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The Narrative Structure of Comics

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The Narrative Structure of Comics

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Sommaire

La bande dessinée est un genre littéraire qui existe depuis plus de 100 ans dans sa forme actuelle mais que l'on commence à peine à regarder de façon critique. Ceci pourrait être dû au fait qu'elle combine deux éléments, la prose et l'image, qui prédominent de façon significative sa propre existence. Pourtant, ces deux éléments interagissent de façon différente dans le cadre de la bande dessinée et cette interaction unique est au coeur même d'une voix narrative propre au médium. Comment ces éléments, ainsi que d'autres que l'on retrouve seulement dans la bande dessinée, unissent leurs efforts pour élaborer et structurer une narration? Cette question même est au coeur de mon mémoire.

Pour mieux comprendre la structure narrative de la bande dessinée, nous devons examiner les éléments qui la composent et leurs diverses interactions. L'élément formateur de la bande dessinée est le cadre qui existe lui-même dans un environnement spatial qu'est la mise en page. Les relations entre cadres, l'espace invisible qui les sépare est l'endroit même où le lecteur crée des liens entre ces deux cadres pour ainsi comprendre ce qui les unit. Ce qui se trouve à l'intérieur du cadre, l'image et le texte, sont aussi d'importance capitale car ils ont leurs propres façons d'interagir. C'est à travers la compréhension de ces diverses interactions qui nous pouvons comprendre le langage unique de la bande dessinée.

Mots clés: image, cadre, mise en page, clôture, icône, phylactère, roman graphique, représentation

Summary

Comics are a literary genre that has existed in its current shape and form for more than a century, yet it has only recently been the subject of serious research. This may be due to the fact that it combines two elements, prose and still images, which have existed for even longer still. Yet these two elements interact differently in comics than they do in other mediums, and that unique interaction is at the very heart of a new narrative voice. How do these two elements, along with others derived from them that are unique to comics, combine to shape and structure a narrative? That question is at the very heart of this paper.

To better understand how a narrative comes about in comics, we must break down its various elements and look at how they exist by themselves and how their interaction with others shapes the unique narrative structure of comics. The smallest unit is the panel, which must itself exist within a greater spatial environment called the layout. The interactions between panels, the invisible space dividing them, is the place where the reader creates a link between the two panels and understands their cohesiveness. What is within the panels, the image and the text, also have their own ways of interacting. It is through this understanding that we can properly understand the unique language of comics.

Keywords: image, panel, layout, closure, icon, word balloon, graphic novel, representation

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Defining comics

Although the comic book has been around for more than a century in its current shape and form, it has only recently begun to be considered a subject of serious study. Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art*, published in 1985, was the first major work to explore the structure of comics but it was Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, published seven years later, that sparked a debate on comics' properties, specific method of conveying meaning as well as calling into question what could actually be considered a comic. This debate is very similar to the one that occurred in the early twentieth century in film, eventually leading to various theories on film language and structure. But why has this debate taken so long to take place? After all, no sooner was film invented that many of its pioneers began to take a look at the logistics behind what could have first been seen as simple moving images on a screen. Perhaps this has something to do with the public's general perception of comics as being a low literary form aimed primarily at a younger audience. As McCloud points out in *Understanding Comics*: "For much of this century, the word "comics" has had such negative connotations that many of comics' most devoted practitioners have preferred to be known as "illustrators," "commercial artists" or, at best, "cartoonists"!" (McCloud: 18). As McCloud and others have only recently begun to ask: what is a comic and what are its basic elements? How do words and two-dimensional images combine to convey meaning? These questions are at the heart of what I wish to explore. Much as film has its theory on film language and prose has its own particular structure and rules, I hope through this study to understand

the comics medium in the hopes of developing even further a consistent theory on comics language.

What can be considered comics?

Before discussing how comics are structured, it is important to establish exactly what is comics, especially since there seems to be a number of different definitions depending on whom you ask. As McCloud points out, we must first separate comics, which refers to the medium, from comic book or comic strip which are actual physical entities (McCloud: 4). McCloud bases his own definition on Eisner's initial theory of comics being sequential art, only adding elements to further distinguish it from other art and literary forms. According to him, comics could be described as "[j]uxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer." (McCloud: 9) The first thing we notice about this definition is the importance of the image in McCloud's view of comics. In prose, words are symbols (letters) arranged in a specific order to represent something to the reader. While not readily accessible, the reader nevertheless imagines the appropriate object since he knows that a certain cluster of symbols represents a certain object or idea. With comics, the image makes the object in question more easily accessible to the reader as the reader immediately sees it for what it is. This allows comics creators the luxury of having an immediate "mise en scène" without having to rely on many words. I will get back to this point later on, as we will see how this notion of immediate "mise en scène" is very similar to what has been developed in film. But the crux of McCloud's definition centers around the idea of images being juxtaposed. Comics have for the most part always appeared on paper, in a tangible form. I say for the most part because the

invention of the internet has led to online comics, but these are very similar to the printed kind by the fact that they appear on a computer screen as they would on paper. Only the medium changes, the way in which elements are brought together and interact to create the particular comics language remains the same. An online comic and the familiar printed kind operate on the same basic principle: a space must be separated to encompass the story the comic artist wishes to tell. Where the film has a screen on which changing images will be shown, comics separates the available space with panels that will encompass the story and guide the reader in his reading of it. The panel is a series of lines, usually rectangular or square, that encompasses a particular image, in a way restricting it while focusing our attention to whatever image the creator wants us to see. This idea of composition is very similar to the one used in graphic arts but uniquely adapted to comics needs as a medium that combines both visual and literary elements. As comics have evolved, so have panels and creators now play with this notion in the composition of their page (layout), leading us to see various kinds of panels and sometimes an absence altogether which suggest various things. I will go further into detail about panels later on as I examine the concept of closure, but for now this short overview should help us understand McCloud's definition. If we were to see a panel in which a man holds a hat that he is wearing, followed by a panel in which the hat is now in the air in his hand, we would understand that the man took of his hat and raised it in the air (see Appendix 1). This notion of conveying information is the most important aspect of McCloud's definition of comics. To further illustrate this point, let us consider two images of Hugo Pratt's famous adventurer Corto Maltese (see Appendix 2). In the first image, we see Corto hanging on to an underwater platform wearing a full diving suit.

In the next image, we see his helmet partly above water and it is at that moment that we understand that he is making his way to the boat or shore. But if we were to only invert these images, the message would be completely different as we would now assume that he would be diving underwater instead of coming up after an expedition. Images are not only defined by what they are themselves, but also by their position to other images. This idea of juxtaposition is the main element that separates comics from film, where images are superimposed on top of one another to simulate movement and also the passage of time. Filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, who himself provided much of the learning in film's development, recognized the power that two images could have, although in this example, they are superimposed (as the film medium dictates it) as opposed to juxtaposed:

> "Each sequential element is perceived not next to the other, but on top of the other. For the idea (or sensation) of movement arises from the process of superimposing on the retained impression of the object's first position, a newly visible further position of the object... From the superimposition of two elements of the same dimension always arises a new, higher dimension." (Eisenstein: 49)

From a combination of images, a new idea emerges. In film, the viewer is left with the impression of the previous image as he sees the new one. In comics, both images are side-by-side but seeing them both produces a new meaning depending on their position and the relationship between the two. This concept is much akin to Kuleshov's experiments with film and sequencing. In the famous experiment, Kuleshov would show an actor's face, followed by a dead baby. The viewer would understand that the face was showing compassion towards the death of the baby. Kuleshov would then show the exact same shot of the actor's face, but this time followed by a plate of food, and this time, the viewer would interpret the face as showing hunger. In comics, movement and time are

affected by what is between the panels as much as what is in it. The same effect can be reproduced; the image being interpreted according to what is before and after it. Again, I will touch up on this later when I examine the importance of closure in achieving this effect.

While being the most effective definition of comics currently existing, McCloud's theory does present a few problems as it leaves out certain types of comics from his definition. The juxtaposition of images is an important aspect in comics but what McCloud does not recognize is that sometimes a single image contained within a single panel can also tell a story and suggest movement and time. Comic strips such as *The Far Side* are an excellent example of this notion. While *The Far Side* is usually only limited to a single image, it is also usually accompanied by a caption (text). In this case, an action is not the result of our synthesis of two images, but rather our synthesis of an image and the accompanying text. Movement of time is implied by the simple fact that when we read the caption, we assume that the image represents only a fraction of the amount of time that this caption implies. While the image is frozen in time, our understanding of it is not as we assume movement occurs before and after the image, depending on the text and context. In both instances, closure plays an important role in our understanding of comics. I will get back to this notion of a single image being able to tell a story later as I examine in detail the image.

Closure

Now that we have a good general idea of what comics actually are, let us look at the most important element in our grasping their specific language: closure. Understanding closure will allow us to more accurately examine individual aspects that we have just

brushed on so far. McCloud defines closure as "[the] phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole..." (McCloud: 63). In the case of comics, it is the synthesis our minds create to unite two different images. It is what allows our mind to create a link, to build a narrative, between two separate images. In the case of similar images where only a part of the image changes, closure can simulate movement. Our previous example of the eye closing or opening would fall under this category. Closure can also simulate the passage of time as in the act of reading, our mind understands that time passes between each panel, the exact length being determined by what is actually in the panel or in the text. But I will look at movement and time more in-depth later on, the understanding of closure being of utmost importance here, for as McCloud correctly states: "[I]n a very real sense, comics is closure!" (McCloud: 67) Prose relies on descriptions and dialogue to convey ideas, to describe characters, to move the narrative forward; everything the author wants you to know is described in detail. Note that for the sake of argument, I will not go into a debate on the differences between the signified meaning and the intended meaning, leaving this to semiotics. I only wish to examine the forms, not necessarily intent and message at this point. For the most part comics do not rely on descriptions to convey information. While some comics are more prose-oriented in the sense that they do contain elaborate descriptions and dialogue, closure nevertheless remains the most important aspect of the "comics language." In that regard, it shares certain similarities with film which also had to find its own language, its own means of being understood. This brings us to the notion of semiotics, as seen by Roland Barthes:

> Semiology therefore aims to take any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all these, which form the content of ritual, convention or public

entertainment: these constitute, if not languages, at least systems of signification (Barthes: 9).

Semiotics clearly illustrate that man relies not only on language for means of communication, but also on other systems and symbols. When trying to devise a language for film, semiotics became an important element as it allowed us to comprehend how we could understand what we were seeing on the screen. Film and comics being both visual mediums, there is an immediate understanding of the message without us necessarily realizing the forces at work. Ladislav Matejka recognized this:

> According to Jurij Lotman, the leading theoretician of the Tartu school of semiotics, every system which employs a set of signs, specifically ordered for the sake of mediating between two or more individuals may be defined as a language (Matejka: 207).

A reader will immediately understand comics as it follows certain logical guidelines that guide him in its understanding. Principles such as organization of elements from left to right in a progressive order, images in succession that the reader can understand at a fundamental level all help to convey meaning. Like film, comic books could be described as Christian Metz says as "[a]n easy art, [which] is in constant danger of falling victim to this easiness." Film is too intelligible, which is what makes it difficult to analyze. "A film is difficult to explain because it is easy to understand." (Monaco: 130) While vastly different on many other levels, comics could be considered in the same manner as film in this regard. Visual narration is deceptively easy to understand as most of the information provided is given immediately through the image whereas language asks another operation of the reader: that he imagines each and every word for what it is instead of simply looking at what it is and understanding it immediately. Written

narratives demand more reader participation in that sense. Being at a crossroads between the purely visual and the written text, comics involve the reader in understanding the relations between images while at the same time giving a lot of the necessary information to understanding through the image. Closure is what ultimately guides the reader to understand the information provided by the work.

Icons and closure

All of this brings us back to McCloud and the notion of closure. His definition of closure presupposes that we understand certain elements on a basic instinct, that we have an innate sense of them. These elements, or icons, allow us to understand an idea based on a visual representation. For example, we know that this symbol "8" refers to the number eight and we understand that this represents a specific amount of something. Letters and language work in much the same way. McCloud describes these as non-pictorial icons which have "meaning [that] is fixed and absolute." (McCloud: 28) This is in contrast with pictures which can vary on meaning depending on the representation of the object in question. In this case, style and craft play great roles in conveying meaning and emotion as the picture is not associated directly to any preconceived idea. Icons become important in the understanding of comics as they allow quick recognition of meaning while at the same time being able to change in aspect and style, and thus create evoke different emotions from the reader. Thus, like film, comics can be considered easier to understand as they reach us on a level of understanding that is more accessible than written language can be. In his book *Du lisible au visible*, Ivan Illich recognizes the rise in popularity of various new types of media and attributes it partly to this notion:

> L'image et sa légende, la bande dessinée, les tableaux, schémas, graphiques, photos, résumés et leur intégration avec d'autres médias exigent de l'utilisateur un rapport au manuel qui se situe à l'opposé des modes de lecture scolastiques (Illich : 8).

Language, itself comprised of various icons, is much more complex in structure and as such demands more from the reader than visual mediums such as film, comics or art. Punctuation, grammar and other literary devices help to guide the reader of the written language, but the fact remains that the word "pen" is but a representation of a the writing device we refer to, whereas a picture of a pen would convey meaning immediately. Icons therefore act to help facilitate closure. But what are the ways in which they can be used?

Closure in practice; types of transitions

Having established the importance of closure in the way comics communicate meaning, let us now look at the various ways in which it is done in comics. Being a strictly visual medium, comics must rely on a greater number of transitions and a greater variety than film, but we will nevertheless see there are many similarities. Again, we refer to McCloud's *Understanding Comics* which offers a rather complete list of the various transitions that can be used. They are as follows: moment-to-moment (a), action-to-action (b), subject-to-subject (c), scene-to-scene (d), aspect-to-aspect (e) and non-sequitur (f) (refer to Appendix 3 for a complete breakdown). Let us quickly see each transition, although I will delve more in detail on a few of them when I examine the notion of movement, of time and of "mise-en-scène" in comics. A moment-to-moment transition implies very little action, and as such very little closure. Each image is similar, since as the name suggests, only a moment has elapsed between the two. Japanese artist Kazuo Koike's masterpiece *Lone Wolf and Cub* offers many examples of this type of

transition. A warrior's seppuku (ritual suicide) becomes an almost poetic affair as the action is broken down into an almost gruesome ballet where the warrior and his observers' expressions tell the tale in themselves. The action could have easily been done in two or even one frame, but the breakdown serves to add more resonance to the act. This type of transition is often used in Japanese comics, which as a result, tend to be much longer than American and European comics. The art style consisting of fewer lines and details, they can afford the luxury of taking their time in developing a scene as the image within takes less time to flesh out. This is not the case in most comics where the creation process involves trying to break down the story as much as possible. Or, as Randy Duncan puts it: "Comics are reductive in creation and additive in reading." (Duncan: Internet). In a way, a moment-to-moment transition would be very much like film, if we were to take a look at the various frames of a scene one next to another. The most common transition found in comics is the action-to-action which suggests both movement and the passage of time. In most comics, it is what drives the narrative forward. Naturally, closure plays a great part in us understanding this type of transition. A greater deal of time passes between this type of transition than the moment to moment. Action is examined at the beginning and the end of the motion to suggest what has come to pass in between. Michel Rabagliati's *Paul a un travail d'été* showcases this beautifully by showing the title character falling in water. We see him in the canoe, then he is already in the water. A moment-to-moment transition would have included another at least another panel in between (if not more) showing Paul as he is about to fall in the water. The subject-to-subject transition works within a same scene and will often help to create an interaction between various subjects through dialogue or action. A higher level

of closure here is demanded as the reader is asked to understand the relations between the

various subjects. Action is often implied instead of shown, which much like film, leaves

a lot to the imagination of the reader who must fill in the blanks so to speak. Creators can

play with this notion to create the desired emotional effect. In film, a great example of

this would the Hitchcock's famous shower scene in Psycho, where as much action is

implied as is shown. The blood running down the drain leaves us to decide how

gruesome the murder actually was as we see very little of it actually happening. The

great innovator Hergé uses this to great effect in *Vol 714 pour Sydney* as he shows a

gangster looking through his binoculars to see Tintin in the next panel. The scene shifts

from one place to the next within a same scene and allows the reader to understand the

transition through the clever use of binoculars to indicate the shift and to add tension to

the scene as the observation is revealed to be menacing through the dialogue. For its part,

the scene-to-scene transition takes us across time and space to another element entirely.

Much like a chapter or a specific break will change the scene in a book, this type of

transition takes us to another part of the story. Jim Steranko, the renowned cartoonist

known for his genre-bending experiments shows in *Nick Fury, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.* how

this transition can add drama by using it to show the destructive effects of a sonic beam

across the world. The aspect-to-aspect transition involves looking at the various aspects

that make up a place or an idea in order to set up a mood. This helps to position the

reader in terms of the scene and, as McCloud puts it, acts more as a wandering eye

allowing the reader to get a better grasp of what the creator is trying to convey (McCloud:

72). David Lapham uses this transition often in *Stray Bullets* as a means to establish not

only a location but a mood as well. Lapham uses very little narration preferring to use a

series of images to give a more thorough description of the setting. Finally, as its name suggests, the non-sequitur transition offers no apparent logical relationship between two different images. It is interesting to note here however that while most of these transitions offer no logical relationship, it can sometimes hide one that may ultimately be revealed later in the work by other images or text. As we go further along, I will continually refer to these types of transition for they allow us to better understand some of the elements that go into determining the structure of comics.

Icons, symbols and representation

We have already looked at icons and the manner in which they act to facilitate closure. But icons are not the only signs used in comics, although they are without a doubt the sign that is seen most frequently. To better understand other signs, let us go back to notion of semiology, the study of signs. Semiotics, although linguistic in nature, have played a great role in helping to elaborate the language of film and I believe that this notion can be extended to the study of comics. James Monaco touches on this very subject in his attempt to learn how to read a film. Elaborating that a sign must necessarily consist of a signifier and a signified, he goes on to state:

> In literature, the relationship between signifier and signified is a main locus of art: the poet is building constructions that, on the one hand, are composed of sounds (signifiers) and, on the other, of meanings (signifieds), and the relationship between the two can be fascinating. (Monaco: 127)

Comics also share these properties with literature as the written language is also often a part of comics. But for now let us keep this aside and focus on what this notion of semiotics entails in terms of the image, for comics is not strictly a medium based on language. Monaco provides us with a great example of what this entails for film, and this

can also be applied to comics. Should we read the word "rose", we might imagine the red flower we gave to our loved one on St. Valentine's Day, but someone else could be thinking of another type of rose that they saw in a garden. Or "rose" could signify the past tense of the verb "to rise", we could imagine someone having gotten up on his feet. That is the beauty of language for we can play with these multiple meanings to give words various implications. Writers will often play with words in such a manner as to suggest various readings of a same sentence or word. Poetry is based on this play of words. For its part, film cannot play as much with this notion as the author's meaning is not so much implied as it is represented. In film, the image of a rose must be shown, thus taking away the reader's part in imagining it as he wishes. But nevertheless, the filmmaker has a certain control over the image. He can decide to show a rose from a certain angle or a specific type of rose so as to elicit various emotional responses from the viewer. As Monaco states: "The reader of a page invents the image, the reader of a film does not, yet both readers must work to interpret the signs they perceive in order to complete the process of intellection." (Monaco: 128) Comics have the unique advantage of combining both the properties of film and literature. As it is primarily a visual medium, the way in which a rose is represented affects the reader's perception. At the same time however, a panel could have text where the word "rose" is used in a way as to suggest multiple meanings while the image could be of something else pertaining to the story. In this case, comics would have properties similar to literature. Therefore, the relationship between signifier and signified in comics could be seen as more complex than film and literature as it can be adapted to reflect properties of either of them, depending on creative choices.

All of which brings us back to the icon. If the image is important in comics, how can creators play with it in order to assign meaning? Again, we must turn to film for the answer. In *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, Peter Wollen suggests that there exists three types of signs:

> "[t]he icon, a sign in which the signifier represents the signified mainly by its similarity to it, its likeness; [t]he index, which measures a quality not because it is identical to it but because it has an inherent relationship to it [and] [t]he symbol, an arbitrary sign in which the signifier has neither a direct or an indexical relationship to the signified, but rather represents it through convention." (Monaco: 133)

Therefore, the image is not limited to conveying information simply by representing what it means to represent (the icon) and merely playing around with the way in which it is represented, but it can also suggest, either through established relationships between subjects (the index) or convention (the symbol). Juxtaposed images can create a story not only by showing action through panels that suggest movement, but can also assign meaning by juxtaposing images that may be entirely different but are linked through an inherent relationship. Again, we can see the importance of juxtaposed images in creating a narrative, but could this also be done through one single image? Is McCloud right in stating that only juxtaposed images should be considered comics?

