally, from any temporal value. It is this dislocation that creates the possibility for Cohn's two differing interpretations of the sequence, each with its own temporal implications. Cohn's formulation of these two readings, however, is limited by his belief that they naturally inhere in the text; this belief is evident in his attempt to produce a hierarchy of textual groupings and in his suggestion that both readings simultaneously co-exist. The advantage of Ricoeur's mimetic model, despite never directly addressing visual narrative, is its ability to understand that the text is being acted upon and that the narrative is being actualized/temporalized by an external force. The reader is necessarily making a decision about the way in which the text should be read and, consequently, the way in which semantic material should be organized. This external actualization/temporalization of narrative is particularly evident when one moves beyond more stringently sequential works. The work of Chris Ware (which will be explored more deeply later in the chapter), for instance, often forgoes a definite sense of sequence. While his stories consequently encourage various interpretations and can be truly *plurivectorial*, no more than

one interpretation can be sustained by any given reading. Subscribing to every possible reading at once would effectively remove the possibility for any narrative vector to be established.

Rather, the existence of multiple potential interpretations can be explained by the relationship of Mimesis II and III to Mimesis I. Every new interpretation of the work creates a new pre-narrative tradition upon which subsequent interpretations of the work can be founded. Yet, no previous interpretation needs to be abandoned because knowledge, within Ricoeur's system, is best represented by a spiral and characterized by growth.

There is, however, one important limitation to Ricoeur's system in the context of its application to the comics medium. While the phenomenological basis of his system and its approach to time are more elaborate than many systems that incorporate space more prominently (both in comics theory and in theory more generally), Ricoeur's system remains largely mute on the influence of space on time. In following Augustine and adhering to the ontology of his *distentio animi*, Ricoeur similarly relegates time to an extra-physical existence in the mind and does not address the question of space beyond his recognition of Augustine's 'spatial' aporia of time. It is necessary, therefore, to address the relationship between each of these aspects of the text and, consequently, to reintroduce space more concretely into Ricoeur's temporal system. It is still more necessary, however, to avoid overly simplistic constructions of this relationship and inadvertently perpetuating constructions such as "space=time." Consequently, I propose amending Ricoeur's Mimetic model by incorporating the concept of the orienting space as it is defined by Daniel Punday. By adapting Ruth Ronen's concept of the "frame" and Gabriel Zoran's three leveled structure of narrative space, Punday is able to produce a system that accounts for multiple levels of intradiegetic spaces in digital media and to suggest the importance of the resulting orienting spaces to the comprehension of narrative. Within this system, Punday

suggests an important distinction between the space within which the action of a narrative occurs, which he will label primary space, and a space, which he labels the orienting space, that surrounds or contains this primary space and helps define it (97). In a video game, a medium that serves as one of Punday's primary examples of digital narratives, the primary space is represented by the "playable spaces" (the area in which the player controls an avatar and is immersed directly into the narrative) (93). The orienting space, alternatively, is more abstract and can be manifested in a variety of different ways; in video games, for instance, the orienting space is represented both by physical boundaries within the playable area that restrict the movement of the avatar and by various menus and missions screens that are made available to the player throughout gameplay (93-93). Furthermore, these orienting spaces often serve as a kind of introduction to the work, guiding players into the primary space. In video games, for instance, the primary world is often accessed through a 'load up' menu or missions screen (95).

Punday does suggest, however, that these orienting spaces are far more common in digital media than they are in print. "Print narrative," he says, "does not usually stage this somewhere, this orienting space, as a literal part of the work in the way most digital narrative does" (107); however, while his article does not address comics in any concrete way, the medium may represent a notable exception to this general trend in print narrative. As Punday, himself, notes, the work of Chris Ware, particularly *Building Stories*, is suggestive of an orienting space. Each story from the *Building Stories* collection is printed differently (small bound books and hardboards, for instance, and each story published in different sizes) (108). The principle of the orienting space, though, can extend beyond the work of Chris Ware specifically and be applied to comics more generally. I would suggest that comics textual gaps, like the gutter for instance, also become a kind of orienting space in comics. They are atypical in comparison to

the orienting spaces discussed in Punday's article – they are not presented as a literal map, features like the gutter are essentially empty space, and there is sometimes nothing particularly textual or symbolic about these features – but they do, in effect, literally structure and bound the primary space of comics narratives at an intradiegetic level that is removed from that primary space. And, like Punday's orienting space, these features have a fundamental impact on the way in which comics are read. Will Eisner's *The Contract with God* trilogy, with its single cartoon pages and the general absence of clearly delineated panels, offers a significantly different reading experience to the well defined and meticulously arranged panels of a work like Alan Moore's *Watchmen*. While the arrangement of the panels in chapter five of *Watchmen*, for instance, emphasizes the control that Ozymandias exerts over the primary space of the narrative by placing a panel directly in the center of the chapter, straddling the middle of each page in perfect symmetry, the persistent single cartoon pages of Eisner's work emphasize the introspective nature of the text and its religious questing. It is evident in works like these, furthermore, that, though they do not use the physicality of their publication format to influence the reading experience, these features are deliberately staged and intended to be engaged with at an intradiegetic level without being incorporated directly into the world of the text.

Punday's article, however, is limited in its discussion about time. Though he does reference the chronotope, the idea developed by Mikhail Bakhtin to describe the way that different genres are identifiable and even defined by their use of different configurations of space and time, he does so more to distinguish between the diegetic levels represented by the primary and orienting space (both are intradiegetic, though one occupies a space within the story-world and the other without) than he does for the purpose of commenting on the temporal variations or effects produced by the orienting space. In this respect, he serves as an ideal counterpart to

Ricoeur, whose primary concern is time. By combining their views on space and time, furthermore, it becomes possible to offer a more complete portrait of the interaction between these aspects in comics. The ability of the orienting space to shape a text and influence a reader can, in comics, be extended to the temporality of the work. Because semantic materials and, ultimately, the narrative are distributed across the page spatially, the orienting space intercedes between Mimesis II and III. Before the narrative can be actualized by the interaction of the time of the text with the time of the reader, it must be scanned and understood in its spatial manifestation. Consequently, the more indefinite the orienting space, the freer the reader is to interpret, and the more possible interpretations are likely to arise.

