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The Interrogative Mode: A Practical Theory for Comics Criticism

by

Noran Amin

A dissertation

submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my parents, Hoda Awad and Ragaie Amin. Thanks to them, as a 7 year old child, I read the first comic book and started questioning the relationship between words and pictures in comics. I also dedicate this dissertation to all of my teachers at Cairo University, especially Prof. Hoda Gindy and Prof. Mounira Soliman who reintroduced me to comics in 2010 by assigning Joe Sacco's comic *Palestine* as part of their collaborative Pre-MA graduate course. For all of my professors at the University of Wyoming, especially Prof. Clifford Marks, who helped me understand comics better in 2014 when I took his course that was devoted to studying graphic narratives. I also dedicate it to Prof. Christopher Caskey Russel, my MA chair, who encouraged me to apply to the PhD program at Idaho State University after finishing my MA at UW. For all of my professors at Idaho State University, especially Prof. Matthew Levay, who I co-taught my first comics course with, and who chaired my PhD dissertation committee and helped me make it to the finish line. For my counselor, Matt Ashton, who taught me to persevere and to stay strong in the face of adversity. For my family and friends (in Pocatello, Laramie, Cairo, and many other places around the world), and everyone who supported me throughout my eventful PhD journey.

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The Interrogative Mode: A Practical Theory for Comics Criticism

Dissertation Abstract—Idaho State University (2020)

This dissertation presents an analytical framework I devised and termed "The Interrogative Mode". The interrogative mode aims to show readers how linking the diverse approaches of comics criticism, suggested by different critics, and presenting them in a question form, can lead to a comprehensive analysis of the medium that attends to its various interdependent and interconnected aspects equally and simultaneously. Since comics is a network whose multiple constituents are correlated, it demands the use of the interrogative mode that attends to the relationships among the different aspects that compose the medium. The interrogative mode's question form is a model that urges critics to think of the importance of providing nonexperts with practical reading strategies. The questions are accessible to educators who aim to teach comics courses (or to teach courses on different topics *through comics*), and to students (as well as nonexperts and non-specialists) who are searching for a practical analytical framework that can help them navigate and/or analyze the medium of comics. The interrogative mode is a blueprint that can be developed and modified in the future through finding more critical questions in different disciplines (as it is an interdisciplinary and a multidisciplinary approach) and through conducting more analyses of various types of comics.

Key words: Comics, Comics Criticism, Comics Pedagogy, Graphic Narratives, Comics Critique, Teaching Comics, Navigating Comics, The Interrogative Mode, Comics Analysis.

Introduction

This dissertation argues that reading comics is not intuitive; it requires specialized training, and it demands utilizing a medium-specific interpretive tool that helps beginners understand comics and read them efficiently. When I was a kid, I realized that comics are not created equal, and that many of them are not easy to navigate and comprehend. I was 5 years old when I "read" my first comic book. It was a Disney comic that told and illustrated various stories featuring Walt Disney characters, mainly Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, and Goofy (fig. 1). That comic was written in Modern Standard Arabic so that Egyptian children could read it. I enjoyed reading this comic and its sequels; I was fascinated by the Mickey Mouse television cartoon at that age, so it was great to see its offshoots on paper. When my parents noticed that I spent hours staring at the pages of those comics, and that I asked them to buy them for me weekly for two years, they decided to get me more challenging comics to read. When I was 7, my mom gave me a stack of translated versions of Hergé's *The Adventures of Tintin*, which she read as a teenager. Unlike the Disney comics, however, the *Tintin* comics did not make any sense to me. At that age, I found the drawings catchy and engaging, especially Tintin's facial expressions (and his hair). However, the stories' vocabulary was hard for me to comprehend (although the cover of the comics said that *Tinin* was "[t]he Magazine for the Youth from 7 to 77"). I did not understand the connection between the drawn images and the written words, and sometimes it was hard for me to figure out the order of panels, or the direction my eyes were supposed to follow in moving from one panel to the next. When I failed to understand *Tintin* comics, I started editing the stories by adding drawings from my imagination to create new narratives, then I dealt with the magazines as coloring books; I colored everything that was left uncolored, including Tintin's dog

Snowy (or Milou in French). This experience led me to the conviction that all comics, other than Disney's, are not for kids, and I gave up on that medium altogether.

Fig. 1. An excerpt from Egyptian Disney comics that shows the kind of graphic narratives children are exposed to at the ages of 5-7.

I never read comics after that until I became a graduate student and took a literature course at Cairo University whose reading list included comics. The first comic I read was Joe Sacco's *Palestine*. Although I was much older and had advanced expertise in literary analysis at that time, this reading experience was as bad as the one I had when I was 7. I had the same problems with navigation, figuring out a sequence, and understanding the relationship between

the words and the images. My teacher at the time assumed that my classmates and I would not experience any difficulty in reading the narrative, *especially* because it included pictures, which was not the case at all. I had a hard time understanding it, and because other students in my class never complained about the difficulty of reading it, and never mentioned the issue outside the classroom, I thought that I had a personal problem with comics, and never asked the professor for help.

In 2014, when I was doing my MA in the Department of English at the University of Wyoming, I took a course devoted to reading graphic novels. Although I was convinced that comics were not my cup of tea, I had decided to challenge myself and better understand the medium. In that course, the first book we were required to read was Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. Reading that book was a turning point. It explained to me the constituents of the medium, as well as different medium-specific concepts like "closure", time in comics, and "the gutter." I read Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* after McCloud, and I noticed that the reading process was now much easier. I understood and enjoyed the narrative, and I also appreciated the art. When I read *Palestine* again for this course, I understood it better and I appreciated the effort that was put into creating it, especially given the fact that my professor gave students the freedom to create reading responses in a comics format. What I still had a problem with, however, was not knowing how to conduct a comprehensive analysis of comics. None of the critical texts I read for the course provided readers with a practical analytical framework, or a methodology designed specially for graphic narratives, that could help me with writing papers about comics. McCloud's book provided me with comics vocabulary and definitions of key concepts, but it did not answer the question of how to conduct a critical analysis of comics. Thus, I ended up using the tools of literary analysis that I was familiar with

as a literature student in order to write about comics. When I worked on my final paper, I noticed that it lacked a methodology. It focused on some aspects of the comics it examined, but ignored many others, especially the art and page layout, because I was not trained to interpret visuals. Although the paper was eventually published in an academic journal, this experience led me to ask the following questions, which are the main research questions that this dissertation takes as its point of departure:

- How can one help students and beginning scholars (and even newbies outside the academic sphere) understand the comics medium efficiently?
- Are the current approaches of comics criticism sufficient for leading readers to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the comics medium that attends equally to the various elements that comprise it? If not, what are their drawbacks, and how can their shortcomings be remedied?
- How can one bridge the gap between the theoretical propositions available in texts on comics criticism and the practice of critical analysis and interpretation? How can one create a mode of critique or an interpretive tool that builds on current critical approaches and presents a practical methodology that helps with critiquing comics?
- How can one urge comics critics to frame their work in ways that speak to wider audiences (students, teachers, and the general public) rather than writing to one another and making comics criticism appear as an inaccessible realm?
- How can one provide teachers with a guidebook to help them facilitate the processes of reading, understanding, and critiquing comics for their students?
- Many teachers use McCloud's *Understanding Comics* as an authoritative text whose definition of comics is accurate. However, in my own teaching experience, the book's

insufficiencies were highlighted on the first day of discussion when a student asked me "why does McCloud exclude single panel cartoons from his definition?" and when another asked if one can consider Ancient Egyptian drawings (fig. 2), which combine words (hieroglyphics) and drawings, comics. How can one help readers realize McCloud's text's limitations, lead them to think critically about what comprises comics, and ultimately decide what counts or does not count as a comic?

Fig. 2. An Ancient Egyptian drawing that combines words and pictures; it raises the question of whether Ancient Egyptian drawings count as comics.

To answer these questions, I wrote this dissertation, which interweaves the major threads of current comics criticism and devises a mode of critique that I term the "interrogative mode": a set of accessible critical questions informed by linking critics' propositions, and the perspectives

of comics creators, in order to provide a comprehensive reading of comics, and to create a truly representative critical conversation that results in a practical methodology for critiquing comics. Inspired by Charles Hatfield's prompt to readers, in *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*, " to ask probing questions of the comics they read," I have developed a form of critical questioning that offers a new, useful way for any reader to approach any example of comics (Hatfield 67).

Chapter 1 argues that, because comics merges two traditionally separate tracks, the visual and the verbal, and because of the abundance of elements that constitute a comic, an all-inclusive approach is needed for a comprehensive reading of the medium. The chapter presents an overview of the major trends of comics criticism, which can be classified into the following categories: the definitional approach, the semiological approach, the anti-hierarchical approach, the scientific approach, the pro-inclusivity approach, the alternative approach, the narratological approach, the typological approach, and the model text approach. The chapter points out each approach's strengths and drawbacks as well as the critical gaps that still need to be filled. The concluding section of Chapter 1 shows how the interrogative mode can contribute to comics scholarship as it leads to a comprehensive reading of comics by linking the various critical approaches that currently seem scattered, divergent, and incompatible, although they all aim to explain some aspect of the reading process.

Chapter 2 introduces the interrogative mode and identifies the preliminary steps readers need to take before applying it to comics to guarantee a strong critical reading. It provides different sets of questions that comprise the interrogative mode, each divided into sections that attend to a variety of aspects of comics, like visual-verbal interplay, page and panel layout, publication format, reading patterns, narrative structures, time, representation, and theme. The

chapter then proceeds to a mind map that visually compiles the main aspects that the interrogative mode scrutinizes. It is meant to be an accessible visual guide that reminds readers of the types of structural relationships they need to focus on when they dismantle the interrelated elements that constitute the coherent networks that make up comics.

Chapter 3 tests the applicability of the interrogative mode by using it to analyze a wide variety of comics. The comics selected for this experiment are different in form, genre, language, publication format, target audience, context, and the era of their publication. Texts include: *Daytripper* by Fabio Moon and Gabriel Bá (a book length graphic narrative), *Calvin and Hobbes* by Bill Watterson (newspaper comics), *A Child in Palestine* by Naji al-Ali (single panel cartoons), *Ms. Marvel* by G. Willow Wilson and artists Adrian Alphona and Jamie McKelvie (superhero comics), *Dirty Laundry Comics #1* by Robert Crumb and Aline Kominsky-Crumb (underground comix), *Qahera* by Deena Mohammed (webcomic), *Buddha* by Osamu Tezuka (manga), *Almost Silent* by Jason (pantomime comics), *I Remember Beirut* by Zeina Abi Rached (graphic memoir), and *Blake et Mortimer: Le Secret de L'Espadon* by Edgar P. Jacobs (bandes dessinées).

Chapter 4 presents a pedagogical approach; it shows how the interrogative mode can be used in a classroom. First, it engages in a critical conversation with pedagogical texts. After that, the focus shifts to my experience in teaching comics. I discuss the strategies I found successful, explain why some of my ideas did not work as expected, and present a revision plan that shows how those ideas can either be developed, improved, or substituted with new, more efficient ones. The following section of the chapter emphasizes the importance of teaching various critical approaches in the comics classroom and why teachers should not limit themselves to using McCloud's *Understanding Comics* as the ultimate tool for critiquing comics. It also emphasizes

the importance of prompting students to experiment with creating comics in the classroom (even if they think they cannot draw) to enhance their understanding of the creation process and of the medium's potential for experimentation and creativity. The chapter ends with a demonstration of how the interrogative mode can be used in the classroom, and includes a sample syllabus for a comics class that uses the interrogative mode as its kernel. Moreover, it suggests activities that can boost students' confidence in writing about comics. I suggest establishing a comics conference for undergraduate students, graduate students, beginning scholars, independent scholars, and the public, through which nonexperts can contribute to the field of comics studies through their work. I also suggest creating an online archive where students' works can be published to be shared with the comics community (critics, enthusiasts, and scholars) whose members can use students' contributions for thinking and writing differently about the medium.

Many teachers today are in dire need of a practical methodology for teaching comics. This need was evident to me when I attended the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts (ICFA) in March of 2019 to present my paper "The Oriental Superheroes: A Discussion of the Political Questions posed in G. Willow Wilson's *Cairo: A Graphic Novel* and the *Ms. Marvel* Comic Books." Another presenter on my panel devoted a portion of her presentation to a discussion of how she taught Wilson's *Ms. Marvel* in a college classroom to first year students. During the ensuing Q&A, an audience member asked her how she helps her students understand comics. He said he always used McCloud's book, but students still went to him complaining that they couldn't understand some of the narratives, and that they do not know what exactly to look for in the comics they read; they also could not write good papers about comics, so he asked the presenter about her strategy for teaching comics. The panelist explained that she has the same problem, and still needs to explore methods and approaches beyond McCloud. At this point, I

had to chime in. I was writing the first chapter of this dissertation at that time, so I told the audience member that the answer to his question was the core of my dissertation, as my work presents a mode of critique that helps students with the reading process, shows students how to think critically about the medium at large, and leads to a comprehensive analysis of any given comic. Once I shared that information, the enquirer said, "Can you publish your dissertation tomorrow? We need it!" Another attendee across the room rapidly said "You should publish your dissertation yesterday!" Some other attendees nodded in agreement. The pedagogy approach I share in Chapter 4 is a direct response to that urging by fellow scholars and teachers.

The conclusion of my dissertation discusses the significance of the interrogative mode and reasserts its contribution to the fields of comics criticism and pedagogy. It emphasizes the fact that the interrogative mode is meant to be a blueprint that can always be revised and expanded, especially today with the rise of digital comics whose reading experience is quite different from their print counterparts. It also presents my future research plans beyond this dissertation, where I aim to turn the dissertation into a book that consults a wider variety of disciplines and fields of study to enhance the interdisciplinarity and comprehensiveness of the interrogative mode. The book will continue testing the applicability of the interrogative mode by critiquing a broader range of comics, other than the ones that Chapter 3 discusses, that are different in publication formats, publication eras, authors' and artists' backgrounds, genres, and styles. The rise of digital comics (and experimental interactive comics) invites more questions about the medium and the reading process, and this is what my book will focus on to expand the work of this dissertation. Because we live in a digital age, I am also planning to develop a mobile app and a website through which the interrogative mode can be accessed on phones and other

electronic devices, which entails collaborating in the future with experts in system development and information technology.

I end the conclusion with a few questions and a call to action that I would like readers to walk away with to do further research in the field of comics criticism. I encourage fellow scholars to test out the interrogative mode, to suggest ways for expanding it, and/or to challenge it through coming up with more practical methodologies for interpreting and critiquing the medium of comics.

The interrogative mode aims to show readers how linking the approaches of comics criticism can lead to a comprehensive analysis of the medium that attends to its different aspects equally and simultaneously. Since comics is a network whose multiple constituents are interdependent and correlated, it demands the use of the interrogative mode that attends to the relationships among the different aspects that compose the medium. The interrogative mode's question form is a model that urges critics to think of the importance of providing nonexperts with practical reading strategies. The questions are accessible to educators who aim to teach comics courses (or to teach courses on different topics *through comics*), and to students (as well as nonexperts) who are searching for a practical analytical framework that can help them navigate and/or analyze the medium.

Chapter I

Comics Criticism Today: Problems and Possibilities

The main argument of this chapter is that because comics is a bimodal medium that merges two traditionally separate tracks, namely the visual and the verbal, and because of the abundance of the elements that constitute a comics page, an all-inclusive critical approach is needed for a comprehensive reading of comics. This chapter shows how the interrogative mode that this study devises can contribute to comics scholarship by presenting a reading strategy that leads to a comprehensive interpretation of the comics page that equally attends to its various aspects. In the following pages, the chapter gives an overview of the major approaches of comics criticism, and it points out their shortcomings as well as the principal gaps in criticism that still need to be filled. The major approaches of comics criticism can be classified into a number of categories: the definitional approach, the semiological approach, the anti-hierarchical approach, the scientific approach, the pro-inclusivity approach, the alternative approach, the narratological approach, the typological approach, and the model text approach. Each of these categories presents the propositions of a number of pioneer comics critics as well as rising critics. So far, these current critical approaches seem divergent and incompatible, although they all aim to explain some aspect of the reading process. The interrogative mode contributes to the field of comics criticism by braiding these multi-perspectival approaches to lead to conducting thorough analyses that view any given comic as a web of interdependent and interconnected relationships that work hand in hand to construct narratives and to create meaning.

The Definitional Approach

The definitional approach is mainly concerned with defining comics as a medium and with dismantling its different constituents to explain how each of them functions and how they work together to create meaning and/or to construct a solid narrative. The definitional approach does not present an analytical framework that readers can utilize for interpreting comics. However, it familiarizes readers with significant medium-specific terms, and it introduces audiences to the medium of comics at large through a set of definitions. Although the definitional approach has several drawbacks, the interrogative mode benefits from it in multiple ways; mainly, it borrows some of its vocabulary, and it uses some of its definitions to urge readers to test their validity as well as their boundaries through applying them to the comics they examine.

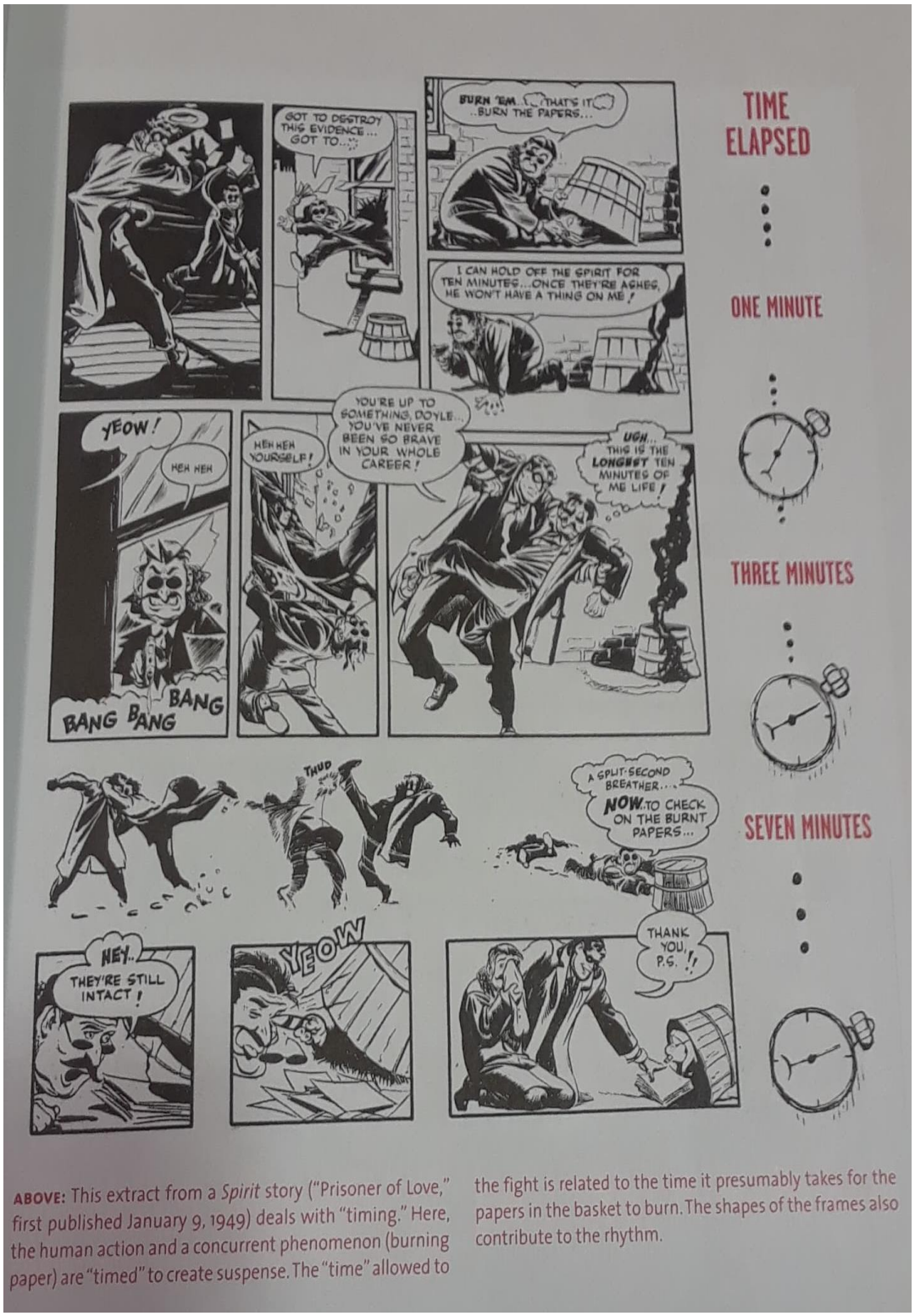
The main audiences for the definitional approach are those who are new to the medium and might not understand its complexity. One of the leaders of this critical trend is Will Eisner. His seminal book *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practices from the Legendary Cartoonist* is primarily interested in defining what the medium of comics is at the core through breaking it down to its component parts, and this is why his work and its like are labelled by several comics critics as "essentialist" (Hescher 87). Eisner's book could be categorized as essentialist because its target audience is students and prospective comics artists who need a thorough explanation of the conventional fundamentals of sequential art, which is evident through Eisner's own words in the introduction of the book as he writes "[m]y goal in this book is to address the principles and practice of the world's most popular art form in a manner that is both thought provoking and pragmatic to student and professional alike" (Eisner xii). His is an instructional language of a teacher who, in order to show students how to create a well-composed

comic, devotes a fair amount of time to expounding the role played by each aspect of a comics page.