Towards a reconciliation of a single image as comics

In *Discours, récit et image*, A. Kibédi Varga examines how stories can be told through images. For that to happen, there must be a clear narrative, the image must be able to show human action within a certain frame, for which there must be a beginning and an end. Human action does not necessarily limit it to actions between humans, rather that the action evoke emotions through its relationship to human behaviour. Landscapes

would thus not be considered as narratives but comics such as *Milk & Cheese*, where the protagonists are a carton of milk and a piece of cheese, would be considered as they mimic human action. While Varga does suggest that the easiest way to create a story through images is to juxtapose them, he also recognizes that a single image can be considered a story in the right context. He provides several examples of paintings which can be considered as being narratives within a single image, but I will instead focus on Theodore Géricault's The Raft of the Medusa to illustrate his point. In it, we can see stranded passengers on a raft, there are a few dead on the left but as we move closer to the right, the passengers seem more and more alive as they see the rescue ship in the right hand corner. Clearly, this painting suggests a story and is not merely a snapshot of a moment. There are clear indications of a narrative line from left to right (which is not to say it should always necessarily be from left to right). Varga explains the difference between juxtaposed images and singles images that relate a narrative:

> "La série narrative est de caractère épique, elle raconte une vie et cherche à éveiller notre admiration. L'image narrative isolée est de caractère dramatique, elle suggère une crise et cherche à susciter auprès du spectateur des émotions plus violentes comme la pitié, la sympathie ou l'horreur. " (Varga : 106)

While they are different in nature, both the single image and the juxtaposed images tell a story. Could the Raft of the Medusa or other paintings where there exists a clear narrative line be then considered to be comics? Varga provides us with an element of the answer when he states that:

> "… par rapport au récit verbal, [le tableau narratif] représente une réduction : le récit complet ne surgit dans la mémoire du spectateur que s'il le connaît déjà… [t]out tableau unique représentant un récit se présente finalement comme une illustration à cette différence près que le texte est absent… " (Varga : 108)

A painting, while clearly stating a narrative, can only be considered an illustration unless there is accompanying text to suggest that there is anything else. In this instance, text would act to perform closure, to suggest movement and the passage of time. While a painting might suggest human action, that action would be frozen in time without the appropriate text to indicate or imply the passage of time. A label caption would not be considered text under this definition as it would only serve to enhance the image, and not perform the closure necessary for it to be comics.

In their book *Pictures and Words New Comic Art and Narrative Illustration*, Roanne Blair and Mark Sinclair examine narrative illustration in all its shapes and forms, from silent multi-panel stories to interactions between images and texts. Of particular interest is their chapter on single-panel stories. As they are not interested in comics as a genre or the particular workings of it, they simply present various narrative stories with their own comments on the work or the intention of the author. By their own account, the single panel "denies any pictorial sense of "before" or "after" but instead captures a moment in time, using it to tell a larger story." (Blair: 40) As such, many of the stories they present could not be considered comics as there is no sense of evolution or closure between the various elements. I shall look at but two, the first a single-panel illustration by Scott Garrett and the second an illustration by David Shrigley (see Appendixes 4 & 5). In the first illustration, image and text both coexist without affecting one another directly. There is no sense of evolution in the story, no sense that time has passed or that events are different as a result of the coexistence of both elements. I would therefore argue that this illustration would merely be considered as such although there is an element of narrative in the comment that the text makes on the image. Nevertheless, it is an image

captured in time with additional information provided through the text. The second illustration, however, is much different. The drawing is a crude representation of a topless (naked?) man with the word joy above it. But it is the text below that actually tells the story. By adding the words: "after joy: arrest, trial, prison, murdered in prison", the illustration takes a whole new meaning as a narrative structure begins to take place. His smile suddenly seems to take a whole new meaning as well as we can only guess what atrocities led him to prison and then to being murdered. In this instance, text and image interact to provide new meaning, to tell a story that goes beyond capturing a moment in time.

With this in mind, we could therefore consider comics to be juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, or single images suggesting movement and the passage of time, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.

The structural elements of comics

Since they have traditionally targeted a younger audience, comics seem to be a simple medium to understand. After all, they are but a combination of images with text, text that is on the whole less intimidating than the text we may usually find in a novel. And therein lies the problem of comics and the perception of them in the general community; underneath this simple exterior lies a much more complex art form than it is generally credited for. While it does contain both text and images, we cannot separate the two of them and analyze them individually. Comics are built on the tension that exists between these two elements on the same page, and it would thus be foolish to use structures of analysis that focus solely on one of these aspects to interpret the whole. Comics are not novels, nor are they film or paintings, and while we may use certain elements of the traditional criticism of each element, we must keep in mind that they need to be adjusted to reflect the distinctive nature of comics. Much of the current comics criticism is concerned with determining which of its aspects (text or image) is the dominant one. This is to the detriment of comics criticism as a whole as so much time is spent debating over this issue that no development is made in other fundamental issues. For now, I will focus on exploring comics and narration as it exists in this art form. As comics borrow heavily from other mediums (and increasingly other mediums, particularly film, borrow from comics as well), I will also examine how comics are similar and differ from other traditional (or I should say here, more examined) art forms.

A brief history

One of the first problems we encounter when dealing with comics is the lack of a true sense of history. No one knows for sure when comics first originated; did they begin with the invention of the printing press or did they exist in other forms before? Were Christian murals or Egyptian paintings the first comics, or can we go even further back to images found in prehistoric caves? As Irene Pennaccioni puts it, this lack of history has caused many problems:

> L'origine de la bande dessinée pose le problème théorique et historique de la rencontre de deux systèmes de signes qui lui préexistent : le linguistique et l'iconique. Voilà pourquoi la bande dessinée n'a pas seulement une histoire, mais aussi une « préhistoire ». (Pennaccioni : 19)

While we can exactly pinpoint when film and photography were invented, we cannot do the same for comics as it was not created from a technological advancement. As such, it differs greatly from film which slowly created its own narrative through the works of some of its most innovative creators, filmmakers like Eisenstein or Griffith to name but a few. These creators advanced filmmaking through the application of old storytelling techniques and the development of new ones that worked for this particular art form. Soon, filmmaking was viewed as a serious form of expression and many critics started examining it to better understand the narrative techniques used and why others worked to help a film and why others could not work in this medium.

We consider today the father of modern comics to be Rudolphe Töpffer who created, in the mid 1800's, light, satiric picture stories that "featured the first interdependent combination of words and pictures seen in Europe." (McCloud: 17) At the time, these comic strips were seen as a humorous way to convey light messages that would appeal to a wide audience. That stigma stayed with comics for a very long time, which prevented it from experiencing the same type of growth that filmmaking did. This may be due to the

fact that filmmaking offered something new, whereas comics seemed to merely combine two elements that had existed for a long time: images which had been used by the Egyptians and Mayas among others to tell stories, and words which eventually replaced images as a means to convey information following the invention of the alphabet. Both are considered to be icons; images "used to represent a person, place, thing or idea." (McCloud: 27) The letters of the alphabet (and other signs) are considered to be non-pictorial icons, their meaning is fixed and does not change according to their appearance. As such, we could see the letter "B" written in many different ways and still understand that it means a "b" sound. Letters form words and these words give us direct access to the world of sounds, of meaning through sound. Even when we are reading silently we form the sounds of the words we read in our head. Images are more complex. They are meant to represent reality and can have different meanings depending on the way the image is used. Both these elements are crucial to understanding the way comics convey a narrative. But before tackling what is within the structure, let us examine how the structure itself is shaped and how what is within is as important as what is outside.

The panel: a starting point

In order to better understand the forces at work in the language of comics, it is important to look at its components and the way these units interact with one another. Daniel Chandler identifies this structural analysis as "identifying the constituent units in a semiotic system (such as a text or socio-cultural practice) and the structural relationships between them (oppositions, correlations and logical relations)." (Chandler: 79) It is through this analysis that we can comprehend the relations that exist as part of the basic structure of a particular type of text or medium and that we can begin to explain how

these relations shape that same text or medium. From that point on, we can start to assign meaning through the way these relations exist as part of what is in the text, but also through what is left out. This is especially true in comics where the reader is asked to "fill in the blanks" so to speak, where closure is needed to understand the whole. Semiotics establish two important dimensions in understanding a text: the syntagmatic which deals with the positioning of units and their relations to one another and the paradigmatic dimension which deals with the substitution of units, the choice of a particular unit over another to shape meaning in a text. Both these dimensions are important in understanding not only a particular text, but in the case that interests us here a medium as a whole. Comics have their own particular relations that are different from film or a novel and that shape meaning in themselves. Units must be examined on each dimension to fully realize the power their relations have on meaning. Semiotics has long been divided on this subject with some analysts preferring to look at the system as a whole and others preferring to look at the units that shape them. For Saussure, the system is the starting point from which we can identify the constituent elements whereas Barthes favours the examination of units in their most minimal form to understand the relations they form with one another. In looking at comics, we will use both approaches for, as Chandler notes: "…the analyst is likely to need to move back and forth between these two approaches as the analysis proceeds." (Chandler: 83)

In comics, the smallest, most basic unit is called the panel. Panels on a same horizontal line form a strip, various strips form a page-frame which is encapsulated on a page, which is finally connected to another page to form a double-page spread as a result of the printing process. But let us focus for now our attention on the panel. In its most

commonly seen form, the panel is a space isolated by a rectangular line itself on a blank, white space. As Eisner puts it, they "are the controlling device in sequential art." (Eisner, Comics: 41) Panels are what hold information important to the narrative, whether that information be visual or textual. But the panel is not merely affected by what is within— it can also serve as a literary device, giving further information to the reader. It can be moved, reduced, manipulated or altered. Its basic form, that of a rectangular box, can be changed to suit the narrative. For example, if the lines used to form the box were in fact more akin to waves, we would understand that the content in the panel is from a dream, memory or any other type of introspective thinking. It is also commonly used to refer to past events. As opposed to this, a panel with jagged, aggressive lines would denote that the content of the frame is highly expressive or emotional (see Appendix 6 for examples of each). The shock at whatever is contained in the panel is not only generated by the content itself, but also by the shape of the panel that guides the reader towards a certain interpretation. Panel shapes and structure can add to the story by conveying dimension, sounds, and emotional climate.

The most commonly seen panel is the rectangular box which offers two very specific advantages: it acts as a perfect container for any action contained therein and more importantly it suits the natural format requirements for newspapers. As comics were initially driven by newspaper sales, their format had to respect certain criteria imposed by newspapers. Every day, strips of three or four panels would appear in the same space it had appeared the prior day and would appear in the subsequent ones. Space was therefore limited to a horizontal spread across a spread. These strips were a way to attract new readers to newspapers, especially in the U.S. where William Randolph Hearst

and Joseph Pulitzer were continually fighting for increased sales. Although they had begun as a supplement in the Sunday pages, their popularity soon made them appear in the daily newspapers as well. The popularity of these "Sundays" and "dailies" led to albums collecting these strips. These albums however merely compiled many of the strips together, placing them one atop another with no clear sense of continuity and regardless often times of story content. Although the pages used in the albums were much bigger than the space allocated to the strips in the newspapers, the space was not used to its full potential as it only served to fit as many strips as possible. But the growing popularity of these collections soon gave way to albums of original work designed specifically in this format from beginning to end, and thus better able to exploit comics' particular language.

From its initial role as container, the panel soon grew to encompass other important narrative and ornamental functions. As Eisner notes, "[i]t can be used to convey something of the dimension of sound and emotional climate in which the action occurs, as well as contributing to the atmosphere of the page as a whole." (Eisner: 46) Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean's graphic novel *Violent Cases* uses many such panels throughout its narrative. One in particular shows a vertical rectangular panel with the word "bang" in the middle that shatters the panel near the text (see Appendix 7). The graphic shattering of the very panel that holds it gives the sound all its power and fury. Another interesting panel can be found later on in the story after the grisly murder of a character. The page shows flowers everywhere; a large panel on which are superimposed five smaller panels (see Appendix 8). These flowers are said to represent the sorrow of a character towards the deceased; that the number of flowers is in direct proportion to the

grief. The first of the smaller panels is actually open at one corner, allowing all the flowers to creep in and to mix with the rest of the panel which is closed. We slowly move back, panel by panel, to notice that the flowers in the second frame are actually different flowers from a different vase recalling the memory of an event that happened around it and which calls into question the actual sorrow of the character sending flowers. Again, the panel structure is used in a different way to augment the narrative, in this case to create a link between various images. Eisner uses this to great effect in *Dropsie Avenue*. The story follows the life of a neighbourhood from its inception to the modern day. The neighbourhood is the actual character as we look at its evolution and the stories that come from it. Following violent upheavals in the neighbourhood, Eisner presents us with a page in which the new order is presented. Things have changed, and to illustrate this fact, Eisner shows us snapshots of the new way of life using actual snapshots as panels to further make his point (see Appendix 9). Eisner also makes a great example that there does not need to be any actual panel for it to convey a message. *Dropsie Avenue* begins with the tale of a man who is driven to despair by financial problems and alcohol. The very bleakness of his plight is illustrated by the black background that separates the page. No panels exist as such, although they are present virtually. The absence of structure in the construction of the page reflects the absence of structure in the man's mind; there is nothing to hold on to in the great chasm that his mind has plunged him into. Whether absent, decorative, big or small, rectangular or circular, the panel shapes our understanding of what is within while serving as an important narrative device.

The panel exists within a space that invariably affects it. Thierry Groensteen identifies three important parameters for any panel: shape, size and location (Groensteen, Système: 36). We have already seen how shape affects the reader's perception of what is contained within the panel. Size works in much the same way, although it always affects it in relation with other elements such as the page size and size of other panels. A bigger panel will suggest that the panel bears greater importance than a smaller one next to it. It is important to note however that the story will sometimes dictate the size of panels. For example, providing a complete view of a waterfall might demand more space than seeing someone fall over the edge which would be the more important of the two elements in a narrative sense. It is thus important for comic book artists to consider such matters when designing a page for it ultimately guides the reader towards certain assumptions. Location concerns the placement of a panel in relation to others on a page. I will return to this later on as I examine how panels interact with one another, but for now we will merely keep in mind the effect that closure has and how the sequencing is important to the pacing and understanding of a narrative. Comics are very different from film in that images are juxtaposed and can thus be looked at together at the same time. This is not the case with film where the reader is exposed to continuous frames playing one at a time on one screen. There is no way for the audience to see previous or subsequent frames as the technology limits this. In a sense, we could say that the film audience is subjected to a narrative, a narrative that is controlled implicitly by the film itself. Comics demand a sort of cooperation between reader and artist. As an image is always affected by what precedes and follows it, the reader participates implicitly in the narrative as he must fill in the blanks when a white space occurs between panels. The realm of the white space

becomes the realm of the imagination in which the reader is actively involved. The reader determines the amount of time that goes on between reading each panel and has the luxury to go back or forth.

> "En bande dessinée, comme en littérature, le temps du récit est inextricablement lié au temps de la lecture, qui varie selon les lecteurs. Cette différence est fondamentale : la bande dessinée, dont les images sont toujours fixes et muettes n'est rien d'une forme d'expression audio-visuelle (...) c'est que, comme tout autre livre, une bande dessinée incite chaque lecteur à s'approprier personnellement ce qu'il lit, par l'intermédiaire de sa propre voix..." (Mouchart : 58)

Film does not involve its audience in the same way that comics does to create its narration. Time is pre-established as are many of its other components. There is only one way to go, forward with no possibility of going back. The viewer must follow the order and sense of pacing and time established by the filmmaker. Although western conventions dictate that reading is done from left to right then top to bottom, the comics reader can perceive other images appear in their peripheral vision that he can choose to ignore, examine or move in the direction he wishes:

> "...when pictures make significant use of the horizontal axis, positioning some elements left of centre and others right of centre, then the left-hand side is "the side of the already given", something the reader is assumed to know already, a familiar, well-established and agreed-upon point of departure – something which is commonsensical, assumed and self-evident, while the right-hand side is the side of the New." (Chandler: 87)

Readers are then free to let their eye wander to the new information to the right, nothing controls how the reader wishes to perform the reading experience. As opposed to a photo or a painting, comics need to be deciphered much in the same way that language needs to be broken down as well before being understood. While the reader gets a sense of a page immediately, he must still take time to understand the various signs that comprise it and

that hold the key to understanding. Without this, comics cease to be comics and become a big page comprised of various drawings and text with no meaning whatsoever. Even character movements occur from left to right to follow the natural flow of reading. Characters seen running from right to left are thought to be coming back on their trail. Creators use this notion to control reader-reaction; they will often keep a mystery to the bottom right-hand page so that nothing is revealed from the quick glance a reader naturally makes once he arrives on a two-page spread. Turning the page opens the reader up to a whole new world that he had not access to beforehand and that he can discover once more by going from left to right. Narration in comics builds gradually through the succession of panels relaying what can be very different information. In film, the frame is a fixed unit; it is the size of the screen, and only what is within that screen can change its meaning. Filmmakers use a variety of shots, angles, movements, backgrounds and other effects to affect their narrative. These elements are also used in comics, which is why they initially appear to be so similar. But upon closer inspection, we can see that the frame used in comics, the panel, is considerably more versatile. As seen earlier, it can be of different size, shape, colour... the possibilities are endless. The only restraint is the size of the page, but again this is easily circumvented by the fact that in comics, it is the relationships between units that create the narrative language. The size of the panel is always in proportion to other panels and the size of the page, making it easy for creators to use this notion for narrative purposes. Scott McCloud even suggests that comics could be infinite in size if they were released from the constraints of a page, and with the advent of digital comics, they could very well be with the computer screen acting as a window to the comic (McCloud, Reinventing: 222). With all these elements in mind, we can clearly

see the advantage that visual narrative offers. Serge Tisseron sums it up best when he

argues that the pleasure in reading a comic book is not as much in the end result but in

the journey the reader makes through the unique narrative language of the medium:

> "… il devient enfin possible de jouir de l'ensemble au rythme propre que le
> propose sa lecture. C'est-à-dire celui d'un glissement interrompu de l'un à l'autre
> des fragments qui le constituent, le regard libre d'en différer le terme, de
> s'éterniser ou d'en remonter le cours à rebours, ou au contraire d'en annuler la
> succession par un défilement superficiel et rapide. " (Tisseron : 74)

Outside the panel

Having examined the panel and the way it can shape a narrative through its form, size

and location, we must now turn our attention to what happens around the panel. Panels

do not drift in space nor are they attached to one another: a number of codes dictate how

they can interact with one another. We will leave these codes for later and focus our

attention on the space that encompasses the panel. A page will initially be looked at as a

whole by the reader who seeks to get a general understanding of what is to come. In that

sense, the space between panels takes a greater importance as it shapes how we view

these panels, much in the same way that the panel's shape, color and size affects how we

perceive what is inside it. We need only look at some reprinted editions of various

comics to grasp the importance of this. Amongst others, Hugo Pratt's *Corto Maltese* and

Koike and Kojima's *Lone Wolf and Cub* have been numerous various times in different

page sizes and formats and it is striking to note the difference upon seeing a different

edition for the 1st time. The story seems strangely familiar, yet different at a level we do

not immediately perceive. The size of the spaces is either smaller or bigger, and this

affects how we relate to the story within. A bigger margin will make the reader feel as

though he is more removed from the narrative, while the opposite will be true for smaller

margins. Closure plays a greater part in the reader's interaction with the narrative when the margins are widened because they encompass the panels even more. The same effect can be accomplished when looking at artwork in a gallery that has a much bigger frame than the work itself and a margin separating the work from the frame. The viewer tends to get more involved in the deciphering of the artwork, the world represented within becomes easier to become as part of as the disconnect effect between work and material plane is made easier through the use of the margin. Size is not the only element that can change the reader's perception of what is within the panels. The color of the margin can also play this role. A red margin will often suggest a high level of emotion or the potentially danger of the action contained therein. Similarly, black will highlight the bleakness of the story's content. Matt Wagner and Bernie Mireault's *Grendel The Devil Inside* uses this technique to highlight the emotional distress of Brian who slowly descends into madness as he feels possessed by the destructive spirit of Grendel. The use of black and red in the margin mirrors the internal conflict within Brian (see Appendix 10). It accentuates the mood of what is within the frames. Also, the bottom of the margin is used to provide further narrative information, as if we are privy to Brian's personal journals and notes, which in fact we are as the story is told from an omniscient narrator's perspective but from someone reading Brian's notes and collecting the story as a whole. This effect reinforces the cohesion of the page which now appears a whole as opposed to various images thrown together. It is also important to note that this allows the color white to become expressive once more and escape its common use as neutral background shade. Dave McKean makes great use of this in many of his works as he uses predominantly colored backgrounds (and text boxes) which allow him to use white

as a very bold, expressive color. Another interesting example of the margin as a graphic element can be found in Alan Moore and Rick Veitch's *Greyshirt* from the anthology *Tomorrow Stories* collecting Moore's collaborations with various artists (see Appendix 11). The narrative tells the story of a mad doctor who uses music to alter reality to suit his whims. The margin throughout the story is a purple representation of a music sheet echoing the doctor's own use of music to achieve his means. The story ends with the death of the doctor, at which point the margin stops being a purple sheet and merely becomes a purple background, as the doctor's death has stopped the music. As with the previous example, the margin becomes a key element of the narrative by mirroring its narrative content through an appropriate use of background color, graphic elements and size. This is important in the understanding of the page as a whole, for as Jean-Claude Forest explains, we see the image as a whole before seeing its parts:

> "Nous savons tous qu'il y a d'abord une première lecture globale: on se laisse imprégner par l'ambiance, par le sens général qui s'offre sur les deux planches. Ce regard rapide rapide circule à partir du haut à gauche, et se poursuit vers le bas à droite. Puis vient le moment réel de la lecture." (Peeters, Autour : 104).