Ware to next: Mimesis and the Orienting Space in Practice

The works of Chris Ware have become a favorite case study of critics either attempting to defend and define the tabular understanding of comics narrative or at least attempting to complicate traditional notions of linearity. This popularity among academics is largely due to the complexity of Ware's visual techniques, particularly his intricate layouts, which often disregard established notions of reading practice and the typical significance of signs and symbols. The complexity of this visual grammar makes Ware's work ideal for demonstrating the mediating function of the orienting space and the consequent interaction between mimetic levels. Applying this theoretical model to Ware's work, furthermore, could reinvigorate critical analyses of this important cartoonist by introducing an added dimension to our understanding of his visual grammar. Many critics have used Ware's work to examine the prevalence and importance of both sequence and the network in comics. Some have even sought to characterize an interaction between these two important principles of comics studies. As in the broader critical discourse, however, time has remained absent or of limited importance in discussions of Ware's work. The

reintroduction of time into this discourse allows us to recontextualize the relationship between the sequential and the tabular by allowing us to better characterize the process of reading these works through an improved understanding of the reader's relationship with the space of the text.

In his introduction to *Jimmy Corrigan: the Smartest Kid on Earth*, Ware gives a sardonic "technical explanation of the language" of comics that at first appears to reinforce a sequential understanding of comics narrative. His explanation of the language poses a series of questions regarding a two-panel strip representing a mouse hitting a cat's head with a hammer. The questions address such issues as the continuity of the characters being represented (i.e. "do you see a) two mice and two cats' heads in two boxes next to each other one raising a hammer over his head, the other striking a cat with a very similar hammer, or b) one mouse and one cat head, portrayed at two different points in time, the result of comparison being the impression of the same mouse striking the same cat head with the same hammer?") as well as questions of order (i.e. "If b), did a) the mouse strike the cat head first and then raise the hammer, or b) first raise the hammer and then strike the cat head?")¹². Ware's purpose in establishing these more traditional, and even simple, notions of comics narrative, however, seems to be to disrupt these accepted notions of comics narrative with the text that follows. While the opening page of *Jimmy Corrigan* does rely on the continuity of the subject being represented across panels, it already disrupts the notion of action set out by Ware's question regarding the mouse raising the hammer. This opening page, rather, represents a series of establishing shots that gradually narrow the reader's perspective from the macrocosmic (the planet, hanging in space) to the microcosmic (Jimmy's house). Further in the text, as the narrative begins to move between the childhood of

¹² The use of the mouse and cat, here, could be a reference to George Herriman's *Krazy Kat*, which was noted for its structural inventiveness and disregard for established notions of comics' narrative practices. This reference would belie the claims Ware is making about the narrative language and would help reveal the irony implied by this explanation. The

Jimmy's grandfather and Jimmy's own adulthood, Ware also disrupts our expectation of the continuity of the character; Jimmy and his grandfather are identical in appearance. The only distinguishing feature between the characters is the state of Chicago at the particular moments being represented (Jimmy's contemporary Chicago and his grandfather's 1893 Chicago, characterized and identifiable by the Chicago World Fair). This disregard for some of the traditional techniques of comics narrative is effective in establishing the temporal role of spaces within the text, producing a kind of chronotope; the space of the city, effectively, becomes a tool for establishing and organizing time within the text, as the narrative moves between several moments in time. However, while *Jimmy Corrigan* is interesting for its use of time and practical for illustrating Ware's move away from traditional narrative techniques in the creation of a formally complex text, it only makes limited use of an orienting space. To understand the extremes to which Ware can go to with formal inventiveness and breaking with traditional techniques, we must turn, rather, to his *Quimby the Mouse* stories and to his *Building Stories*.

joke, mocking a preoccupation with sequence. These arrows instead lead to multiple narrative threads, never precisely delineating a cohesive structure. (92)

This openness to interpretation of the orienting space, here best represented by the arrows, leads to several different temporal interpretations of the text. The strip is characterized by two dominant panels/sequences at the top and bottom of the page, and, depending on the direction the reader chooses to adopt, the text can be understood as moving away from one and toward the other. If the text is read from the top of the page downward, the reading of the text would consequently emphasize a temporal movement forward, from Quimby's past toward his present, while the opposite direction would imply a movement from the present backward, toward the past.

Thus, the relationship of the reader to the vignettes contained in the middle of the page is determined by his/her decisions regarding the direction in which the text should be read. In this sense, while the text itself never "delineates a cohesive structure" and avoids any "preoccupation with sequence", the interaction between Mimesis II, in this case the indeterminate temporality of the text, and Mimesis III, the phenomenologically and temporally determinate experience of reading, will necessarily impose a sense of sequence on the disparate materials of the comic. The temporal direction in which these events can be read, the movement forward or backward within the text, may seem inconsequential; however, it can have a fundamental impact on a reader's understanding of the text. Read from top to bottom, the moments represented follow the linear action of reading, and the act of remembering is only another action in the sequence; read from the bottom up, the entirety of the vignettes are better understood as comprising the act of remembering and, consequently, become an integral part of one overarching moment. Each temporal reading, finally, could have an important impact on the reader's understanding of the

work's content. Read from the top down, the final sequence, in which the younger Quimby is remembering past moments, is best understood as producing confusion and, ultimately, a tragic tone, as the reader comes to recognize the health crisis of the rapidly aging Quimby. Confusion and tragedy are emphasized, in this reading, by the progression from what at first appear as gag strips toward the hospital bed of the closing panorama. Read from the bottom up, tragedy is replaced by a sense of nostalgia and longing, as the younger Quimby remembers these various moments, which terminate in a panorama emphasizing the perfect health of both Quimbies. Their resemblance to gag strips, in this reading, help introduce levity into an otherwise tragic situation. Though perhaps still a sad moment, this second reading is less pessimistic and allows the reader to find solace in the act of remembering. While this reading of the content is protracted and overly simple, it does serve to illustrate the different hermeneutic possibilities produced by the reader's conscious decision to read the text in a specific direction, and consequently highlights the importance of understanding the fundamental relationship between Ricoeur's mimetic levels as they apply to comics and its visual narrative tendencies.