Eisner illustrates visually as well as in writing the function and the effect of elements like letters, balloons, or frames/panels in conveying meaning when they are used by artists as narrative devices (and he shows how variations in the drawing styles of these elements can create different effects in different narrative contexts). For example, Eisner writes "[l]ettering (hand-drawn or created with type), treated 'graphically' and in the service of the story, functions as an extension of the imagery" (Eisner 2) in the sense that it can provide "the mood," "a narrative bridge," or "the implication of sound" (Eisner 3). To show how lettering can extend and enhance imagery, Eisner provides readers with an excerpt from his own work, *The Spirit's Case Book of True Ghost Stories,* through which one can see how special lettering styles can reveal sound and emotion. Furthermore, Eisner discusses another essential element of comics through the section he devotes to the various shapes and functions of conventional speech balloons. To illustrate the differences between them, he gives visual examples of the balloons that encompass normal speech, thought balloons, and the balloons designated to enclose a "sound or speech that emanates from a radio, telephone, television, or any machine" (Eisner 25). In addition to the visible elements of comics, Eisner discusses some elements that are perceived and inferred rather than seen, like time, which Eisner describes as "a dimension integral to sequential art" (Eisner 23). He measures the success of a visual narrative through its ability to convey time (Eisner 24). Through illustrations from his own work, namely *The Spirit* stories, Eisner shows students and artists how time is constructed in comics and how it is supposed to be interpreted as it progresses from one panel to the next, and he demonstrates the difference between conveying time (or duration) in comics and conveying timing (see fig. 3), "which is the manipulation of the elements

of time to achieve a specific message or emotion" (Eisner 24). He also illustrates the "conventional pattern" (Eisner 42) of reading comics to display "the normal flow of the reader's eye" (Eisner 41). By doing that, Eisner provides readers with a strategy for navigating through a conventionally composed comic page.

Furthermore, throughout the book, Eisner tells readers how he utilizes different aspects of the comics page to control his readers' feelings by evoking certain emotions. He writes that he deliberately uses elements like panel shape/ position, or perspective, to create an emotional effect. For example, he uses the "flat-on perspective" to give a sense of normalcy within a science fiction story world (Eisner 99). By showing visual examples of how he invokes emotions through his narratives, Eisner creates a model for one of his central target audiences, comics practitioners and artists-to-be, that they could learn from and emulate in their own works.



ABOVE: This extract from a *Spirit* story ("Prisoner of Love," first published January 9, 1949) deals with "timing." Here, the human action and a concurrent phenomenon (burning paper) are "timed" to create suspense. The "time" allowed to the fight is related to the time it presumably takes for the papers in the basket to burn. The shapes of the frames also contribute to the rhythm.

Fig. 3. Eisner shows the difference between time, duration, and timing in comics.

Not only does Eisner break down the reading process by showing examples of how he creates his works, but he also shares his opinions on what an ideal comic book should entail. For instance, he poses a question about the term "creator" and how hard it is to determine who should claim it, especially in a work composed cooperatively. He writes "[w]ho is the 'creator' of a comic page which was written by one person, penciled by another and inked, lettered (and perhaps colored or had backgrounds created) by still others?" (Eisner 128). He answers this question by offering his opinion on the matter as a practitioner; he writes "I have always been strongly of the opinion that the writer and artist should be one person. Failing that, and in the absence of any prior agreement between artist and writer, then I come down in favor of the dominance of the artist" (Eisner 135). It can be easily inferred from this statement that Eisner gives imagery primacy over the written word, which, in a definitional book, could lead readers to perceive comics as a preeminently visual medium. He even explicitly labels the medium as such in his words "[f]or the end product is, after all, to be read as a total visual" (Eisner 132). This immediately gives the impression that, to Eisner, the verbal track is marginal. Eisner is not the only comics critic and practitioner who believes the visual track is what defines comics; the definitional approach comprises other influential voices that perceive comics as a predominantly visual medium, like Scott McCloud, for instance.

One can hardly discuss the definitional approach without referring to Scott McCloud's groundbreaking work *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. McCloud's book was not a breakthrough in comics criticism because it was necessarily innovative in what it offered readers; on the contrary, McCloud based his propositions on the works of a number of critics and practitioners whose works preceded his, especially Will Eisner. According to Achim Hescher in *Reading Graphic Novels* "the essentialist basis of *Understanding Comics*… is Eisner's notion of

comics as sequential art" (Hescher 87-88). McCloud built upon Eisner's concept of sequentiality (McCloud 7) by expanding it through examples that are meant to prove that comics is, at the core, a sequential art that can be easily understood if perceived as such. The originality of McCloud's book resides in the following factors: its format (being a self-referential/ meta work of comics that defines comics), its ability to showcase comics' educational capacities, and, most importantly, its effect on the community of comics critics and creators. Not only is *Understanding Comics*, like Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art*, a highly visual book that illustrates the points it makes, but it is actually written as a comic book. Readers meet McCloud in a cartoon form on the first page, and from then on, McCloud's cartoon character guides them from one panel to the next and from one page to the following one to show them what the essential constituents of the medium are and to demonstrate how a comic book should be read. Instead of solely focusing on familiarizing readers with the vocabulary of comics and providing them with a basic strategy that facilitates the reading process through using words and illustrations (as Eisner does), McCloud gives his readers, especially those with no previous experience with the medium, the opportunity to read and understand their first comic book through reading his text, which is a unique technique that allowed his work to stand out at the time of its publication among other important texts on comics criticism. The book's format could be the reason why it is still popular today, especially in the academic sphere. Although the book was published 25 years ago, the majority of comics teachers include *Understanding Comics* as an introductory text in their courses today because of its ability to demystify the medium and the fact that it supplies a vocabulary that allows anyone to discuss comics academically.

In addition to the role it plays in introducing the basics of the medium, McCloud's book highlights the educational capacities of the medium. It confirms that the comics format is perfect

for explaining intricate topics. The book's effectiveness, especially in academia, inspired others from different academic disciplines to utilize the comic format to explain complex subject matter in their fields to students. A good example of this is the book created by Elizabeth Losh, Jonathan Alexander, Kevin Canon, and Zander Cannon called *Understanding Rhetoric: A Graphic Guide to Writing*. The creators, two English professors and two cartoonists, respectively, not only borrowed McCloud's popular title, but they also used his meta technique in writing this textbook whose main audience is first- and second-year composition students. Like in McCloud's book, readers of *Understanding Rhetoric* meet the cartoon representation of the authors on the comics page. The authors verbally and visually define rhetoric, and they provide students with the tools of rhetorical analysis as well as the strategies of argumentative writing (see fig. 4). Thus, McCloud's success in emphasizing the educational aspect of comics made his book exceptional in comparison to its counterparts, and it motivated many to use comics as an effective teaching method.

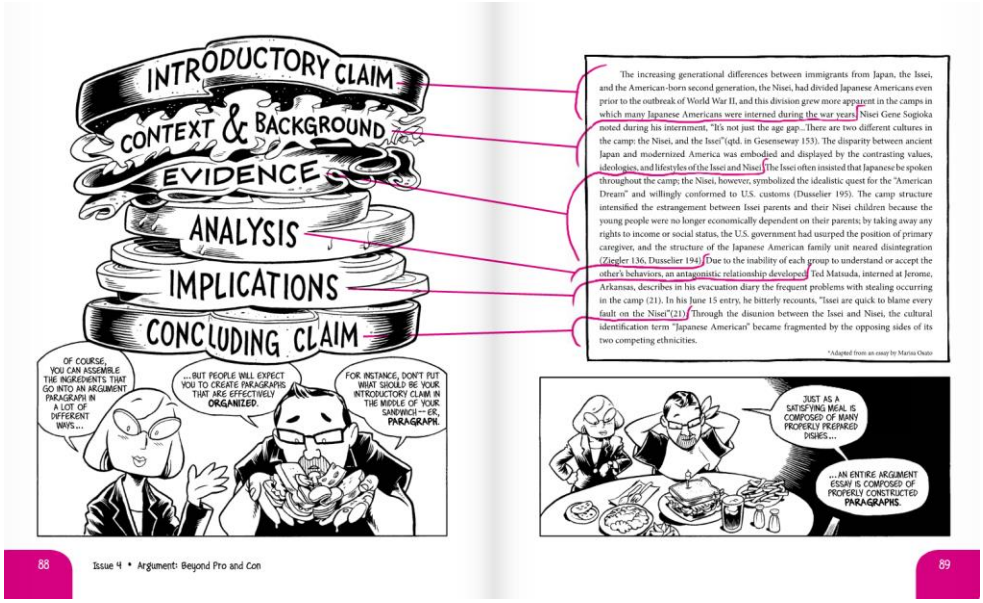


Fig. 4. An excerpt from *Understanding Rhetoric* that shows how McCloud's educational methods are used in teaching rhetoric and composition.

The most significant fact about *Understanding Comics* is its unprecedented effect on the community of comics critics and creators. The book stirred critics to action; it stimulated critical responses and serious conversations about comics at a time when the medium was still striving to gain legitimization as a worthwhile genre. Although the majority of the critics who responded to McCloud's propositions disagreed with his definition of comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence" (McCloud 9) and criticized plenty of the claims his book makes, it is undeniable that his book is one of the main gateways that gave comics access to academia, and that enabled comics studies to become an established field of scholarship today. Notwithstanding the fact that he aims to convince his audience that comics is a sequential art that creates meaning through juxtaposition, closure, and filling the gaps in gutters, McCloud, towards the end of his book, invites his readers, especially critics, to build on what he offers and to come up with their own definition of comics. He writes "the best definition for comics will, I think, be the most expansive," and he shows that his definition is not the final statement that could be made about comics as he writes "with a little refining, such a definition can take comics far into the future" (199). One of the problems with this invitation to further exploration is that McCloud wants his own definition (which is quite limited) to be the point of departure for prospective works of criticism, which ignited a surge of critical responses from comics critics. On the last page of *Understanding Comics*, one of the last statements that McCloud leaves his readers with is the following:

> I've learned a lot about comics since beginning this project and I know I have a lot left to learn. I hope you'll all consider exploring—or continuing to explore comics on your own! However you experience comics—as a reader, creator, or

> businessperson—there are a million and one ways you can help comics to grow into the next century (215)

Critics did exactly what this statement urged them to do. They criticized McCloud's propositions and poked holes in them in attempts to provide readers with more accurate definitions of comics and clearer strategies for analyzing the medium. Consequently, comics scholarship thrived even more.

The definitional approach that Eisner's and McCloud's works represent has numerous drawbacks. First, the idea of *defining* comics, which, according to Neil Cohn, "has become a common exercise in the study of comics" (Visual Language Lab), is limiting in many ways. Once a comics critic uses the words "*comics is,*" works that do not fit their definition of the medium are automatically dismissed. For example, when both McCloud and Eisner define comics as a sequential art, they exclude single panel cartoons from the array of works that count as comics. McCloud writes "single panels are often lumped in with comics, yet there's no such thing as a sequence of one!" (McCloud 20). Thus, the definitional approach regards sequentiality as the principle factor that makes an illustrated work count as a comic. Sequentiality disregards important comics like, for instance, many early strips of *Non Sequitur*, the single panel gag cartoons of Wiley Miller, or Gary Larson's *The Far Side*. Moreover, nonconventional works that do not follow a regular sequence do not fit the constraints of the definitional approach either. An important work like Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*, for example, does not fall under the umbrella of "sequential art" that both Eisner and McCloud use to define the medium. *Jimmy Corrigan* breaks traditional reading conventions by presenting plenty of flashback scenes, parallel storylines, and diagrams that interrupt any narrative sequence. The definitional approach does not take into consideration experimental comics like *Jimmy Corrigan*

and its like, which is clearly a limitation. In addition, the majority of the visual examples that both Eisner and McCloud give in their works to support their claims are limited to either their own drawings or, again, to conventional works that match their definition of what constitutes the medium. This is a drawback as it confines the definition of comics to a single style of composition that does not represent the totality of the medium's possibilities.

Second, the definitional approach has failed to perceive comics as anything but a visual medium. As mentioned above, Eisner proposes that the medium should be "read as a total visual," (Eisner 132), and McCloud defines comics as "juxtaposed *pictorial* and other *images* in deliberate sequence," (McCloud 9, emphasis added) a definition that completely ignores the verbal content. Since comics is a medium that combines both words and images, completely neglecting or even marginalizing the verbal track does not lead to a comprehensive reading of the medium. Besides, any definition or reading strategy that excludes the content or the verbal track is deficient because it is the verbal track that distinguishes comics from other forms of illustration. Not giving enough attention to the verbal communication in comics also leads to overlooking the work done by authors who collaborate with illustrators to create comics. Eisner explicitly tells readers "I come down in favor of the dominance of the artist" (Eisner 135). If Eisner's proposition gets a buy-in from his readers who are new to the medium, when they read a work like Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen*, not only will they fail to understand the visual track as it defies sequential transition, but they will also fail to appreciate the literary content and the unique style in which Moore wrote the narrative. Besides, the fact that *Watchmen* includes numerous pages that only include writing with no visuals (in the intermissions between chapters) accentuates the limitations of the definitional approach as it does not take into account comics that mix genres and that give a high agency to the verbal track.

Third, the definitional approach answers the "what" questions regarding most of the elements that constitute the medium. However, it does not really answer the "how" questions. It gives a definition of the different aspects, but it does not elaborate enough in explaining how they work exactly. The explication process in both Eisner's and McCloud's books seem rushed and undeveloped at many points. For example, Eisner's explanation of the concept of time in comics is not analyzed adequately. He tells readers what time in comics *is*, but he neither elaborates enough on such an important element, nor does he show what breaking its conventional rendering looks like. The chapter devoted to time and timing in Eisner's book is less elaborate compared to the other chapters. It begins with a general definition of time, then it shows the difference between time and timing in comics, and it highlights the role played by speech, sound, and frames in the delineation of time. Eisner gives examples from his own comics to show how time is constructed and conveyed in various ways, then the chapter ends without providing a thorough discussion of those examples. According to Neil Cohn, Eisner's "concept of time, which is so central in his approach, remains rather vague; nowhere does he expound on it, be it in terms of story (or fictive) time, discourse (or reading) time, or time as a concept or additive construct in the meaning building process, as it happens in the mind of the readers" (Hescher 87). The same applies to Eisner and McCloud's sections on the use of color in comics. In *Understanding Comics*, the chapter devoted to color is one of the shortest chapters in the book. McCloud does not go beyond telling readers what type of colors comics artists traditionally use and mentioning the ways in which economy and technology affect the production of colored comics. His explanation of *how* colors work in comics and how they can affect readers' understanding of a given work is very brief and hurried. This is a shortcoming of the definitional approach that could be an obstacle in the analytical process. Solely providing the

reader with the definition of a concept and listing its conventional usages without spending enough time explaining it, or focusing on "typical" examples of comics and not explaining outliers, is counterproductive as it leads to confusion and misunderstanding, which is the opposite of what the definitional approach aims to do.

As mentioned previously, several critical works criticized the definitional approach. For example, in commenting on how McCloud's text excludes a number of works like single-panel comics, Hescher writes "[t]he exclusion problem in McCloud emerges because of an essentialist definition relying on one core feature (sequential images) instead of a number of graded core and peripheral features, through which cartoons would fall into the same category as comic strips or books—although they would not have equal status" (Hescher 88). In addition, Hescher criticizes both McCloud's and Eisner's neglection of the verbal track as he writes "McCloud's vocabulary, as a matter of fact, is highly metaphorical and geared toward visuality, similarly to Eisner" (Hescher 89). To shed light on the shortcomings of the essentialist approach, Hescher writes that, "[p]urporting to explicate a process of meaning making, McCloud falls into the trap of essentialism with his definitions and descriptions of what comics *are*, that is panels or sequential images—instead of focusing, for example, on what the readers' minds do when they connect them" (Hescher 89). Hannah Miodrag also criticizes the definitional approach's dismissal of the verbal track. In her book *Comics and Language*, Miodrag defends the crucial role of language in comics as she writes "language is, in many cases, a crucial element in comics, and the common insistence that words are always of secondary importance in every hybrid text is a mistaken move" (location 1008). She then supports her claim by referring to the works she examines in her book, like, for instance, George Herriman's *Krazy Kat*, as she writes "[n]one of the cartoons

discussed here could convey much of a narrative without their outlandish and engaging textual context" (location 1008).

Despite the drawbacks of the definitional approach, the works of Eisner and McCloud should not be dismissed by any means. According to Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen, in their foreword to Thierry Groensteen's book *The System of Comics*, the works of both Eisner and McCloud "offered a significant contribution to the dialogue about comics form, suggesting new avenues for investigation and providing a tool box of terminology that continues to be used to this day. Nonetheless, it is fair to say that both of these contributions have been criticized for their lack of theoretical sophistication" (Beaty and Nguyen, location 11, par. 1). The real success of these works is that they prompted critics to do take their discipline more seriously and to actually engage in a large critical conversation about the medium. They incited debates. Although their work has been labelled as "essentialist", a label used in this case as a pejorative term that disapproves of their propositions, there is much that can be gained from their works, especially in academia. Perhaps a better label, and a positive one, for these works is "educational" instead of "essential" or even "critical". Since these books are often used in academic spheres, it is the responsibility of instructors who choose to assign these works to explain their shortcomings to students, and to emphasize the fact that defining comics should not be an end in and of itself; it should be a means to an end, which is *truly* understanding comics. The interrogative mode claims that it can help teachers highlight the drawbacks of the definitional approach through many of its critical questions, especially the ones that focus on the concept of sequentiality and on visual-verbal interaction.

The Semiological Approach

The semiological approach is a critical framework that sees affinities between the construction of language and that of comics. It is an approach that perceives comics primarily as a language composed of visual codes. The interrogative mode uses the questions and the arguments of this approach to lead readers to perceiving each work of comics as a network of interdependent relationships, then it links this approach's main concepts to those of other critical approaches to help readers see how those relationships are constructed across a given comic book.

Thierry Groensteen's book *The System of Comics* is one of the most influential works to explore the relationship between semiology (the study of sign and symbols and the production of meaning) and the interpretation of comics. To introduce the fundamental tenet of his approach to comics, Groensteen writes "I intend to demonstrate the primacy of the image and, therefore, the necessity to accord a theoretical precedence to that which, provisionally, I designate under the generic term of "visual codes," (location 71) and to introduce the analogy between language and images he writes that "the linkage of images constructs articulations that are similar to those of language" (location 1479). These quotes show that, like the definitional approach critics, Groensteen hierarchizes the visual track in comics, and devotes his work to giving evidence of the dominance of image and highlighting the importance of devising theoretical lenses that attend primarily to the visual codes that, as he argues, resemble the codes of language. Moreover, in *The System of Comics*, Groensteen identifies the panel as "the base unit of the comics system," (location 513) and he presents two central concepts for understanding the relationship between panels, namely "arthrology" (location 333) and "braiding" (location 2011). By arthrology Groensteen means "the different sorts of relations among images in comics," (Hescher 97) and

by braiding he refers to "the translinear and distant relationships" between pictorial elements across panels. Through these two key terms, Groensteen claims that meaning in comics is constructed through a system or a network of relationships between panels that are on the same page as well as translinear panels across and beyond the single page (Hescher 98). He writes that a single panel on a page is simply an "utterable" (location 1479) like a single word in a sentence, as "it never makes up the totality of the utterance but can and must be understood as a component in a larger apparatus" (location 107) and this is why "it can only be described in terms of a system" (location 121). Every word in language has a meaning in itself, but that meaning changes once this word is used as part of a sentence. Once it is used in a sentence, its meaning is produced through its relationship to the word(s) preceding it as well as the one(s) following it. When words are linked forming sentences and paragraphs, they make better sense as they are thought of as part of a whole. Groensteen applies the same system to comics when he writes about the "panel's plane," (location 1517) "the plane of the syntagm," (location 1521) and "the plane of the sequence" (location 1521).