In this sense, the margin can play an important role in helping to shape the narrative by providing further visual information that shapes the viewer's overall reading experience. This differs greatly from other visual mediums such as film and art. A painting captures a moment in time even if that moment implies a narrative in itself, but there is no way to see beyond that frozen moment or before it. It is as it appears. Similarly, film only projects a frame at a time, at a speed of 24 per second, and does not allow the viewer a sense of what is to come. Any graphic hints come from what is within the image, the frame (screen) does not alter in any way the viewing experience nor does it enhance it by

its very existence or any additional artifice that the comics medium allows. As Benoît Peeters correctly observes: "Le récit qui, englobant l'image dans une continuité, tend à nous faire glisser sur elle. Le tableau qui, l'isolant, permet qu'on s'y arrête. » (Peeters : Lire : 50). Eisner notes other uses for the margin, that of the meta-panel and the super-panel. In essence, the meta-panel is the layout of a page with a conscious decision to use the page as a sort of invisible panel. There are no borders, the ends of the page act as invisible panels. It is important to note here that even though there are no actual panels visible to the eye, the page is structured so that images are still sequential as if they would be in panels. Even if images overlap one another as there are no borders to keep them inside preset borders, they still act as sequential images that interact with one another as they would in a panel. The super-panel is similar in that the page is once more the total perimeter, but with the important distinction that there is another device contained therein to act as panel and meta-panel:

> "Where the super-panel purports to be a page- that is, to make the reader conscious of it as a page- it serves as a containment without perimeter. It is best employed for parallel narratives." (Eisner: 80)

In Eisner's example, the books at the bottom act as new meta-panels for the information contained therein while the page as a whole acts as a super-panel. The reader understands that the panels within panels represent two different storylines that must be read simultaneously to understand the narrative. Through its size, color, positioning and other graphic elements, the margin enhances the reading experience in a way that is singular to comics.

Spatial relationships between panels

Before going into further details about some of the other components of comics' unique language, let us examine the type of relations that exist in a sign and how these can be applied to comics. Daniel Chandler explores the various relations that can occur as part of the syntagmatic dimension:

> "While narrative is based on sequential (and causal) relationships (e.g. in film and television narrative sequences), there are also syntagmatic forms based on spatial relationships (e.g. montage in posters and photographs, which works through juxtaposition) and on conceptual relationships (such as exposition or argument)." (Chandler: 84)

As we have already seen, the sequential relationships in comics occur as part of the juxtaposition of images whereas conceptual relationships are a result of the textual interactions within the document. We have already seen how panels (whether visible or not) form the basic structure of the sequential relationship so let us focus our attention now on spatial relationships. We will examine conceptual relationships later when we look at how text serves to shape the narrative in comics.

Spatial relationships are concerned with the position of a panel in the layout of a page. Its location in a horizontal/vertical axis will determine how soon the reader will see it as panels at the top left and bottom right will more often than not attract the attention first as the reader tries to identify where he is coming from and where he is going. Also, the position of the panel will determine how the reader will reach that particular panel. After having seen a panel, the immediate reaction is to wonder where to go next. Positioning thus takes all its importance in guiding the reader through the narrative. Size also plays a part in this process as the reader will necessarily assume that the bigger images are the more important in the narrative flow. The panel is not only defined by the image it contains but in the size of its container with any additional graphic elements that may

characterize it and the relationships between its position and the position of other panels around it. The image leaves a lasting impression and as it is always present, it helps to define others around it. This is in sharp contrast with cinema which, as Serge Tisseron puts it:

> "Le cinéma, par sa technique narrative, fait en effet toujours violence. Le déroulement continu et imposé des images, même s'il n'aboutit pas à l'horreur, ne tient le spectateur attentif qu'autant qu'il ne produit sur lui un effet de sidération." (Tisseron : 81)

In film, images are bombarded to the viewer continuously with no way to reconstruct anything other than through the memory of the previous images that have appeared on the screen. In comics, the image is always available, always there to be looked at and to go back to. This encourages associations and strengthens the relationships between the various units. Literature is very different in this regard as well as it is not a visual medium. As such, we can go back to words but they may not necessarily form the same associations in our mind that they had initially. The same can be said when we step between the panels of a comic book, but the ever-presence of both images tends to strengthen the associations the reader will have made the first time around. The disadvantage to this of course is that it becomes difficult to surprise the reader. Having not complete control of the speed at which the story is presented and the order in which the reader will look at the page, the comic book creator does not have the same control over his audience as the filmmaker. Only in the turning of the page can the creator regain control. Only when the opportunity for a new set of panels to exist does he have the ability to surprise and take the reader elsewhere. It is in the panel's location that the narrative is completely determined.

The layout in comics

Having examined spatial relationships, let us look at how these relationships are created: the page layout of the various panels. This concept is probably the one that causes the most confusion as to the differences between comics and film or more specifically, the storyboards that film use to map out the story in its creation. After all, these storyboards are collections of juxtaposed images in a greater narrative... wouldn't that consider them as comics in their own right? To answer this question, we will look more closely at the image as used in both mediums, how they are shaped and how they structure the narrative.

Images in comics always appear on the page, whether the reader has moved on to the next image in his sequential reading of the comic. There always remains a trace of the narrative, while the reader may have moved on to the next panel; he can still see what is in the previous panel:

> "L'objet d'analyse n'a pas à subir une conversion qui en modifierait la morphologie: il est directement accessible aux investigations analytiques qui se préoccupent au premier chef des questions de forme. Cette simplicité de la manipulation facilite considérablement le travail. " (Samson : 125)

By this token, we could say that the reader takes part in the creative process as he is the one filling in the spaces between the panels to help create a narrative. McCloud demonstrates this effectively when he juxtaposes two images; one of a man chasing another with an axe, the other of a skyline with a scream written across the image. As McCloud points out, it is the reader who ultimately decides how the man dies, how the axe was used to murder the other (McCloud, Understanding: 68). The creators suggest this but the reader is actually the one committing the murder in his head. But the layout is not the simple arranging of panels in sequential order so that a narrative is created.

This would be more akin to the storyboard which is in fact a collection of the various frames used to tell the story. The storyboard has no particular meaning in itself. Some images may appear to go together but they do not mesh together to tell a story. The storyboard is a tool; it takes the script and shows it visually with no other information being given. There is no text, no "mise en scène", nothing binding the images together into a coherent narrative. It is but a succession of frames showing where the story will take place, how characters will look and what actions they may take but with no reasoning behind any of these elements. There are no sounds, no lines of movement; elements that comics have sought to find a way to convey through visual sound effects or movement lines. The page layout in comics allows the reader to immediately see a narrative as the images capture a part of the story that only leaves gaps for the reader to fill in. These gaps are too wide in the storyboard, linking the images is close to impossible as there are no conventions that can keep them together. The layout of panels guides the reader through these gaps, letting him fill them in as he goes but also making sure he follows the narrative as it is intended with no unnecessary detours. Images are constantly being organized in function of the other images on the layout:

> "À la différence des images fixes, publicitaires par exemple, qui organisent chacune « un réseau de rapports autosuffisants », les images-vignettes de B.D., centrifuges, sont « sans cesse déportées vers un ailleurs », leur finalité « ne réside que dans le dépassement des plans sans cesse confrontés à d'autres plans ». " (Tilleul : 29)

This notion explains perhaps while the reader will sometimes hasten their reading during an action sequence. For example, a fight scene would be read very rapidly as the reader would wish to get to the end to see what happens. Establishing shots are an opportunity for the reader to reflect and as such would provide pause to the more action-oriented

sequences in a book. Recent creators in American comics have sought to push the envelope in terms of page layout to further their art. The splash page, a page in which there are fewer panels to accentuate the beauty of the art, have also contributed to this change. As certain comic artists have gained in popularity, they have sought to change the way pages are presented, seeking to make each page a work of art. This has sometimes come to the detriment of narration, as certain pages were so filled with detail and the layout so convoluted that it became difficult for the eye to focus on one aspect. Since the reader could not determine as accurately the chronological order of panels, this made causal inference much more difficult and thus the narrative lost its effectiveness. This highlights the difference between views on classical narration and visual narration:

> "Narratology absolutely privileges "discourse" over the "figural." But visual narrative resists that polarity and the hierarchy of values associated with it, and refuses to be reduced to "une organisation géométrique entièrement pensable par concepts." (Gibson: 29)

Images, and the way they are laid out on a page, are linked to our understanding of the narrative, unlike a text which relies on ideas. It is therefore of utmost importance to the understanding of the page that both the image and the page layout be understandable to the reader for both have different practical uses: "Le strip relève du temporel (le linéaire), la planche, en principe, du spatial (le tabulaire)." (Fresnault-Deruelle Du linéaire: 7). Having the images clearly positioned spatially to reflect the narrative makes it easier to understand the narrative as it is meant to be. It should come as no surprise that the creators pushing these new layouts were essentially new artists who sought to make comics more aesthetically pleasant. This is not to say that comics should limit themselves in any way, only that creators effectively use the language of the medium as effectively as possible:

"If, as Eisner proposes, comics have their own iconic and structural 'language,' it follows that the comics reader will achieve a greater 'fluency' through repeated readings of comics." (Sivak)

There is thus incentive for creators to innovate, for it is through theses innovations that comics can continue to develop its own narrative language. Comics should not strive to be paintings, for they are obviously not nor never will be. As Hergé put it so beautifully about fellow creator Paul Cuvelier: "Paul Cuvelier aurait voulu être Raphaël... Ah! Si seulement il avait voulu être Paul Cuvelier!" (Mouchart: 63)

The functions of the layout

In building a narrative, elements must be in sequential relation with one another to drive the story forward. This is easy to achieve in film where a single screen is able to convey the passage of time while surprising the viewer at every turn since he is not able to see what will be the next frame. In comics, the narrative owes much to time and space. Time affects the reading experience since it is the reader who determines his own reading rhythm and who is partly in control of the whole experience as he is involved in creating some of the narrative through his imagination. The creator for his part is in control of the space through which he wishes to guide the reader through the narrative. Benoît Peeters identifies four possible layout conceptions: conventional, decorative, rhetorical and productive (Peeters, Lire: 51). Each can be used in a specific work but more often than not, creators exhibit a distinctive preference towards the use of one. The conventional layout refers to the layout that was imposed for a long time by the technological limitations of the printing press. This was usually that of a strip of approximately three or four panels, which could thereafter be reproduced many times on a bigger page when many of the newspaper strips were collected into albums. The page reads very easily

from top left to bottom right and there is never any doubt about where the eye should go

next after any particular image. While deceptively simple, this layout is highly effective

in that it is the easiest for the reader to understand. Hugo Pratt makes great use of this in

Corto Maltese to weave stories of surprising depth. By changing but very small details in

the facial expressions, Pratt gives his scenes more emotional resonance without much

artifice (see Appendix: 12). The decorative layout's name speaks for itself as here, it is

the aesthetic of the page that is the main concern. The page is designed first and foremost

as a piece of art, narrative considerations are not the main focus although the artist will

work to find a way to move the narrative forward. But the focus here is the design of the

page, which should create an immediate response in the viewer as soon as he encounters

it. P. Craig Russell's work is done almost exclusively with this sense of aesthetics in

mind. His collaboration with Neil Gaiman on *Sandman* is a great example as the whole

design of the page is based on the circle: the circle of the pupil, the circle of the crystal

ball and finally circle panels highlighting the eye, the figure that started the whole design

(see Appendix 13). While it is often done more in an ornamental sense, the play on

figures, forms and designs can also often be a play on images in the same way that a poet

would play with words. As with *Sandman*, where the whole play on circles is in reality a

play on the eye and what the vizir in the story has seen or pretends to have seen. The

rhetorical layout is the one most commonly seen as it is the layout where images respond

directly to the story. In other words, images will react according to the needs of the

narrative and all the arrangement of panels will be made to optimize the needs of the

story. Hergé's *Tintin* offers almost exclusively examples of this type of layout. For our

purposes, we will only look at *Le lotus bleu* and a scene in which Tintin is looking for the

famous Blue Lotus (see Appendix 14). As Tintin delves deeper and deeper we can see the panels begin to darken in their coloration as to shrink as the focus shifts to only Tintin. The reader thus feels the possibility of an impending doom as Tintin is shown alone, in a narrow panel depicting a dark door through which light is seeping through. Then panels here, as does the coloration, respect what Hergé is trying to achieve in terms of narration. Another example of this can be found in *Sandman Midnight Theatre* where smaller panels are inserted into bigger ones to show the action up close (see Appendix 15). This allows the creator to show all that he wants in a scene while at the same time focusing the attention on the smaller details, which are more important to the story. For its part, the productive layout is the exact opposite of the rhetorical one, namely that the layout is first designed and the characters are forced to fit into the frames that are pre-established as a result of creative intent. Intent here is the key word as it is only through our own judgement that we can differentiate the two. To better illustrate this, let us look at Alan Moore and Rick Veitch's *Greyshirt* (see Appendix 16). In the panel, we can clearly see that the artist wanted to fit the four storylines in their respective panels because he wanted to show the whole building in order to give a sense of time. The available space for each panel is therefore limited to a wide rectangle to respect the artist's decision to show the whole building as part of a narrative tool. The layout, regardless of its type, thus plays a vital role in organizing the panels that will eventually form a narrative.

How panels interact within the layout

While the layout in itself can play a great role in shaping the reader's understanding of the narrative, its greatest role lies in regulating the way panels interact with one another.

The layout organizes elements in a spatial environment but it is the relationships between these various elements that are ultimately the crux of the specific language of comics. Relationships between panels serve to reinforce the narrative by filling one of many specific functions related to the flow of the story. Thierry Groensteen identifies these main functions as follows: encompassing function, separating function, rhythmic function, structuring function, expressive function and finally the reading function (Groensteen, Système: 49). These functions interweave with one another to suit the story's needs and it is therefore not surprising to find many on a double-page spread. The encompassing function relates to the encapsulation effect of closing off an image within a panel. It is what the creator chooses to show over whatever else he could have chosen instead. This brings us back to the notion of paradigmatic relationships in semiotics; namely that what is absent from the text provides determinative information to what is found within. As Daniel Chandler notes:

> "In natural language there are grammatical paradigms such as verbs and nouns. In a given context, one member of the paradigm set is structurally replaceable with another. The choice of one excludes the choice of another. The use of one signifier (e.g. a particular word) rather than another from the same paradigm set (e.g. adjectives) shapes the preferred meaning of a text." (Chandler: 81)

Much like film, comics must be aware of what is within the panel; why an image is selected (how it captures a moment in time that is important to the narrative) and how it is presented (graphically using the artist's particular representation and by using different angles, perspective and lighting). A panel does not necessarily show a whole image, it shows what the creator wishes his reader to see. The image could conceivably exist to the infinity much like film shows a part of an image in a whole scene. However, the comics creator is not as concerned with what does not appear in the frame as much as the

filmmaker is. This is due to the fact that a lot of the preparation for a particular shot in film must be done in advance, backgrounds, costumes, lighting, positioning, lens types and others all determine how a shot will eventually look and need to be properly prepared for the desired effect to be achieved. As such, there is greater liberty for the comics artist who has control over all these elements through the image he creates himself. And there are no budgets or time restraints to respect; his imagination and eventually that of the reader's when he becomes involved in creating the story in his head, are all that is needed. I will get back to the various ways an image can be presented when I examine the image within the panel as an element of narration.

The separating function of the panel is what allows us to see each image as a separate entity that must be looked at individually. A space usually delimitates two panels and it is in that space that the reader makes the plunge from one piece of information to the other. If such a separation did not exist, it would be impossible to tell that both images are sequential and provide narrative information; we would see this as one image and would try to find a way to find a meaning for it instead of taking both and creating a new meaning from their juxtaposition. Some panels, such as Eisner's "invisible panels" we have seen before, are not necessarily separated by visible lines, but the layout and order of the page nevertheless suggest them. They are there through the design of the page and perform the same functions even if they are not clearly visible upon first glance. The rhythmic function of the panel is the one through which reading time is suggested by the creator. It remains nevertheless up to the reader to determine how he will read and how long it will take him (especially as images may be examined for a longer time by some), but the creator can still try to affect this by widening panels, using a greater number of

them, changing the perspective from horizontal to vertical etc. There is no one recipe for how a page will be read and which procedures can cause a reader to slow down or speed up, which makes for the interesting nature of comics as many different elements can be used to achieve a desired effect (to varying degrees of success of course). Creators can nevertheless exert some control over the pacing of the story through ingenious use of structure and panel placement. David Lapham provides a wonderful example of how a creator can shape the reader's reading experience (see Appendix 17). On the first panel, we can see the main character being struck to the side. The next panel being black, we assume that he has passed out as a result of the blow. Lapham then follows this with five more panels of different sizes, all pitch black, that indicate that other things go on while he is unconscious. While the creator has no control over how the reader will read this scene, the fact that he uses multiple panels to convey the scene shows a conscious effort to exert some control over the amount of time he wishes to suggest has passed between the blow and whatever is to happen next. It is interesting to note that this allows the following page to act as an element of surprise as the reader does not know at the bottom of the page how the story continues and must turn the page to find out more. The structuring function concerns the shape of the panel and the role that shape plays in determining what is within the panel itself. We have examined this point earlier on when talking of the different ways the panel can affect the image, but it is important to remember here that a shape other than a square or rectangle calls attention to the relationship between said shape and the image within. Panels are more often than not rectangular or square because the pages themselves are rectangular, and it is much easier to fit these shapes inside than a circle or octagon which create blank spaces around them

that need to be filled in with other odd shapes if the page is to be used to its optimal level. As reading is done from top left to bottom right, using shapes other than the square or rectangle poses problems in terms of continuity; the reader must always ask themselves where to go next as the layout does not necessarily follow an easy left-right, top-bottom sequence due to compensating for the use of shapes that demand that others around it adjust to them. An easy way to remedy this but which has not been used all that frequently is to change the format of the comic book itself. By changing the shape or the size, a new universe of relationships opens itself to the creator and reader. Benoît Peeters highlights this when talking of creator Chris Ware who is not averse to changing the size and style of each of his books:

> "... Chris Ware parvient à maîtriser une série de paramètres jusqu'alors difficilement accessibles aux auteurs de bande dessinée. La séparation traditionelle entre le travail du dessinateur et de l'éditeur n'est plus ici de mise : Ware domine de bout en bout ses albums, de leur conception à leur fabrication. Sur ce plan comme dans d'autres, il ouvre au neuvième art de passionantes perspectives." (Peeters, Lire : 82)

A work of art should be one from beginning to start, even if that means changing common conventions to push the medium forward. Getting back to the structural function, it is important to note that a panel is never alone by itself, it is always in relation to another. The structure thus has as much to do with placement in relation to other as it does with positioning on the spatial plane. The expressive function refers to how the panel, graphically, gives clues as to how its content should be interpreted. This is similar to the structuring but here it is less concerned with spatial relations than it is with the relationship with its content. For example, a balloon would signify that the panel is a flashback or memory; the panel is in direct relation to its signified and is thus as expressive. The reading function is the last possible function for a panel. A panel is an

invitation by the creator to stop and read, that in the panel there lies information that is relevant to the story. An image may be continuous over several panels but the fact that it is separated as such should signify that there is more than meets the eye. A great example of this can be found in Jim Steranko's *Nick Fury, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.* which shows a high-tech car over six different panels (see Appendix 18). There is only one image that is cut many times by the different panels, but in doing this, we stop to read each one and perceive that time has elapsed even if it is in reality one image. Text also helps in this example as reading each part presupposes that a moment in time has elapsed in the character saying the text out loud.