Chapter Three: Movement in Comics Narratives

The subjectivity that Ricoeur's mimetic model introduces into the temporal analysis of comics and the variety of possible relationships that it identifies between image and text suggests further questions of importance regarding comics and the reading process, notably questions regarding order, frequency, and duration. While all three of these features, as they pertain to comics, have been studied academically, these studies have frequently either offered a limited scope in their analysis or have avoided addressing the inherent subjectivity of these features, aiming instead to produce objective approaches and measurements to time and chronology as it is manifested and distributed through these various features. Thierry Groensteen, for instance, does suggest the subjectivity of time in comics when he claims that "aucune durée interne réelle (mesurable) ne peut être assignée à une vignette BD" (91), but declines to pursue the topic further and does not address time at any depth throughout *Système de la Bande Dessinée*. Neil Cohn, alternatively, in "Navigating Comics: An Empirical and Theoretical Approach to Strategies of Reading Comic Page Layouts" introduces an objective approach to ordering comics pages by identifying a set of rules to produce standardized methods for reading various page layouts. These strategies are based primarily on cognitive and psychological approaches – such as the view, in Gestalt psychology, that proximity will lead to the grouping of objects/stimuli together. Cohn terms this reading strategy and the totality of these rules *assemblage* and identifies four general preferences that predict reading patterns:

1. Grouped areas > non-grouped areas
2. Smooth paths > broken paths
3. Do not jump over units

4. Do not leave gaps

While these preferences are founded on sound psychological/cognitive research and through the empirical observations made over the course of an experiment dedicated specifically to this purpose, they are ultimately limited by the underlying pursuit of objective approaches to order in comics. It would be difficult (or even impossible), for instance, to apply these general rules to works like those of Chris Ware (seen in the previous chapter); the logic of the Quimby mouse story, for instance, encourages the reader to disregard grouped areas while the arrows encourage the reader to follow what would traditionally be considered broken paths.

Furthermore, the addition of *lexia* would complicate the reading process and the application of these rules to the comics medium. To be clear, however, this is not a limitation of Cohn's experiment, which purports only to examine page layouts devoid of content either verbal or visual; it is important to note only because a practical understanding of comics often does necessitate bridging the gap between the visual and the verbal. How, for instance, do we read a series of panels with a word balloon or box overlaid above them all or a series of panels that all relate to a single word balloon that is spatially separate from them, or from part of them? In many situations, Cohn's preferences would remain relevant even after the introduction of *lexia*; if a word balloon is overlaid above a series of panels, the primacy of grouped areas and smooth paths would logically be applicable. The primacy of grouped areas, furthermore, is evident in most single panels that incorporate word balloons. The panels and balloons create a logical grouping of features. At issue, however, remains the order in which these features should be read and the question of their relation one to the other. Should *lexia* and image be considered as distinct features or in their relation to one another when considering reading order. Ultimately, the questions regarding order, as well as the related notions of frequency and duration, can be

understood as questions about movement: the movement from panel to panel and from panel to *lexia*, the movement of the reader's eye (which is of importance to Cohn's study and a number of others), the movement within the panel, the movement of the artist at his work. The order of the text can be recognized in the movement from panel to panel/panel to *lexia*, while duration is evident in both the movement between panels and *lexia* as well as the movement within individual panels. The movement associated with frequency, however, is more difficult to identify, and could, in fact, be associated with all four types of movement identified above. Frequency is normally associated with repetition and repetition is possible at the level of textual and physical movements; eye movements and motions of artistic production can be repeated as easily as individual panels, words, or intradiegetic actions.

Despite his suggestion that traditional methods of literary analysis cannot be applied to the *bande dessinée* because of a narrative structure that encourages synchronic readings, the terminology that Gérard Genette establishes in his *Discours du Récit* to talk about narrative structures offers an ideal narratological model within which to discuss and dissect the nuances of comics' narrative tendencies. Genette's approach to narrative is founded on the tension between *erzählte Zeit* (historical time) and *Erzählzeit* (Narrative time), consequently creating an interpretive space conducive to a subjective approach to narrative. Genette's theorization of order, however, balances the subjectivity inherent in the reading experience with the objectivity of an algebraic structural approach to suggest movements forward and backward within the diegetic time of the text. His conception of *prolepses* and *analepses* is ideal for the description of the textual and often temporal movement from panel to panel, and, despite seeking a certain degree of objectivity, can still account for the subjectivity of the reading experience. His description of duration, which also relies on the tension between historical time and narrative

time, furthermore, serves as an ideal compliment to the inherently subjective reading experience described by Paul Ricoeur, explored at length in the previous chapter, and offers a conception that is suited for the discussion of comics' narrative gaps. Finally, frequency may be more relevant to comics than to written narrative because of the multimodal nature of the medium and the potential repetitions created by the relationship between image and *lexia* – we can think, here, of Julia Round's concept of doubling – as well as the potentially increased possibility for repetition created by the addition of a new semantic mode. This chapter, consequently, will seek to recontextualize comics' narrative tendencies – in particular order, frequency, and duration – by analysing them through the scope of Genette's narratological model and placing Genette's model into contact with analyses drawn directly from comics studies.

Ordering the comics narrative

In describing order within western narrative literature, Genette isolates the related concepts of *prolepses* and *analepses* to describe the anachronistic tendencies that characterize this narrative order. That narrative is inherently anachronistic, for Genette, is evident in the tension between narrative time and historical time; narration is seemingly always an action of remembering or of anticipating, and events are, consequently, represented outside of their chronological order and are rarely narrated from the moment of their occurrence. We can, therefore, speak of *analepses* when a text looks back to a previous narrative moment, a tendency that is often suggestive of remembering, and of *prolepses* when a text looks forward in anticipation of a future narrative moment. In both cases, Genette distinguishes between an internal and an external capacity. External *prolepses/analepses* have no effect on the “primary narrative” (to which they are a secondary narrative) beyond offering supplementary information; external *analepses* serve to fill in narrative gaps or help define narrative moments for the reader

by turning towards the antecedent(s) to a particular narrative moment (Genette 39). Genette gives as an example of an external analepse the story of Ulysses' injury in the *Odyssey*, which chronologically precedes the events of the *Odyssey* and whose narrative weight remains distinct from the primary narrative (39). External *prolepses*, alternatively, function like epilogues, bringing narrative moments to their logical conclusion even if this conclusion is secondary to the primary narrative (59); Genette, here, gives the example of the narrative moments in *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* that are brought to a conclusion even after the primary narrative is completed with the hero's decision to leave the world and retreat into his art (the death of Charlus, the wedding of Mlle de Saint-Loup, the appearance of Odette three years after the Guermantes matinée, and the future experiences of Marcel) (61). The internal analepse, on the other hand, looks back to a moment that proceeds the beginning of the primary narrative and, consequently, falls within the chronology of this primary narrative. The internal prolepse, alternatively, represents Genette's most complicated feature within his conception of order. He describes internal *prolepses* as "des témoignages sur l'intensité du souvenir actuel, qui viennent en quelque sorte authentifier le récit du passé" (62). Internal *prolepses*, consequently, look forward to the present of the narrator looking back at the moment being narrated.