According to Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen in their introduction to *The System of* Comics, Groensteen's approach revealed new avenues for scholarly investigations (location 19). However, many other critics, like Neil Cohn, author of *The Visual Language of Comics: Introduction to the Structure and Cognition of Sequential Images*, critiqued Groensteen's propositions and developed their own theory on comics as a visual language. Groensteen's book is significant as it leads readers to think beyond the page; it prompts them to go back and forth through a comic to examine the entire system that is revealed through braiding scattered particles. One of the main problems with Groensteen's approach and its like though is that they propose that the text in comics plays a marginal role. Beaty and Nguyen write that according to

Groensteen's "book-length definition… comics are a preponderantly visual language in which text plays a subordinate (though far from superfluous) role" (location 19). This is certainly a drawback in this mode of criticism because several comics, like Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* for instance (which is full of complex allusive literary references), show that in order to understand comics, the relationship between the verbal and the visual must be scrutinized. Giving the visual track primacy over the verbal is something that the semiological approach shares with Eisner and McCloud's definitional approach. Thus, both approaches share the same shortcoming, which is neglecting the capacities of the verbal track although it is part and parcel of the medium, and it plays an integral role in creating meaning and conveying messages.

The book's negligence of the verbal track might not be as problematic as the fact that Groensteen's *The System of Comics* is not an easy read. It is not certain whether this is a result of its translation from French (which is Groensteen's native language) to English, or of Groensteen's writing style and the way he structures his sentences. Some audiences, particularly students and non-academic readers, can find this book hard to understand. The book immerses readers in semiotics with no scaffolding or explaining of terms like "syntagms," "isomorphism," or "heteromorphism," which shows that Groensteen wrote his book for an audience that is quite familiar with this material. In other words, the book requires a certain expertise in the study of semiotics to be fully comprehended, which automatically dismisses non-specialized readers. This criticism is not an attack on academic language by any means, and the purpose here is not to advocate for using non-specialized diction in academic or critical texts, exclusively. It is meant simply to shed light on the necessity of explaining sophisticated terms and jargon for a wider variety of audiences. Even established critics in the field expressed their dissatisfaction with the language used in the book and the way its ideas are presented to Anglophone readers. In his

review of *The System of Comics* on his online Visual Language Lab, Neil Cohn writes "[a]t times, the English felt unnatural, and word-choice often felt clumsy if not uninformed. For instance, calling the psychological device of an 'eye tracker' an 'eye path follower' betrays a lack of competency and/or desire to find the accurate vocabulary (whether on the part of the translators or author is unknown)" (Visual Language Lab). To clarify this comment on language usage, Cohn compares Groentsteen's complex work to McCloud's reader friendly text:

> [i]f McCloud lies on one extreme of being too accessible (as if that's a bad thing), Groensteen's work is the inverse, reflecting the worst of academic jargon and inapplicability of "theoretical sophistication"—to the extent that the terminology obfuscates the actual theories (to academic and layfolk alike). Groensteen offers complicated names and lengthy descriptions of what are otherwise fairly facile observations about surface phenomena (Visual Language Lab)

Cohn writes that the issue of language difficulty in Groensteen's book is a surface issue (Visual Language Lab). Yet a more profound drawback resides in the fact that Groensteen does not explain the specific role that panels play in storytelling. According to Cohn, there is a very important question that Groensteen left unanswered in his book, which is "how do sequences of images create meaning" (Visual Language Lab). As he writes, "Groensteen does not even come close to talk about semantic concerns… Braiding and arthrology are a theory of *compositional relationships*. What Groensteen focuses on is not in any way a system of how the content of panels leads towards making meaning" (Visual Language Lab). Moreover, Cohn writes that Groensteen never tells readers "how his theory is useful or applicable to 1) describing how the medium of sequential images communicates, 2) contrasting various comics' structure with each other, or 3) describing the relationship of the visual language in comics to other modes of human

expression" (Visual Language Lab). Cohn's criticism is a good eye opener to the fact that, although Groensteen begins his argument with a critique of McCloud and Eisner's "essentialist" approach by writing "[t]his enterprise is no doubt doomed to failure" (location 210) because "it has become impossible to retain any definitive criteria that is universally held to be true" (237), he falls into the same trap of defining comics, and answering the "what" questions, while leaving the "how" questions unanswered or less discussed. Like Eisner who does not elaborate on the concept of time and how exactly it functions in different comics, Groensteen does not elaborate on how exactly meaning is created through braiding, and he does not give many visual examples to illustrate his propositions. When visual examples are scarce in a book that defines comics as a primarily visual medium, this is a problem. In addition, Groensteen claims that his work precludes essentialism; however, his semiological approach is highly essential, which is evident in making statements like "comics are therefore an original combination of a (or two, with writing) subject(s) of expression, and of a collection of codes. This is the reason that it can *only* be described in terms of a system" (location 121, emphasis mine). The use of the word "only" here limits the possibility of describing comics in any other terms. Thus, the semiological approach, like the definitional approach, is also limited. Hescher argues that "Groensteen, like McCloud, holds on to the essentialist notion of sequentiality…What Groensteen adds to McCloud's sequentiality concept is the over-determination of images and that they stand in what Hatfield/Frensault-Deruelle would call tabular (as opposed to linear) relations. Iconic solidarity[1] is an admittedly appealing metaphor but not an analytical concept" (Hescher 96). This critique shows that Groensteen's theory still cannot lead to a comprehensive analysis of comics.

[1] Groensteen defines this term as "interdependent images that, participating in a series, present the double characteristic of being separated […]and which are plastically and semantically over-determined by the fact of their coexistence in *praesentia*" (location 287)

However, because the interrogative mode links it to other approaches and presents it in a question form, it constructs an analytical concept that can lead to a broader analysis.

The Anti-hierarchical Approach

In response to the essential/definitional, semiological, and the primarily visual approaches, an opposing direction in comics criticism emerged, which is the anti-hierarchical approach. This is a strand of comics criticism that rejects the idea of giving any of the two main modes of comics, the image and the written text, a higher status over the other. This trend is mainly concerned with exploring and demonstrating the interrelationship between the two aspects. Hannah Miodrag is a significant name in this camp that promotes a holistic reading of comics, a reading that views comics as a web of interconnectedness between the verbal and the visual in their various renditions. The central argument and the critical propositions of this approach enhance the comprehensiveness of the interrogative mode as they lead to composing analytical questions that ponder the function of the verbal track and its relationship with the visual aspects of comics.

In her book *Comics and Language: Reimagining Critical Discourse on the Form*, Miodrag points out that comics criticism has always privileged the visual mode over the text, which she thinks is a problem as in comics both tracks are equally important for meaning construction. About privileging the image, she writes, "[s]o keen can critics be to champion the power, efficacy, and importance of the visual that they display an "almost universal" fear that words somehow take over or conquer comics' images" (location 200). She incites critics to view the pivotal role that the text plays in comics, and she stresses that scrutinizing the text should be moved from the margin of comics criticism to the center; as she writes, "we lose out on an appreciation of literary language in comics if we refuse to recognize its *potential* centrality"

(location 208). Moreover, she refuses and refutes the suggestion that "because visual and verbal interact, they become an inextricable blend that can therefore be framed as a unified language in itself" (location 217). She shows that "distinctions between the two modes and their operations persist, even when they are drawn into collaborative play" (location 217). Thus, she does not believe that words and images combine to produce a hybrid medium; she treats the two modes as separate entities that fit together and function collaboratively to narrate a story without losing the characteristic features that distinguish them from one another. She rejects the word "hybrid" because it connotes an act of blending that produces a mixture whose elements overlap, or whose main constituents are indistinguishable. On the notion of hybridization, Miodrag writes "[c]omics critics are of course quite right to insist that neither verbal nor visual signification should be privileged as better at communicating. However this refusal of hierarchy makes an erroneous logical leap when it rejects the idea that any pertinent distinctions exist at all between these two very different signifying systems" (location 1014). She devotes the most part of her book to point out the distinctions between the two tracks and to prove that they should neither be scrutinized with the same lens nor to be perceived as modes that communicate equally. To support this point, she uses Chris Ware's comic "I Guess" as an example that "[enacts] the ultimate antagonism of visual and verbal" (location 1567). In that particular comic, "[t]he sequence shows how the comics form spatially intertwines word and image, yet also asserts their independence from each other. Woven together on the page, they resist the suggestion that their distinctness might thus be eroded by willfully telling two utterly separate stories across the one space" (location 1567). This observation highlights three important points: 1) There is a distinction between interconnectedness and interplay between words and images in comics and the notion that they blend to create a new breed of communicative tools; yes, words and images

interact on the page, but each remains a distinct track. 2) The more creators experiment with the medium, as Ware does, the more the existing definitions of comics will fail to encompass what constitutes the medium as a whole because it continues expanding and defying conventions. 3) Comics artists can be critical of comics criticism (either explicitly or implicitly) and can respond to existing propositions through their work, which is evident in Ware's work. Miodrag states this clearly when she comments on Ware's ability to break conventions: "[d]elving into Ware's work further will show exactly how far the form can deviate from this set of conventions, both in terms of representing concepts rather than fictive stretches of time, and in constructing convoluted, and even non-linear reading pathways from the arrangement of segments" (location 2391).

In the introduction, to sum up the central aim of her project Miodrag writes, "[t]he central thrust of this book is to demonstrate via close analysis of both texts and source theory the precise differences between visual and verbal modes, which are habitually swept aside, seemingly for defensive reasons" (location 233-241). She also criticizes contemporary comics criticism for confining scholarship to legitimizing, defending, or celebrating comics. Besides, she urges critics to develop the discipline in a way that abandons hierarchizing a single aspect over others and that includes an analysis of the various constitute parts of comics in critical discourses since comics, naturally, as a medium, invites inclusion. This is evident in the following statement:

> It is… all the more imperative that the field's proponents finally abandon the core tenets that characterized the discipline's awkward adolescence ensuring comics studies is instituted not as a vague and general pulp of piecemeal theory, celebratory criticism, and a denial of hierarchies that is extrapolated to a lack of discernment, but as a more consistently serious and rigorous discipline whose only necessary defense is that it self-evidently merits inclusion (location 258)

She also explicitly criticizes the definitional approach that always attempts to craft a final statement that defines the medium through looking at specific examples. This is evident in her claim that "[i]t is a mistake to elevate characterizations that aptly describe particular examples to the status of a definition" (location 1572).

To prove how important language is in comics, and how marginalizing it is a big mistake on many critics' part, Miodrag uses George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* as an example of a case where the creator's merit resides not only in his brilliant art, but also in his ability to skillfully experiment with language usage in a unique way that creates humor and challenges readers' understanding of language as they know it (location 511). What is outstanding about *Krazy Kat*, as Miodrag shows, is Herriman's constructed idiosyncratic language that deconstructs conventional linguistic rules, and that is the main source of humor in the comics. Miodrag writes that Herriman possesses "a poet's ability to have fun with words," (location 292) and that in his comics "sense comes unstuck from the linguistic system, with nonsense utterances making perfect, comically amplified sense" (location 425). To accentuate some of the capacities that words have, which pictures might lack, and to respond to the critics who equate images' communicative abilities with those of words, Miodrag writes "[c]omics' critics efforts to argue that pictures can communicate "as well as" words fall flat in the face of a cartoonist like Herriman, for whom language's very slipperiness enables the sense-disturbing games that make his work—and his language in particular—so delicious" (location 511). *Krazy Kat* is a great example that refutes the claim that comics is a primarily visual medium in which language plays a secondary role as Herriman presents comics that are the complete opposite of that notion. Without its funny language, Herriman's works might not have been as exceptional as they are.

Moreover, Miodrag further challenges hierarchizing the visuals by showing that in many comics, like Herriman's, the narrative will not make the same sense without the words used in them. She argues that "language is, in many cases, a crucial element in comics, and the common insistence that words are always of secondary importance in every hybrid text is a mistaken move. None of the cartoons discussed here could convey much of a narrative without their outlandish and engaging textual context" (location 1008). The following example illustrates Miodrag's[2] point on the importance of language in creating meaning (fig. 5).

[2] Miodrag did not use this specific strip as an example to illustrate her point. She used a number of other *Krazy Kat* strips. The one presented here (fig.1) was chosen, however, because it highly matches Miodrag's point about the importance of words in comics and their distinct communicative abilities.

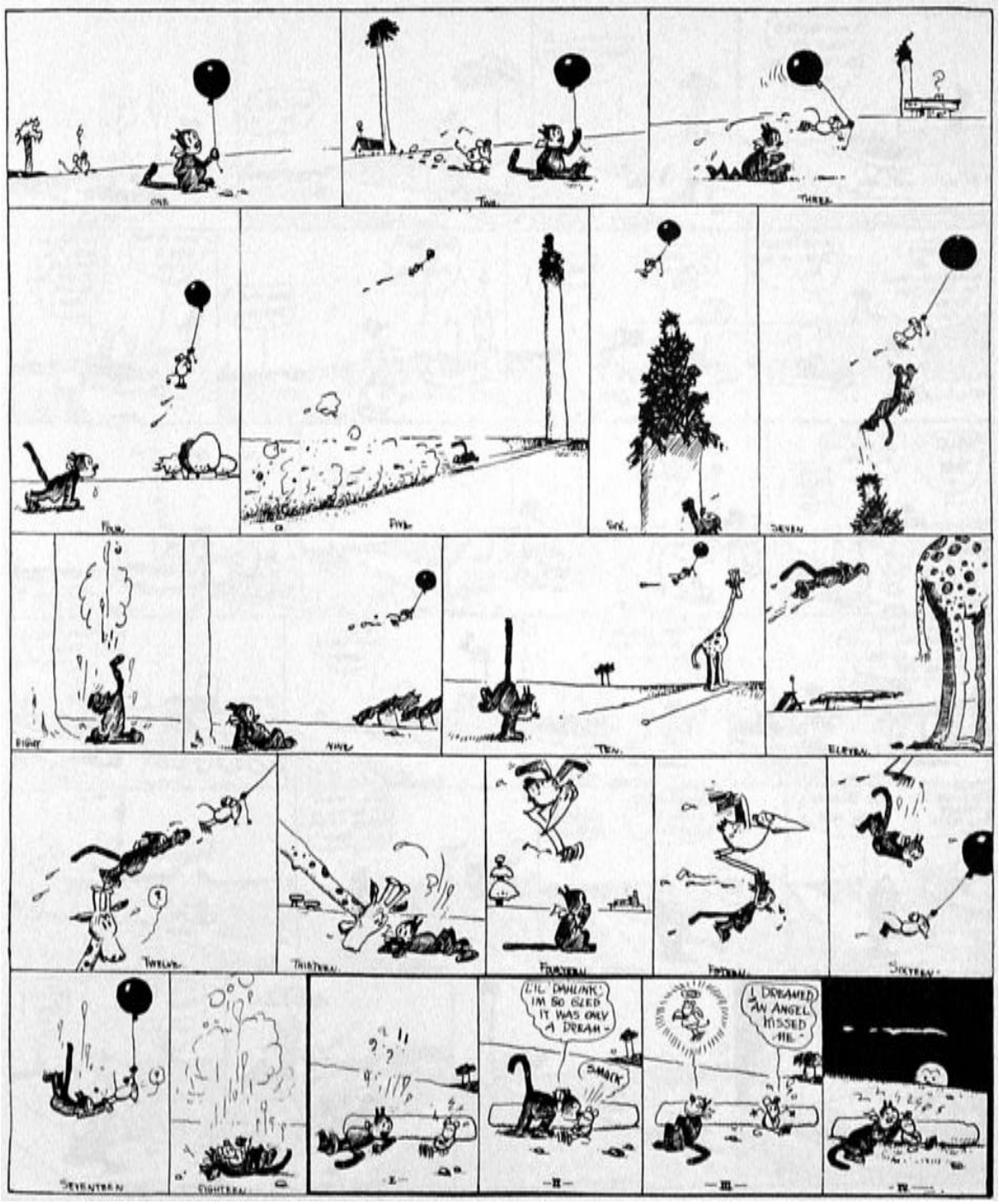


Fig. 5. An example of George Herriman's comics that highlights the significance of words for creating meaning in comics.

The majority of the narrative is told through images (except for two panels), and it makes complete sense without words. Nevertheless, without the words in the *only* two speech balloons used in the antepenultimate and the penultimate panels, the story will neither be understood correctly nor completely. In the antepenultimate panel, Krazy reveals to the reader that the whole narrative in the strip was just a dream using the words "[l]'IL 'DAHLINK', I'M SO GLED IT WAS ONLY A DREAM" (Ignatz Archives), and in the penultimate panel, Ignatz shows that he has been asleep and dreaming too as he says, "I DREAMED AN ANGEL KISSED ME" (Ignatz Archives). The plot twist in this case is communicated through language, not through the action that each panel frames. Nevertheless, Miodrag does not commend language usage in Herriman's works just for their ability to accentuate meaning; she appreciates the language, most importantly, because Herriman uses it creatively and unconventionally, not only through employing dialects, but also through twisting conventional usages and meanings of words to show language's limitlessness. According to Miodrag, in Herriman's work and its like "[w]ords proliferate, not in service of conveying more meaning, but for their own aesthetic sake" (Hescher 104).

In spite of her defense of language, Miodrag makes two important remarks. First, she points out the fact that not every work of comics contains an advanced literary language like that of acclaimed classic prose. This is evident in her claim that " not all comics— complex, rich, and thematically sophisticated as they may or may not be—employ literary language, or indeed any language at all" (location 1048). She refers to Alan Moore as an example of a creator who has always been held up as a great writer (location 1092) although the timber of his prose is not "consistently polished as that of numerous other comics' writers—and ones to whom the 'great writer' tag is not always so readily applied" (location 1096-1100). This does not mean that every

great writer has to be "polished;" it simply means that the criteria for critiquing language in comics is medium specific, and what makes one comics writer great is not necessarily his polished prose, it can be his ability to skillfully deploy language in a way that fits well in the medium (though they might not be very good regular prose writers). Neil Cohn praises Miodrag, in his review of her book, for making this point as he writes "[t]his is [a] rare statement of honesty in comics theory, since the defensive "comics are just as good as all that other stuff" viewpoint often casts the net too wide in claiming that "comics are art/literature" without acknowledging the whole variance of quality" (Visual Language Lab). It is a statement that prompts critics to be more *critical* in their judgement of works and not to let the legitimization complex blind them to existence of works that are not worthwhile.

Second, Miodrag states that "language-in-comics can only be evaluated within media-specific parameters;" (location 1059) in other words, "[c]omics' use of language...needs to be considered according to the specifics of the form" (location 1145). By this statement, Miodrag calls for devising an interpretive mode that is comics-specific. The literary analysis methods that are used for understanding and critiquing other forms of literature might not be as applicable when used as lenses for interpreting comics. Moreover, expecting every work of comics to be highly literary, or claiming that all of them are, is unfair to a medium whose singularity emanates from its unconventional use of language and its ability to create its own vocabulary registers that are only associated with comics, like "boom", "pow", "zap", "krak", and numerous other onomatopoeic coined works that are only known today thanks to comics.

Unlike Miodrag who thinks that studying language in comics has been ignored, some scholars, like Bart Beaty, argue that contemporary comics studies have ignored the art and focused more on the sophisticated literary narratives. Beaty presents this argument in his book

Comics Versus Art, and he emphasizes the importance of viewing comics as an art whose aesthetics are worth more scholarly attention. He begins his book with the following words:

> this book challenges the prevailing orthodoxy in much of contemporary North American comics scholarship that suggests comics are best understood as literary and fannish phenomenon, and, further, that scholarly approaches derived from the study of literature are the most appropriate tools for analyzing comics as a medium. This work proceeds from the assumption that… the analytical frameworks that emphasize the crucial visual element of comics are particularly called for at the present moment (Beaty 205)

Beaty calls for devising analytical tools that attend to the visuals, while Miodrag argues that the study of visuals has dominated the critical scene, which necessitates creating analytical tools that critique language in comics. The anti-hierarchal approach is a reminder that it is important not to focus on one track more than the other because in comics, the two are interdependent, and they interact to create a narrative.

The significance of the anti-hierarchy approach of comics criticism is that it plays a complementary role towards the other approaches that hierarchize the image; it completes the picture and adds an important missing piece of the puzzle by emphasizing cross-reference reading that draws links between the verbal and the pictorial tracks. It is a huge step towards a much more comprehensive comics criticism that neither privileges one aspect of comics over the other nor completely ignores such an important element, which is the text in comics. It veers readers' attention towards the interplay of word and text, which is especially important for their understanding of works that are rich in text like the previously mentioned example *Fun Home*, or works that are playful and creative in their use of words, like *Krazy Kat*.