Through their numerous functions, panels shape the narrative in a way that is unique to comics. The encompassing, structuring and expressive functions help to define the panel; what is within, how it is presented and how the reader should relate to it as a result. These would thus be considered the paradigmatic relationships of comics: they help to shape meaning through the proper use of the signified. They could not however be considered a narrative by themselves although they help to support one that is in place. The rhythmic and separating functions, by the very fact that they presuppose the existence of other panels, fall under the realm of syntagmatic relationships. It is through the existence of a multitude of panels, or I should say through their relations and oppositions, that a proper narrative can take place. Serge Tisseron finds it these relations and oppositions the very essence of the narrative:

> "La succession des cases devient la condition de la charge dramatique de chacune, un procédé graphique par lequel l'aspect fugitive de chaque action représentée reçoit un contrepoint tragique dans l'importance des enjeux qui y sont mobilisés. Et la violence ne semble à son tour concentrée que pour valoriser l'oeil dans sa capacité de l'arrêter." (Tisseron : 65)

It is through their sequential relations that panels bring us to narrative. The reading function is itself the best example of narrative as it goes beyond the others in the sense that it supposes that the panels must be read and understood. Narrative by its very definition implies that there is a beginning and end; that a story exists between various elements, a story that is made possible by the relations that unite these elements. In comics, these elements are encompassed in panels that encapsulate part of the narrative. The reader extrapolates his own narrative from these elements, making the reading experience additive much in the way that reading a book will ask of the reader to imagine many of the elements he sees only as a series of letters that combine to form words and eventually language from which meaning can be deconstructed. In comics, the icons are mostly visual, so information is made more readily available than in books. Yet, it requires that the reader abandon himself in the gaps between the panels, that he create the links that exist as part of the various functions of the panel. Film does not provide this opportunity as it takes the viewer inside a world of its own making where each element has been controlled. A filmmaker has more control over what he wishes his audience yet it is that very lack of control that makes reading comics so enjoyable as the reader can imagine for himself what unites the panels, yet at the same time have some strong visual references around which to build his assumptions. It is important to note however, that comics is not a medium in constant mutation. The gaps between panels is not an invitation to interpret whatever the reader wishes, it is a space that differentiates clearly two pieces of information so they are seen as such and later assimilated in a logical manner. As Groensteen points out:

> " Le "blanc" entre deux vignettes n'est donc pas le siège d'une image virtuelle, il est le lieu d'une articulation idéelle, d'une conversion logique, celle d'une suite

d'énonçables (les vignettes) en un énoncé unique et cohérent (le récit). "
(Groensteen : 133)

It is through a previous image that a reader assigns meaning to the image that follows it.

Or rather, we should say that it is through the imprint of what that image has left in the

reader's mind that he is able to move forward and assign meaning through the separation

of these two elements. This process can go on and on, where images not only have a

correlation with the image that precedes it and the following one but with numerous

images that precede it and follow it. In literature, the author must set the mood and tone

of the scene, and often this is done through describing the setting of the story. Whether

the room was dark, lit up, had certain types of furniture as opposed to others are all

factors that shape our understanding of the story. In that sense, an image showing a

particular background setting will shape not only the following image but all other

images in the story having to do with this setting. The imprint has left a mark and can

affect meaning over several spreads and pages. Relationships between panels can thus be

multi-layered with many relations going on at once in a story, all affecting the narrative

in its own particular way.

Looking at what is within: images and text

Having examined in detail the particular language and structure of comics, let us now look at what is within the panels. While the previous chapter focused on the differences between comics, film and literature, we will see in this case how they can be very similar in other ways. There are generally two different schools of thought when it comes to comics: those who value the art over the story and others who prefer the written word to the image. As we have seen before, comics is a visual medium where images are juxtaposed to form a narrative. The image's importance in this process could therefore not be denied. Without images, a text cannot be comics, but without text, images can be considered comics. This was proven a few years ago as new Editor-in-Chief of Marvel Comics Joe Quesada asked his writers and artists to create "silent" stories, stories where there would be no accompanying text to complement the image. While the experiment had various degrees of success, it did however prove that images can tell a story by themselves. "Silent stories" such as these had been done before, a famous example was an issue of G.I. Joe starring Snake Eyes, a mute character, but this was the first time this was done on such a scale, over so many books at once. An interesting thing to note is that Joe Quesada is one of the first artists to be nominated as Editor-in-Chief, past EICs having been mostly former writers or editors. But the process through which these, and other "silent stories," have been executed reveals that this predominance of the image could in fact be a little misleading. All these stories were created from a script, a writer elaborated an outline from which the structure (layout, use of panels etc.) was laid out for

the narrative. So while the images may be text-free, there is decidedly a textual narrative structure behind that guides toward the creation of a visual structure. Also, while the stories had no phylacteries or other types of text boxes, language could be found inside many of the panels to further guide the reader. The text could be as complex as a newspaper with a full story contained within or something as simple as the mentions "on" and "off" on a button that the character was about to press. This is not to say that purely visual narratives do not exist, but merely to point out that in comics, the visual and textual interweave in very insidious ways and to favour one form over another would be to completely ignore the very specificity of comics.

Images are nevertheless the first element a reader will look to in order to construct meaning. This has to do with the fact that an image is a sign whose concept reaches us at a more primitive level than language. With language, we must make the connection between the concept and the written signs (letters) that act as its representation. The same goes for language in a vocal sense, where we substitute what we hear for a mental image of whatever we are talking about. In examining comics and the role of the image, Alberto Manguel notes how this makes comics immediately appealing to a larger public:

> "… je feuillette une bande dessinée japonaise à l'aéroport de Narita et j'invente une histoire aux personnages dont les paroles sont figurées par des caractères que je n'ai jamais appris. La tentative de lire un livre dans une langue que je ne connais pas – grec, russe, breton, sanscrit – ne me révèle rien, bien entendu; mais si le livre est illustré, même si je ne peux pas lire les légendes je peux en général en deviner un sens – qui n'est pas nécessairement celui qu'explique le texte. " (Manguel : 122)

If we can understand parts of a story based purely on visual aspects, the question then must be asked as to how exactly we manage to read images? The most obvious answer to this question is that images offer as Eisner explains "a commonality of experience," they

speak to us because as humans we recognize them for what they are and by using them, we are "evoking images stored in the mind of both parties," namely that of the creator and the reader (Eisner, Comics: 13). We know them because we have all seen them and identified them. As human beings, we are programmed early to understand visual icons. Language is based on the recognition of the visual. A baby will learn the word "spoon" because he will make the association between the sound that he hears "spoon" and the physical representation of that sound. He will later learn to make that same type of association between the written representation and either the visual or oral which he has now learned. This would explain why images were such an important part of communication in the early history of humanity. Take for example Egyptian paintings or even Mexican codex, which exclusively used images to tell a story. Murals in cathedrals, Greek paintings and Hogarth's famous carved moral cycles are other examples of early communication through a visual narrative. It is without a doubt with the invention of the printing press, or rather, its later development allowing it to reproduce images that they begin to reach a greater public and thus, take on a greater importance. Images were now available to the general public who quickly learned to "read" them, to understand their meaning. But how do we manage to decode information from a simple image? What forces are at work as we do this? In order to understand this, we must look at the image in two different ways: the image as a whole, an entity, and the different components of an image.

The image as we see it

The first and most obvious observation we can make regards the image as we see it, as opposed to the various lines that make up the image and which we will look at later on.

To that end, Georges Pernin offers four different ways in which we can look at the image; as independent content, as inducer, as determinant and as pre-determinant (Pernin: 28). The first category is fairly straightforward; it is what we see in a panel, for example a baseball player rounding first base. We could also look at the image as an inducer, in which the image would induce us to look at the world in a particular way, either by the point of view, the angle of the image, the position of objects in that image and so on and so forth. If we take our first example and expand it a bit, we might see a baseball player, this time shot upwards with the focus on his face, his teammates in the back of the picture. The inducer encourages us to see the image in a different light, to highlight certain aspects. But this changes from person to person, it is subjective unlike describing what is actually in the image. This brings us to the next category, the image as a determinant. The most important part of this category is that it operates on an unconscious level. It is what we perceive of the image, based on the image itself (independent content) and how the artist presents it to us (inducer) in order to provoke a reaction. But while an artist may want us to understand something from the way he has presented an image, it is in reality each separate reader who assigns his own meaning to that image, on a totally unconscious level. For example, a reader might see our earlier example as an image signifying victory. This would be based on his seeing the baseball player rounding first, with his teammates behind him as if they were celebrating a home run. Finally, the pre-determinant is similar to the determinant, except that it happens on a conscious level, and as such the reader is aware that the image is causing him to create links with other images or other information. For example, a reader may recognize the work of a certain artist because of the way this artist presents his images. The reader is

thus recognizing that the baseball player is drawn by Artist A because that artist uses bold lines coupled with a minimal use of blacks. As we can see, images work in different ways to convey meaning. But can they reveal even more information that we might not initially see at first glance?

Line, shape and colour

Now that we have seen different ways in which an image may be read by itself, let us focus on the components of the image itself. The first and most important aspect of the image is the line. Although comics using other techniques such as painting or computer-generated art have begun to increase in popularity, the line has always been at the very heart of comics and still a vast majority of comics today are done using the line as a means to define form (which we will look at later). Philippe Marion offers two different categories of lines: the contour line and the expressive line (Marion: 92). The contour line is the one we encounter most in comics and it is the one that allows the reader to recognize objects. It is through these lines that the reader gets the sense of the image as a whole, but also of the different components that make it up. For its part, the expressive line is used to add style or mood to an image. It affects the way a reader perceives the image as it changes our perceptions of objects or characters. We could immediately see this if we were to compare Tintin creator Hergé's style to independent comics creator Robert Crumb. Hergé uses clean, fine lines to represent a reality that is very close to our own whereas Crumb's wavy, shaky lines tend to put his characters and objects in an imaginary world distorted by the very shaky nature of his lines. Walt Disney played with this very notion, favouring the use of bold, clean, circular lines which tended to reassure readers. But while the line helps to create an image, it is actually the shape which more

accurately represents it. The organization of various shapes, or composition as it is called, is what allows the reader to understand the image. The line is very important in creating this form but we must keep in mind that the form is an independent element. The line may help the reader to understand the mood of an image, but the shape will allow the reader to understand what the image actually is. For a long time, these two elements were the only ones needed to understand the components of an image (in comics at least), but technological advancements have created another: colour. Colour helps the reader understand an image, much in the same way that line and form do. For example, colour can help with the spatial positioning inside an image. Through the use of lighter shades, colour helps to indicate what is in the foreground and what is in the background. Also, as certain colours have certain characteristics, mood can be established through the use of colour. An example of this would be an image coloured in red exclusively, which would indicate one of anger, violence or passion. The same image in blue might have another connotation as blue is considered a cold colour and does not evoke the same mood. As Scott McCloud points out: "Colors could express a dominant mood. Tones and modelling could add depth. Whole scenes could be virtually about color." (McCloud: 190) Pierre Masson provides us with three different functions for colour: analogical function, in which colour represents a conformist vision of the world; symbolic function in which colour is meant to represent the world symbolically and finally aesthetic function which is much like the symbolic function with the exception that it does not need to be defined as opposed to something else, and can have a meaning through mere association with images with similar colours. As we can see, many elements can affect the way a reader perceives an image. Lines, forms and colours all

have their role in our understanding of a particular image, and the way in which that image touches us. For, as Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle points out: "À partir du moment où l'on a un certain réalisme, le dessin devient narratif." (Fresnault-Deruelle, La bande : 26) We could say that each image reveals its own particular type of information; different elements that combine to reveal the story of that particular image. But that story is far from being an actual narrative; rather, it serves merely to encompass what the image is all about. It is through the relationships of these images, each carrying its own elements of information that is particular to it, that the narrative truly takes place.

Pictorial representation

Line, shape and colour help to define an image, helping us recognize it for the sign it actually represents. But visual iconography can go much farther than the simple reproduction of a sign. It can help to shape our understanding of the sign (the image) through the way the visual representation is done. For example, let us imagine that we have before us two different images of a same object, say a gun. One would be done by Astérix creator Uderzo, a simple drawing of a gun, detailed enough for us to recognize it for what it is but without any unnecessary detail. We recognize for what it is because it has the same basic shape we know guns to have. Now, let us imagine the same gun, but this time drawn by painter Alex Ross, detailed to the point that we could recognize the exact type model of the gun if we were knowledgeable enough to know these things. Already, with this simple example, we can see how two different images of a same object can take us down different paths. In the first example, although we recognize the object to be a gun, the fact that it is rendered in this fashion takes away the fear that we would normally associate with a gun. We expect the violence, if there is to be any, to make us

laugh, we do not fear any real sort of violence from an object that has lost some of the properties that would make it fearsome in the "real world." In contrast, a revolver as represented by Alex Ross, whose art is based on real-life models, would be almost as if we were to see a gun in reality. The violence would therefore become much more tangible and real to us.

In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud examines this very notion, while also arguing that a cartoon imagery will appeal to a larger audience since more people recognize themselves in this type of image than a more realist one which is so close to reality that it must represent someone in particular. Hergé used this to great effect in *Tintin*, where the difference between the iconic abstraction of the characters and the realistic backgrounds allows the reader to easily identify with his world. The objects and background settings being very realistic, it is very easy for the reader to believe in the existence of this world yet, the characters themselves are but simple representations, with but a few dots to identify the eyes in some instances. This allows the reader to participate in this world since he can substitute himself with the characters. Tintin is so graphically simple that he can stand for pretty much anyone. As Tisseron notes, this allows readers to feel they can participate actively in the narrative:

> "[les arts de l'image] assurent une participation du spectateur sur le mode d'une identité de perception plutôt que sur celui d'une identité de pensée, semblables en ceci au processus primaire qui caractérise le système inconscient. " (Tisseron : 35)

It is therefore through the image and its accessibility that the reader can emotionally invest himself in the world that is presented graphically. McCloud also argues that comics are not limited between realism and meaning, but that there is also a picture plane, a more abstract, purely artistic frame that stands above them, thus forming a

triangle (McCloud: 52). Comic book writers and artists are thus not only torn between reality and ideas, but also in the representation of these elements. This particular element does not exist in many other art forms. As Francis Lacassin would argue, this is what makes comics such an interesting art form:

> Résultat d'un équilibre harmonieux entre les sons et les formes qu'elle réunit en une synthèse graphique, la bande dessinée réalise la réconciliation de la parole et de l'image rêvée par toutes les écritures anciennes du monde. (Lacassin : 26)

Comics are therefore apt to relay more abstract information through the fact that ideas can be conveyed not only through a representation of the world we know (or of worlds in space or wherever else imagination may take us), but also through the visual understanding of the graphic plane. Simple shapes and lines, arranged graphically and in a multitude of colours if desired, can create a reaction in the viewer as prove the works of painters Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline who favored abstract expressionism as a way to communicate through their paintings. Such an arrangement of shapes and forms can evoke emotions on a purely visual plane that cannot be done through film which represents reality in some sense. Similarly, books are tied to language and cannot reproduce this effect. Comics thus offer a completely new plane of understanding, the ability to evoke emotion through the use of purely visual stimuli.

The image as a means of expression

Filmmakers long ago discovered that a way in which an image is presented changes the viewer's interpretation of it. Perspective, framing and sequencing all help shape the way the information is presented to the viewer. Comics has all of these elements in its narrative language, but changed a few along the way in order to suit its own structure. As Eisner explains, perspective in comics serves two primary functions, "to manipulate the

reader's orientation for a purpose in accord with the author's narrative plan" and to "manipulate and produce various emotional states in the reader." (Eisner: 89) As an example, let us look at a page from Gaiman and McKean's *Violent Cases* (see Appendix 19). On the page, the magician seems even bigger and fearsome because we are seeing him from the perspective of a child. Also, the use of a narrow panel causes us to feel as though we cannot go away, a feeling of confinement vis-à-vis the protagonist's imposing figure. In this instance, perspective and panel work together to enhance the reader's emotional attachment towards the image. Had the image been presented on a flat perspective where the viewer is at the same level as the image itself, the magician would not have seemed so menacing. Likewise, an overhead view would have made the magician seem smaller and no threat at all. For its part, framing has to do with the distance from which the action is presented to us. It is the equivalent of shots in film; the establishing shot, the close-up etc. Hugo Pratt played with this beautifully in *Corto Maltese*. In *Mû*, he shows Corto walking towards something which we will learn in the next panel to be his own shadow (see Appendix 20). In the first panel, the action is from mid-range. It is also interesting to note the perspective as we are behind and below Corto, with no way to see what stand before him. The second panel then surprises us as we are now close to Corto and therefore able to see his emotion as he gazes upon his shadow. The next panel focuses on both their expressions in a close-up of their respective faces. Then we go back to look at the action as it would appear from afar only to jump once more ahead to see Corto's reaction as his shadow attacks him. By playing with the framing of his sequence, Pratt avoids to make this confrontation stale as he involves the reader in the whole altercation through the framing (moving closer, then

away from the action to get a better general idea of it) and perspective (we are first behind Corto, unaware that danger lurks, then we are first-hand witnesses of the action). Sequencing deals with the order in which panels are shown and takes both framing and perspective into account. An image is never by itself; it is always in relation to others around it. As Benoît Peeters explains, it is "une image « en déséquilibre », écartelée entre celle qui la précède et celle qui la suit, mais non moins entre son desire d'autonomie et son inscription dans le récit." (Peeters : 29) Thus, perspective and framing owe much to sequencing in that it helps to oppose various perspectives and shots and thus create a narrative from these relationships. Each panel, regardless of its composition, is dependent on the one that follows it and the one that preceded it:

> "… on verra que tel gros plan n'a pas de valeur en soi, mais en tant qu'il s'oppose à un plan général, ou s'intègre dans une progression du plan large vers le gros plan, progression observable seulement si l'on prend en considération le syntagme formé par plusieurs vignettes consécutives. Ce gros plan peut aussi « rimer » avec un autre gros plan, les deux vignettes ainsi reliées pouvant de surcroît occuper dans la page des places opposées ou symétriques. " (Groensteen : 8)

This is very similar to film and the relations that form between various shots when opposed to one another. We could again state here the famous Kuleshov experiment where contrasting shots give a whole new meaning to the actor's facial expression. Eisner notes a difference however between both film and comics' use of sequencing (see Appendix 21). In his opinion, comics narrative is "slower because it involves an intellectual input out of a reader's real experience." (Eisner, Graphic: 73) When we look at the example, we can see how it becomes more difficult to read the film sequence as it does not allow for any connections between the various panels. It becomes that much more difficult to read as it lets too much up to the imagination of the reader; it does not guide the reader in the way the sequence on the right does.

These three techniques, which owe much to the art of filmmaking while being adapted to comics, can be used together to more accurately represent an artist's vision for his narrative. Frank Miller shows a great use of these techniques in his classic *The Dark Knight Returns* (see Appendix 22). The page begins with an establishing shot of the city on fire to give the reader the full scope of the action that is taking place. We then cut to the next panel in which we see Commissioner Gordon running towards the reader with a caption mentioning that he is running towards his wife. The perspective used, that of a worm's eye view, immediately involves the reader in the action that takes place while the background of the buildings blowing up evokes the memory of the first image. The scene then shifts to show prisoners as they try to break free from their cell. The extensive use of black in the third panel underlines the fact that they are trapped in a small space, which is further reinforced by the fourth image which shows the prisoners cramped against one another. The fifth panel brings us back to Commissioner Gordon who is now seen clutching a lamppost with an obvious look of pain on his face. This keeps the same angle as the first panel we saw of him, as he is still looking towards the reader although now we know the movement we saw in the first instance has been reduced to a grinding halt. The sixth panel moves even closer up to the commissioner to focus not only on his painful expression but also to show clearly the action; he is taking his pulse to see if his heart will withstand. The sequencing, here the opposition between the various scenes (the commissioner, the prisoners and the ones that follow) creates a dramatic tension that drives the story forward over the next several pages. As the final panels jump to another narrative, I will not examine them in detail here, but the first six panels clearly illustrate

the role that the framing, perspective and sequencing play in the creation of a successful narrative.

The image as defined by techniques used in graphic arts

Having seen how techniques used in film are successfully used in creating comics, let us look at how comics are shaped by techniques used in graphic arts. Perspective and colour are important elements but as I have looked at these previously, I will skip ahead to other elements that have yet to be examined. These include panel composition, symbolism and lighting. Panel composition has to do with a way an image is represented. This brings us back to McCloud's triangle of representation and the way an image can be rendered; on a graphic plane, a realist plane or abstract plane. Also, it includes expressive anatomy; the way human bodies suggest certain emotions by the way in which they appear or move (or in the case of comics, appear to move through visual effects). As Eisner notes:

> "… the "reading" of human posture or gesture is an acquired skill which most humans possess to a greater degree than they know. Because it has to do with survival, humans begin to learn it from infancy. From postures we are warned of danger or told of love." (Eisner, Comics: 101)

As such, characters will be visually shaped by the way in which their body appears or the movements they make. Human beings understand this at a primitive level since we are trained from birth to recognize these signs for the assigned meaning they have. Of course, certain signs are dependent on the society from which they originate, but on a basic level, a person smiling will have the same connotation whether you live in Japan or Alaska. Facial expressions, posture and gestures are all elements that shape our understanding of how a character feels. Creators can thus play with this in the image to assign specific meaning in a narrative. Literature must use words to explain these bodily

expressions that can be understood in a fraction of a second in visual mediums such as film, art and comics. The added advantage that art and comics have over film is that they do not represent reality, rather a graphic representation of it. As such, objects can be assigned human behaviors and expressions that we would normally not see in film. While special effects have evolved greatly and allow filmmakers to bend reality to suit their particular stories, the fact remains that it is still a representation of reality: "C'est sans doute parce que, à la différence du cinéma, elle ne peut pas se donner pour "être" le vrai." (Tisseron: 88) Comics bring the reader into a whole new world, a graphic world that can totally bend the laws of time and space, where the reader has control over some of the narrative himself. This is what Groensteen calls the rhetorical convergence of the image:

> "Le dessin narratif obéit à un impératif de lisibilité optimale. En conséquence, il utilise les différents paramètres de l'image (cadrage, dynamique de la composition, mise en couleur, etc.) de manière à ce qu'ils se renforcent mutuellement et concourent à la production d'un effet unique." (Groensteen : 191)

All the graphic elements come together to create a whole: a unique world that not only lives on the page but also in the reader's imagination. The narrative is thus created in this unique graphic world completely from scratch. An artist is always confronted to a white page, which he then separates according to his story into panels filled with images of a certain graphic nature that will interact with one another. It is through this interaction of elements that the comic finds its narrative voice. But it is through the graphic treatment of the artist (whether he uses paint, draws, uses photography, montage or mixes all these mediums and more) that the world in which the narrative takes place is formed. Comics create their own reality:

"La bande dessinée n'est par ailleurs pas vraiment, contrairement au cinéma, un art mimétique : sa fonction n'est pas d'imiter la réalité, mais plutôt d'en donner une vision transposée, que le style graphique relève de la caricature humoristique ou du « réalisme »." (Mouchart : 59)

Lighting also helps to establish this world graphically. It can create emotion, draw attention to detail and generally guide a reader through the understanding of a particular panel.