There are, however, two important limitations to bear in mind in the application of Genette's conception of order to the comics medium. On the one hand, there is the addition of images, which typically complicates the application of traditional models of literary analysis to comics. On the other hand, because Genette's structural model is conceived for the analysis of traditional written narratives, which are monovectoral, little attention is paid to movement. These limitations, however, can be overcome by keeping in mind Punday's conception of primary and secondary spaces elaborated upon in the previous chapter. As was the case with Ricoeur,

integrating Genette's and Punday's analytical models allows us to understand the visual space of the text as a mediating force that operates on the narrative; the integration of these models, consequently, allows us to describe narrative order more accurately while still accounting for the inherent subjectivity of comics' narratives. Furthermore, the integration of these models amplifies the movement implied by Genette's conception of order. While Genette, because of the monovectorial nature of the written language, does not overtly address the question of movement, it is implied by the forward and backward-looking motion of *prolepses* and *analepses*. The application of this analytical model to the spatial complexity of the comics medium necessitates an increased and explicit understanding of movement. To this end, I propose the hybrid conception of proleptic and analeptic movements as an ideal mechanism for describing order within comics. The proleptic movement, like Genette's conception of *prolepses* within written narratives, is forward looking and anticipates upcoming narrative moments; however, unlike Genette's *prolepses*, the proleptic movement is defined by a forward-looking motion across the visual space (both images and *lexia*, which are organized spatially) of the comic. The analeptic movement, because of the plurivectorial nature of comics, is more difficult to define, but is evident in two different movements within comics – the movement of the reader forward and backward across the tableau, and the chronological movement backwards within the text. The chronological movement backwards is simple, and replicates Genette's traditional *analepses*, relying on content rather than form. The movement of the reader across the tableau represented by the page, offers a more complex understanding of the reading experience; in this second sense, the analeptic movement allows us to describe the inherent interrelatedness of the panels and the process of producing order from the tableau. Because every panel is defined by the panels that precede and follow it to narrative meaning, there is a persistent movement backward

in the process of reading comics narratives. The action of looking backward towards previous panels to define the present panel represents an analeptic movement, as the reader must move backward across the visual space of the page, thus turning backwards both spatially and chronologically.

While these various movements make it difficult to trace order structurally because of the subjective experience of reading comics and of the backward and forward movements produced by the reading experience, it may in fact be possible to usefully distill comics narratives within Genette's algebraic system for organizing narrative structure. In *Discours du Récit*, Genette creates a system in which events are identified in their order of apparition in the text by a letter, each letter corresponding to a different event. These events are, subsequently, each associated with their chronological position within the historical time of the text, which is identified by a number. Thus, the sequence "A1, B2, C3" would represent a sequence in which events appear in the text in perfect chronological order, while the sequence "A3, B2, C1" would represent a sequence in which events appear in the text in reverse chronological order. After having established this basic structure, Genette introduces parentheses and brackets to facilitate "[l']analyse des rapports syntaxiques (subordination et coordination) entre les segments" (29), with brackets representing *analepses* and parentheses representing *prolepses*. Within this system, the sequence "A2 [B1 (C3) D1] E2" would represent a sequence within which there is an analepse interrupting between two events that occupy the same historical moment within the text (A2, E2), while the analepse (B1, D1) is itself interrupted by a prolepse (C3). The addition of brackets and parentheses emphasizes the relationship and the movement between segments of the

text. It is in this capacity to describe movement that this algebraic approach to narrative is applicable to the comics medium.

This relationship in comics cannot, however, be expressed exactly as Genette has done for written narratives. The presence of two semantic systems that are inherently interrelated, whether their meanings are conflicting or doubling (Round) is produced, introduces an added dimension of intradiegetic time. The reader must now navigate events as they are expressed both lexically and by the images and must even consider *lexia*, in certain circumstances, as an event in itself (for instance the action of speaking). If we apply Genette's algebraic distillation of order to this page from Joe Sacco's *Palestine* (the layout of which is relatively simple by comparison to the inventive layouts found throughout the work), for