Although the anti-hierarchical approach takes an important step towards leading readers towards a more comprehensive reading of comics, its presentation in Miodrag's text reveals some drawbacks. First, the book is more defensive than it is practical. Miodrag devotes the book to defending language and its importance but does not offer a methodical approach for reading comics with equal attention to both words and pictures. Second, like many other comics critics, it is obvious that her aim is to respond to what other critics claimed and proposed. Thus, her inferred target audience is a community of acclaimed critics. She, unintentionally, excludes an important group of audiences, which are the readers who seek her text for finding an analytical strategy. Addressing a scholarly community of critics is not a flaw in and of itself, and claiming that this is a drawback in Miodrag's work does not mean that her work is not appreciated; on the contrary, her work is a great eye opener to the necessity of attending to the text in comics. What is meant here though is that examining Miodrag's work and its like highlights the need for works of criticism that are as great in terms of ideas, but that are geared towards the less experienced reader, which is what the interrogative mode claims to be.

The Scientific Approach

The scientific approach perceives comics as an object worth scientific examining and experimenting to unravel and understand readers' cognitive processes. The interrogative mode finds explaining cognitive processes beneficial to comics readers when conducting a visual analysis. However, the scientific approach does not present an analytical framework. This is why the interrogative mode links the information it presents to instructive questions on visual analysis to optimize this information's usefulness. The most prominent critic who promotes the scientific approach is Neil Cohn. His book *The Visual Language of Comics: Introduction to the Structure and Cognition of Sequential Images* combines the work of several years of research that Cohn

did to study the relationship between comics, as a medium, and linguistics and cognitive science. The label "the scientific approach" fits Cohn's project as he uses comics, not as an aesthetic subject, but as a scientific object (Hescher 86) or a catalyst to explore how the mind functions in order to compose as well as to understand visual language. Thus, his aim is not necessarily to offer an analytical tool for reading comics per se; it is mainly to explain "how the mind works to create meaning through various modalities, and how graphic expression relates to other systems of the mind," (location 343) and he uses comics as the most fitting medium for his project as comics is a "predominant place in culture where visual language is used, often paired along with writing" (location 310-318). Cohn explains:

> [w]hile "comics" can be studied in a primarily sociocultural light (literary studies, political science, economics, history, etc.), visual language should be studied in the linguistic and cognitive sciences. For this latter field of study, the focus is not on "comics", but on the visual language they are written in… while glossed over as the study of "comics," really the cognitive study of this visual language aims to illuminate the links between domains that can paint a broader picture of the nature of human expression. (location 343)

Cohn claims that "the visual language created by drawing is similar in structure to the verbal language created by writing/speaking" (Visual Language Lab). He uses statements made by several comics creators to prove that artists think of the visual work they create as a language. He quotes comics artist Jack Kirby, who said "I've been writing all along and I've been doing it in pictures", and Osamu Tezuka, Japan's "God of Comics," who stated, "I don't consider them pictures… In reality I'm not drawing… I'm writing a story with a unique type of symbol" (location 296). He also quotes Chris Ware who argues that "comics are not a genre, but a

developing language," Will Eisner who "compared gestures and graphic symbols to a visual vocabulary," and Scott McCloud who "described the properties governing the sequence of panels as its "grammar"" (location 302). All of these statements show that many of comics' greatest artists view their drawing as a narrative written in visuals; instead of using words (or words alone) to tell their stories, they draw pictures as this is where their expertise resides. In his review of Nick Sousanis's *Unflattening*, Cohn explains how he sees an affinity between the structure of drawn images and that of language:

> [d]rawings are not a siphon for our perception, they reflect entrenched and learned cognitive patterns stored in our memories just as much as language, because they are built just like language. For example, drawing is not about re-presenting perception, but about learning and producing patterned graphic schemas in order to express our concepts. If you don't learn enough patterns, you won't draw proficiently. This makes drawing less like perception, and more like language: both involve stored information in memory. As I argue in my paper "Framing 'I can't draw,'" the assumptions about "drawing as tied to perception" actually limit people's ability to learn to draw (Visual Language Lab)

The objective of Cohn's approach often gets misunderstood, which leads him to constantly re-explain it and defend it against misinterpretations. Using the word "language" in the title of his book and in his argument is somehow misleading. Many readers, and even critics, do not quite understand what he means. They think that Cohn argues that comics is a language. In response, to defend and to clarify his argument, Cohn states "***Comics are not a language***. I emphasize this greatly, because the title of this book might lead some to believe that "The Visual Language *of* Comics" means "comics are a visual language" and that this is the ultimate message

of the book. That is *not* the case. Rather, comics *are written in* visual languages in the same way that novels or magazines *are written in English*" (location 318). Cohn repeatedly responds to critics who write about his central claims in a way that does not quite represent an accurate picture of what his approach achieved, like Miodrag for example. In his review of her book *Comics and Language*, he criticizes her for misrepresenting his propositions:

> She acknowledges and understands my idea of "visual language" that is used in comics… but does not describe how it changes the argument with regards to comparisons of comics and language broadly. My argument is *not* that "comics are a language" or "comics are like a language." Rather, it's that comics are written using two processes: writing and drawing, and that the structures of both of these are similar (that is, the visual language created by drawing is similar in structure to the verbal language created by writing/speaking)
>
> (Visual Language Lab)

Because of this confusion about what Cohn is actually arguing, readers who are seeking an interpretive method for reading comics might think that Cohn fails at offering one, which could be viewed as a drawback of the scientific approach. The reality is though, that Cohn's is not a book *about* comics. This is evident in Achim Hescher's brief review of the book in *Reading Graphic Novels*. He writes that the book "strictly speaking, is not even a book on comics but an investigation of the processing of silent narrative images, inspired by linguistics (morphology) and cognitive science" (Hescher 86). Nevertheless, the analysis of the system that governs visual language in which comics is written in is definitely helpful for reading comics' visual-track. Thus, Cohn's propositions should still be consulted for visual analysis because, as Miodrag indicates "Cohn's theory… furnishes us with an unusually viable comparison with language in

demonstrating a systematic organizing principle that governs how sequences of panels make meaning" (location 2239-2243). To sum up, although his theory "deliberately excludes the verbal track," (Hescher 86) and is not concerned with offering guidance through the reading process, it should not be completely dismissed as it offers an important insight into the structure of the visual track. The interrogative mode links this insight to those offered by other approaches, like Miodrag's for instance, to urge readers to engage with the verbal track and to analyze visual-verbal synergy.

The Pro-Inclusivity Approach

Nick Sousanis is the leader of the pro-inclusivity approach. His book *Unflattening* promotes a message of inclusiveness and breadth that defies conventional critical approaches and discourses that are limited, limiting, and dismissive of others, which is one of the main inspirations for devising the interrogative mode that braids a variety of viewpoints and that invites for constant evaluation and revision of critical lenses. Before presenting the book's main argument, it is important to note that the book is written entirely in a graphic format. Neil Cohn praises *Unflattening* for this rhetorical choice in his review of the book: "it succeeds quite well as an example of graphic non-fiction, especially without relying on a "narrator character" like McCloud (and others… me included). For those reasons alone the book is worth reading" (Visual Language Lab). The book showcases comics' ability to make an argument through deploying the interplay of images and narrative captions. It argues that images are not subordinate to words, and the medium of comics proves that the two communicative modes are interdependent and interrelated, and they work hand in hand to convey messages.

Not only does Sousanis's book defy conventions through its verbal content, but also through its graphic form (see fig. 6). Originally, this book was Sousanis's doctoral dissertation

that he wrote as a graphic work, which is a rare case that one does not see very often in academia, if at all. Through its graphic format, the book, as Cohn puts it, “embodies its message of attempting to break through the confines of the "flatlands" of received viewpoints that unconsciously pervade the ways we see the world” (Visual Language Lab). Like McCloud’s *Understanding Comics*, Sousanis’s *Unflattening* is quite accessible to audiences beyond the academic sphere. What is unique about it, however, is its ability to maintain a balance between being a fairly easy read and being a text that is overtly grounded in theory (and that cites all of its sources), unlike McCloud’s text that has been accused for not stating clearly and explicitly what it bases its propositions on.

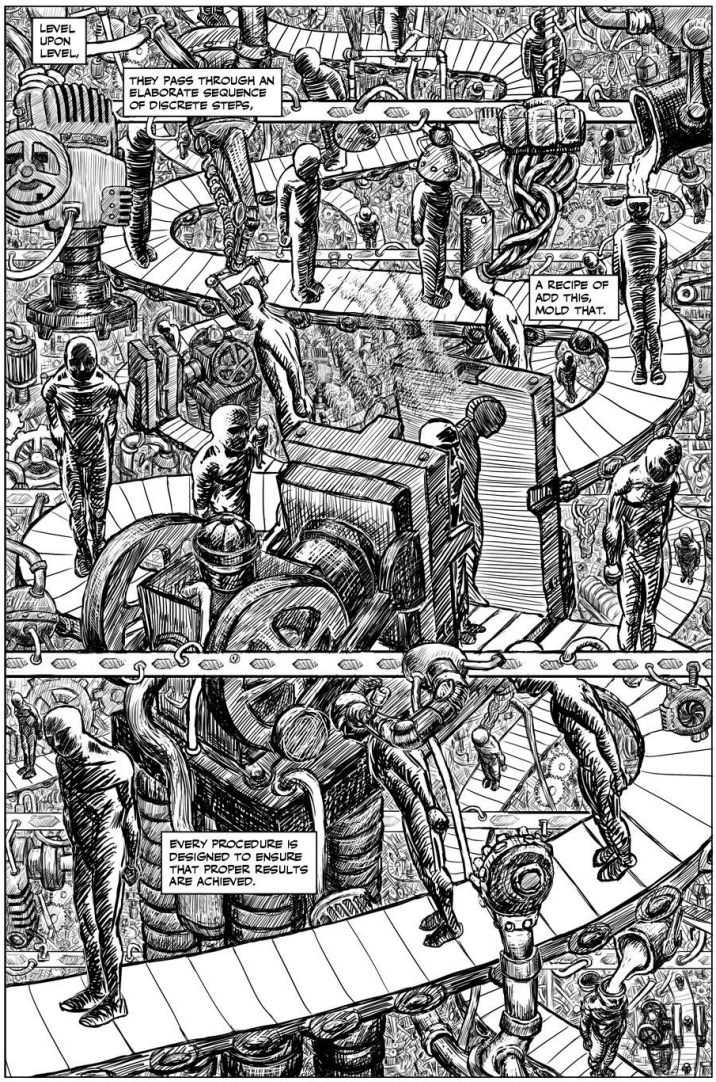


Fig. 6. An excerpt from Nick Sousanis's *Unflattening*. It shows how the author wrote his entire dissertation, which later became his book, in graphic form.

At the outset of his book, Sousanis addresses the problem of limited or exclusive definitions (like the McCloudian/essential definition):

> A fixed viewpoint/A single line of thought/can be a trap/where we see only what we're looking for/Blind to other possibilities… Consider instead/ Distinct vantage

> points, separate paths, joined in dialogue, thus not merely side by side, they intersect, engage, interact, combine, and inform one another, as the coming together of two eyes produces stereoscopic vision/ outlooks held in mutual orbits, coupled, their interplay, and overlap, facilitate the emergence of new perspectives. Actively interweaving multiple strands of thought, creates common ground. A richly dimensional tapestry, from which to confront and take differences into account, and allow the complex to remain complex. (36-37)[3]

This proposition is an invitation to explore new possibilities instead of being trapped within the limitations of conventional views. Sousanis's book gives a brief example of braiding different viewpoints from different disciplines to gain a panoramic perspective that is inclusive and diverse (see fig. 7). The whole text itself is "an insurrection against the fixed viewpoint. Weaving together diverse ways of seeing drawn from science, philosophy, art, literature, and mythology, it uses the collage-like capacity of comics to show that perception is always an active process of incorporating and reevaluating different vantage points" (*Unflattening*).[4] Thus, the book does not only tell readers that it promotes inclusion and interdependence, but it also shows, through the way it is rendered verbally and visually, how this works through interweaving the threads of multiple disciplines and standpoints. The whole book is a journey across disciplines to prove that words and images are equally important and interconnected.

[3] Because this quote is originally written in separate tags (that look like narrative captions) in *Unflattening*, I use slashes here to indicate the breaks between them.
[4] These words are written on the inner cover of *Unflattening*

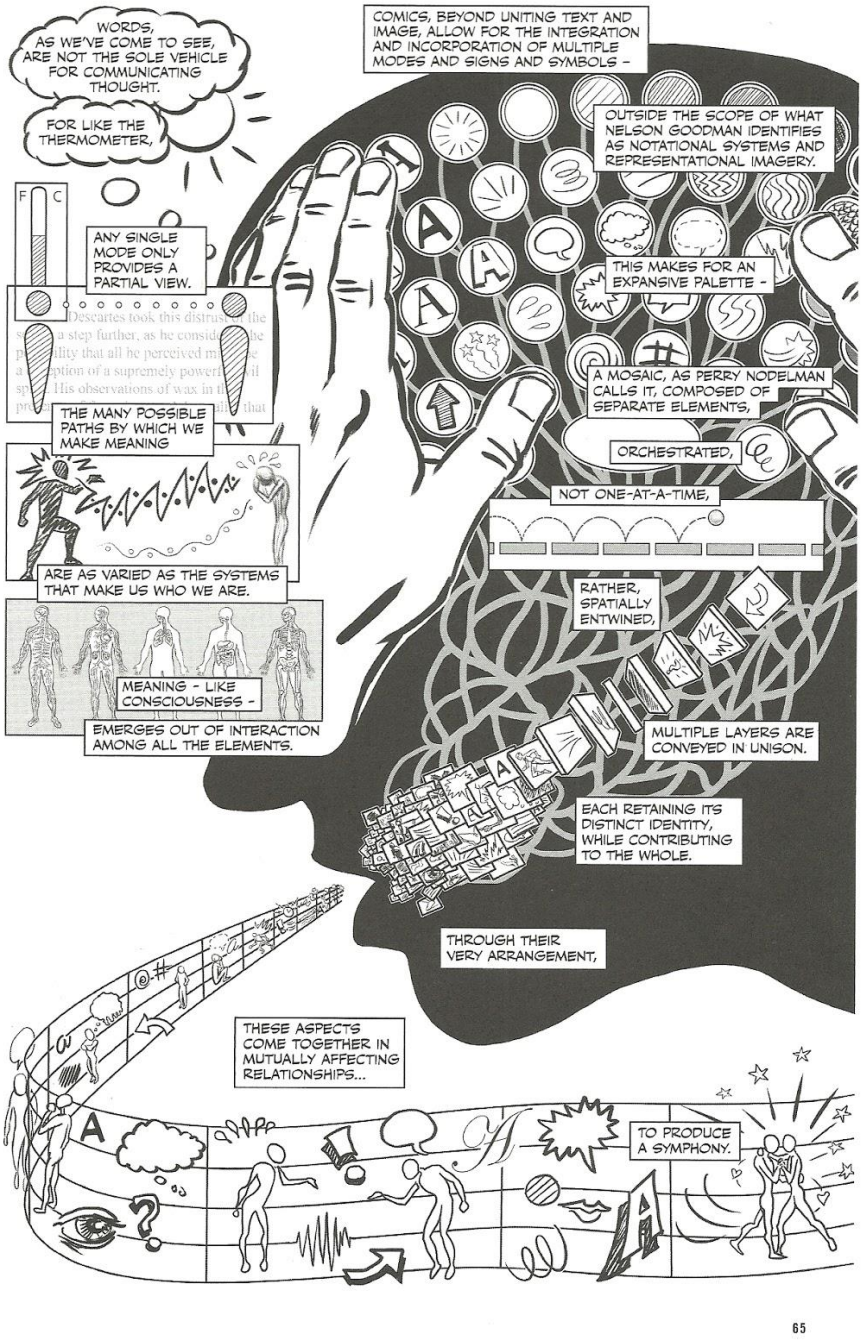


Fig. 7. Sousanis's brief example of braiding different viewpoints from different disciplines to gain a panoramic perspective that is inclusive and diverse.

Sousanis seeks a critical outlook that constantly poses questions and that is open for updating and rethinking its own propositions as well as those of others. He provides a rationale for seeking this outlook as he writes "[w]hen ideas are written in stone with the certainty that we got it right, we risk following without reflection," and "[w]hen we stop questioning, we become transfixed, as if by Medusa's gaze rendered inanimate, flat." Thus, unflattening means openness and willingness to adapt diverse viewpoints (including opposing ones) and to be critical about our findings through constantly questioning them and imagining other possibilities and other "dimensions beyond the familiar" (Sousanis 113).

Towards the end of his book, Sousanis emphasizes his rejection of the definitional approach and its attempts to achieve closure. To him "it's not a process of closing" or "of being finished" as "each new engagement generates another vantage point from which to continue the process anew" (Sousanis 150). Thus, critics should embrace the notion of the impossibility of finding an accurate definition of comics because, as mentioned above, the more creators experiment with the medium, and the more critics propose new interpretive methods, or even new points of departure, the definition will need to change to encompass new dimensions. Sousanis concludes by stating that reaching closure is unattainable as "there are always gaps: spaces for the unknown, openings for imagination to spill into," yet "incompleteness reveals that there is always more to discover" (Sousanis 150). This is how Sousanis's pro-inclusivity approach views studying comics. It perceives this study as a work-in-progress that will always have gaps that require critical speculations that aim at further investigations, not at achieving

closure, or at devising, as Neil Cohn puts it, "*the* new revolutionary paradigm for comics that will sweep away all others" (Visual Language Lab, emphasis mine)[5].

Unflattening provides the current study with a strong rationale for the interrogative mode, since the main aim of the interrogative mode is to interweave different strands of comics criticism, to include diverse viewpoints, and to pose questions that prompt further investigations. The book makes it very clear that the status quo of comics criticism necessitates devising an interpretive method that unites and engages various theories instead of adhering to a fixed standpoint. However, *Unflattening* does not go beyond advocating for inclusivity and providing a rationale for it. It helps one gain a new perspective on comics, but it does not offer a practical critical apparatus. It leaves that for further studies to adopt its call for inclusivity and act upon it by devising inclusive critical tools. It is clear that suggesting an interpretive mode is not the book's purpose, yet the fact that it lacks inclusive interpretive strategies highlights the need for one (or some), so the interrogative mode responds directly to Sousanis's call for inclusivity, and it complements his argument.

The Alternative Approach

The interrogative mode is also a direct response to the alternative approach, which stems from Charles Hatfield's seminal work *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* that discusses the need for alternatives to the existing critical approaches and definitions of comics, especially McCloud's sequentiality concept. The alternative approach invites readers to braid various critical lenses, and to analyze comics using a set of critical questions. In response, the

[5] This quote is excerpted from Neil Cohn's review (on his website) of Thierry Groensteen's book *The System of Comics*, in which he concluded that the book offers an interesting outlook, but it is "*not* the new revolutionary paradigm for comics that will sweep away all others" (Visual Language Lab).

interrogative provides readers with those critical questions that interweave various approaches, and with examples of how this mode can be applied to a variety of comics.

Unlike McCloud, Hatfield does not view comics as a sequential art, rather, he thinks of it as an art of tensions (Hatfield 32). He categorizes these tensions into four types, namely "code vs. code," (Hatfield 36) "single image vs. image in a series," (Hatfield 41) "sequence vs. surface," (Hatfield 48) and "text as experience vs. text as object" (Hatfield 58). He writes that it is the reader's responsibility to infer the kind of tension at play in the comics they are reading and to explore the role those tensions play in creating a narrative. Moreover, he clarifies that his aim in presenting and explaining these tensions, and showing how they function through specific examples, "is not to set forth an empirical model of comics reading but rather to establish the complexity of the form by broadly discussing the kinds of mixed messages it sends even to the most experienced of readers" (Hatfield 36). Moreover, he argues that "[c]omics readers must call upon different reading strategies, or interpretive schema, than they would use in their reading of conventional written text" (Hatfield 35). Hatfield's approach calls for readers' participation, and it is evidently reader-oriented. Perhaps this is the result of the fact that Hatfield is a teacher; he attempts to come up with an alternative reader-response approach that he can use in the classroom with his students as a substitute for the existing strategy that could confuse rather than help beginners.