For its part, symbolism deals with stereotypes that exist in our society. Much like expressive anatomy, this is learned from a very young age from looking at our society and examining the relationships that exist between objects and the meaning we assign to them. Eisner explores these signs and how the artist's representation of them can affect meaning, even showing that the way in which an object is held can change its meaning entirely (see Appendix 23). If we refer back to Alan Moore and Rick Veitch's *Greyshirt*, we can see how symbolism plays a part in our understanding the various panels (see Appendix 16). We could tell that time has passed between the first and last panels even had the dates not been written on the left by the fact that objects and characters tell a story of their own. If we start with the last panel, the clothing worn by all characters suggest that this story takes place a long time ago. As we move upwards, we can see the characters age and change in their expressive anatomy, the boy goes from shy child, to defiant teenager and finally to resigned middle-aged man. The posture tells a story of its own. The same could be said for the building which starts out as a beautiful new structure until slowly, we see it age. Already in the third panel from the bottom we can see the wear and tear on the sign to the right, the windows are not as shiny as they once were, some of them are even condemned while the buildings behind show a "for lease" sign, a sure indicator that the neighborhood is in disarray. Finally, the first panel from

the top shows the complete decay of the building while the neighborhood around it seems to have modernized itself. The once vigorous owner is now a poor old man in a wheelchair whose physical power is but a shadow of what it once was. Also, the lighting gets darker as we move up the building, a sure sign of the darker times in which the story takes place (in the present, on top). Graphic elements provide valuable information into how the image within the panel is interpreted, thus helping to piece together a narrative when these panels are examined in relation to their position with one another.

Means of expression unique to comics

Having seen how comics use techniques borrowed from film and graphic arts, we may be tempted to assume that the medium has brought nothing of its own in establishing narrative. Nothing could be further from the truth as comics has invented many means of expression particular to its own structure in order for it to be properly understood: the panel, the phylactery, movement lines and sound effects. As we have already examined the panel extensively in a previous chapter, I will focus on the other means of expression. Comics being a still visual medium, it does not render sound and movement as film does, neither does it render texture as painting does. To remedy this, certain techniques were developed to give the reader the sense of movement and sound the creator wishes to express in his story. Sound effects help to convey, as their name would suggest, sound in comics. They are words which imitate, to the best of their ability, the sound of familiar objects we know. They range from the simple "tick-tock" of a clock, "bang bang" of a gun to the more complex "pffft" of flying objects or the "kraaak" of a violent shock. Certain guidelines have been established that regulate the differences between certain similar sounds that regular comic readers would understand, but the

general idea is understood whether the reader be experienced or a novice. The way a sound effect also affects the way it should be perceived; whether it be the size of the lettering, the position or the color. As an example, let us examine Turk & DeGroot's *Léonard* which uses many such sound effects to add pace and humor to the story (see Appendix 24). We can immediately see the differences between the sound effects used in panel three; the sound of the gun is much louder than the sounds of the portable time machine worn by the disciple as it heats up. But this is followed by an even bigger sound as the time machine sends them back in time, so much so that it occupies the space of the entire fourth panel. It is also important to note that the sound effects are always near the objects that generate the sound in question. Many cartoonists have used these to comic effect, especially when they make them visible to the characters in question, thus breaking the fourth wall of comics so to speak. The phylactery is the visual equivalent of speech, it indicates who speaks and how that is done by assigning a physical space for speech. I will look at it more closely as I examine text in comics later, but suffice to say that it is unique to any other medium as it is a purely visual representation of sound. It is important to note here that phylacteries can sometimes contain images themselves as the creator seeks to make understanding even simpler than if he were to introduce text in the phylactery:

> "C'est en effet le propre du système psychique inconscient de traiter les mots et les sons comme des choses et de les transformer en leurs équivalents visuels. Ce principe est si important que, dans les rêves où s'exercent plus librement qu'à l'état de veille les processus inconscients, il n'est pas rare que les textes figurent sous une forme graphique... " (Tisseron : 94)

Since comics relies on juxtaposition of images instead of having images follow one another, movement; the act of moving an object in space, would appear impossible to

reproduce in this medium. Quite the opposite, as many techniques were developed to reproduce movement on a still page. The classic effect is to show different "moments" in the action while also showing the effects of such "moments" on other parts that would be affected by this first action. We can see this clearly in *Nick Fury* as Baron Strucker lift Fury in the air only to throw him (see Appendix 25). The image only shows Strucker holding Fury in the air but from both their body positions, we understand that he lifted him from the ground and is about to throw him. The second technique is one that is often seen in mangas, namely the speed line. These lines would normally not appear in reality and are a purely graphic way to show movement. David Lapham's *Stray Bullets* provides an example of this as we see the car racing down the street (see Appendix 26). The lines indicate the point from which the object is supposed to have come from (in this case the car) up until the object itself, suggesting that is has at least moved from these two points and probably beyond. This technique was inspired by photography as objects will tend to blur when caught in motion. This blurry effect can sometimes resemble lines or just be a whir where nothing is easily identifiable. The next technique also uses this effect, but in a different fashion. Movement can be achieved by reproducing the object in motion several times one next to another to simulate this. The object itself can even blur against its multiples to further accentuate this notion of movement. Michel Rabagliati's *Paul a un travail d'été* shows an example of this as we see Paul fighting off mosquitoes (see Appendix 27). Paul is doubled to suggest that he moves back and forth to get rid of the mosquitoes, thus suggesting movement. Finally, the simplest and easiest way to suggest movement is to juxtapose two images: one showing the beginning of the movement and the other showing the end. The reader thus understands that between these two,

movement must occur for the character to be able to move from both points. This brings us to the notion of time in comics for time must elapse between the two frames for the action to move forward and for there to be a narrative.

Time through the juxtaposition of images

In order for a narrative to exist, there must be a resolution to an event, for as Nicole Everaert-Desmedt explains: "Ces deux éléments (représentation – événement) doivent être considérés comme des conditions nécessaires pour obtenir un récit." (Everaert-Desmedt: 8). Without this resolution, an image simply becomes a representation. Or, as Pascal Lefèvre explains:

> "For me, the core definition of a narrative is: 'A formal system that the reader interprets as an interesting representation of a series of logically and chronologically related events, caused or experienced by actors.'" (Lefèvre)

But how can we build a narrative from images that represent a segment of time and place? This is where the notion of closure comes in. Scott McCloud defines closure as "[the] phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole..." (McCloud: 63). In the case of comics, it is the synthesis our minds create to unite two different images. It is what allows our mind to create a link, to build a narrative, between two separate images. This can also work within a single image as words can act to simulate the passage of time within a single frame, but we will examine that later as we look at the importance of the text. Comics present segments of a story but in a way that the reader understands that there is a narrative flow. For as Vincent Desautels states: "Au contraire, plutôt qu'un arrêt du temps dans sa course, l'image dessinée parvient à suggérer un segment temporel entier et indépendant, comme un mini-récit ou un épisode."

(Desautels : 33) Pascal Lefèvre even goes as far as to suggest that there are certain basic

conditions needed to understand a comic:

> "A crucial shema to understand a comic is the elliptic and fragmented nature of
> the medium. The history of comics is partly a history of the refinement of elliptic
> and fragmented storytelling." (Lefèvre)

Whereas film presents us with action as it happens, comics can only show parts of the

story. The gutter, the space between images, thus becomes the place where

understanding is reached for the reader. For example, if we were to see an image of a

hockey player winding up for a shot, next to another where he scores a goal, we would

understand that this is part of the same action. The space between the images is where

we, as readers, understand the link that binds these two images together. Much like film,

there are different types of transitions that may occur for while film tends to present

action in "real-time", it nevertheless focuses on the important aspects of the story to get

its message across. McCloud describes the different transitions that may take place in

comics: moment-to-moment, action-to-action, subject-to-subject, scene-to-scene, aspect-

to-aspect and non-sequitur (McCloud: 70). All these transitions, with the exception of

the non-sequitur which is a juxtaposition of two images with no discernible link between

the two, help to advance the story, the narrative. We could therefore consider comics to

be "reductive in creation and additive in reading", our minds filling in the missing parts

of the story, the space between panels (Duncan). It is not surprising to know that the

action-to-action transition is the most commonly used in comics as it mimics movement

in the real world, but what is surprising is the difference between Japanese comics and

other comics in terms of use of transitions. Japanese comics rely far less on the action-to-

action transition, using a variety of the other ones instead. McCloud attributes this to a

difference in culture, Western art and literature being "goal-oriented" (McCloud: 81).

Japanese comics seem to suggest that there are other ways to approach the comics

medium. As the development of comics coincided with the development of cinema, there

has often been the desire to validate comics through its similarities with film:

> "C'est une idée qu'il faut combattre: la bande-dessinée ne devient réellement elle-même qu'à partir du moment où elle s'émancipe, à partir du moment où elle va s'écarter du cinéma." (Fresnault-Deruelle : 25)

And nowhere do comics differ more than in their ability to fixate the image in time.

Text in comics and its interactions with the image

Now that we have looked at the importance of the image, of its components and of the way it is presented, let us examine the text. Whereas the image presents us with instant information, the text offers a logical progression of ideas to relay its message. While we could say that comics would not be considered as such without the image, we could also safely say that within the image, the text is the dominant aspect:

> "Mais en fait, on peut dire que dans l'image même, le texte règne, tant que l'histoire est d'abord pensée en mots et que le dessin est la mise en images d'un message qui a été conçu selon les catégories du langage". (Masson : 85)

It is exactly this tension between the narrative aspect of images and of text that create the uniqueness of comics. They may sometimes struggle, one trying to subordinate the other, often to the detriment of the work itself. But it is when they work in conjunction, complementing each other's strengths and weaknesses that they truly transform comics into an exciting artistic medium. Many critics favour the use of one over another; Groensteen is a known supporter of the image as the driving force of the narrative structure of comics: "… alors que l'aptitude de la langue à signifier est une évidence admise par tous, il paraissait nécessaire d'établir clairement que l'image seule est porteuse de sens." According to him, the fact that the image can translate visually information pertaining to setting, character, object, mood, expression, movement and action shows its dominance in the narrative (Groensteen: 151). While I would I would never question the importance of the image in the construction of narrative, I would argue that it is not the predominant aspect of it. If we look at the way in which comics are

created, narrative, which is formed by the juxtaposition of images, must first be constructed as a text of some kind. The comics creator, even if he is both the artist and the writer, will begin any work by planning an outline in textual form before going on to determine how each page will be cut and how many panels this will require. Clearly, the importance of the text here is equal to that of the image in building the bases for a narrative. As mentioned earlier, comics must have a visual image for them to be considered comics; a text by itself could not be considered as such. We have also seen how many narratives involve no or very little text at all, a point that was further proven when Marvel Comics decided to launch a month of comics in which there would be no dialogue or written narrative. But while these, and countless other silent graphic narratives, can be considered comics, they tend to be much more difficult to understand as one of its basic elements, text, is suppressed in favour of graphic storytelling. In talking about *Vertigo*, a 300-page graphic novel without any dialogue or text, Eisner underlines the problem of purely graphic storytelling:

> "While this permutation succeeded in demonstrating the viability of graphic storytelling, to an audience alien to comics it could not go very far beyond simply breaking new ground. Many readers found this book difficult to read... But in the main, this experiment overlooked the reinforcement of a balanced mix of image and text." (Eisner, Graphic: 141)

Comics is based on the interaction between not only juxtaposed images, but also between text and images. Groensteen and others' view that the image is predominant neglects to take into account the fact that words can be used to enhance the general reading experience and that images by themselves can muddle the narrative structure as intended by the creator. Peter Kuper's *The System* proves this exact point. The story is told entirely through graphic storytelling, and while difficult in some instances to understand,

manages to guide the reader towards a proper narrative. But to achieve this feat, Kuper uses a few words here and there; a newspaper clipping, text from a computer, written notes, to drive the story forward and to erase any doubts that the reader may have concerning certain images (see Appendix 28). Images without any context are difficult to understand and this is especially tricky to achieve when absolutely no text is present to tie certain loose ends together. While Kuper's work shows that purely graphic storytelling is possible, it also proves that a combination of images and text form the best context in which a proper narrative can emerge. But exactly how do words work to complement images in comics?

Ways in which text interacts with images

Images in comics have a variety of different ways in which they can interact with one another. The relationships they have are based as much on what is within their panels as to what is without; their position on the spatial plane and in relation to others. The same diversity applies to relationships between text and images. Scott McCloud breaks down the different combinations into distinct categories: word specific combinations, picture specific combinations, duo-specific combinations, additive combinations, parallel combinations, montage and interdependent combinations (McCloud: 153). These categories all share one thing in common: they are used to establish continuity and move the story forwards by either complementing what we already see in the image, or by establishing links between the various images through language. In film, the succession of images at a fast pace of twenty-four frames per second ensures continuity, as does sound. Comics must rely on language to compensate, whereas film is the art of movement and sound, comics are the art of the visible and the invisible. Text also helps

to simulate the passage of time to compensate for movement. While this may be done through images, the result would be much slower. Japanese comics are once again the exception, as they rely much more on images to simulate movement and time. This may be due to the drawing style that is popular in Japan, which is less detail-oriented than in America or Europe and thus allows the artist to complete more pages per day. Text thus plays a vital role in the narrative aspect of a comic, even if its role may seem overshadowed by the image which provides immediate information to the reader.

Combinations in action

Having previously established the importance of the image and its container (the panel) in the graphic narrative, let us examine how text interacts with it to complete a homogenous whole. For by its very nature as a set of signs easily identifiable and accessing the cognitive plane, text is an integral part of comics: "Dans son contenu comme dans sa facture, il est une composante indissociable de l'histoire en images." (Peeters: 110). Word specific combinations between image and text are those in which the text is dominant and the image merely illustrates what is said without adding any further information. The example from *Watchmen* shows this rather straightforward combination at work (see Appendix 29). The image of two people holding a beer merely reflects what is stated in the text above. Writers coming from a literary background will often tend to have many of these types of combinations as it is in fact an exact illustration of prose. The exact opposite of this of course are the picture specific combinations which favor the image over the text. In this case, it is the text that is subdued to what the image is bringing in terms of narrative. We tend to see these combinations less frequently as they are often used in transit between other types of combination as a way to show

surprise or any other type of emotion through a simple verbal outburst. The example from *Grendel* shows a woman screaming in fright as she narrowly avoids being hit by an arrow (see Appendix 30). Her scream adds nothing further to what the image has already given in terms of information rather it reinforces it by providing the sonic expression we would come to expect from such a visual. Duo-specific combinations involve panels where the text and the image combine to give essentially the same message. Again, this is a type of combination often seen in works from writers coming from a prose background as they will usually give directions that would involve a graphic representation of the literary narrative. The difference with word specific combinations is that duo-specific combinations will require information from both elements to give the whole story. Both text and image complement each other with neither being dominant over the other. Edgar P. Jacobs used many of these combinations in *Blake et Mortimer*, and in the example, we can see how both the text and image are complete on their own yet complement each other to provide a richer reading experience (see Appendix 31). Both the text and the image convey basically the same information with each confirming what the other is either showing or telling.

The combinations we have examined so far do very little to differentiate comics from other literary forms. In fact, we could say from these combinations that comics is a medium in which image and text are used only to represent a story graphically, with no significant interplay between the two. These combinations are effective in that they are easily understandable and can drive a narrative forward, but it is with the next combinations that creators can truly exploit the unique narrative language of comics. Additive combinations deal with panels in which the words amplify the image or vice

versa. This is the first combination in which the text and the image do something other than represent the other or complete it. In this instance, both present a part of the information in a way that completes the other, adds to its total value. With this combination we begin to see the true appeal of comics. The reader becomes involved through both immediate visual information that can easily be absorbed, and visual iconography that delves more into the realm of ideas. The image is absorbed in much the same way that a painting would be: we get a general sense of emotion from the way the lines are drawn, interact with one another and how color plays a role in all this. At the same time however, we are plunged in the realm of thinking through language that complements our initial reading of the image. P. Craig Russell and Neil Gaiman provide a wonderful example of this type of combination in the pages of *Sandman*: on the page, the city of Baghdad is represented in all its glory with the sun rising on its timeless beauty (see Appendix 32). The images themselves paint the portrait of a wonderful city, one which would remain eternally striking simply on the grounds of this visual. But the added captions detail how this beauty is accented by the presence of wise men who would go on to perform grand feats, thus adding to the city's greatness. While the power of the image is evident, the accompanying text enhances the reading experience in a manner unique to comics.

Additive combinations can also work in more subtle ways as Benoît Peeters points out in an example from Hergé's *Tintin et le secret de la licorne* (Peeters: 152). The scene shows a man pointing towards birds shortly after having been victim of an attack. The pointing is actually a clue for Tintin— the victim knows his aggressor is named "Loiseau", which is of course French for the word bird (see Appendix 33). In this

instance, the image acts as a word, the birds being the visual clue needed to solve the mystery behind the attack. Images and words can thus essentially replace one another in addition to conveying information that would be different if but one of these elements were missing from the panel.

Parallel combinations could be considered an antithesis of additive combinations as the text and image each go in their separate direction. Each can stand on its own as a narrative but, when put together, give a completely new meaning to the panel or series of panels. A long-running Vertigo series, *Sandman Mystery Theatre*, uses this type of combination profusely. The advantage of this combination is that it allows the action to be condensed; essentially the author can move the story along on two different paths at once. *Sandman Mystery Theatre* uses captions that place the reader inside one of the main protagonists' head and that drives an interior monologue that becomes in itself a narrative that can shape the story (see Appendix 34). Meanwhile, the image conveys the actions that are needed to tie up some loose ends from the plot, in this case the Sandman coming late after a night investigating and finding his girlfriend looking out for him in a foreshadow of things to come in the story arc. With the image essentially telling a story on its own, the text is free to wander and examine elements that may otherwise not be shown either because they cannot be adequately represented graphically or because they do not fit in the rest of the story. While this may seem like a separation between text and image, it is actually a different kind of fusion in which both elements are developed independently but it is in their coming together on the page, and sometimes the manner in which their opposition creates meaning, that once again characterizes comics. The opposite for this type of combination is the interdependent combination where neither

text nor images read on their own make any sense. In this instance, the presence of both text and image is needed to understand meaning as it is intended to be understood, for each separately either makes no sense at all or does not give the intended meaning. In *La boîte noire*, we see this type of combination at work as we are presented with the sunken image of Laurent Aubier as he aimlessly wanders the streets (see Appendix 35). By itself, the image would suggest that he is off to someplace, but when we read the text we in fact understand that he is actually looking for himself, that he is lost. Reading the text, we would not understand that he is not another but a shadow of his former self, which is evident in the way he is presented in black from behind. Creators will often play with this to create comical situations where the text and image are not in synch or sometimes to establish a mood, where the words are the driving force of the narrative while the image may show something else entirely that helps set the tone of the scene.

Comics being a graphic art form, text can sometimes be used as a graphic element in its own right. Words stop being merely language but become an intrinsic part of the image. The Hernandez brothers show this combination, called montage, in their most famous work *Love and Rockets*, a work heavily influenced by science-fiction and containing many types of story. The Hernandez brothers will use different art styles to suit the story they wish to tell, whether that story be a space age story, a romance, a drama, a lighthearted comedy and so on and so forth. As such, art to them involves suiting the image to the type of story they wish to tell while trying to find ways to push the boundaries of what they wish to infer through the story. As such, their tale of a writer looking for a way to kill its character ultimately ends in the character being disintegrated as the words "how to kill Isabel Ruebens" disappear away from her body. In this

instance, the text becomes a graphic element while at the same time serving its role as language (see Appendix 36).

These categories all share one thing in common: they are used to establish continuity and move the story forwards by either complementing what we already see in the image, or by establishing links between the various images through language. In film, the succession of images at a fast pace of twenty-four frames per second ensures continuity, as does sound. Comics must rely on language to compensate, whereas film is the art of movement and sound, comics are the art of the visible and the invisible. Text also helps to simulate the passage of time to compensate for movement. While this may be done through images, the result would be much slower. Japanese comics are once again the exception, as they rely much more on images to simulate movement and time. This may be due to the drawing style that is popular in Japan, which is less detail-oriented than in America or Europe and thus allows the artist to complete more pages per day. Text thus plays a vital role in the narrative aspect of a comic, even if its role may seem overshadowed by the image which provides immediate information to the reader.