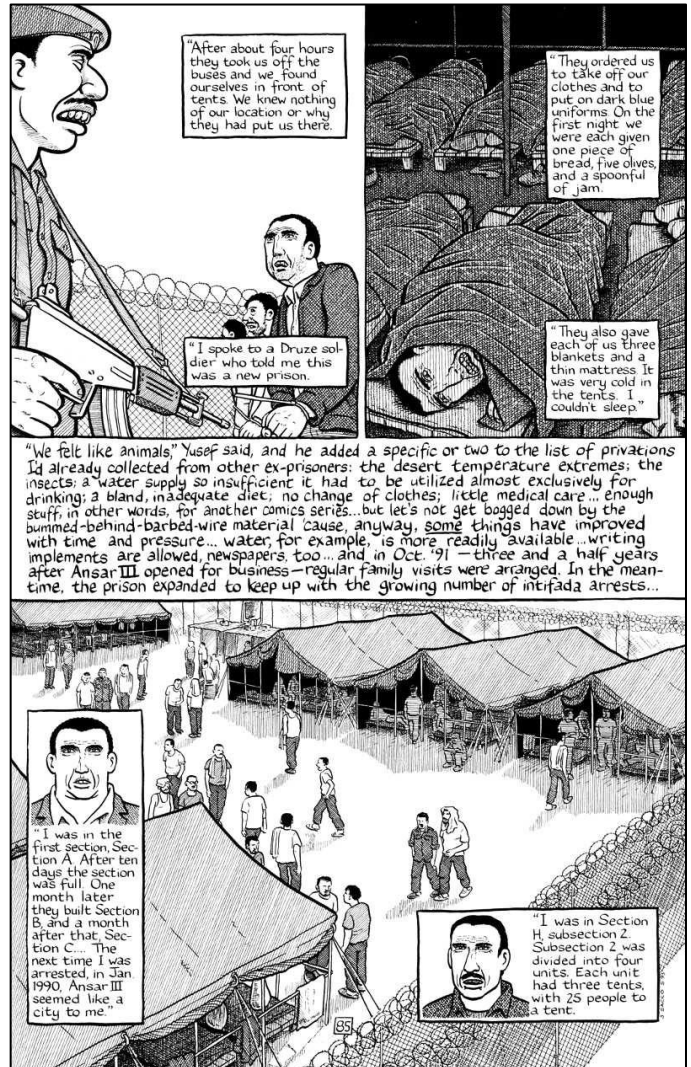


Figure 8. from *Palestine* by Joe Sacco. P.85.

instance, it is immediately evident that it will prove impossible to apply Genette's algebraic expression of order unilaterally; the attempt to do so would give rise to a number of prohibitive problems. Notably, there is the question of which semantic system should be read first in any given situation, which would often lead to different interpretations of chronological order and, consequently, diegetic relationships. A related question would also arise regarding the

association of more ambiguously distributed images and *lexia* to their counterparts; in the above page, for example, the reader must make a decision about the large central narrative box and its relation to the images. While it is clearly a continuation of the narrative started in the opening narrative box of the page, its relation to each image is more ambiguous; does it naturally relate to every panel, to one specific panel, or to none of them?¹³ It is, consequently, necessary to find a method for expressing these relationships that can account for the important interrelationship between image and text.

To this extent, I would propose the addition of the Greek *sigma* (Σ) to Genette's algebraic language. In mathematics, the *sigma* is used to indicate *summation*, a technique in calculus used to determine the sum of a finite number of terms in a sequence. Mathematically, the use of the *sigma* necessitates that a finite but specified number of integers be applied to the basic equation. While its mathematical purpose is of little interest to literary studies, the symbolic value implied by this mathematical function of the *sigma* could be useful in describing order in comics. The *sigma*, essentially, represents the necessity for an equation to be repeated within limited parameters. Certain features of comics, like the narrative box from *Palestine*, necessitate a similar act of repetition from the reader, who is encouraged in such situations to scan the tableau moving forward and back repeatedly across several features. If Genette's algebraic system is meant to highlight relationships of subordination and coordination, the *sigma* notation is meant to highlight a broader relationship between one event and a collection of others. The above page from Sacco's *Palestine* could, therefore, be represented by the following sequence of variables:

¹³ This question is particularly relevant to the work of Joe Sacco, which often interrupts the regular comics text with pages of pure *lexia*, which seemingly relate to no specific image sequence.

$$\sum E2 [A1 - (B2) - C1 - (D2) - F1 - (G2)]$$

Within this sequence, E represents the central narrative box, while A,C, and F represent the adjacent images and B, D, and G represent the narrative boxes contained within these adjacent panels. The numbers 1 and 2 represent the two diegetic moments represented across this page, with 1 representing Yussef and the other's arrival at Ansar III and 2 representing Sacco's interactions with these prisoners in the present. The content of the central narrative box, in which Sacco recollects Yussef's description of his experience at Ansar III, is general enough that it can be understood to have a relationship of coordination with all the images on the page; it does not describe any particular incident, though the statement "We felt like animals," can easily be applied to all adjacent images – the visuals are, for instance, reminiscent of cattle being herded. This narrative box, furthermore, represents the continuation of the text begun in the narrative boxes contained within the adjacent panels, suggesting its relationship with other *lexia*.

While, in practice, it would be counterintuitive to begin reading the page from the central narrative box (both because the page does follow a more traditional reading order and because, lexically, it follows from the previous narrative boxes), the algebraic representation of the page must begin with the narrative box to appropriately capture its relationship with the entirety of the page. In Genette's representation of order, subordinations and coordinations are represented in such a way that the emphasis is on the relationship between adjacent moments; moments stand in a proleptic or analeptic relationship to the events immediately prior to or following them. Thus, to demonstrate the broader relationship created by the comics page layout and the asynchronous reading method that it encourages, it is necessary to remove features with broader and non-linear relationships from Genette's linear representation. These features, like the narrative box, are then consequently placed before the series with the sigma notation in place to represent their

relationship with the page rather than with only a limited number of narrative moments. Sacco's narrative box, however, though standing in relation to the entirety of the page, is accorded a specific location on the page, and it consequently appears within a relatively fixed order; it must, in fact, be read after the narrative boxes from both prior panels for the page to make sense lexically. Consequently, despite being represented outside of the appropriate order in an effort to more accurately represent its relationship with the entire page, the narrative box preserves the letter (E) that would have accurately represented its order of apparition in the reading process.

There still remains, however, one important problem to address in the application of this formula to Sacco's page, and to comics more generally: how do we describe the movement between features of the page while still considering the tableau as a whole and the broader interrelations maintained by certain features? Features like the narrative box will often stand in relationship to moments that are diegetically distinct. In the page from *Palestine*, for instance, the central narrative box stands in a proleptic relationship with the images from the adjacent panels, while it is simultaneous with the adjacent narrative boxes. However, because the text is organized spatially across a visual plane, we can describe the relationship with a certain degree of accuracy. The path of the eye, as it moves across Sacco's page from left to right and top to bottom (encouraged by the more traditional layout of the page), naturally rests upon images first and *lexia* second, as the narrative boxes are located at the right of each of the upper panels and toward the bottom of the lower panel. While the narrative box to the left of the lower panel, being drawn vertically, leaves less room at the top or left of the page for the image, it is still inferable that the reader's eye would rest upon the image first, as the eye, in returning to the left of the page from the extreme right at which the previous *lexia* concludes would naturally travel across a substantial portion of the image first. Consequently, because the images on this page are

given precedence in the order of apparition, the algebraic representation must consider their visual preponderance. To this end, I have used brackets (representing *analepses*) to describe the relationship between the narrative box and the page, while the association of the letter ‘E’ with the number ‘2’ creates a temporal association between the narrative box and the other *lexia* of the page, capturing their simultaneity. The other *lexia* of the page, furthermore, are represented in parentheses, which represent *prolepses*, and are consequently represented as distinct and a movement forward and away from the temporality of the images. By using the sigma notation in combination with this complex use Genette’s bracketing system, we can, in effect, algebraically describe the dual relationship that the central narrative box maintains with multiple temporally distinct moments represented across the complex visual space of the comics page and can work towards categorizing and understanding these subjective narrative movements.