The examples that Hatfield scrutinizes in the case studies he provides in *Alternative Comics* are not excerpted from conventional texts. They are, mostly, either underground comics (of the 60s and 70s), alternative comics (of the 80s and the 90s), or graphic novels (long-form/book-length serious comics). Many of the examples Hatfield studies prove that the available analytical frames, such as McCloud's sequentiality or Groensteen's braiding, might not

be applicable in several cases. For example, Hatfield analyzes the multiple layers of narration that Chris Ware creates in his experimental six-page comic 'I Guess' that "seems to tell two different stories" (Hatfield 37) as its visual and verbal tracks are intentionally inharmonious and can hardly be read in a sequence. This rendition proves that traditional comics reading strategies are not easily applicable to unconventional comics. Hatfield states that comics like Ware's change the way the structure of comics has always been perceived, and they influence reading strategies. He states "[a]dmittedly 'I Guess' represents a radical questioning of the way comics work; few comics test the limits of the form so rigorously. Yet, by destabilizing the conventions of visual/verbal interplay, Ware's six-page effort throws those conventions into relief, and encourages us to read even conventional comics more attentively" (Hatfield 39-39). Hatfield also uses Eric Cartier's *Flip in Paradise* as another example of comics that prove the limits of the essential and the semiological approaches. Cartier uses clusters of visual non sequiturs in his narratives, and he uses series of pictograms as well as diegetic and non-diegetic symbols for creating wordless visual dialogues, which are features that neither McCloud's nor Groensteen's texts explicate. All of Hatfield's case studies showcase the need for alternative analytical lenses for reading comics that account for texts that betray the z-path grid and that invent unconventional renditions.

Because his intensive studying of comics and comics criticism lead him to the conclusion that "no single formula for interpreting the page can reliably unlock *every* comic," (Hatfield 66) Hatfield suggests that comics criticism should ask texts questions instead of employing limited analytical schemes that, most times, fail to attend to the intricacies of many comic books. This idea is quite promising. It could lead to a comprehensive analysis of comics since it does not stick to a single point of departure; it is flexible enough to adapt its queries to the conditions and

the context of each work it examines. In fact, this dissertation, and the interrogative mode it devises, is a direct response to the following urging statement that Charles Hatfield makes in *Alternative Comics* to direct critical analysis "[t]oward a habit of questioning" (Hatfield 66):

> criticism in English, until very recently, has been unable to distinguish between skimming comics and reading comics, with the result that critical discussion of the form has been generally impoverished and, at times, irresponsible. My hope is that the above discussion, though it stops short of trying to construct a universal critical scheme, will inspire readers to ask probing questions of the comics they read… Such questions, while perhaps impressionistic, provide lenses through which we can more fully appreciate, and more pointedly critique, the comics text. (Hatfield 67)

Hatfield even gives examples of the kinds of questions he hopes to see if such an interrogative mode is constructed. The following are examples of these questions: "[w]hat relationship does this page create between time and space? Am I ever in doubt about that relationship?" (Hatfield 67) "How does the layout of this page or surface—the relative size, shape, and positioning of its images— inflect my understanding of the narrative? When I look at this page, am I conscious of its overall design, or of the way I move from one design element to the next? Are there moments at which it helps to be aware of both? How are the boundaries, or margins, of the page used?" (Hatfield 67). The interrogative mode asks similar questions, but most of its questions are, as Hescher puts it "steeped in solid theoretical groundwork" (Hescher 92). The interrogative mode's questions use prominent critics' propositions as their basis, to engage readers with current theories and to urge them to think critically about them.

The Narratological Approach

The narratological approach is preoccupied with discussing narrative and its structure in comics as well as the ways in which narration affects readers' perception. To augment the capability of this approach to thoroughly analyze the structure of narratives, the interrogative mode links it to other frameworks that examine the various visual and verbal elements that play significant roles in constructing narratives. Achim Hescher, a rising critic, introduces and discusses the narratological approach in his book *Reading Graphic Novels: Genre and Narration*. Hescher's book presents an analytical framework for graphic narratives beyond classical or conventional narratology that discusses aspects of subjectivity, which is a focal paradigm in contemporary research. To underscore the significance of what his work presents, he argues that "the focalization concept from classical narratology is not suitable for books of comics because it does not account for the relation between what an image *shows* and what characters *see*, which is paramount to meaning production" (195). This is why he presents "occularization" as a "more efficient and discriminate term for the analysis of graphic novels" (181). Unlike François Jost who presents "a complex relational concept setting what images show (*occularization*) against what characters and readers know," (which is the concept of focalization) Hescher adopts occularization as an analytical method as it "concerns the finished given of the image" (201). To explain that choice, he writes "[i]mages or image sequence in graphic novels often show what is not (or not yet) focalized and whose focalization can only be accounted for by assessing a longer sequence or several sequences in a row- or even the whole work" (171). In other words, Hescher argues that the concept of focalization from classical narratology cannot be applied to the medium of comics because each panel in sequential comics shows an incomplete picture (as the borders of panels omit the rest of the elements of the picture

that complete it), which takes away from readers the privilege of knowing what the characters know. Occularization, on the other hand, is concerned with the finished product, or what the panel shows or choses as its main focus. With occularization, for the reader to know what the characters know, they have to actively think of connections between panels across the comic.

Hescher devotes a significant part of his narratological analysis to answering the important question of "who narrates the story in comics?" He writes:

> Unlike verbal narrative fiction, graphic narratives have no meditating or transmitting communication system, reified in a 'fictional narrator,' that could be held responsible for the production of the whole verbal and *pictorial* discourse. Therefore, the pictorial track should be ascribed to the artist-writer in the external communication system. Only when there is a figure or character *marked* as a narrator on both the verbal and the pictorial plane (through narrational script and a realistic or iconic shape, or through pictorial allegory), distinct from the intradiegetic story, should we speak of a narrator. (197)

The significance of this approach that explores narration and point of view in comics is that it attempts to solve a problem that arises when critics apply classical theories of narrative and narratology to an unconventional medium that breaks most of the traditional rules of narration. However, just by itself, the narratological approach might not be helpful for a comprehensive reading of comics as it attends to a single aspect of the medium: narration. To lead to a reading that questions the relationship between the different narrative devices that tell a story as well as create meaning within the medium, the narratological approach must work hand in hand with other approaches, which is what the interrogative mode allows for.

The Typological Approach

The typological approach is interested, for the most part, in sorting and classifying different elements of comics into categories based on their function and their significance on the page. The interrogative mode introduces readers to the different categories that this approach presents to familiarize them with the conventions of the medium. One of the most quoted texts that represent the typological approach is Benoit Peeters's "Four Conceptions of the Page." In his article, Peeters classifies the comics page layout into four specific categories based on their function and style, namely the conventional, the decorative, the rhetorical, and the productive. Among the different examples that Peeters uses to illustrate the different categories is Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen*, a text that has a conventional appearance yet breaks a lot of traditional, visual patterns of storytelling in comics. He also discusses Chris Ware's works and how they strive to reinvent the concept of page layout to serve the narratives. This classification that Peeters presents veers readers' attention to the fact that, in many cases, the page is not simply a container that encompasses the narrative. It is a functioning element that is utilized by many comics artists as part and parcel of their narrative devices. It prompts readers to add the question of the function of the page layout to the critical apparatus they utilize to read comics. In addition, being familiar with these four categories can be helpful when reading unconventional comics that break the tradition. It makes it easier to notice the difference between the traditional rendering of the page and the exceptional delineation.

Peeters is not the only name associated with the typological approach. Many of Neil Cohn's and Chris Gavaler's studies classify different elements of comics into groups and categories based on their type and/or their function to help readers understand the structure of comics. For instance, Cohn's article "Japanese Visual Language: The Structure of Manga,"

categorizes panels of Japanese manga into varying types (macro, mono, micro, and polymorphic) depending on the amount of information they contain (see fig. 8); this classification helps in understanding the visual grammar of manga and in noticing the difference in delineation between manga and Western comics. Gavaler's "Analyzing Comics 101: Layout," is another example of the typological approach. It familiarizes nonexperts, especially students, with the different types of page layouts in comics. It gives several conventional and nonconventional examples that show how different layouts "influence the way images interact by controlling their number, shapes, sizes, and arrangement on the page, giving more meaning to the images than they would have if viewed individually" (Gavaler Analyzing Comics 101). Gavaler does not only display the different types of layouts; he also suggests reading paths to help students navigate different comics. He provides these examples and suggestions because he did not find satisfactory sources on teaching comics. This is evident in his words "[t] The downside to teaching a course on comics is discovering that no textbook quite matches the way you want to teach the material. The upside is writing that textbook yourself" (Gavaler Analyzing Comics 101). This highlights the dire need for a critical approach that can help teachers facilitate the process of reading comics to their students.

Despite the significance of the typological approach, analyzing comics requires much more than a stand-alone approach. Yes, attending to the panel and page layouts and their narrative functions is important, but it needs to be linked to other narrative and stylistic devices so one can fully understand the dynamic relationships between the different elements of the comics page, which is what the interrogative mode aims at.

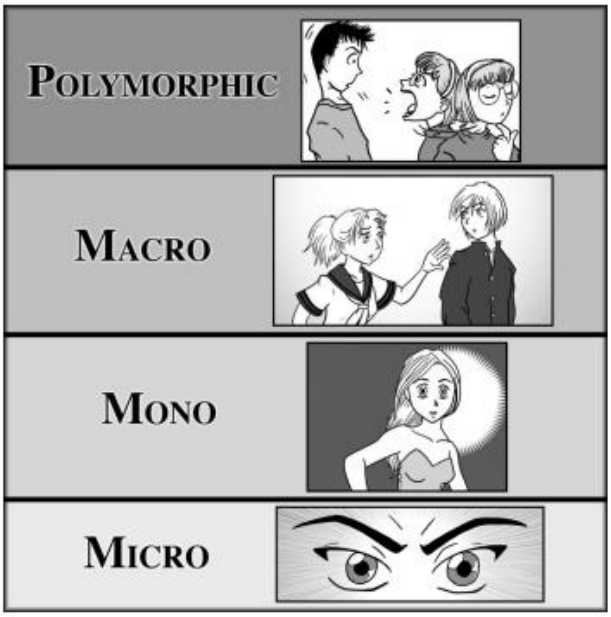


Fig. 8. Neil Cohn's classification of the Japanese manga panels into 4 types (polymorphic, macro, mono, micro) depending on the amount of information they contain.

The Model Text Approach

This approach of criticism chooses a single comic book, or a collection of works by a single prominent comics creator, and either proposes analytical strategies for reading these particular works, or use the works as models to highlight very specific aspects of comics usually associated with an individual genre. Because this approach comprises a variety of reading strategies that are applicable to different types of comics (conventional and nonconventional alike), the interrogative mode links its scattered threads to construct a multi-dimensional analytical tool. Some examples of the texts this approach comprises are *The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing as a Way of Thinking*, edited by David M. Ball and Martha B. Kuhlman, Sarah J. Van Ness's *Watchmen as Literature: A Critical Study of the Graphic Novel*, and *Krazy Kat: The Comic Art of George Herriman* by Karren O'Connell, Georgia Riley de Havenon, and Patrick McDonnell, just to name a few. Most of these works can be quite helpful in understanding the

works of individual authors, especially those that readers that are new to the medium might find hard to understand, like most of the experimental work of Chris Ware. Some examples claim that by reading them, one will be able to understand the various elements of the entire medium. One of these is *How to Read Nancy: The Elements of Comics in Three Easy Panels* by Mark Newgarden and Paul Karasik. The book, as the title indicates, focuses on a single 3-panel comic strip of Ernie Bushmiller's *Nancy* (see fig. 9). The authors dissect the comic strip extensively so that "the student of comics—or any interested reader— can better understand the medium by examining forty-two aspects of the single strip in naked isolation," which is uncommon in books that analyze comics; it is hard to find a book that is entirely devoted to the analysis of a single strip, but the authors claim and demonstrate that Bushmiller's strip constitutes the basic elements that readers need to be familiar with. The two authors make it clear at he outset of the book that theirs is an attempt "to get to the essentials of comics" and that they are not "concerned with classifying the infinite systems of text and image interconnectivity and delineating their relative attributes;" they also write "[o]ur concern is with Bushmiller's system and its universal applicability. We are opinionated. We like *Nancy*. A lot" (21). Thus, the book is interested in showing how the comics medium work, and it uses *Nancy* as a universal example. Interpretation and critical analysis, and unravelling word-picture interplay, is not what this book sets out to do. Thus, like McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, and like other texts that constitute the definitional/the essentialist approach, this example of the model text approach does not go beyond presenting the essential elements and explaining how they work. Explanatory texts that introduce the basics are greatly helpful for students. However, since they are not interested in critique or interpretation, they need to be coupled with approaches that lead to critical analysis.

Many of the books that focus on model texts do not offer a critical lens that can be easily adopted and transferred from one critical study to another; most of their approaches are text specific as they analyze a single author or illustrator (or just one complex, unconventional comic). Some of them comprise a variety of critical approaches, but always in the context of a single creator or title. Although the approaches that those works suggest can be applicable to works of other authors and illustrators, this applicability will always be limited to and linked with the presence of a good number of common factors between the work they focus on and another that must highly resemble it. The usefulness of the approaches that this type of literature offers will increase if its applicability is broadened. Thus, approaches that are not confined to a specific text or a group of prominent artists is a project that the field of comics studies needs to see more of. This highlights the need for the interrogative mode as it is a much broader approach whose scope of applicability is wider in that respect.

Nancy, August 8, 1959.

Fig. 9. A 3-panel *Nancy* comic strip that Mark Newgarden and Paul Karasik use to help readers understand the medium of comics better.

Major Gaps and Crucial Issues in Current Comics Criticism

Studying the major approaches of comics criticism reveals that the available approaches are, as Hescher puts it, “heterogeneous in nature” (Hescher 86). Although numerous critics, like

Miodrag, for instance, try to base their arguments on works that preceded theirs, and to avoid seeming like what Miodrag describes as *ex nihilo* projects, it is undeniable that the majority of works of comics criticism still seem divergent and unrelated. The party that is most affected by the status quo of comics criticism are the readers who seeks an interpretive methodology that can help them produce a comprehensive reading in their analyses of comics as a medium. One of the main objectives of the interrogative mode that this study presents is to fill this gap in comics criticism by braiding the various voices of comics critics and presenting them in the form of questions that lead to a holistic reading of comics.

As shown in Chapter 2, the interrogative mode provides readers, students, and scholars with an extensive list of detailed questions about various aspects of comics that they can use to approach a wide range of works. Each question is informed by a strategy that has been suggested by a critic for reading comics. In other words, the first part of most questions states a critic's reading strategy or a claim they make about comics, and the second part of the question leads the reader to explore whether the theorist's claim or approach applies to the comic(s) they are studying or not. Nevertheless, this is not the case with all of the questions. Some questions explore aspects that have not been previously covered in comics criticism, or that are traditionally neglected. That is, the questions that constitute the interrogative mode not only combine and tweak the works of major critics, they also provide innovative questions that go beyond the foci of those works and their propositions. Here are a couple of examples of the type of questions the interrogative mode asks readers:

- In *The System of Comics*, Thierry Groensteen writes that the gutter (which is the space between panels or frames) is "an identifiable absence," and that, "[m]ore than a zone on the paper, it is the interior screen on which every reader projects the missing image (or

images)" (Groensteen, location 1539). Do you find this statement true of the comic(s) you are currently reading? Does the gutter play an active role in the comic you are examining?

- In his article "Four Conceptions of the Page", Benoît Peeters argues that "it is the organization of the page which seems to dictate the narrative. A particular arrangement generates a piece of narration" (Peeters Four Conceptions of the Page). Do you think that the way in which pages are arranged in the comic(s) you are currently examining plays a role in unravelling the plot, or is it a functionless arrangement that is not part of the narrative sequence?
- If the comic you are reading has an overtly grim and dramatic subject matter, can you still find elements that create a comic relief and prompt laughter? If yes, what is the source of humor in this comic, and what is the significance of this juxtaposition between the subject matter and the humorous aspects?
- Some graphic narratives, like G. Willow Wilson's *Cairo: A Graphic Novel* for example, merge elements of fantasy with the real, which, in Wilson's case, creates a fanciful image of Cairo. Some readers might think that this fanciful depiction is orientalist, and that it reinforces the notions of exoticism that have always been associated with the East. Does the presence of imaginary visual elements in the comic you are reading reinforce any stereotypical notions?

Many critics point out that comics creators have played a role in shaping critics' views about the medium's capacities. The most prominent example is likely Chris Ware and his experimental comics. However, there are many others that have challenged, and are still challenging comics' conventions whose voices need to be part of the critical conversation. A good example is G.

Willow Wilson, who created Middle-Eastern superheroes, and a female superhero who belongs to an ethnic minority in the U.S., to challenge their Western counterparts, which is a breakthrough for superhero comics worth critical scrutiny, and that leads to numerous questions about the concept of the superhero as well as the graphic representation of cultural identities. It is important to consider the statements that creators make, whether explicitly or implicitly, about the medium, its form, its contents, and its criticism, as part of the interpretive strategies for analyzing comics. This is another gap that needs to be filled and that the interrogative mode attends to, utilizing creators' statements to form questions about different aspects of comics as well as about different critical propositions.

The interrogative mode also aims at prompting the readers to conduct efficient visual analyses. One of the major gaps of comics criticism is the lack of strategies that clearly show readers how to interpret abstract forms. It is clear that comics critics need to consult studies on expressionism and abstraction to provide readers with an interdisciplinary approach that helps them understand how to assess the drawings in comics. To fill this gap, the interrogative mode presents questions drawn from studies on expressionism. The available works of criticism insist that comics is a primarily visual medium. Nevertheless, very few of them offer practical methods for visual analysis that go beyond explaining the function of images in constructing meaning or in telling a story and show how they can be aesthetically evaluated. This is why the approach of the interrogative mode, which immerses readers in visual analysis, is needed.

Moreover, hierarchizing visuals has blinded comics criticism for so long to the importance of language in comics, which is a huge drawback. Thanks to Miodrag and the anti-hierarchical approach, content analysis is growing. The interrogative mode uses Miodrag's propositions and their like to ask questions about the various functions of language in different comics. Instead of

forming broad questions that pose questions similar to what one usually asks of prose, the questions of the interrogative mode focus on the use of language *within the context of comics*. Thus, all of them are medium-specific. Some comics critics, like Bart Beaty for instance, argue that the study of the verbal track in comics has dominated comics studies, which is the complete opposite of what Miodrag claims. To resolve this issue, the interrogative mode attends to both the visual and the verbal track equally, and it is interested in their interplay and their interconnectedness.

The interrogative mode is interested in providing tools for exploring global comics. Current critical conversations are mostly concerned with analyzing Western comics that are written in English. Beyond that geographical sphere, they discuss Japanese manga as examples of global comics, or works that were considered breakthroughs not only because of their aesthetic and topical merit, but also due to their linguistic accessibility as they were either written in, or translated into, English or French, like Marjane Satrapi's *The Complete Persepolis*, for example. As a result, the works of many international comics creators are still unknown to both Anglophone and Francophone comics critics. This is another issue that the interrogative mode is concerned with. Thus, it includes questions that attend to sociocultural and national-specific aspects in comics that set international comics apart from their Western counterparts.

Many comics critics are more preoccupied with responding to and refuting the essentialist approaches of Eisner and McCloud than they are with offering practical strategies for reading comics. Thus, they end up presenting works that are more defensive than they are instructional. Yes, it is important to have this critical conversation as it leads to a better understanding of the medium. However, denouncing the essentialist approach, especially the work of McCloud, is becoming more and more démodé. Besides, it is becoming counterproductive as it rarely offers

definite and clear alternatives. Thus, unlike other works of criticism, the interrogative mode does not take attacking the essentialists as its point of departure. Rather, it directly immerses readers in the analysis of comics.

Some works of comics criticism seem to be written specifically for an audience of experts, and not for the non-specialist or the unexperienced reader who is new to the medium of comics. The way some critics render their arguments excludes a wide range of audiences. This is another issue that the interrogative mode attempts to solve. It acts like a bridge between the critics and the beginning scholar, and that is through explaining some of the jargon and the complex arguments in each question. Thus, the interrogative mode aims, through its elaborative questions, to make humanities more accessible to the public. It shows an example that critics can follow in writing books on criticism in the future; it is an example that addresses a wider variety of audiences. The interrogative mode still uses academic language; however, it devotes time to explaining discipline-specific expressions.

The question format that the interrogative mode uses leaves the door open for readers to have a say in how comics *could* be read. Thus, it is an approach that does not lead to closure; it leads to inclusiveness, questioning, and re-thinking various critical modes.