Writing process and graphic adaptation

Now that we have examined how images and text interact with one another in the finished product, let us look at how they interact within the creative process. While there are many jobs in the creation of comics, the two most important roles are played by the writer and the artist. I use the term artist here because there are many different ways in which comics visual can come together. The artist can be a penciller, whose work is then embellished by an inker (either himself or someone else) who in essence traces over the penciled work with a defining bold line, a painter, a computer artist… the possibilities are

endless especially considering the new developments in computer technology which allow for reproduction of certain techniques (such as watercolors or penciling which is directly reproduced on the page) that were impossible before. For our purposes, we will consider the artist the one being responsible for setting up layouts from the script provided by the writer. While there are many talented writer/artists such as Hergé, Frank Miller, Chris Ware and Matt Wagner to name but a few, we will examine each role separately to better understand them and their interaction in the creative process. Furthermore, most comics are created through a collaborative effort and only a minority of creators tackle both jobs at once.

While comics end up being an amalgam of text and image, it initially starts, as do many projects in other mediums, as a text. The writer outlines the story in the traditional way with a plot containing an exposition (the information needed to understand the story), a conflict (which will move the story forward), a climax (the turning point in the story where the character makes a major decision regarding the conflict) and a resolution. The writer will also be responsible for giving information as to story setting, background, character descriptions and the like. This process is much akin to literature, film and other such mediums. Where it differs from literature is in the fact that the artist is the one who will be responsible for providing a visual for the writer's descriptions. Whereas in a book, the reader constructs his own mental image from the description provided by the writer, in comics, this information is readily available visually through the image. The writer will therefore need to rely on the artist to convey information vital to the narrative. This is why collaboration is so important in comics. Writers cannot rely solely on their words to tell their story and must rely on the artist's interpretation of these words. A

writer may envision a scene of two knights bearing down on one another from one of the knight's perspective while the artist may render the same scene from a side view. This is why a script must be especially thorough in terms of information provided. Much like film, the comics writer will often need to establish setting, background and angle in order for his vision to be accurately represented. Collaborations can change greatly between pairs of creators with some artists preferring to work from full scripts while others preferring to work from an outline from which their artistic vision will be more fully realized. The advantage, of course, of being both writer and artist is that these decisions are made by one person with all possible problems resolved in the creative process.

Two major companies, Marvel and DC Comics, currently dominate the comics market in the U.S. and both espouse their own philosophy on how the collaboration between artist and writer should be approached. At Marvel Comics, the writer provides an outline that is then given to the artist who graphically adapts the different scenes, backgrounds and lays them out on the pages. Theses pages are then given back to the writer who will script these pages, adding dialogue and captions as needed. DC Comics favors the full script approach which is to say that the writer produces a document that includes all information needed for the story (including scene descriptions, dialogue, captions, perspective, etc.). The writer does not see the pages afterwards but his initial document is so complete that there is really no need for him to see it again. Both these approaches have their own advantages and disadvantages, with the Marvel approach favoring the artist while the full script approach favoring the writer's vision, but in the end, it is the collaborative process that makes either of these approaches work successfully or not for the sake of the story.

The script produced by the writer is addressed to the artist directly whose role it is to translate, in visual terms, any information provided within. As each artist has his own interpretation, one script could theoretically be adapted an infinite number of ways. The number of panels could change, the graphic style could be different, the angles and perspective could also change from artist to artist. In a way, the artist works much as a set coordinator would on a play, helping to set up backgrounds by choosing the appropriate objects and lighting to best reflect the contents of the story. Writing for comics thus becomes "economical, eschews literary style, and does not need descriptive passages that evoke images by analogous prose." (Eisner, Graphic: 112). There is no need to repeat information that will be found in the image; rather it is trying to balance the need to use words with the presence of images that becomes the true art form behind writing comics. The partnership between writer and artist is essential to this delicate balancing act as their roles complement each others' in creating a solid narrative.

Text seen by the reader: dialogue, thought balloons and captions

Much of the writing for comics occurs behind the scenes as the writer tries to direct the artist in translating his vision into graphic form. But while this text does not see the light of day in the finished product, other texts do and play an important role in shaping the narrative. Captions, text that is boxed within a shape (usually rectangular), dialogue, text that is boxed within a phylactery, and thought balloons are the main ways in which text is presented in comics. Words within the image can also interact with said image but they rarely interact in what we would consider a more literary way. These words do not drive the story forward in any way but help to complement aspects in the image. Captions have traditionally been used to incorporate the narrative text. It acts much in

the same way than would text in a book, it can sometimes describe, add value to what the image is showing or simply go inside a character's head. It can act as the omniscient narrator that drives the story forward as it is understood that text within a caption stands outside the image even if it shares the same space. Captions are also used for transitional text, words such as "elsewhere" or "meanwhile" that create links between panels. They can also be used for off-panel dialogue, to resolve within the panel dialogue that occurs elsewhere. Captions could be seen as the literary frame for text, helping to guide the reader through the story in a logical and understandable manner.

Being a visual medium, dialogue plays an important part in understanding a comics narrative. As with film, the fact that the reader sees both protagonists makes it easier to simply having them speak as opposed to examining their reactions as what happens in the literary world. In books, the author must not only describe the dialogue, but also the protagonists' reaction to it as there is no way for the reader to see how they would react to it. This is not the case in comics, where the image immediately gives away this information. The writer is thus free to push the story forward through dialogue between characters. With both text and image existing within one panel, it becomes difficult to determine how the action is sequenced:

> "We have no real evidence that they are read simultaneously. There is a different cognitive process between reading words and pictures. But in any event, the image and the dialogue give meaning to each other – a vital element in graphic storytelling." (Eisner, Graphic: 59)

Panels thus exist in a sort of timelessness when it comes to the relationship between the image and the text. Regardless of which is read or seen first, the meaning of the panel will come from the amalgam of both elements as understood by the reader. Dialogue is contained within a phylactery, or a word balloon as it is often referred to, which is a

bordered shape, usually circular with a tail at the end indicating the speaker. Balloons can come in different shapes and the letters within can also change to suit the story. Big, bold letters within will mean that the character is screaming, and other moods can be similarly expressed through the shape of the phylactery. Thought balloons are also used to express a character's thoughts, although in this case it refers to an internal monologue as opposed to a dialogue. They are usually in the form of a cloud or another bumpy shape and give the reader access to a character's inner thoughts which can be crucial in understanding certain aspects of the story.

The interaction of two very different elements, the image and the text, help give comics its unique voice. The traditional elements of storytelling, story construction through acts, characterization, plot, description are combined to visual narratives such as image, sequencing, layout, to create a unique type of interaction. Text structures a story not only through this interaction, but also in the creative process as it is the driving force behind the writer-artist association. We should therefore consider it as an equally important part of comics, and move away from discussions as to which of the two main aspects is the dominant one.

Analysis: putting theory into practice

Having now looked at the mechanics behind comics, its different structural elements and how they combine to create a narrative, let us put theory into practice and examine a comic book tale. For reasons of space, I have selected a 12-page story written by Alan Moore with art by Rick Veitch starring their creation Greyshirt from the pages of *Alan Moore's Tomorrow Stories* (see Appendix 37). Greyshirt is of course inspired by Will Eisner's famous creation "The Spirit", a detective who solved crimes through his cunning and fists and who appeared in many newspapers across the United States. It is through this creation that Eisner began to hone his craft and push the boundaries of comic book storytelling through the use of cinematic camera angles and groundbreaking use of image and text together. Moore and Veitch's creation pays homage to "The Spirit" through its own use of many different techniques that showcase comics' potential as a diverse creative medium.

The story opens up with a four-panel page but it is not these panels that draw our attention, rather it is the page frame made to look like a music sheet that we immediately notice. Our eye is then drawn to the magenta music notes that float above the three top panels and that eventually descend to the final panel, where we see that a violin is the cause for all these notes. Right away, we can see that while Veitch uses panels to sequence the story, he is not bound to them in any way as shapes move beyond the panels' frames, shapes such as the aforementioned musical notes and the violin. The notes' movement suggests that the music being played is heard throughout the amount of

time that passes in all these panels. Time is thus rendered here in a visual way; no text tells us that time has elapsed, rather we understand that is has through the music that fills all frames. Movement is likewise rendered visually through motion lines, such as the ones from the man as he smashes the door or the vibrations from Dr. Crescendo's violin. Much of the action in this opening scene leaves much to the reader's imagination as frames are shown from very close angles. Also, we never see the man's death, simply that the door breaks open and then a pair of boots fuming from what we presume to be the man's remains. The reader is left with the actual "killing" of the man, we can imagine in our minds how it plays out for while it is a visual medium, comics can still leave much to the reader's imagination. Likewise, Dr. Crescendo is never revealed, we are only treated to his instrument and his withered hands. The tale's credits, which would normally appear in a separate box or in a corner on the page, are included here as part of the scene as Crescendo's music sheet. The story's title is included in the same magenta as the floating notes which all jump out and attract the reader's attention from the get-go as he turns the page.

It is also important to mention the style used by Veitch, a style that is reminiscent to comic book art from the sixties and pulp magazines. While being realistic in its approach, it is a realism that is more akin to the 1960's than it is to today as art has evolved and its sense of realism with it. We understand the intention to be an homage to comics of that time, with both its shorter format (many stories of that time were shorter in length than today's multi-comics epics), art style and choice of subject. The story structure is also akin to stories of that time with an abundance of action-to-action, subject-to-subject and scene-to-scene transitions in traditional page layouts. By doing

this, they once again evoke the stories of the past, the pulp fictions they are trying to emulate, while also setting up what will later be a complete departure from this. This type of storytelling was initially introduced because it drives the story forward in the most logical and efficient way. Comics being an additive process, readers can easily make up the rest of the story based on the information provided in these types of transition. However, more and more artists are moving away from this type of traditional storytelling to explore whole new avenues. This has much to do with the exploration of the comics medium but also with the influence of others, notably Japanese manga. As Scott McCloud points out:

> "Traditional Western art and literature don't wander much. On the whole, we're a pretty goal-oriented culture. But in the East, there's a rich tradition of cyclical and labyrinthine works of art... For in Japan, more than anywhere else, comics is an art." (McCloud, Understanding: 81)

As mentioned earlier, the traditional storytelling used in *Greyshirt* has much to do with the style of the pulps and the conventional laws of comics to which they adhere. But as we will see later on, this style is established early in the story only so that it may be subverted later on to great effect. Likewise, the page layouts, with an array of rectangular panels arranged in conventional order, are established in the classic comics narrative tradition only to be further deconstructed.

The different uses of fonts and word balloons to convey meaning are evident from the 2nd page of the story as Greyshirt encounters a homeless man. We immediately understand, from the wobbly shape of the word balloon and the tail leading to the homeless, that he is having difficulty to speak properly. There is no need for a narrator to explain the character's emotional state as it is done visually both from the image, in which the character looks shaken and the word balloon which reinforces this without us

having to read anything. Contrarily to the novel, comics do not need words to express what is happening or even emotion; this is all done through the different visual codes of comics. The image describes, so there is no need for textual description. Text can therefore be used for dialogue to drive the story forward. There is no need to endlessly explain what the eye senses in but a few fractions of a second, at first glance.

The second and third pages of the story highlight the importance of "mise en scène" in a comics story. The setting is established through the art which, as mentioned above, has its own unique graphic properties to establish mood. Also, recognizable objects place us in a alleyway, then inside a store. But the story itself is continuously moving visually throughout these scenes. For example, page two shows us a conversation between three characters in an alleyway. But the visual is constantly moving, we are never shown the same angle or the same elements. The first panel establishes the setting from the backdrop behind Greyshirt and Rocky. The second panel shows us who they are talking to in that first panel while establishing their position vis-à-vis his. Whereas the shots establishing Greyshirt and Rocky are from the bottom looking upwards (giving Greyshirt a sense of greatness), the shot establishing the homeless man is from the top down; establishing his own struggles and position in the story. The scene then shifts to show us all three characters in a different angle, as if we are there with them listening in. The fourth panel is a close-up of the backwards watch with the effect this has had on the homeless man to the right of the image. The fifth panel moves the story as all three protagonists leave the alleyway but it also sets up the last panel on the page with our seeing the small window above them which shows Dr. Crescendo listening in on their conversation. Finally, the last shot shows us a mood shot of Dr. Crescendo, in shadow,

with tattered drapes hanging from his window looking upwards clutching his violin. This contrasts with the dialogue from the homeless man below (for we recognize his particular balloon and font) who says to "keep it down" as Dr. Crescendo himself look upwards at the whole scene. In this instance, words and pictures unite to create a unique meaning from this union. The third page shows the same type of progression with the first panels establishing the scene and with many "camera shifts" as we move from panel to panel, focusing on various elements of the store and a diagram provided by Greyshirt. Comics function much like cinema in that the angle and the way in which things are presented can provide meaning as much as description or dialogue can. Also, creators need to keep the reader interested and will shift to various points of the scene to avoid redundancy and to prevent the scene to feel like talking heads just reciting the dialogue. The artist must show emotion through the way the character appears (body positioning, clothing, facial expression etc.) in the scene and how we relate as a reader (camera angle, lighting etc.) to it.

Page four shows a flashback scene going back to the Miss Crescendo's childhood. This is established visually through the characters who look much younger but also by the fact that the meta-panel has now been transformed from musical notes on a purple background to a chalkboard exposing Dr. Crescendo's theory. The meta-panel quickly reverses back as the story moves back to the present. The sixth page shows a wonderful example of movement in comics. The three last panels, separated as are the others above it on the page, are in reality but one background through which the characters move as they go from the stairs to the sidewalk. Movement is implied by their positioning; they are going from left to right and moving from one end of the scene to the other. No

movement lines suggest this movement; rather it is our understanding of reading from left to right and seeing them at various points in the movement that we understand it takes place. Similarly, it is harder to understand that the blue car in the background (seen first in the second panel) makes that same type of movement as it goes against the main movement of the characters and against our logical assumption of movement in comics. It is only in focusing on the scene that we can later attest to it, but the fact that it is not as straightforward underlines positioning in our understanding of movement when it is implied visually.

The seventh page builds up the action that is to come; the confrontation between Greyshirt and Dr. Crescendo. This is built-up slowly on the page as Greyshirt finds, then confronts Crescendo on a rooftop, but the creators keep the surprise until the next page. One of the attributes of comics is that they are a physical, manipulable objects that demand a certain interaction with the reader. A creator cannot control how a reader will approach a comic book, whether he looks at the whole page before reading or looks at panels one by one is clearly up to the reader. Creators can, however, play with the element of surprise that comes with reading comics. Each time the reader turns the page he is presented with a new world to discover. This is different from cinema where the filmmaker has complete control over how the audience sees the film as he controls which panels are shown in which order on the one screen. Comics imply an interaction of the various panels and creators do not have as much control, which opens up various reading possibilities for the reader. In this instance, the creators keep the surprise of the confrontation until the next pages in which all existing rules established earlier in the story are transformed to great effect. The meta-panel explodes as the notes get bigger

and go in different directions. The panels themselves change from regular rectangular shapes to a bigger rectangle from which hang panels in the shape of musical notes. Elements contained in the main panel leak down to the other ones but are transformed as the reality in the story is transformed through the actions of Dr. Crescendo. There is no up or down in looking at the panels and similarly, objects are skewed much as their reality is. The only constant and the elements that bind this all together are word balloons which maintain their regular shape and more importantly their horizontal positioning as everything around them is turned upside down and sideways.

The following pages are as different in their treatment as are the previous ones. Gone is the chaos seen before, replaced this time by a new order. Characters seem to duplicate as Crescendo increases the number of dimensions in which he plays. Again, the visuals play an important role in positioning the reader. We see immediately upon turning the page that things have changed. While it may seem like an elaborate page design, it actually follows a very simple left-to-right, top-to-bottom reading pattern which ultimately ends with Miss Crescendo's teary eye as she understands the possibility of her father dying before her eyes. Again, Moore uses the relationship between words and images to great effect by having Rocky mention that the doctor is reaching a crescendo, which is never mentioned, but instead followed by the image of Miss Crescendo colliding with Greyshirt on the following page. Here the image replaces the word that Rocky was about to say as the story reaches its own crescendo. It is also interesting to note that the colouring, which was consistent throughout in its heavy use of blue and purple-colored hues changes slightly near the end. It stays in these tones, but Dr. Crescendo stops having any coloration and is reduced to shades of blue as we see him moving away from

reality. Again, we see the importance of the visual in providing clues to a better understanding or alternate reading of the story.

The *Greyshirt* story ends with the disappearance of Dr. Crescendo. Again, the meta-panel immediately indicates things have changed as the notes have disappeared from the purple background. Also, the second and third panels are in fact but one which are separated to indicate a passage in time between both these panels even though they occupy the same physical space. From the violin crashing to leave behind but a trail of smoke, we understand the movement that has occurred between these two panels that indicate actions that are very close to one another.

Looking to the future

With film now taking an interest in comics with such blockbusters as *Spider-Man*, *X-Men* and *Superman*, comics are enjoying a sort of renaissance in the eyes of the general public. But while these movies open the eyes to what comics are presenting, they do not offer the experience of reading a comic. While no film could ever truly do this, Frank Miller and Robert Rodriguez's *Sin City* comes close to matching that experience by virtually lifting scenes and camera angles directly from the comic that mix in with digitally created backgrounds meant to better represent the graphic style contained in the original work. They even consider their work to be a translation as opposed to an adaptation, with Rodriguez's love for Miller's original work prompting him to preserve as much of the experience we get from reading the comic onto film. Comics have long been cast aside as children's literature and may be forever categorized as such, but there appears nevertheless to be progress as an increasing number of critical work (such as this), begins to take surface. The fight for general acceptance is still ongoing, but there is hope in that comics are now being looked at much in the same way that film was when the likes of Eisenstein and others began to observe the various elements that come together to form it. As creators such as Chris Ware, Moebius and Joe Sacco continue to push the boundaries of the medium, comics can hope to shed its tag of being children's literature that comes with the fact that most of its output is concerned with super-heroes and other fantastical subjects.

Like any other media, comics share elements with other media that can lead to assumptions on its workings and reduce it to its formative elements. Comics are not only art mixed in with words, they are much more than the sum of its parts. As we have seen, the relationships that can exist between art and text are numerous and more importantly offer a myriad of different narrative possibilities. Comics are reducing in their creation but additive in reading. They open up a wealth of various reading experiences as the reader has some control over how he approaches the work. Also, layout plays an important role in comics as not only what is within the panels is important, but also what is in the meta-panel and the relationships between the elements contained in the various panels and their spatial positioning to one another. It shares some of the best elements of literature while mixing it with some of the best elements of graphic arts. More and more comics are made by painters who treat each panel as a miniature painting while taking into consideration the relationships between all these panels. Also, graphic designers are influencing comics with more and more artists now creating pages that take into account the whole page instead of restricting themselves to doing panels with a simple white background around all these panels. Similarly, writers are taking advantage of the fact that their words are coupled with art and can thus avoid long descriptions to focus mainly on dialogue or text that is relevant to moving the story forwards.

Creators in North America are not the only ones being influenced—all over the world creators are seeing what is being done elsewhere and adapting some of it into their own work. Japanese comics, manga to be precise, are currently influencing a whole generation of American artists much in the way that Europeans influenced these same Americans in the seventies and eighties. This changes the approach drastically as manga

are more prone to using all sorts of panel transitions, even at the risk of slowing down the pace of the story, to tell their narrative. This has much to do with the fact that their work is usually more prone to wander, as the story follows its own path filled with allegory and poetic imagery. With all this in mind, it is vital to understand the specificities of comics as it is those exact properties that make it the unique, engaging medium it is today.