Duration in Comics

Despite the ability of this algebraic approach to represent narrative order across a visual space by emphasizing the necessary movement of the reader across the page, it is inherently limited, or even incapable, of describing duration, either in comics or in traditional literature; however, while being identified as a separate chapter within Genette’s study of literary narrative, the questions that Genette raises about order and duration share a similar foundation. They both arise from the distinction that he makes in the introduction of his analysis between the temporalities represented by narrative time and historical time and the inherent tensions that can arise between them. Thus, while there is a difference in approach, the inherent subjectivity that he attempts to address with his algebraic approach to order is identical to the subjectivity that he attempts to address in his chapter about duration. Where the chapter on order was meant to examine the tension between narrative time and historical time by analysing the order of events

as they appear in the text and as they are chronologically, the chapter on duration is meant to examine the tension by isolating “la vitesse du récit” (83) through the analysis of the relation between the duration of events (in years, months, days, hours, minutes, etc.) and the length of the text measured in pages and lines (83). This practice leads to the suggestion of different gradations of narrative speed, ranging from the acceleration of the narrative rhythm (historical time is greater than narrative time), to the isochronic text (historical time and narrative time are the same),¹⁴ and to the slowing of narrative rhythm (narrative time is greater than historical time). There is an inherent difference, for instance, between a passage of three lines accounting for 12 years and 190 pages accounting for two to three hours that Genette isolates in *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. Genette, furthermore, suggests that these variations in rhythm often form patterns within the broader fabric of a text. He suggests, for instance, that Proust produces the gradual deceleration of the text by focusing more heavily on longer scenes covering shorter periods of time later in the text (88). This is perhaps most evident in Proust’s decision to end the work with the *Matinée Guermantes*, which corresponds to the above-mentioned scene of two to three hours represented over 190 pages, perhaps the largest variation between historical time and narrative time in the work.

As was the case with order, this model for understanding duration can be applied to comics, though there are some important limitations that need to be addressed in doing so. As with traditional literary texts, individual comics can all be said to have a particular rhythm and variations in that rhythm. This rhythm in comics, however, is not determined uniquely by the written narrative. We must, as will always be the case when analysing comics, address the

¹⁴ This text, for Genette, is completely hypothetical; it serves only as a foundation upon which the analysis that follows can be constructed by contrasting this hypothetically perfect isochronic text to the variations on this isochronic text that he will elaborate further. This observation leads to his conclusion that all texts have specific and varied internal rhythms.

presence of images as a constituent part of the narrative; we must also bear in mind the organization of narrative across a visual space. To this extent, it is impractical to follow Genette in searching to isolate the relation between historical time and narrative time by examining such features as the number of pages and lines of text used in constituting an event; the production of narrative across a visual space creates the possibility for too much variation for this practice to be tenable. Comics pages can be organized into any number of formations, ranging from the traditional nine-panel grid, to splash pages, to a 22-panel comic strip (see Figure 10 below). It is more practical, consequently, to turn toward panels both collectively and individually, examining narrative events as they unfold within and across this visual space. Duration, understood as the tension between historical time and narrative, is best understood, in comics, as the movement within and across panels.

It is therefore useful, here, to follow Paul Atkinson in turning toward Phillippe Marion's concept of *graphiation* in understanding movement within the static pages of the comics text. For Marion the act of graphiation is the creation (by the graphiateur – the author or authors of a text) of a subjective imprint characterized by the individual style¹⁵ of the creator(s) of that work. This individual style, which may be more or less subjective depending on its adherence or not to prescribed traditions, thereafter hails the reader of the comic and invites him to participate in, or at least recognize, the act of creation that originally produced it. Marion claims that :

le lecteur-spectateur de BD est appelé à mettre son regard en coïncidence avec le geste du graphiateur; c'est en épousant l'empreinte graphique de celui-ci qu'il peut participer au message. Dans cette mesure, la graphiation est donc

¹⁵ By 'style' I do not mean to propose that Marion is suggesting that the authors are referencing an established tradition (such as *ligne claire*, or an in-house style like that espoused by Marvel), but that he is, in fact, referring to the deeply personal, and even at times impressionistic, nuances in the author's (authors') act of creation.

fondamentalement autoréférentielle. Avant de contribuer à la figuration, elle est automonstration, dans la trace, d'une identité graphique perceptible dans la spécificité subjective d'une empreinte. (36)

For Marion, the comics image is self-referential in that it signifies to the reader its own act of creation and encourages, even necessitates, that the interpreting reader participate in this creative act. This conception of graphiation is also important, however, because Marion does not subscribe to any approach that would define comics as a hybrid medium, rejecting its definition as merely a narrative form that combines images and *lexia*; rather, graphiation is also manifest at the level of *lexia*, which are generally drawn rather than typeset (Atkinson 271). While this rejection of the 'hybrid medium' definition of comics may be limited in certain ways (for instance, in assuming a too smooth integration or interrelation between images and *lexia* which would be problematic if applied to certain texts), it is useful in bridging the divide between traditional literary analysis and comics studies by drawing the two narrative modes together under one interpretive umbrella.