Chapter II

A Practical Mode of Critique for Reading Comics: The Interrogative Mode

As shown in Chapter I, comics criticism still lacks a practical approach that leads to a more comprehensive reading of the medium by attending to the interplay between the various aspects that constitute a comic. The interrogative mode, which is the focus of this chapter, aims to braid the different critical approaches for interpreting comics and to present them in a question form to lead readers and scholars to a much more substantial analysis of comics. The questions that the interrogative mode poses are not confined to critics' propositions; this mode of critique also considers the critical statements that comics practitioners (illustrators and authors) present in their works (whether implicitly or explicitly) and puts them in dialogue with prominent critical approaches. Moreover, the interrogative mode incorporates critical statements from other disciplines (like the visual arts and narratology) to show how they can be used in interpreting comics and to highlight the importance of thinking of comics as an interdisciplinary medium that requires a broader, more inclusive critical lens than what is currently available.

Before introducing the interrogative mode and presenting its questions, it is important to state the scope and the limitations of this interpretive strategy. Yes, the interrogative mode hopes to guide readers, especially early career scholars and/or those who are not familiar with the constituents of the medium, through the process of reading comics. However, this study does not present the interrogative mode as the *ultimate strategy* for reading comics. On the contrary, this study rejects the idea of attempting to find such a strategy because the more comics are created and published, the more reading strategies will change. The interrogative mode proposes a

strategy that tries to incorporate as many varieties of interpretation as possible, and leaves a room for adding more. It is also a model that urges critics to consider presenting their analytical strategies in a manner that makes interpreting comics more accessible and that facilitates the reading process. This mode of critique, on its own, cannot completely solve the problem of impracticality that current comics criticism faces. Thus, it opens the door for other critics and scholars to critique its questions, to make changes to them, and to add more questions as needed.

This chapter includes the following: 1) an instructional introductory statement that explains to readers how to utilize the interrogative mode and what they need to know and do before they start applying it to the comics they are studying in order to guarantee an efficient reading. 2) The questions of the interrogative mode separated by subheadings that identify the main focus of each set of questions, and a number of figures that illustrate those questions. 3) A mind map that compiles the main elements of comics that the interrogative mode scrutinizes. It is meant to be an accessible visual guide that reminds readers of the types of relations that they need to focus on when they dismantle the elements of the network that constitutes a comic. 4) A concluding suggestion on how to incorporate more questions in applying the interrogative mode and how to make changes to it.

The Interrogative Mode

Instructional Introductory Statement

The interrogative mode provides you with different sets of questions that are meant to lead you to a comprehensive interpretation of comics. Although these questions are presented in a specific order, you, the interpreter, are in control; you are not required to adhere to the suggested order. In other words, you are free to start with the section that attends to the aspect you find the most compelling in the work you are studying, and then you can think of the

relationship between it and the other elements that the other sections scrutinize, especially because the particular section you choose to start with will prompt you to think of connections between it and the other sections. For example, if you think that the verbal track in the work you are reading is its most riveting element, start with the section that focuses on writing in comics. You will find that the questions in that section mainly focus on the verbal track yet they invite you to think of comics as a web. Thus, the questions will prompt you to connect the elements you find significant to the other elements that complete the picture. The more questions you attempt to answer the more profound your analysis will be.

In order to fully understand a work of comics and to successfully interpret it using the interrogative mode, you need to exert some effort towards attaining a certain level of expertise that can be acquired through two main processes: 1) studying the conventions of creating comics and learning what is meant by *traditional* comic books or comic strips , 2) comparing a variety of comics to one another. You have to select a number of comics from different genres, created at different historical moments by different authors and artists (or even by the same creators at different times in history to examine how their art differed or developed if it did), from different cultures, and that present different themes. The comparison will show you whether the work you are studying adheres to comics conventions, redefines comics by introducing an element that is new and nontraditional, or if it completely rejects conventions through reversing and/or deconstructing them. It is important to understand how the work you are studying converses with and responds to the comics that preceded it as well as its contemporaries in order to dismantle its rhetoric and to present a panoramic picture in your analysis.

In his seminal work *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practices from the Legendary Cartoonist*, Will Eisner stresses the importance of putting some effort into gaining the

required experience for interpreting visuals within a single work of comics (and even within a single strip) by comparing each image (or each element of an image) with the ones surrounding it. He writes: "[i]mages without words, while they seem to represent a more primitive form of graphic narrative, really require some sophistication on the part of the reader (or viewer). Common experience and a history of observation are necessary to interpret the inner feeling of the actor" (Eisner 20). He gives the following example to illustrate his point about understanding through observation and comparison that provide experience (fig. 10).

Fig. 10. Eisner's example of comics with no speech balloons, which prompts readers to use visual cues to supply the dialogue.

In this comic (fig. 10), there are no speech balloons, so readers have to "supply the dialogue which is evoked through the images. In order to do that, readers have to observe the action and the facial expressions in the first image their eyes meet, then by comparing it to the next image (with the experience they gained from the first one), they can construct a dialogue and a narrative. They also bring to the reading their own innate visual experience and their prior knowledge of the differences between emotional expressions (laughing, crying, anger..etc), which helps in the process of supplying dialogue and narrative. The same can be said about comics in general. In order to interpret a single work of comics, it is helpful to put in comparison with other comics to get a clear idea of how it creates meaning and constructs a narrative. For example, if you are reading a comic book that was published in the 2000s, you need to think of whether it copies any of the traditions of comic book writing and drawing of the 1930s through the 1990s, or it belongs to a new tradition of its time, or it comes up with a new writing or drawing style that defies traditional writing. The more comics you bring to this comparison, the more thorough and deep your study will be.

Familiarize yourself with the structure of the medium by skimming through different comics; compare them to one another and list your observations, as they will be quite useful when you begin using the interrogative mode. It is important to note that when you start conducting this initial comparison, you may think that what you produce is an amateurish analysis that lacks the required sophistication of academic studies. Nevertheless, you must remember that, as an inexperienced reader or interpreter, you still play a very vital and significant role in shaping and reshaping critical apparatuses, and that your findings matter to critics and comics practitioners alike. It is important to write down your initial take on any comic you study (prior to using the interrogative mode) for comparing it to the conclusions you make

after using the interrogative mode. Your initial response to the works and your analysis will play a significant role in helping you realize the major differences between the reading experience of a non-specialist versus the systematic and informed reading that results from consulting scholarly and professional critical statements.

The Questions

The Comic Cover, Preliminary Pages, and the First Page[1]

Before examining the first page of the comic you are studying, look at the book covers (front and back) and the first few pages, and ponder the following questions**:**

1- If you are reading a comic book in print format, how is the book cover designed? Is it in the same size of the traditional comic books of the 1930s (see fig. 11)?

2- Does the shape and the size of this comic book's cover belong to the conventions of the era in which this comic is produced? If yes, how so? If not, how does it differ?

3- Each culture has a variety of shapes and sizes of comic books. Franco-Belgian comics (bandes dessinées) are larger than American comic books, which are in the size of catalogue books and magazines. Most Japanese comic books (manga) are much smaller than both American and Franco-Belgian comic books. To which culture does your comic book belong? Do you read it from left to right like you read Western comics, or do you read it backwards like Japanese manga?

4- There are comic books whose covers challenge the traditional shape and size of comic books, like Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (see fig. 12a & fig. 12b). Does the comic you are reading have an exceptional shape/ size? If yes, how does

[1] You might not find these questions applicable if you are examining newspaper comics or webcomics (unless they are compiled in a book length collection). If the medium that contains your comic is not a book, you can skip this section and start with the next one that focuses on the context of production.

this affect your initial judgement of the work, its creators, and the narrative you are about to be exposed to?

5- What kind of images are presented on the book cover? Do those images attempt to create a narrative? If yes, how do those images affect your expectations about the tone, the mood, the genre, the pace, the plot, the characters, and/or other important elements of the narrative? Are the images in color or in black and white? What type of colors are used and what is their effect on you?

6- Other than the title of the comic book, the names of the authors/ illustrators, and other informational writing, are there written texts on the cover that can be connected to the narrative? What are they and how are they presented?

7- Where is/are the name(s) of the author(s) and/or the illustrator(s) placed on the front cover? Which name comes first? Does the way in which the name(s) of the creator(s) of the work and the other informational texts are placed on the cover have a communicative significance that you can address?

8- Does the back cover of the comic you are reading have a function, or is it a blank, imageless cover? If it does, what is the function that the back cover plays? Does it contain advertisements like most of the back covers of older, traditional comics (see fig. 13) or does it include quotations that praise the narrative (see fig. 14)? Does it have excerpts from the narrative? If yes, do they respond to the ones used on the front cover, or do they tell a different narrative? Do they help you in forming an opinion about the comic you are studying? If yes, how so?

9- Does the comic you are reading include preliminary pages[2]? If yes, do those pages have any significant images that can be connected to the narrative? Some comic artists use those pages to foreground and highlight a visual motif that has a significant meaning in their stories. For example, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons do that in their prominent comic book *Watchmen* through using the image of a clock on both the cover of the book and the preliminary pages (see fig. 15) to refer to the importance of time to this specific narrative. It is an image that recurs frequently in the narrative. Magdy El Shafee does the same thing in the preliminary pages of his comic book *Metro: A Story of Cairo* (see fig. 16) through foregrounding the "M" sign, which is a symbol of the subway in Cairo; it has a high thematic significance in the narrative. Before delving into the details of their stories, El Shafee and Gibbons present those visuals so that readers recognize them and question the significance of their recurrence. Does the work you are reading use a similar technique in the preliminary pages? If not, what exactly do the preliminary pages include?

10- Is the first page of the comic book you are reading a splash page[3]? According to Will Eisner in *Comics and Sequential Art*, a splash page (see fig. 17) or the first page of the story usually plays an important role:

> The first page of a story functions as an introduction… What or how much it contains depends on the number of pages that follow. It is a launching pad for the narrative, and for most stories it establishes a frame of reference. Properly employed it seizes the reader's attention and prepares his attitude for the events to

[2]Preliminary pages, or prelims, are the pages preceding the main text of a book.

[3] The splash page is a large page that is completely covered with illustration that introduces the story. It is, traditionally, a single, full page panel. In comic books that include more than one chapter/section, it is used by some illustrators to introduce the new section.

follow. It sets a "climate." It becomes a splash page proper rather than a simple first page when the artist designs it as a decorative unit" (Eisner 64)

Does Eisner's statement apply to the splash page in the comic you are reading? If yes, what does it reveal about the narrative? How does it shape your expectations?

11- If the work you are examining is a webcomic or an e-comic (digital comic) that you are reading on an electronic device, does it have an equivalent to the book cover or the preliminary pages that is worth scrutinizing? How would you describe the first visuals and texts you encounter in the comic you are reading?

12- Do you see the "Comics Code Authority (CCA)" logo[4] on the cover of the comic book you are studying (see fig. 18)? If yes, what do you expect to find in this work?

13- Does the comic you are reading contain the label "graphic novel" or any other alternatives like "comix" or "comic book" that identifies the work through the cover (see fig. 19)? If yes, how does this label affect your expectations? What do you know about this genre and what does the label entail?

- Once you are done reading the comic you are studying, and after answering the rest of the questions that the interrogative mode presents in the following sections, come back to this section about the book cover and the first few pages. At that point in your study, the following questions will be helpful:

1- Now that you have read the entire comic book and understand the relationships between its various constituents, how do you perceive the book cover and the first few pages?

[4] The "Comics Code Authority (CCA)" was created in 1955 by the Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA) to censor comics when the practicing psychologist and public intellectual Fredric Wertham wrote his book *The Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954 to warn against the dangers of comics and their negative effect on children's psychology, especially comics that included images of violence, horror, and sexual activities (Hescher 10). After congressional hearings on comics, at which Whetham testified, the seal of CCA had to be placed on the top right of the cover of comic books to signify that the publishers of the work had corrected all of its errors and that it was safe for children to read it (Hescher 10).

2- Is there a relationship between the narrative and the book cover and/or the preliminary pages?

3- With the knowledge you have now about the whole narrative, which of your answers to the questions above has to change and which will stay the same?

4- How would you evaluate the way in which the creators of the comic utilized the front and back covers as well as the introductory pages that precede the narrative?

Fig. 11. An illustration of the size of traditional comic books.

Fig. 12a. A comic book cover that challenges the traditional shapes and sizes of comic books.

Fig. 12b. A comic book cover that challenges the traditional shapes and sizes of comic books.

Fig. 13. A traditional comic book cover that contains advertisements.

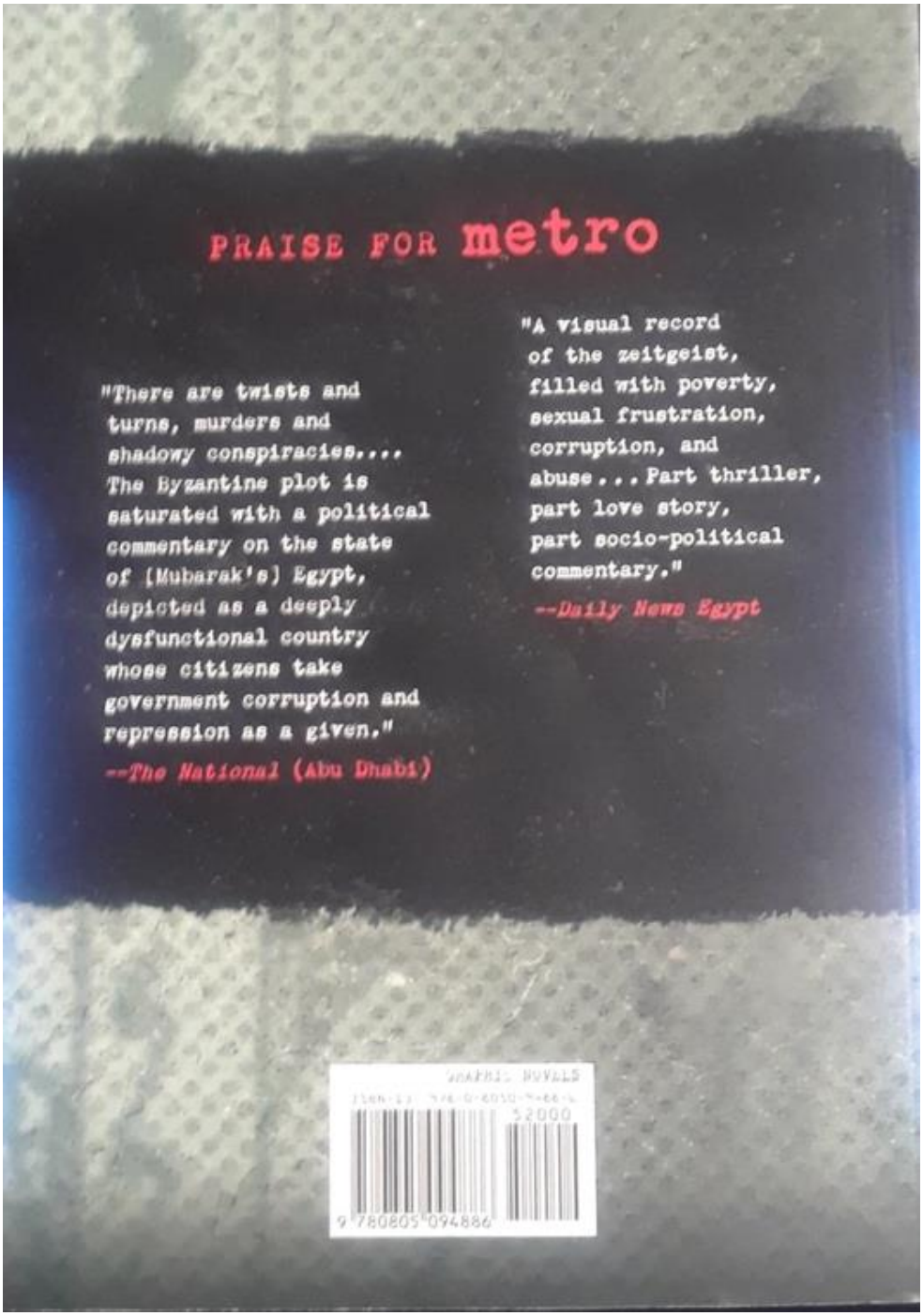


Fig. 14. A comic book whose cover includes quotations that praise the narrative.

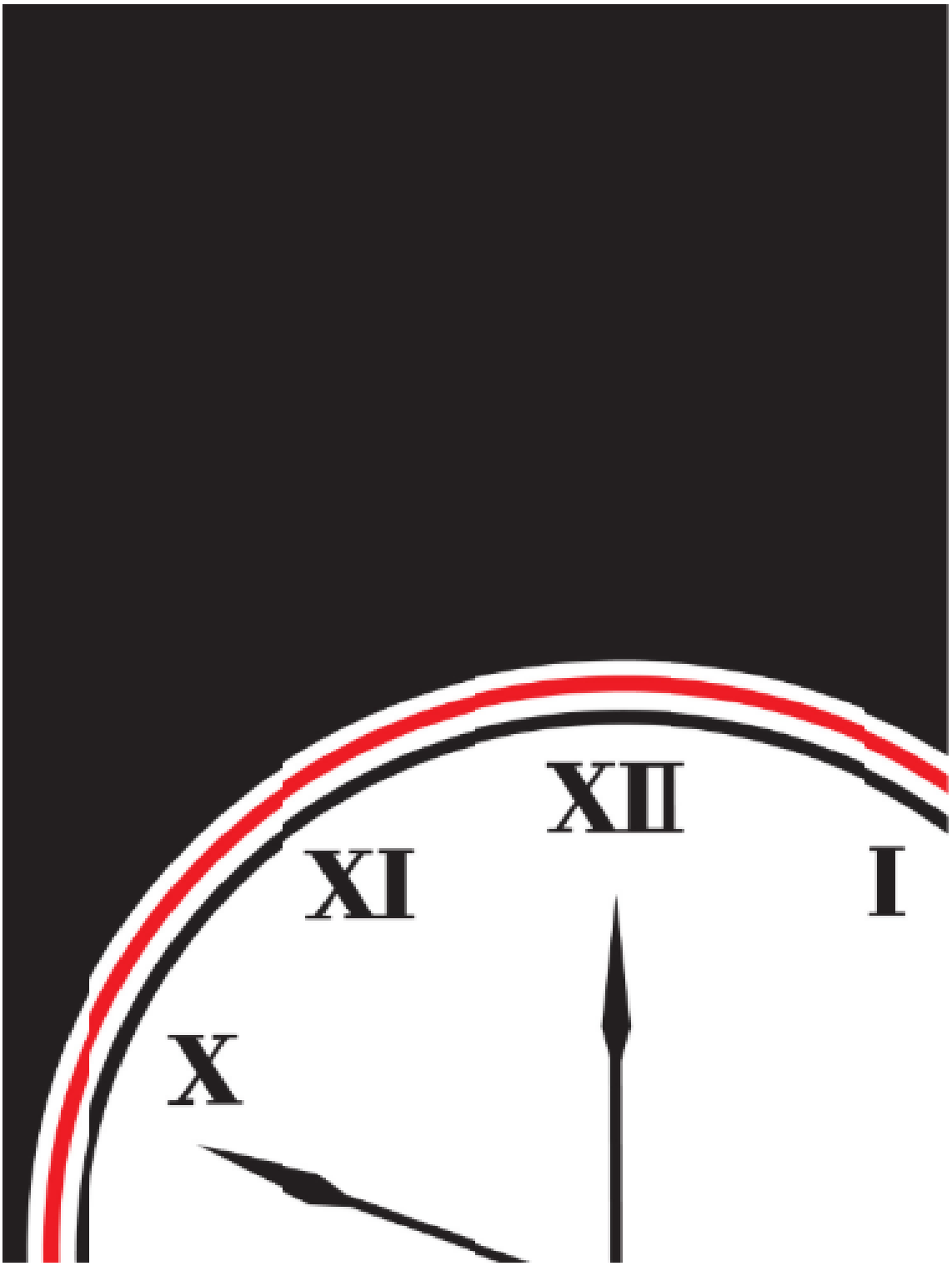


Fig. 15. Preliminary pages in comics that are connected to the content of the narrative.