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Appendix 1
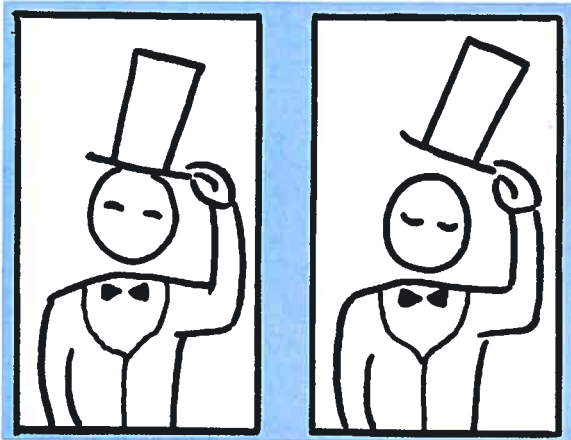
Understanding Comics by Scott McCloud, 1993

Appendix 2
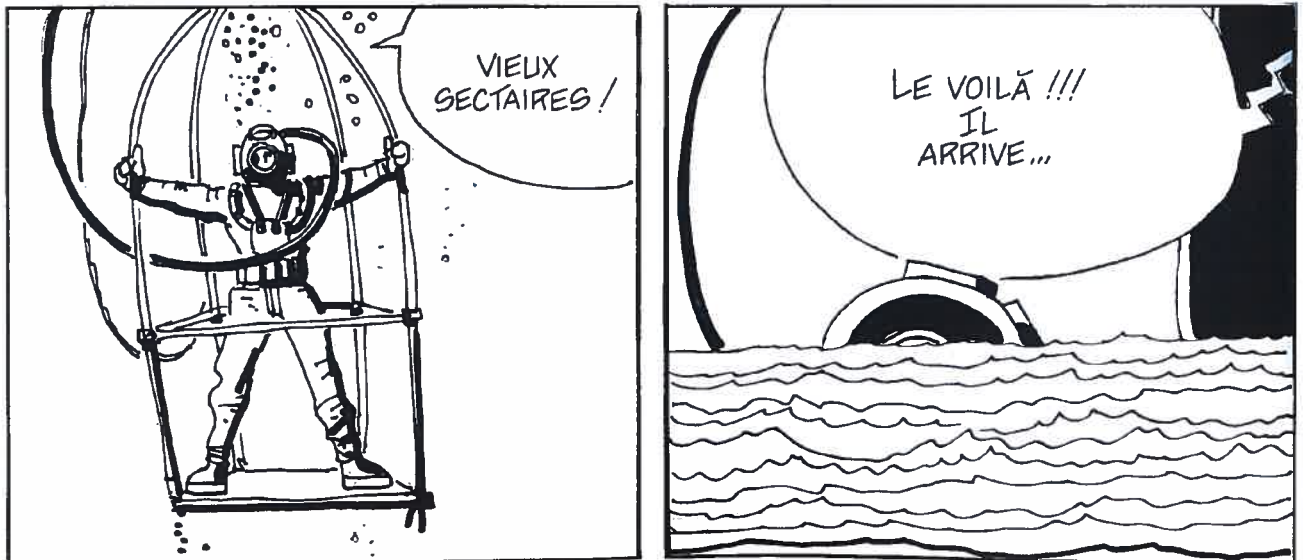
Mû by Hugo Pratt, 2001

Appendix 3-a
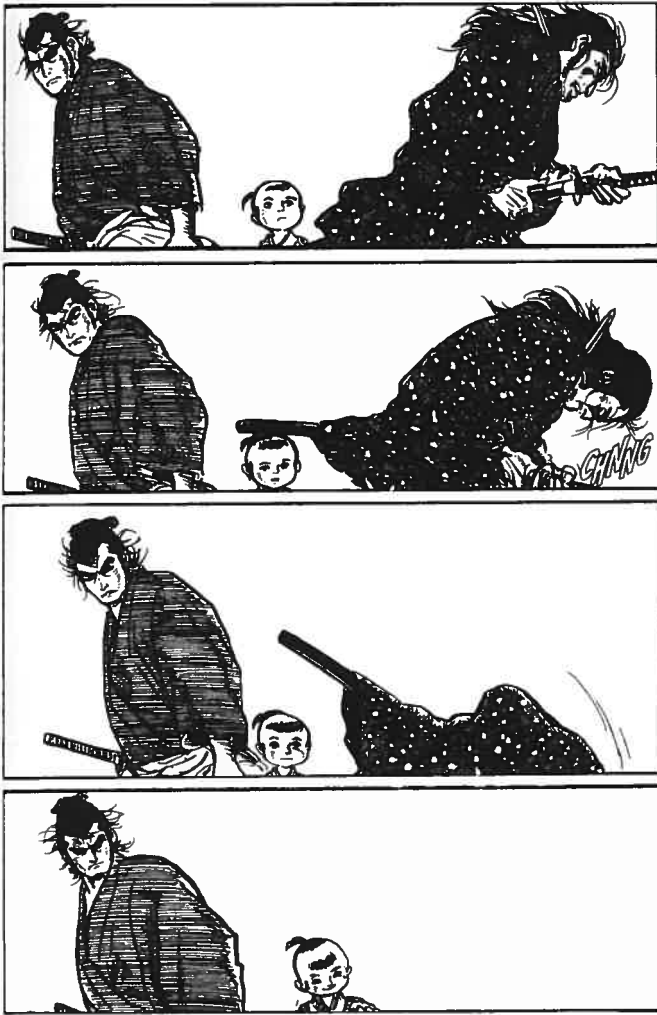
Lone Wolf and Cub by Kazuo Koike and Goseki Kojima, 1995

Appendix 3-b

Paul a un travail d'été by Michel Rabagliati, 2002

Appendix 3-c
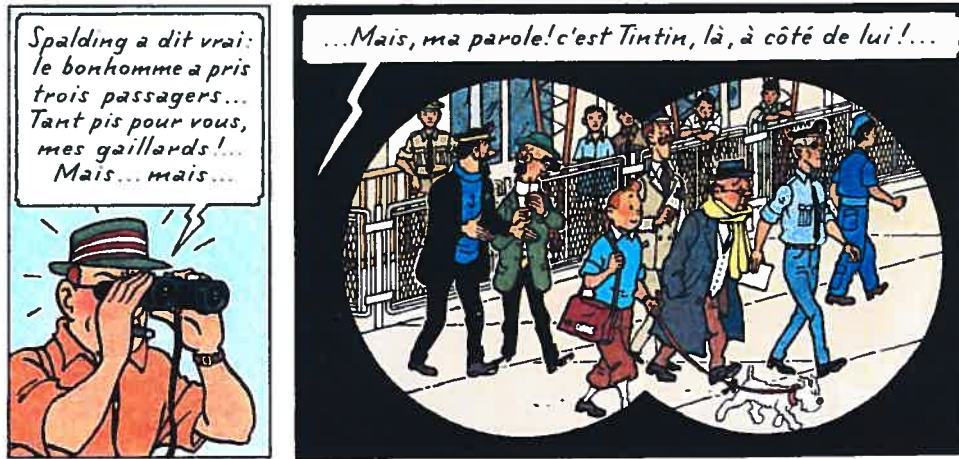
Vol 714 pour Sydney by Hergé, 1968

Appendix 3-d
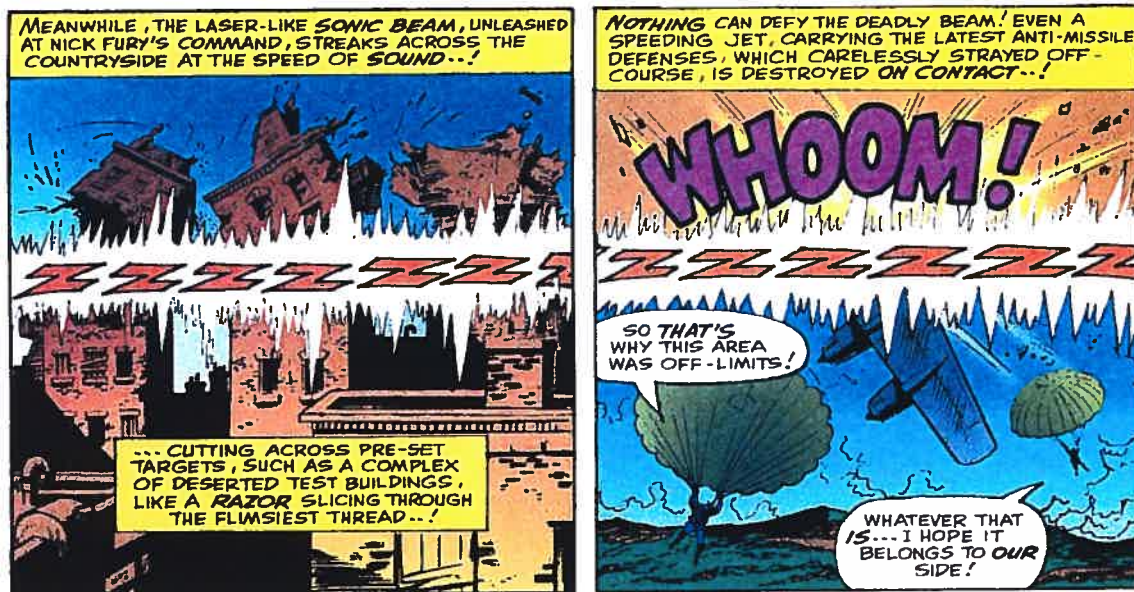
Nick Fury, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D. by Jim Steranko, Stan Lee et al., 2001

Appendix 3-e

Understanding Comics by Scott McLoud, 1993

Appendix 3-f
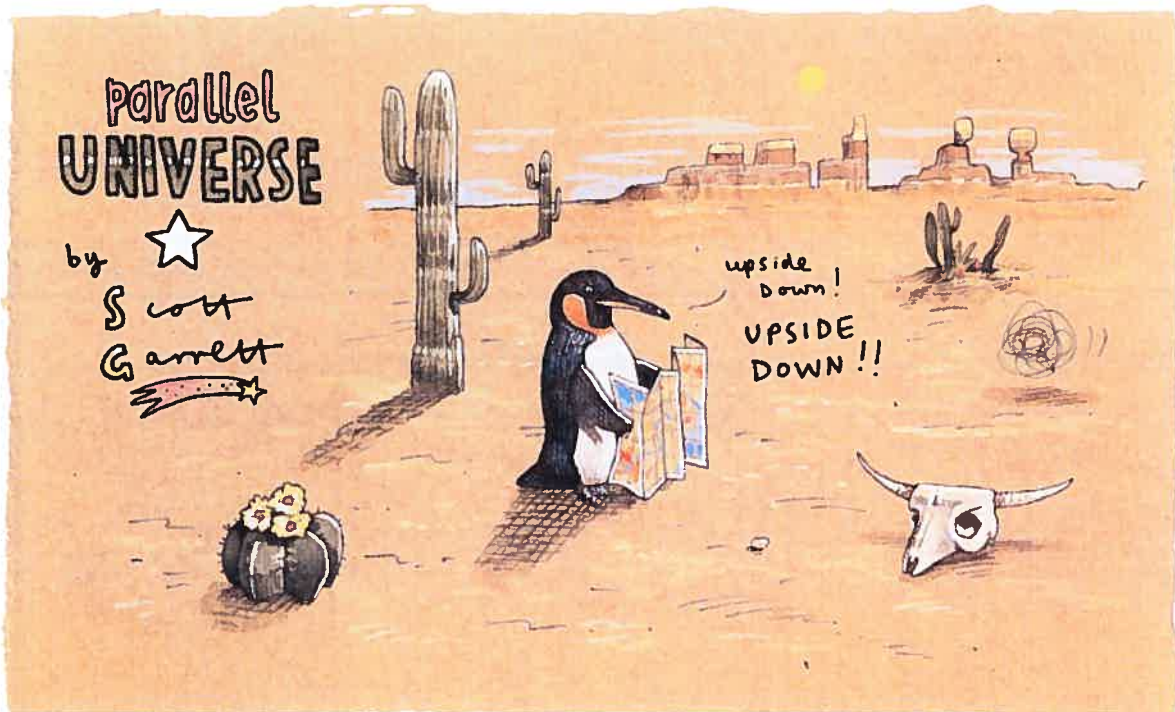
Appendix 4

Parallel Universe by Scott Garrett, 2002 from *Pictures & Words*

Appendix 5

JOY
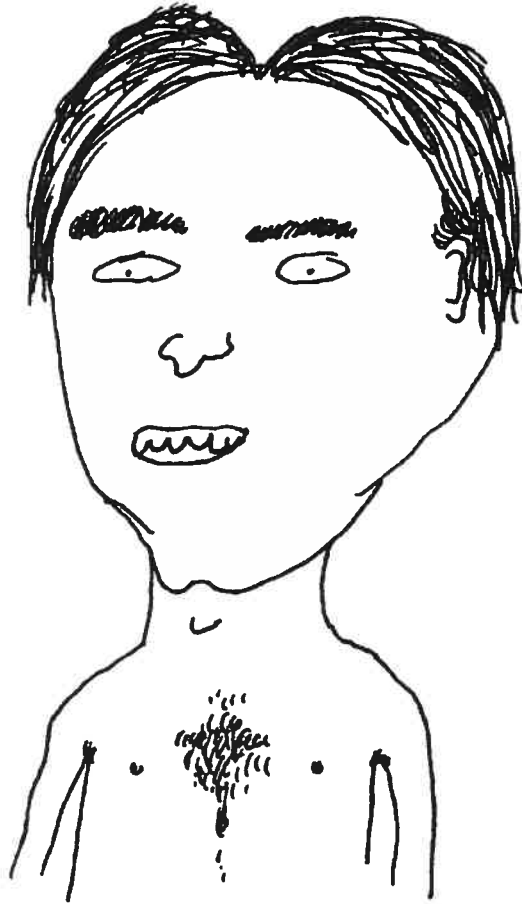
AFTER JOY: ARREST, TRIAL,
PRISON, MURDERED IN PRISON.

Parallel Universe by David Shrigley, 2000 from *Pictures & Words*

Appendix 6
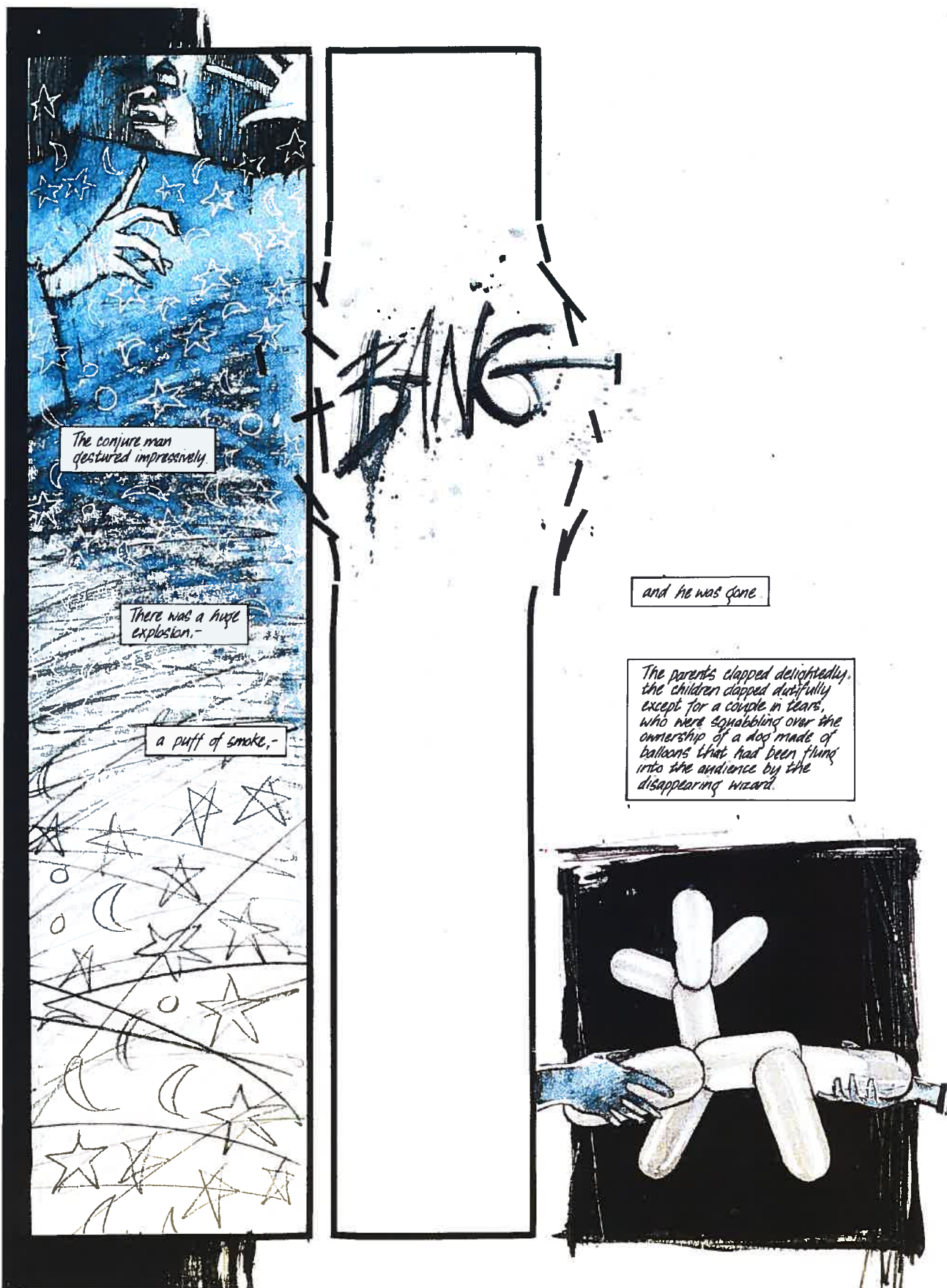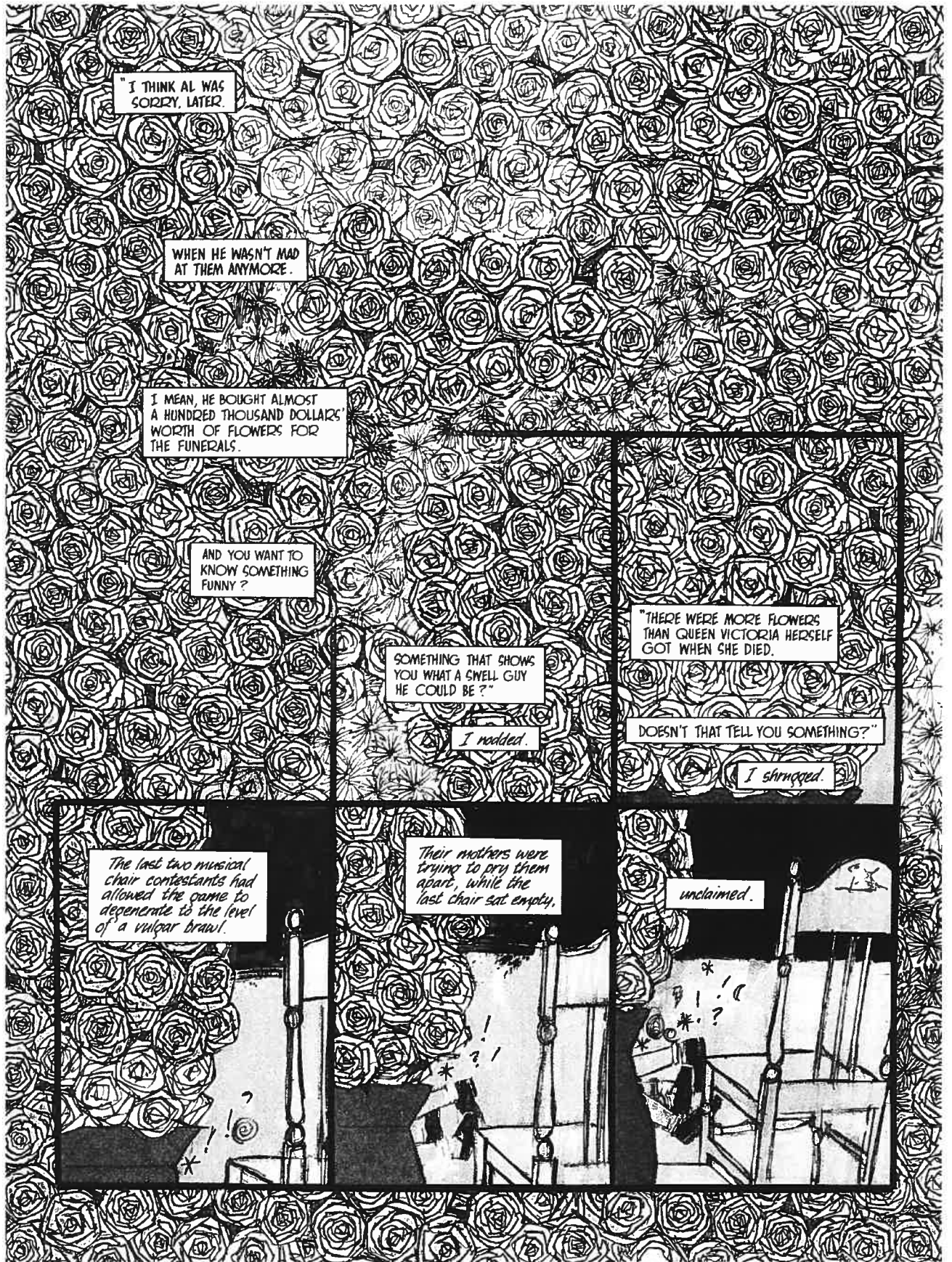
A

B

C

D

Comics and Sequential Art by Will Eisner, 1985

The conjure man gestured impressively.

BANG

There was a huge explosion,—

a puff of smoke,—

and he was gone.

The parents clapped delightedly, the children clapped dutifully except for a couple in tears, who were squabbling over the ownership of a dog made of balloons that had been flung into the audience by the disappearing wizard.