More importantly, and despite never using the term himself, Atkinson's focus on movement highlights the impact that different artistic styles and methods can have on the rhythm of a comic. This is most evident in his comparison of Paul Dini and Alex Ross's *Batman: War on Crime* and Bill Sienkiewicz and Frank Miller's *Electra Assassin*. Ross's photorealistic painted illustrations deliberately obfuscate any evident lines or traces of the artist, while Miller's style is characterized by almost chaotic linework that, in *Electra Assassin*, often incorporates paint splatters, making it nearly impossible to ignore the process of production implied by the images. The difference in these styles, however, goes beyond their ability to invoke the act of production by also suggesting the way in which they should each be read. The deliberate and

slow process of Ross's illustrative work (a process that involves three-dimensional models or actors, multiple layers of paint, and an air brush finish) emphasizes the static quality of the image; "In the quest for three-dimensional verisimilitude



Figure 9. Paul Dini and Alex Ross, *Batman: War on Crime*, p.81.

there is a loss of the graphic movement found on the two-dimensional surface of the image" (272). This rigidity in the image invites the reader to linger over it, consequently slowing the rhythm of the narrative. Alternatively, in Miller's work the "arc of the splattered paint across the page refers to the speed of the artistic gesture" (273), inviting the reader to move rapidly through the visual space of the text. To this extent, the visual techniques of the comics medium create an explicit tension between historical time and narrative time, either prolonging or shortening the reader's subjective experience of duration. The above page from Dini and Ross's work (Figure 9.) perfectly exemplifies the connection between Atkinson's argument about movement and Genette's conception of duration. The lack of outlines on the characters, the renaissance style use of light, and even the typeset *lexia* unencumbered by any speech balloons all emphasize the rigidity of this moment. Despite the apparent brevity of the moment (suggested by the limited *lexia* and the images' occupation of only one page), its duration is prolonged by the static image, the rigidity of which gives little indication to the reader of a natural need to move from image to image. In fact, movement is only implied by the final panel of the sequence; the first four panels

offer only a change of perspective rather than the movement of the characters. This use of the static image, here, heightens the tension and suspense implied by the narrative content.

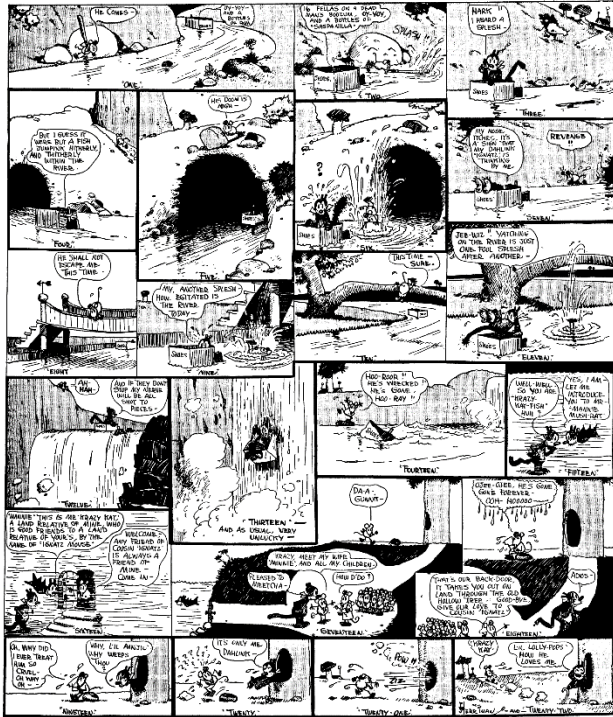


Figure 10. *Krazy Kat* by George Herriman, Published May 14th, 1916. Retrieved from: <http://www.comicstriplib.org/display/9>

Atkinson's argument about movement and Marion's conception of graphiation are, however, limited in one important respect – they fail to consider *lexia* beyond their status as marks on a page or traces of an imagistic artistic production – and, consequently, both theorists view *lexia* as integrated or imbedded into the visual fabric of the text. Atkinson, interpreting the work of Marion, claims that image and text are “joined in a common movement which is indexically linked to the hand of the artist/author or graphiateur – the

comic book's implied author” (Atkinson 270). This description of the integration of image and text is sufficient when considering texts in which the narrative modes integrate harmoniously, but cannot accurately describe texts in which there is a dislocation between the narrative modes. Any tension between the narrative modes, furthermore, fractures the identity of any implied author, revealing the possible multifariousness of artistic production in the comics medium. This tension can even be observed in comics created by a single artist. In George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* comics strips, for instance, the illustrations are nearly always dynamic; every strip is a variation on one basic plot in which Ignatz mouse throws one or many bricks at Krazy Kat. This dynamism in the image suggests an accelerated rhythm; however, the text, which is also written

by Herriman, can be deliberately difficult to read, often incorporating puns, archaisms, misspellings, and vernacular grammar (this is especially true of Krazy's speech patterns). The difficulty that can arise in reading the text from these comics strips intermittently suggests a decelerated rhythm, conflicting with the accelerated rhythm suggested by the dynamic illustrations. In Figure 10, for instance, the illustrations are evocative of constant movement through their incorporation of lines implying the movement of water, which runs through the majority of the narrative, yet, when Krazy speaks, the reader must necessarily pause over certain words ("Jumpink," "Dahlink," "Yatching," etc.).

This tension between text and image also raises an important question regarding Genette's understanding of duration, which seeks to analyze the tension between historical time and narrative time by examining physical features of the text: is it possible for an individual narrative event to simultaneously be characterized by two durations each represented by an individual feature of the text? Baetens and Lefèvre, while they were not, being comics theorists, addressing Genette's theory, offer the necessary critical tools to answer this question and to address the tension between image and text. In their attempt to address rhythm in comics, Baetens and Lefèvre distinguish between the separate notions of "story rhythm" and "reading rhythm," a practice that suggests the separation of the diegetic and the narrative (Conrad, Lambeens 100). This distinction allows us to suggest that the rhythm of the story, characterized by the movement between events, can be frustrated by the process of actually reading these events. By incorporating this distinction into the framework for understanding duration provided by Genette it becomes clear that duration, while it relies heavily on features like graphiation and stylized writing (which, in comics, are more important to duration than the number of pages and lines), must also consider the movement between panels. In Figure 10, for instance, the *lexia*

consistently slows the rhythm of the text at moments when Krazy is about to be hit by Ignatz. At the level of the individual panel, this slowing of the rhythm seems purposeless; however, at the level of the broader text it creates suspense for the initiated reader, who would be awaiting the inevitable contact between a brick and Krazy's head. Thus, what initially appears as an intermittent deceleration of the text, is revealed as a conscious alteration of the rhythm. To this extent, it is useful to note Baetens and Lefèvre's isolation of 'repetition' and 'alteration' as features that would effect the reading rhythm. Alteration is produced when new elements are introduced into the narrative (for instance, Ignatz being temporarily unable to hit Krazy), adding suspense to the narrative and facilitating a slower reading rhythm. Alternatively, repetition is produced when elements recur, placing the reader at ease and facilitating an accelerated reading rhythm. Individual events, therefore, are not characterized by different durations. Rather, duration can be directly affected by the complex interplay between panels and by the tension between image and *lexia*, features that can easily introduce various levels of repetition and alteration into the text, complicating the relation between historical time and narrative time.