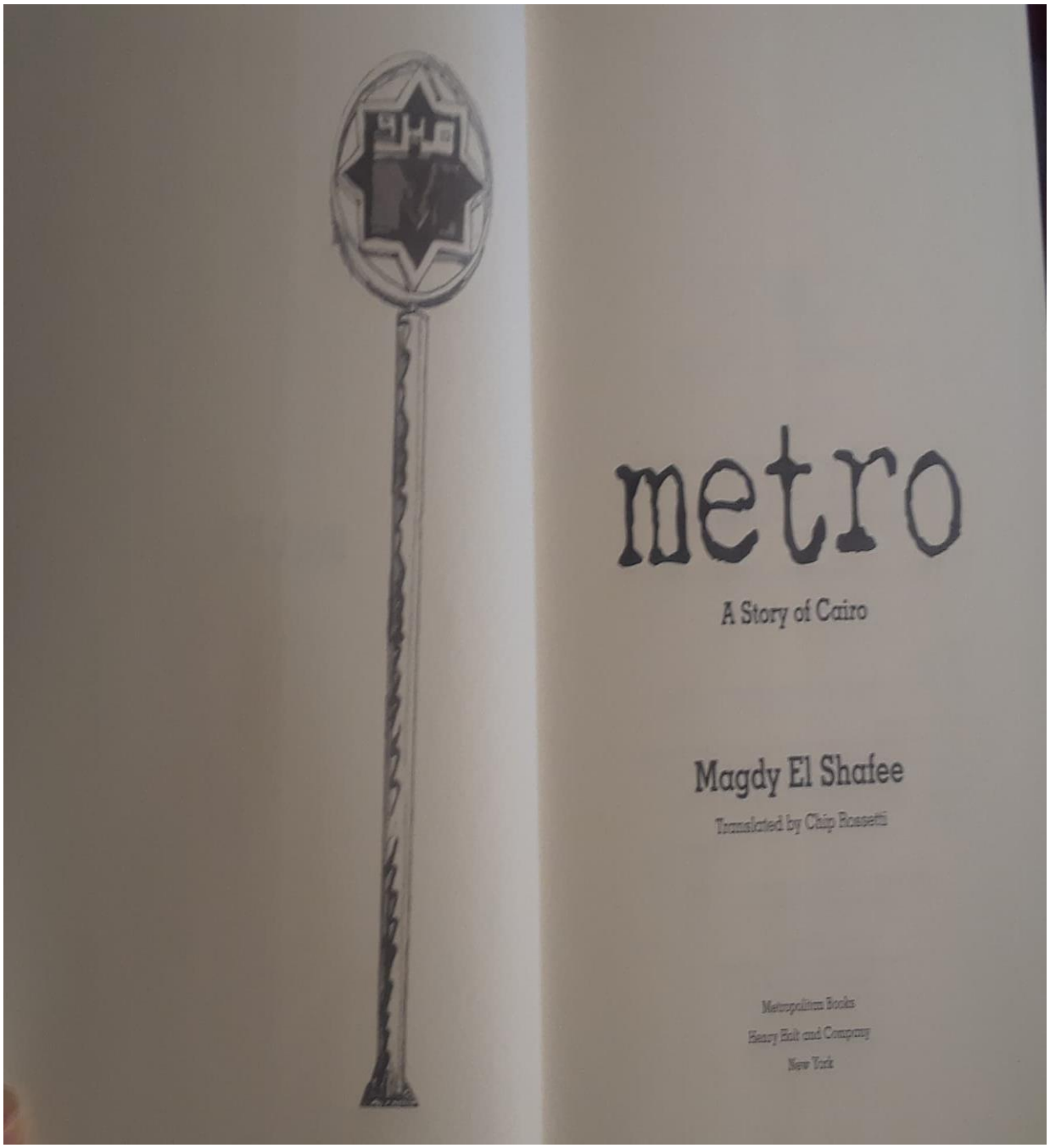


Fig. 16. Preliminary pages that include a visual content that reoccurs in the narrative.

Fig. 17. A Splash page that functions as an introduction to the narrative of the comic.

Fig. 18. The Comics Code Authority logo that can be found on the covers of censored comics.

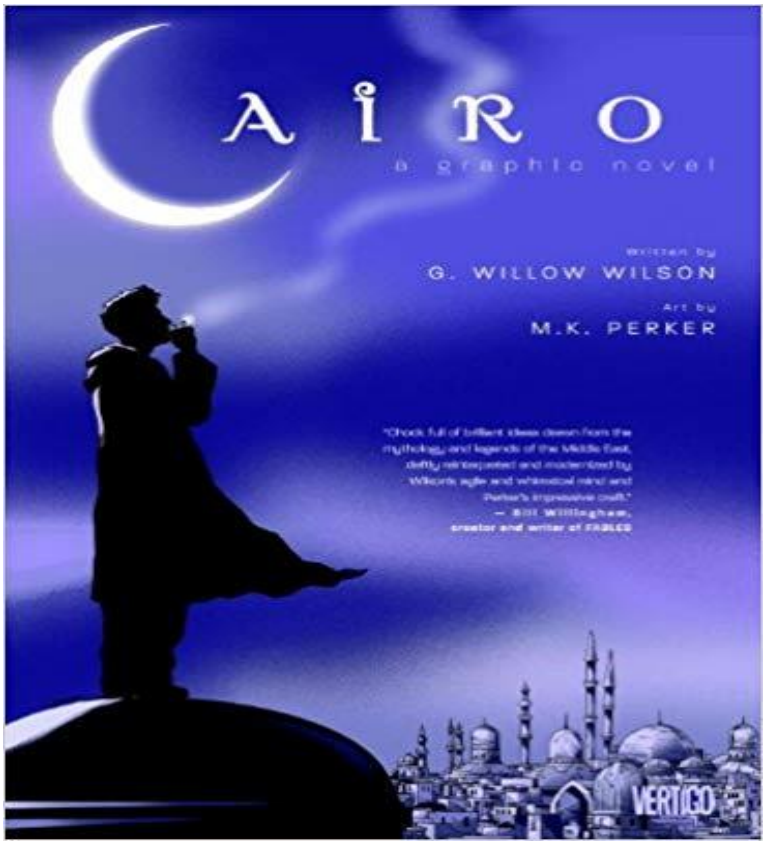


Fig. 19. A comic book whose cover has the label “graphic novel” on it.

The Context

- The meaning and significance of works of comics do not only exist within the comic book itself; they exist outside and beyond its covers. Most comics respond to specific events: political, social, cultural, economic, artistic, historical, or even medium-related issues. Thus, in order to fully understand the work you are studying, it is important to familiarize yourself with the context that prompted it. The following questions can guide you through the process of thinking about the context[5]:

1- In which historical moment was the comic you are studying created? What is/are the most significant event(s) that took place in that era?

2- How were comics viewed at the time the work you are reading was created? Were comics accepted and welcomed as a legitimate medium, or were they banned or censored?

3- What is the background of the *Creators*[6] (writers/illustrators/letterers..etc) of the work you are studying? What do you know about their nationality, language, education, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, ability or disability, and/or any other background information?

4- Do the Creators of the comic you are examining belong to a certain well-known group of comics artists and/or authors? For example, in the late 1960s, the comix[7] artists Robert Crumb, Bill Griffith, S. Clay Wilson, Gilbert Shelton, Victor Miscoso, Rick Griffin, and

[5] Once you are done reading the questions in this section, visit the rationale below them that shows why these questions are important for understanding the work of comics you are studying and how they can be helpful. The rationale section provides examples of specific comics and/or critical propositions that informed the questions.
[6] The capitalized word "Creators" will be used throughout this study to refer to the persons who collaborated to produce a work of comics in case the comic in question was not created by a single individual.
[7] Whenever the word "comics" is written as "comix", it is to refer to a type of comics that has been labeled as "underground comics". This genre of comics was created by a group of comics artists who presented a counterculture through their works that targeted adults to defy the mainstream or the traditional comics of the 1960s (which were mainly superhero comics that appeared in both Action Comics and Detective Comics magazines/comic book series) that abided by the comics code (Hescher 10). A major outstanding creator of this counterculture was Robert Crumb who created *Zap*: a comics magazine that can be considered the epitome of the underground comics of the late 1960s (Hescher 10).

Manuel "Spain" Rodriguez contributed to Crumb's comics magazine *Zap*, which is labelled today as the epitome of "underground comix" (Hescher 10). *Zap*, and its like, presented a counterculture that defied its day's mainstream comics which abided by the comics code (CCA). Thus, creators of this genre of comics that hyped in the 60s and 70s are classified today as underground artists. Many of their works, especially Crumb's, were reproached for their sexism and misogyny. Their narratives included the themes of rape, sadism, incest, and many other taboos (Hescher 10). Through researching the background of the Creators of the comic you are examining, did you find that they belong to a circle similar to Crumb's? If yes, which one and what are its characteristics?

5- What do you know about the publishing history of the book you are reading? Was it first published as a book-length comic, or as a series of shorter comic books that were compiled in one volume? Is it a compilation of newspaper comics? Is it a compilation of comics that appeared in comics magazines or anthologies earlier? Was it first published in print format or in a digital/web format?

6- If what you are studying is a long-form comic or a traditional comic book, what do you know about the history of the publisher(s) of this work? Does the publisher have a history worth finding out and accounting for in a critique like that of Vertigo Comics[8]? Is the comic you are reading published by one of today's well-known big names[9], or the mainstream publishing houses, like Marvel or DC Comics, or is it published by one of the independent and art comics publishers like Fantagraphics, Drawn & Quarterly, Top Shelf,

[8] Vertigo comics was an imprint of DC comics that was established to publish comics that have adult content and do not abide by the comics code (CCA). Unlike the main imprint of DC Comics, the narratives of Vertigo Comics were geared towards an older audience that did not need guardianship. Most of the themes delineated in Vertigo Comics' publications resembled (both verbally and visually) those found in R-rated movies. Today, Vertigo is no longer a DC imprint, and had stopped publishing comics.

[9] Look up the name of the publishing house of the comic you are reading to find this information.

or Pacific Comics? Every comics publisher has a unique story about its establishment and its primary purpose, which usually changes over time depending on the demands of the market and the context of publication, its contributors, and its titles. What is the story of the publishing house of the comic you are examining?

Rationale for "The Context" Questions[10]

1- It is important to familiarize yourself with the historical moment in which the work you are reading was published, as the meaning of the work might not be complete without the contextual narrative that surrounds it. For instance, in order to fully understand Chester Gould's newspaper comic strips, it is necessary to know that many of his cartoon characters were caricatures of famous political figures; Gould used some of his characters, especially the villains, as visual metaphors that represent people that America was preoccupied with, especially during and after World War II (Kresten 257). In "On Pink Shirts and Power Struggles", Jeff Kresten writes that Mumbles, a thief and a killer who constantly appeared in many of the *Dick Tracy* strips, is "Chet's metaphor of the Soviet Union's intelligence apparatus" (Kresten 258). In addition, Mrs. Volts, an older woman and another villain in the *Dick Tracy* strips, is "a combination of the President and First Lady [of the U.S. at the time, Harry S. Truman and Bess Wallace]" (259). Without this information, the comic strips will still be understandable, enjoyable, and interpretable; however, for conducting a thorough character analysis, knowing what they are based on is definitely helpful, especially when it comes to the visual analysis of their rendition which, in most cases, is exaggerated.

[10] Unlike the other sections, the context section is given rationale because it poses questions that require doing research and finding additional information beyond the comic you are examining. This rationale shows the significance of conducting this research and collecting contextual information. It explains how this information can influence and enrich your analysis.

Moreover, visiting the historical context helps one unravel the political stance of the Creators (or notice the absence of it, which is in and of itself an implicit political stance). Throughout the medium's history, comics, like every art form, usually responded to the events that were taking place at the time of their publication. For example, superhero comics have always been a hub or raising political questions and responding to political incidents. In the documentary *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked*, the late Stan Lee, comics writer and Chairman Emeritus of Marvel, states that his time's comics were overtly political, and that they started their own political conflicts on the comics page that the American government was not involved in, or at least not yet. He says "we were fighting Hitler before our government was fighting Hitler… we could just see what a menace Hitler was." (Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked). The documentary's narrator supports Lee's statement in saying that "although America wasn't involved in World War II in Europe, many superheroes were"[11] (Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked). The documentary also tells the story of how the creators of Superman "thought the man of steel could stop the war in 2 pages. In a special story for *Look* magazine in February 1940, Superman simply grabs Hitler and his then ally Stalin and drops them off at the League of Nations. End of story. End of War" (Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked). Without any knowledge of the events of the historical moment in which such comics were produced, interpreting them will lack insight about the characters, the setting, the events, the dialogues, and other elements created in response to a historical event.

The way comics were perceived at the time of their creation is also important for understanding numerous works. Many comics artists and authors respond to contemporary, as well as dated (yet still effective) views about comics through their

[11] See fig. 20 and fig. 21.

works. According to Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey in *The Graphic Novel: An Introduction*, "Wertham and the anti-comics crusade are a recurrent theme in modern graphic novel production" (Beatens and Frey 32). Without familiarizing oneself with the history of how the perception of comics changed over time, and without knowing what those views were when the comic in question was published, it might be hard to understand the Creator's stance, and, more importantly, it might be impossible to notice the theme of the anti-comics crusade, or others that are similar to it, without knowing how comics were perceived in comparison with other types of literature or works of art at the time the examined comics was produced.

2- Before you analyze a work, it is important to know who exactly is behind its creation. In cases in which the author and the illustrator are not the same person, this information will help in unravelling the relationship between the verbal and the visual track and in determining whether they are harmonious, or one of them is more effective or dominant than the other if it is the factor that drives the narrative. Take G. Willow Wilson's *Cairo: A Graphic Novel* and the *Ms. Marvel* comic book series as an example. These two works are constantly referred to as Wilson's works although M.K Perker (artist) collaborated with her to create *Cairo*, and the editors Sana Amanat and Stephen Wacker as well as the artists Adrian Alphona and Jamie McKelvie collaborated with her to create the 2014 *Ms. Marvel* comics series (fig. 22 and fig. 23). Another good example is Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman*. Although Gaiman, the writer, created this series in collaboration with a number of artists, including Jill Thompson, Marc Hempel, Sam Kieth, Shawn McManus, and Mike Dringenberg, *The Sandman* is never attributed to the artists; it is always referred to as Gaiman's creation. The concepts of attributing credits to the writer and the primacy of

the writer in contemporary comics has been criticized by some scholars, like Bart Beaty. He writes that his book *Comics Versus Art*, "challenges the prevailing orthodoxy in much of contemporary North American comics scholarship that suggests comics are best understood as literary and fannish phenomenon, and, further, that scholarly approaches derived from the study of literature are the most appropriate tools for analyzing comics as a medium" (location 205). Knowing such facts prompts one to approach the work with a special attention to how each contributor tells the story, and to ask the questions of why one track (either the verbal or the visual) is more compelling to readers, and how the two tracks work together to create a narrative. It is also important to think why a specific work's credits are given to the writer not the artist or vice versa, and whether the attribution in question is fair.

3- Knowing the background of the Creators may not be as important for the analysis of many types of media as it is when it comes to comics, especially because of the questions of identity and representation. The nature of the medium requires asking questions about the nationality, the gender, and even about the ability/ disability of the Creators because representation becomes a much more sensitive subject in a visual medium that relies heavily on drawings for telling stories. This information helps one see the difference between self-representation and representing "Others". In the case of the Iranian comics artist/author Marjane Satrapi, for instance, Satrapi writes her autobiographical comics in the first person and presents her personal identity through drawing herself as a kid, an adolescent, and an adult who interacts with family, friends, and teachers. By contrast, Wilson creates several male and female characters from Egypt, Lebanon, and Israel in *Cairo* and a Muslim Pakistani-American female protagonist in the *Ms. Marvel* series

although Wilson herself is a white American and the illustrators she collaborates with come from different national backgrounds that are not necessarily represented in the works (like the Turkish Perker who illustrated *Cairo* and the Canadian Alphona as well as the British Jamie McKelvie who illustrated *Ms. Marvel*). In order to delve into questions of visual and verbal representation, it is important to ask oneself which national, ethnic, or racial group the Creators belong to.

Knowing the native language of the author is also significant, especially if the comic in question is translated from its original language, like in the case of Japanese manga, for instance. This piece of information is most helpful with verbal and linguistic analysis. For example, in order to critique language in Shigeru Mizuki's *Onward Towards Our Noble Deaths*, one needs to know that the work was originally written in Japanese and then Jocelyne Allen translated it into English. Thus, before assessing language and its use in comics, it is necessary to know whether it belongs to the author or the translator, which will inevitably prompt the question "what was lost in translation?"

In some cases, bilingual and multilingual authors choose to write their comics in the language of their target audience (even if it is not their native language), the foreign language they learned through their education, or in the language they are most comfortable using. For example, Zeina Abirached, the Lebanese author whose native language is Arabic, wrote her graphic narrative *I Remember Beirut*, in which she delineates her memories of the Lebanese war, in French. Knowing Abirached's educational background and the languages she is proficient in could help one infer the reason behind her choice to write in French instead of Arabic. According to Gaelle Rolin in "Zeina Abirached, L'hirondelle de Beyrouth", Abirached studied at the Lebanese

Academy of Fine Arts (ALBA)[12], which offers its programs in French. It was there, in a research workshop at ALBA[13], where she created her first comic, *Beyrouth Catharsis (Beirut Catharsis)*, in French (Rolin). Because the language of instruction in ALBA in some classes is English and in others is French, "students are expected to have proficiency in both languages" (alba.edu). Thus, the context and the target audience in this case necessitated using French for creating her first comic. In 2003, Abirached travelled to Paris for studying at the National School of Decorative Arts[14] (Rolin). During a Q&A session at the New York Comics and Picture-Story Simposium in September 2013, one audience member asked Abriached "what the reception of her book was like in Lebanon" (therumpus.net). In response, "[s]he pointed out that there is no Arabic translation of her books, and that ties into why she left to write in France where there are actually publishers for graphic novels. The reception, however, has been very positive, despite the fact that comics are not commonly seen as a medium for serious subjects" (therumpus.net).

This information reveals three important things: 1) Abirached's primary target audience was not the Lebanese; it was the French who appreciate comics, 2) Abirached had to write in French for French speaking audiences because comics are not taken seriously in Lebanon, and there are no publishers who are primarily interested in comics, 3) Abirached's comics were never translated into her native language, yet those who understood English and French admired them. Having this information in mind while examining Abirached's work (see fig. 24 from *I Remember Beirut*), one will understand

[12] I translated the title from French to English. The original title is Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts.
[13] The original title of the research workshop in French is Atelier de Recherche ALBA.
[14] I translated the title of the school from French to English. The original title is L'École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs.

why the narration in the captions is in French (or in English in the translated versions of her comic) while the words she uses in speech bubbles with visuals that are extracted from her memories in Lebanon are in Arabic, which distinguishes rewriting memory through narrative captions, and concretizing memory through visuals that include words. She writes the narrative in French for her immediate target audience, while she leaves the language of her memories intact. Understanding this relationship between languages in her comics might not be quite possible without knowing enough information about the languages in which Abirached is fluent.