Violent Cases by Neil Gaiman and Dave McKern, 2003

Dropsie Avenue by Will Eisner, 2000

Grendel: The Devil Inside by Matt Wagner and Bernie Mireault, 2004

Greyshirt by Alan Moore and Rick Veitch, 2000

Mû by Hugo Pratt, 2001

Sandman: Fables and Reflections by Neil Gaiman and P. Craig Russell, 1993
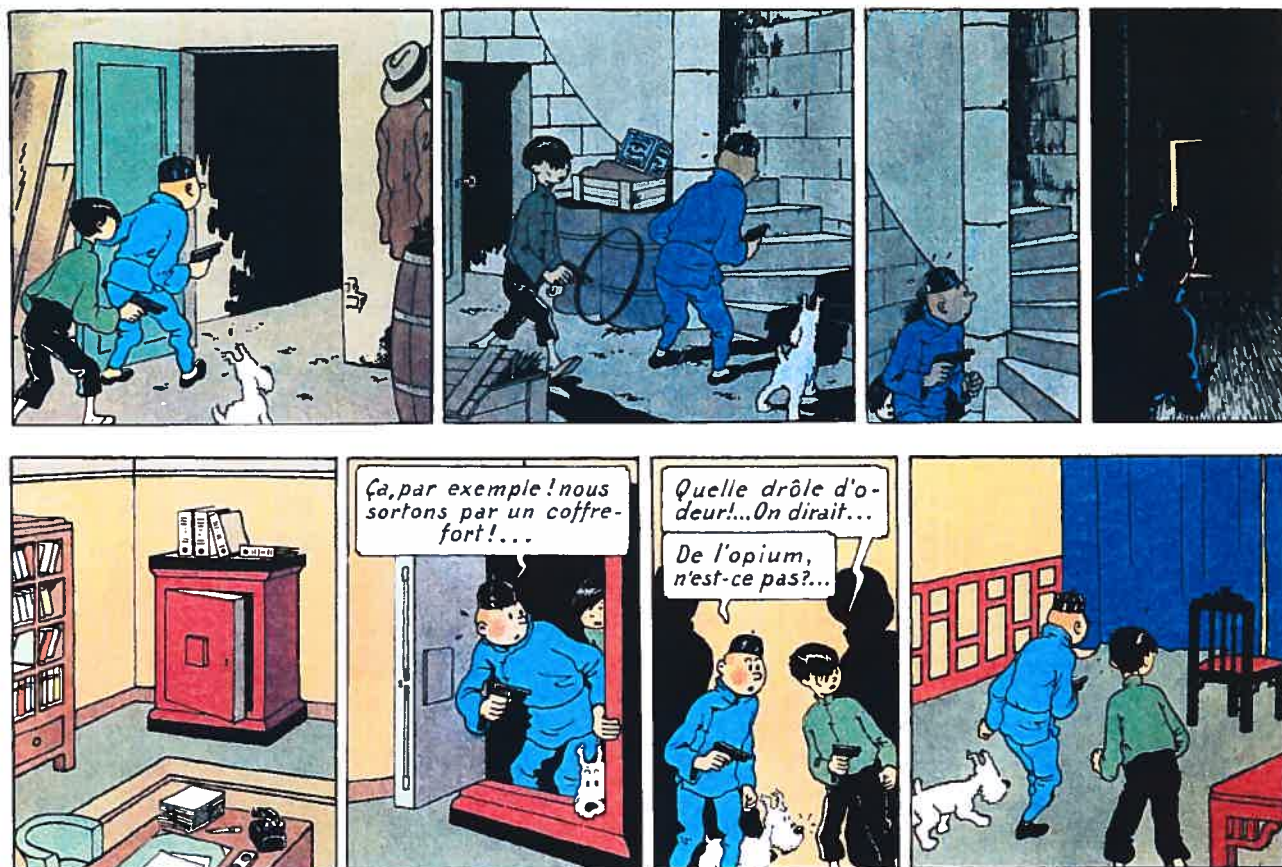
Le lotus bleu by Hergé, 1946

Sandman Midnight Theater by Neil Gaiman, Matt Wagner and Teddy Kristiansen, 1995

Greyshirt by Alan Moore and Rick Veitch, 2003

Murder Me Dead by David Lapham, 2002

Nick Fury, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D. by Jim Steranko, Stan Lee et al., 2001

The bald magician,-

huge and impassive,-

walked over and closed the curtains.

I ate one of the sweet biscuits I had put into my pocket, crunching the icing between my teeth.

Then I went up to Louisa Singer and her mother, who were standing by the big door.

I said 'Thank you for having me.'

Louisa's mother said 'You're welcome',-

and I put on my coat with the velvet collar, and, accompanied by my parents, I made my way home.

Violent Cases by Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean, 2003

Mû by Hugo Pratt, 2001

Comics and Sequential Art by Will Eisner, 1985

The Dark Knight Returns by Frank Miller and Klaus Janson, 1996

Appendix 23
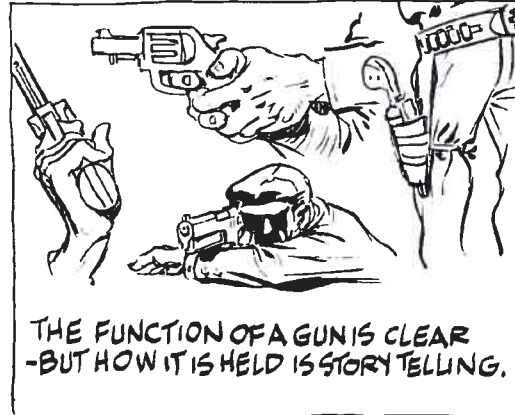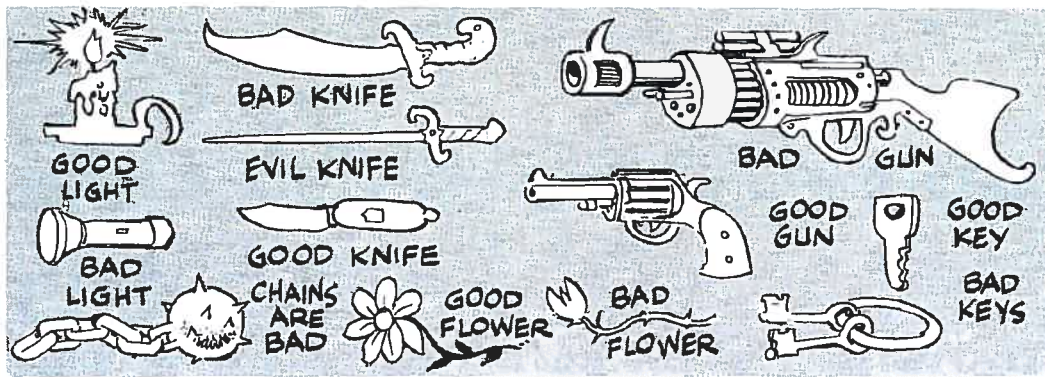
Comics and Sequential Art by Will Eisner, 1985

Appendix 24
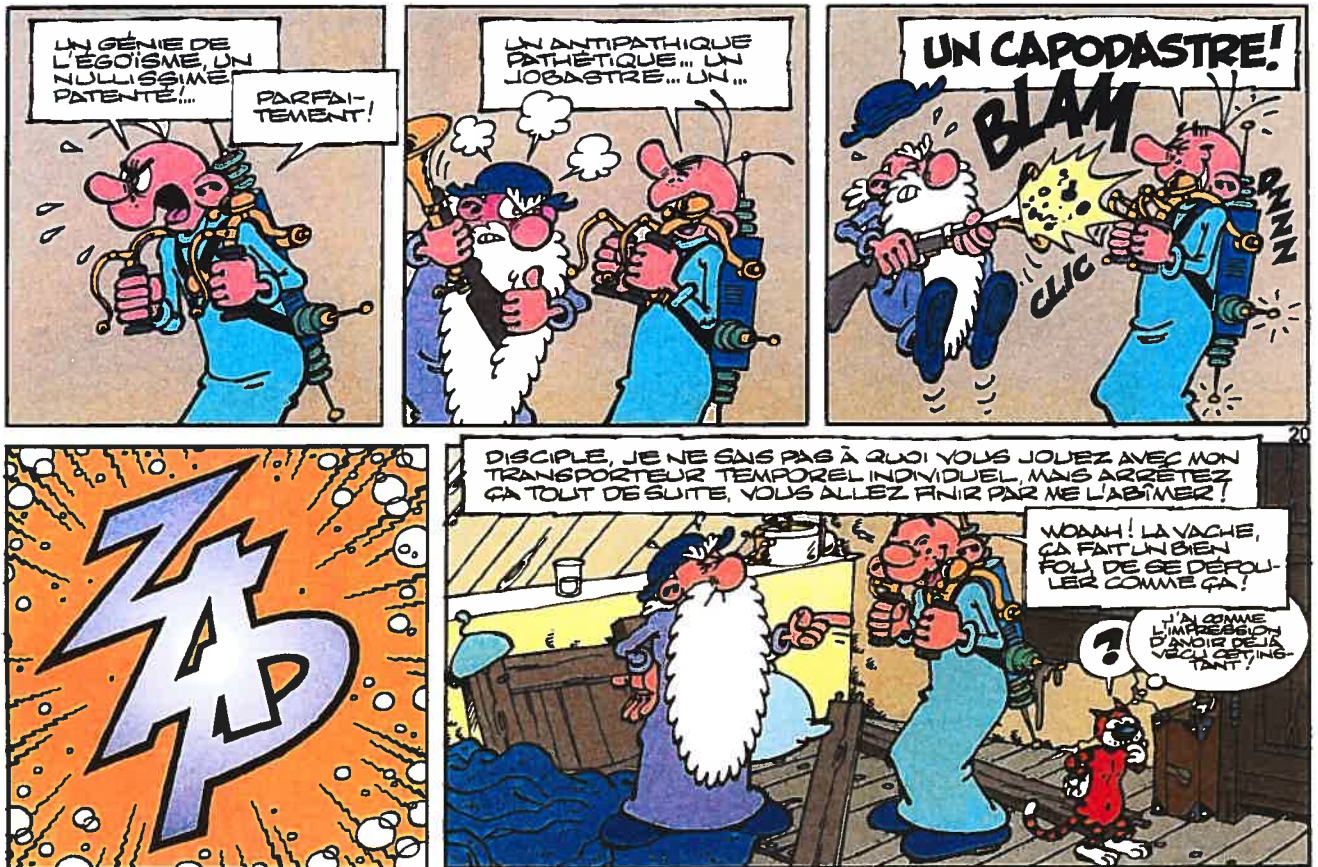
*Léonard génie toujours... prêt* by Turk and De Groot, 1998

Nick Fury, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D. by Jim Steranko, Stan Lee et al., 2001
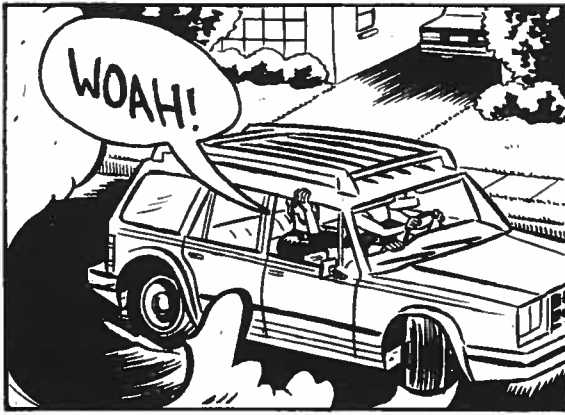
*Stray Bullets* by David Lapham, 2003

*Paul a un travail d'été* by Michel Rabagliati, 2002
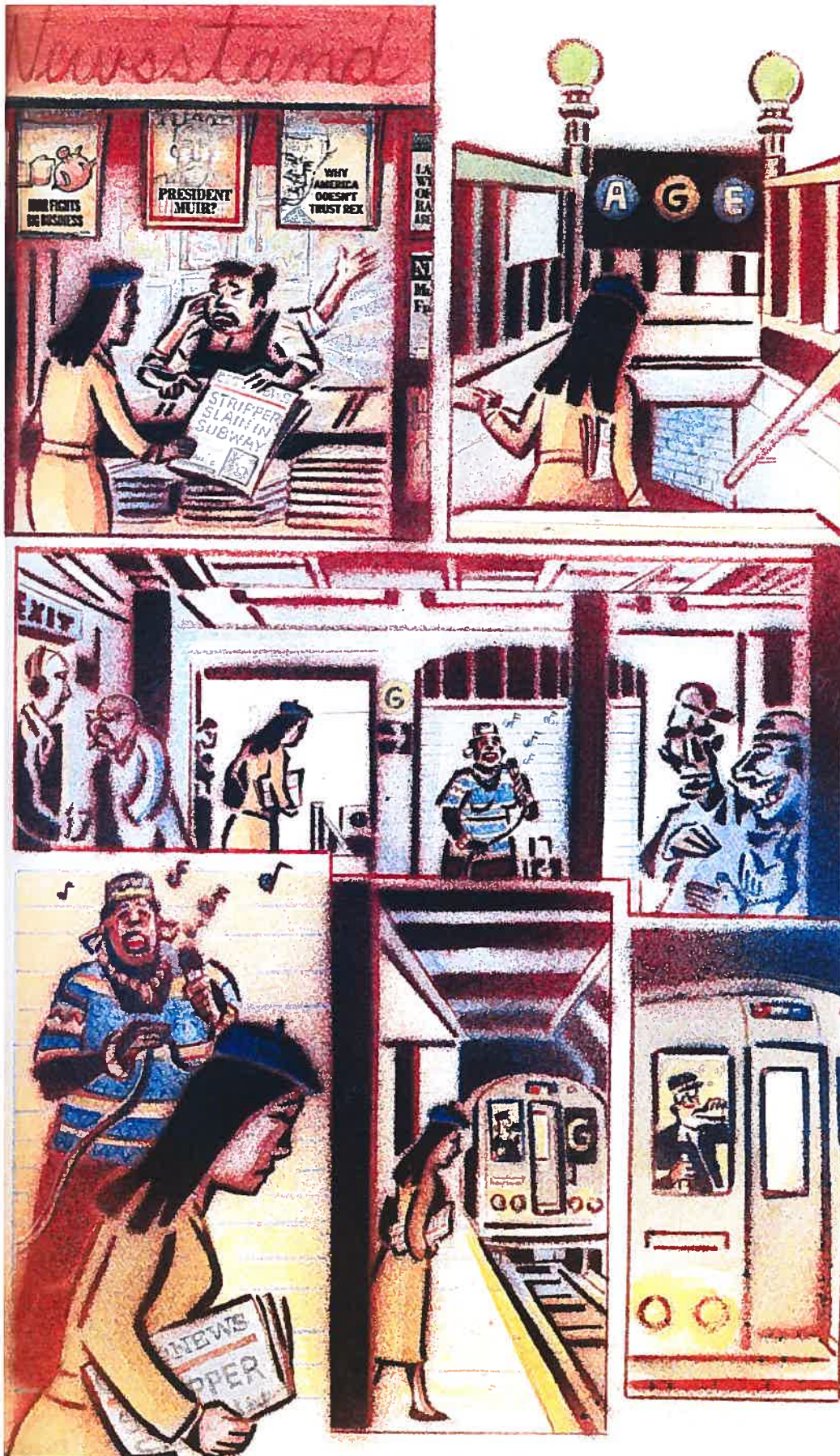
The System by Peter Kuper, 1997
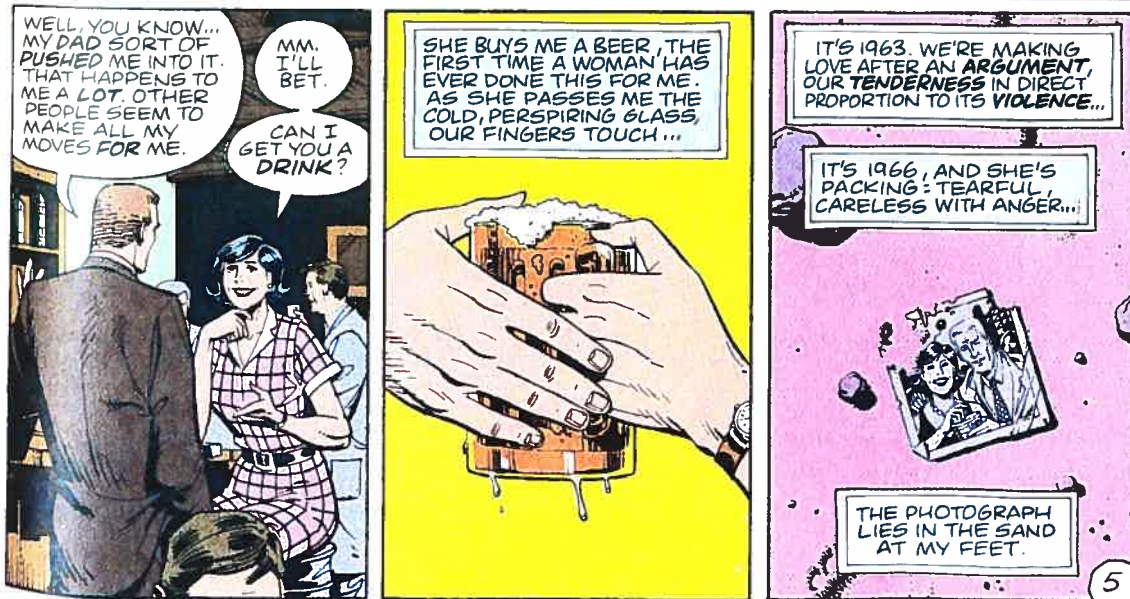
*Watchmen* by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, 1986

Grendel: The Devil Inside by Matt Wagner and Bernie Mireault, 2004

La marque jaune by Edgar P. Jacobs, 1987

Sandman by Neil Gaiman and P. Craig Russell, 1993

Tintin et le secret de la licorne by Hergé, 1946

Sandman Mystery Theater by Matt Wagner, Steven T. Seagle and Guy Davis, 1993
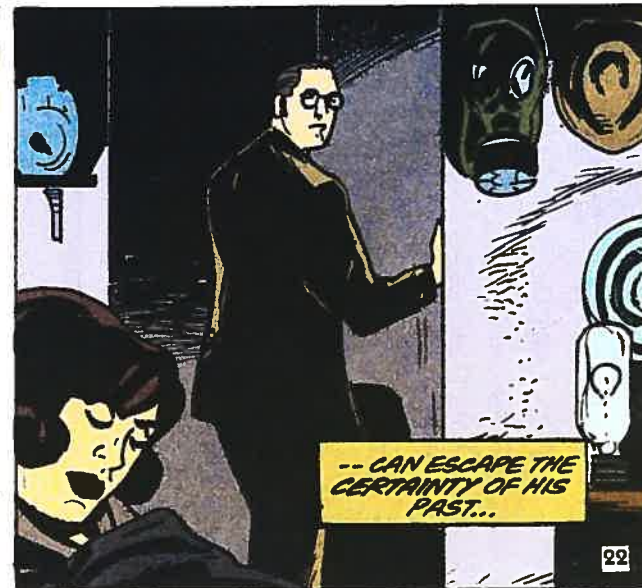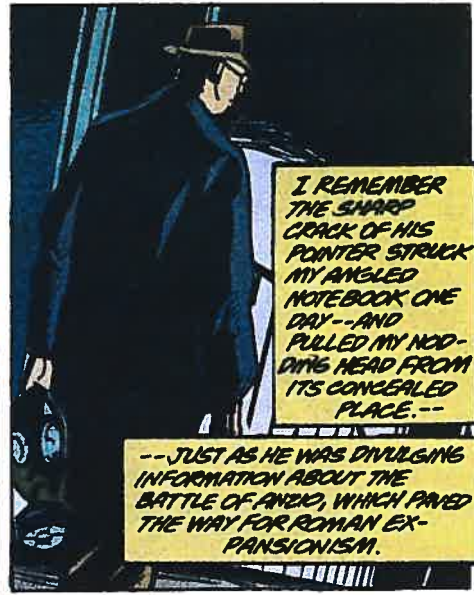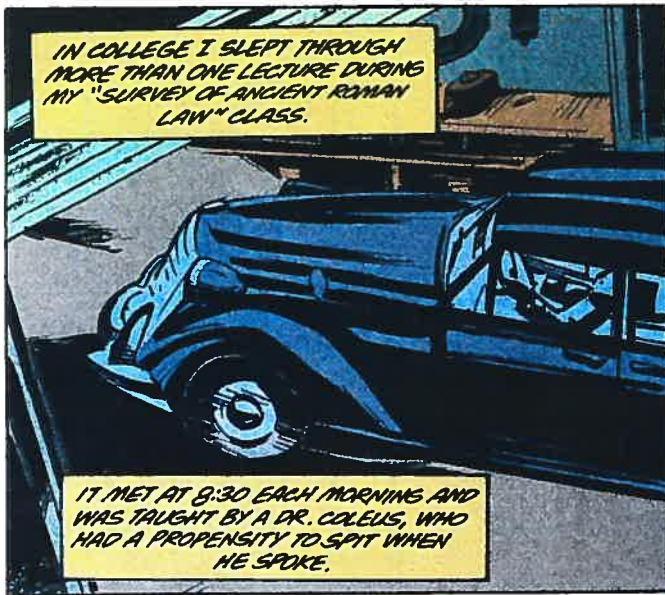
La boîte noire by Jacques Ferrandez and Tonino Benacquista, 2000

Love and Rockets by Los Bros Hernandez, 1994

Greyshirt by Alan Moore and Rick Veitch, 2000

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