A Short Note on Frequency in Comics

What both order and duration should have made evident, beyond the difficulty in approaching the space of the comics narrative, is the importance of frequency to the medium. For Genette, frequency is a relatively simple feature of the written narrative, characterized in its essence by repetition. In comics, a medium defined by the word and the image, however, frequency, even imagined as simple repetition, is given greater importance by its omnipresence in our critical understanding of the medium. Baetens and Lefèvre, for instance, turn toward repetition to add greater depth to their model of narrative rhythm in comics. In understanding order, furthermore, it is important to understand the repeated movements forward and back

within the intradiegetic time of the text (mimesis II, in the terms of the previous chapter), and the co-dependent movement forward and back of the reader across the physical (visual) space of the text. In this sense, frequency/repetition, are also central to much of Neil Cohn's critical output, which relies on cognitive sciences and such physical cues as eye movements to explain the reading process. The more linguistically oriented work of critics like Hanne Miodrag, Julia Round, and Charles Hatfield, alternatively, localizes repetition in the interrelation of word and image in their attempts both to defend language's place in comics' criticism and to identify the symbolic or semantic relation between word and image. This repetitive nature of the medium encourages constant and consistently innovative interpretations and re-interpretations of both individual works and the form more broadly, and, in this repetitive motion begins to resemble Ricoeur's non-viscious mientic spiral; every new interpretation of the form produces a new mimesis I and a new understanding of these various repetitions. Thus, while I have only paused briefly, here, on the concept of frequency/repetition, it is because the concept runs throughout the entirety of my analysis and the systems of many established critics in ways that, I hope, are now evident if they had remained hidden. Structurally, comics is a medium of and about frequency.

Conclusion

The purpose of this work, in broad terms, has been to understand the relationship between space and time as it appears in the Comics medium and, subsequently, to relate any findings about these concepts to our understanding of the way that narrative functions in comics. Furthermore, I hope to have suggested that fostering a deeper and more complete understanding of the comics medium and comics narratives requires a broader approach than is possible if critics, particularly those who specialize in comics, continue to limit themselves to specialized approaches with a too narrow definition of comics and a limited interest in its intersection with other narrative media. While the relationship of comics with film is often acknowledged, due largely to parallel historical development and the organization of narrative into static frames, a relationship with novels or narrative poetry, for instance, has been slower to manifest in the critical literature. There has been a conscious effort by some critics, in fact, to distance comics from literary narratives; I would follow Hannah Miodrag in suggesting that this tendency arises from a desire to defend the value of comics, a medium long considered either juvenile or a popular form of entertainment of little artistic merit, as a subject worthy of critical attention. It should be noted, here, that I have also, in some instances, succumbed to this defensive, and perhaps in a sense reactionary, position in formulating my own views about the importance of applying more traditional literary approaches to the comics medium – exaggerating, for instance, the limitations of certain literary theories in their application to the comics medium.

That said, in an effort to address the tension in comics scholarship between comics and literature, I consciously chose to adapt important narratological theories centered primarily on more traditional literary forms to comics narratives. I turned, specifically, to Paul Ricoeur and Girard Genette because both theorists offer models that could help produce a comprehensive

view of the comics medium despite its hybridity as a medium using both images and words as integral parts of the diegesis. Ricoeur's theory of the various temporal levels associated with the act of producing and receiving literature is flexible enough in the relationship that it identifies between reader and author to successfully suggest a reciprocal relationship between producer and interpreter that distends across time; this distention, which proposes the persistence of interpretation and re-interpretation across time is ideal for describing the experience of reading comics (which itself encourages repeated readings as well as movements forward and back across the narrative). Finally, by applying Ricoeur's theory to the plurivectorial narrative of comics, it becomes clear that narrative order is indeterminate outside of the reader's interaction with the physical space of the page (the layout of the panels, for instance).

In contrast and as a check to the more subjective, reader-response understanding of narrative formation produced by my interpretation of comics narrative in relation to Ricoeur's mimetic model, I sought to use Genette to re-introduce some sense of objectivity regarding order and the related notions of duration and frequency. Genette allowed me to suggest that, in keeping with the previous chapter, there was an interpretive space that the reader could inhabit between narrative time and historical time. His narrative algebra, however, also allowed me to suggest that the "semantically overdetermined" relationship between panels does offer a preference for certain prescribed reading patterns. In other words, while comics undergo a persistent and sometimes radical re-interpretation that can alter the temporal relationship between reader and text, certain conditions will always adhere. It was my express desire, in juxtaposing interpretations of comics narratives informed by Ricoeur and Genette, respectively, to balance the interpretive space of the reader and the productive space of the author. Authorial intention, consequently, manifests as a foundational assumption of my interpretation of comics narrative in

Chapter Three, though it is mentioned nowhere explicitly. Further investigations into the presence and importance of authorial intention in the production and reception of comics could be a valuable avenue for future research, helping produce more comprehensive systems for understanding comics narratives.

Finally, I believe that the importance of this work is, ultimately, multifaceted. On the one hand, it exposes a medium to a number of theoretical perspectives that had not been considered adequate for analyses of the comics medium (Genette himself, for instance, makes a distinction between traditional literature and BD, claiming that because they inherently function differently, his approach could not be applied to comics). On the other hand, my argument that narrative is represented visually and, consequently, spatially, allows me to produce analyses of the interaction between space and time that are liberated from the tension between sequence and synchronicity. Finally, I hope that this work, by embracing concerns both for literature as a field of critical inquiry and comics as a narrative and literary form within the same critical framework and argument, will participate in the tradition established by critics like Hilary Chute (with *Comics as Literature?*) of destabilizing the institution's traditional ontological understanding of literature. I hope also, however, that it will challenge definitions of comics and push specialists in comics studies to re-consider literary approaches in light of what they can tell us about the comics medium.

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