Knowing the gender of the Creators and getting information about their sexual identity as well as their views on matters that are related to the body can be helpful for understanding several comics narratives and for inferring Creators' stances on the subjects of gender roles and sexual orientation through what is relayed to readers through the word-image interaction on the comics page. In the process of examining autobiographical comics, this information helps one answer the question of how Creators represent their genders and their sexual identities versus those of others both visually, in their delineation of bodies, and verbally. This question helps in critiquing the work of Alison Bechdel, for instance, whose graphic memoir *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* explores the themes of gender and sexuality through Bechdel's graphic recollection of her complex relationship with her father, a closeted homosexual, and of her own sexual development in the process of realizing her sexual identity as a lesbian. In Bechdel's case, because hers is a memoir that focuses primarily on the struggle of exploring sexual identities, the comic itself provides readers with the creator's stance on sexuality. Nonetheless, getting more contextual information in addition to what is relayed on paper

leads to a more detailed picture, which makes one's critique more comprehensive. In a video interview with the Institute for Women's Leadership at Rutgers University, Bechdel reveals the following about the way media in the 60's portrayed females versus her own perception of women (which she presents in drawing):

> I grew up in the 60s, in the early 60s. I started noticing this incredibly sexist world where women were Beaver Cleaver's mother. She was an idiot, or on Thorazine, or both! It just was not something I related to at all. And again, in the children's book illustrations and comics I was seeing as a kid, the female characters were always somehow not generic. They weren't regular. They were always female people as opposed to people… People were always boys or men in my sketchbooks… There is some way that I just couldn't draw women with the ease I could draw men and so I started examining that, like, "is this my internalized misogyny?" My first women looked a lot like men, but I got better at it. The trick was, I finally realized I could draw a woman if I thought of her as a lesbian. Now I can draw; I don't need to do that. But somehow it was a necessary connection that I needed to make at that time, and then I just couldn't stop drawing lesbians. I drew lesbians forever after. (IWL Rutgers, 0:50 – 2:53)

Moreover, according to Hillary Chute in *Graphic Women*, Bechdel took pictures of herself in different poses for using them as references for drawing herself (as well as other family members and characters in *Fun Home*). Chute writes "Bechdel...created a reference shot by posing herself for each person in the frame with her digital camera ... In cases where she already had a photographic reference shot from her parents' collection, she yet posed herself in a new photo" (200). Those three pieces of information, about

Bechdel's rejection of the stereotypical image of the female body, the development of her artistic representation of bodies, and her use of pictures of her own body as a reference for drawing *all* of her characters in *Fun Home* lead one to an analysis that pays extra attention to the representation of the body, and that ponders the relationship between the context of the comic and the content (both the visual and the verbal). The result will be an analysis that is steeped in a content-context comparison; it will create a network that links the narrative outside the comic to the narrative on the page, given that the contextual information is available to the researcher.[15]

Another example of self-representational works whose critique would be richer if one researched contextual information about their Creators' genders and their stances on the themes of gender and sexuality are the comics of Aline Kominsky-Crumb. Most of Kominsky-Crumb's work, when considered out of context, appears disgusting, grotesque, crude, demeaning, and even offensive to many readers (see fig. 25 from "Bunch Plays with Herself" and fig. 26 from "Of What Use is a Bunch"). It was definitely shocking to readers of mainstream comics in the early 70s, and can still be shocking to readers today, to see a picture of a woman on the comics page "popping a pimple, scratching her behind and smelling her finger … [and] masturbating" (Chute "The Comics of Aline-Kominsky Crumb") with vegetables, or having sexual affairs with different men. Even the boldest female underground comix artists of Kominsky-Crumb's era did not approve of her work, and many of them did not want to accept it as part of their women's comics magazine called *Wimmen's Comix*, and they criticized it harshly. In an interview with Peter Bagge, Kominsky-Crumb was asked about other women's reactions to her first comic strip that

[15] This type of information can be found on plenty of platforms online in different types of media (videos, newspaper articles, journal articles.. etc). Interviews with Creators, if found, are usually the most helpful. Thanks to youtube.com, there are plenty of video interviews with pioneer Creators that can be easily accessed online today.

got published, "Goldie: A Neurotic Woman," widely regarded as the first women's autobiographical comics story. Bagge asked "[t]his first story that you had in print — this "Goldie" story — seems like it's a little capsule of everything that you're going to deal with in your comics from then on. Did the other women recognize and appreciate the blatant honesty that you showed in this strip? Kominsky-Crumb's answer was "[n]o. Right from the beginning I got a lot of flak from everyone for being so primitive and self-deprecating. Women like Trina[16] were influenced by traditional comics. They had images of women being glamorous and heroic. I didn't have that background." In another interview with John Heneghan[17], Kominsky-Crumb says the following:

> we were like the bad girls of the group and we broke away from the group because we like boys and we like sex and the other women thought we were…not feminist because we like to be sexy and we like to have boyfriends and flaunt it… nevertheless, this created a big kind of schism in the original group… I felt like some of these militant feminists were humor impaired, so I decided that, and Diane[18] and I decided that, you know, we had more in common, we were gonna do the bad girl book which was *Twisted Sisters*… and I do think that, in the long run [*Twisted Sisters*] holds up better than the *Women's Comix* I have to say.

This information helps one see a justification of the exaggeration and the extremism of Kominsky-Crumb's work. It helps one understand how Kominsky-Crumb aimed at presenting her own views and her own truth in all honesty without omitting anything in order to adhere to the social role constructed for women at the time, nor to the definitions of feminism that do not

[16] She refers here to Trina Robbins who was in charge of *Wimmin's Comix in* 1971, which was a comics magazine exclusively for women aritsts and whose main subject were women related issues.
[17] This interview can be found on youtube.com at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jMiMapUxGiI&t=719s
[18] Kominsky-Crumb refers here to Diane Noomin, another female comics artist associated with the underground comix movement.

fit her. Learning her stance on the issues of femininity and sexuality can be quite helpful for understanding and interpreting her "disgusting" or "demeaning" art in ways that go beyond knee-jerk revulsion or dismissal.

The representation of gender becomes even more sensitive when a member of one sex delineates another in a way that could be seen as sexist, which is the case with Kominsky-Crumb's husband, Robert Crumb, who "was often reproached for his own material being sexist and misogynist" (Hescher 10). In a 1988 interview[19], Crumb explains that, because of the availability of drugs in the late 1960s and early 1970s, most of his comics, and his generations' comics, were inspired by LSD, which explains their extremism. He also said that at the time, he took part in the sexual revolution; he believed in sexual liberation, and shared the same collective mindset and of the rebellious youth movement, so his comics reflect the era. He said that at the time, artists believed they were free to draw what they wanted, since their work was never going to be censored as it was not meant to be published by mainstream publishing houses; they were secretly distributed and sold, which gave artists freedom to explore anything and everything, especially their sexual desires. Again, learning about the context of the creation of Crumb's comics and their like, that can be viewed as misogynistic, helps interpreters understand how these comics respond to and reflect social and political change, and gain insight on the roles played by comics Creators at that historical moment.

Race, ethnicity, and physical and/or mental disability are already quite sensitive topics in literature. In comics, visually presenting these topics can be much more sensitive, whether the work is a self-representation of the Creator or a representation of others. Because of the immediacy of their reception and perception, images can be very offensive if the viewer thinks

[19] This interview can be found on youtube.com at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CwFzJlIBaSg&feature=share

they misrepresent a certain group. However, delving into the background of the Creators, and researching information about how they view themselves as opposed to others, can makes one's reading of their cartoon representations more situated.

4- There are several comics artists who create non-conventional works that challenge the traditional rendition and composition. Their comics present avant-garde and postmodernist narratives that deconstruct expected forms and storylines. Familiarizing oneself with them and with the characteristics of their work can help one understand their comics better. For example, knowing that Chris Ware is an experimental comics artist, his non-conventional rendition of the comics page in *Jimmy Corrigan* will make more sense. The comic will be scrutinized with the awareness that it is not meant to be an easy read, and that it intentionally breaks the rules of the medium, which prompts one to try to unravel its critical message.

5- Knowing the history of publication of the comic one is examining (whether it was serialized then compiled in one volume, was first published as a comic book, or was first published daily or weekly in newspapers) matters as it gives one an idea about the kind of audience it was catering to as well as the expectations of that category of readers. Moreover, it can explain why there are gaps in some of the narratives that were originally serialized in comics magazines then were compiled in a single volume.

6- Getting information about the history of the publishing house matters because it helps one understand how certain stories and characters *had to* change or develop in ways that catered to audience's expectations and/or market requirements. For example, when the comics code authority (CCA) was formed in the 1950s, most comics publishers had to abide by it and to tweak their stories to fit its regulations. Later, publishers like Marvel

abandoned the code, while others ignored it. The difference between the comics that were published in the code era and the ones that appeared after its abandonment will be clearer if one knows this historical background.

Fig. 20. An example that shows how superhero comics were interested in politics during and after WWII.

Fig. 21. This example shows how superhero comics went to war before America did in the 1940's.

Fig. 22. An excerpt from G. Willow Wilson's comic *Cairo: A Graphic Novel* that prompts the question of who the story belongs to (the writer, the illustrator, or other contributors), and who deserves the cover credit.

Fig. 23. A page from G. Willow Wilson's comic book series *Ms. Marvel* that urges the question of who the story belongs to, and who deserves the cover credit.

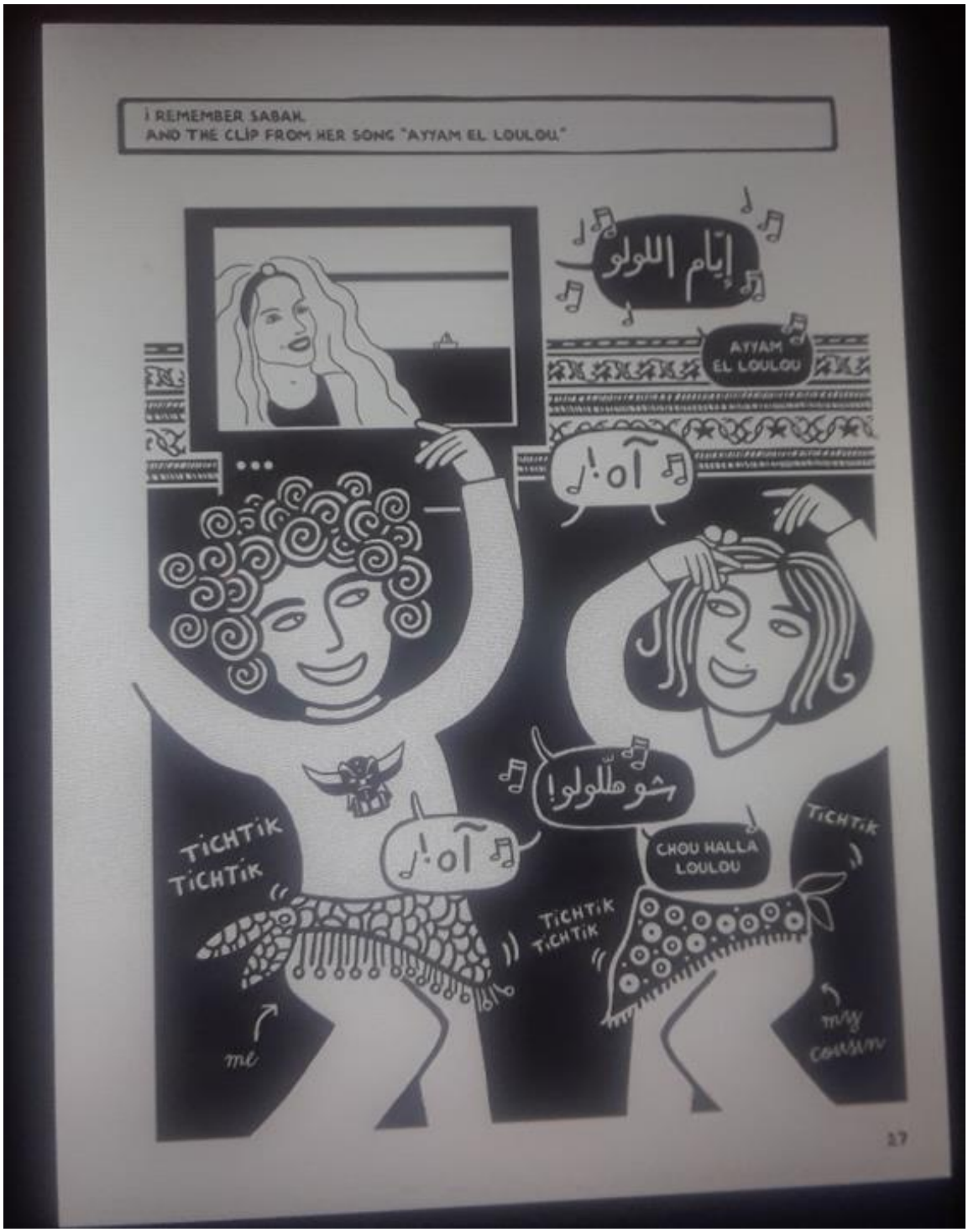


Fig. 24. Zeina Abirached uses Arabic words in this excerpt from *I Remember Beirut* as her native language is part and parcel of her memories.

Fig. 25. An example of Aline Kominsky-Crumb's comix that, if seen out of context, appear disgusting, grotesque, crude, demeaning, and even offensive to many readers.

Fig. 26. Aline Kominsky-Crumb shares the most intimate details about her sexual drives with her readers, which is a common theme in many underground comix.

The Content

Page & Panel Layout

Before answering the questions in this section, there are some key terms in comics that you need to be familiar with as they refer to a group of integral elements that constitute the comics page:

A) The panel: the "frame," the "box," or "the lines drawn around the depiction of a scene, which act as a containment of the action, or a segment of action". Panels have "as one of their functions the task of separating or parsing the total statement" of a narrative (Eisner 26). It is the frame "within which the narrative action unfolds" (Eisner 41).

B) The page, also referred to as "the total page (or screen, in digital comics)" is the frame "on which there are any number of panels" (Eisner 41).

C) The gutter: the space between panels (McCloud 66)

1- *Layout:* if the work you are examining is either a book length comic or a traditional comic book, examine the first few pages (5-10 pages). How would you describe the page layout of the pages you examined?

- According to Neil Cohn, "[c]onventional wisdom would expect that comic panels follow the order of text: left-to-right[20] and down – a 'Z-path'"(Neil Cohn "Navigating Comics"). Does the comic you are examining allow you to smoothly follow this reading path? Does it have a grid layout (see fig. 27- A)?
- Cohn also states that "several layouts can violate this order" and can "pressure readers to choose pathways deviating from the Z-path". Does this description apply to any pages of the work you are examining? Do they "depart from the stereotypical grid layout"? Which of the layouts in fig. 27 (in which Cohn

[20] This depends on the language of the comic you are reading. If it is in a language that reads right-to-left (like Japanese or Arabic, for instance), you will definitely be prompted to read in the opposite direction.

compiles different examples of manipulations of comic page layouts) do you see in the first few pages of the comic you are reading: (A- “canonical grid layout stereotypically read in a “Z-path”, B- “layout where a horizontal panel “blocks” the creation of a row of panels”, C- “layout where panels are separated by a wide space”, D- “layout where panels overlap each other”, or E- “layout where panels are staggered to no longer retain a contiguous gutter”(in other words, panel sizes are altered “so that their borders do not line up cleanly to create a smooth row or column”)? Does the comic you are reading include “insets” (see fig. 28)? “Inset panels feature one “enclosed” panel embedded within another “dominant” panel” (Cohn “Navigating Comics”).

- In addition to the layouts that Cohn groups in fig. 27, Chris Gavaler presents more variations of layouts in “Analyzing Comics 101 (Layout)”. The types Gavaler presents are: “diagonal layouts” where “panels do not follow vertical or horizontal divisions, and so are neither clearly rows nor columns” (see fig. 29), pages that contain “caption panel[s]”, which are panels that contain words only and “tend to be smaller, subdivided panels” (see fig. 30), pages with “broken frames”, in which “image elements of one panel extend beyond its frame into the gutter and/or into the frame of an adjacent panel” (see fig. 31 and fig. 32). He also shows examples of the following: a “full-page panel”, which is a “page panel with no insets and a single unified image” (see fig. 33), a “splash page”, which is a “full-page panel with author credits” (go back to fig. 17), a “two-page panel” where “two facing pages” are “designed to be read as a unit” (see fig. 34), and a “two-page spread”, which “are two facing pages” that are “not designed as

a unit." (see fig. 35) (Gavaler Analyzing Comics).[21]Did you notice that a specific layout is more dominant or is more frequently recurrent than others in the work you are examining? Did you notice a recurrent pattern in the layout structure? Gavaler states that some comics have a definite "base layout pattern," which is "a panel arrangement repeated on multiple pages". This base layout pattern can be either "strict": where "repetitions from page to page contain no variations in a base pattern, or "flexible": where there are "some variations in base pattern". Some comics lack this definite base layout pattern; Gavaler calls this type "irregular" (Gavaler). To which of these classifications does the work you are examining belong?

- International comics from different parts of the world (non-English language or non-European comics) could have a different set of layouts that serve their specific narrative or that are based on their culture's reading style. If the comic you are reading is not a Western comic, does it have a different set of page layouts? How different/similar are they to those of Western comics that are listed here?

2- *Entry Point*: If the comic you are reading is in print format[22], go to the very first page and answer the following question: where is the starting panel, or your entry point? Cohn states that "[b]efore actually navigating through various panels, readers must

[21] These are Chris Gavaler's classifications of page layouts in "Analyzing Comics 101 (Layout)" on The Hooded Utilitarian: A Pundit in Every Panopticon online blog. All of the images that are used here to illustrate the layouts that Gavaler classifies are also taken from Gavaler's "Analyzing Comics 101 (Layout)"; they are the same images Gavaler uses to illustrate his page layout categories.

[22] The case with paper/print comics is different from "a scenario when the first panel is overtly provided, such as in digital comics that force the reading to begin at a particular panel" (Cohn Navigating Comics).

find a starting panel" as "navigating page layouts also involves where people prefer to begin reading a page" (Cohn).

- What are the characteristics of the panel/spot that you identify as the starting point? What are the factors/elements that led you to identifying it as such?
- Does the structure of the page layout make it hard for you to find/identify the entry point? How so?

  If this is the case, Cohn suggests the following strategy for determining the entry point:

  - "[*G*]*o to the top left corner*."
  - *"*[*I*]*f no top left panel, go to either the (1) highest and/or (2) leftmost panel*."
  - "Note, cultural experience may alter the direction of this [rule] as indicated by right-to-left preferences from readers of Japanese manga" (Cohn). Thus, if the work you are examining reads from right-to-left, or comes from a culture that reads in that direction, *go to the top right corner* or *to the rightmost panel*.
- Do you find this strategy helpful for determining the entry point? If not, find the starting point that you prefer and provide an elaborate rationale for choosing it over others. According to Cohn, determining entry points depends on the particular characteristics of the comics one is examining (Cohn).

3- *Layout and Navigation*:

Once you determine the entry point, attempt using each of the following navigational choices and paths, that Cohn suggests in "Navigating Comics," for reading the first

page (or the first few pages if you are reading a long form work) of the comic you are examining:

- Cohn suggests following the outer-most borders of the panel that you mark as your entry point and the adjacent panels surrounding it (see fig. 36). Does this navigational choice apply to the comic you are reading and proves to be the correct reading path? If not, try the next one.
- If following the outer-most borders does not work, or if "all the available paths have contiguous outer borders," follow the inner-most borders of the entry panel and its immediately neighboring panels (See fig. 36).
- Note: Cohn points out that "border" in this case is not necessarily an actual visible border drawn on the page: it can be an abstract or an imaginary border as some artists draw borderless panels (Cohn). Are the panels in the comic you are reading borderless? If yes, can you assume that there are borders and follow either the inner-most or the outer-most boarders?
- If following the borders does not help, Cohn suggests that you move rightward (move to the right). Does this help?
- If there is no rightward path, move straight down (Cohn "Navigating Comics).
- Sometimes there will be no panels to the right (like at the end of a row of panels, which "forces the reader to move to the next tier[23] down" (Cohn). In that case, "follow the diagonal motion inherent in the Z-path" (Cohn). Nevertheless, "this rule comes into direct conflict with the previous rule as a separate type of downward movement. In those cases, the local context decides which rule wins out" (Cohn). In the comic you are reading, which rule wins?

[23] Some comics critics and scholars use the word "tier" for referring to a row.

- If none of the navigation choices above works, Cohn suggests that you "go to the panel that has not been read yet," especially in cases where "panels are randomly scattered and "floating" on a page" (Cohn "Navigating Comics"). Does this help you find order in the comic you are reading?
- Which path(s) did you find helpful for navigating the comic you are reading? Does the comic force you to follow a different path other than the ones Cohn suggests?
- Does the comic use vectors or arrows to show you the path that the Creators planned for you?
- When readers view comics on a screen, like in the case of webcomics or digital comics, sometimes the borders between pages and panels merge, and scrolling up and down instead of turning pages and going back and forth through them flouts most of the reading paths that readers know through exposure to print comics. If you are reading a digital comic, how do these factors affect your reading process? Does technology make the reading process easier or more complicated? Do conventional reading strategies apply to webcomics and e-reader comics?

4- *Panel Layout and Foci*:

In "Japanese Visual Language: The Structure of Manga", Neil Cohn categorizes panels into varying types based on how much information they contain (Cohn 13). Through this classification, he shows how "panels can serve to 'window the attention' of a reader (see fig. 37) onto different parts of a narrative representation (Cohn 13). Those panel categories are:

- Macros: panels that focus on multiple characters or show a complete scene.

- Monos: panels that contain individual characters or individual entities.
- Micros: panels that contain only a part of a character or an entity "such as in a close-up of a character where only part of the person is shown at a time" (Cohn).
- Polymorphic: panels that "depict whole actions through the repetition of individual characters of various points in that event" (see fig. 37).

Cohn noticed through a statistical study he conducted that American comics use *Macros* more often than other panel categories, while in Japanese manga, *Monos* and *Micros* are more dominant (Cohn 15). In the comic you are reading, which category of panels is used more often? If the work you are examining is an American comic or a Japanese manga, does it showcase Cohn's findings, or does it differ in its panel usage and in its foci? If it is neither American nor Japanese, how are the layouts in the comic you are examining different from/ similar to American or Japanese ones?

- Once you are done reading the comic you are studying, and after answering the rest of the questions that the interrogative mode presents in the following sections, come back to this section on page and panel layout. At that point in your study, the following questions will be helpful:

1- In "Four Conceptions of the Page," Benoît Peeters distinguishes four general modes of page and panel utilization (see fig. 38). Those four modes of utilization are:

- Conventional utilization: when comics Creators use the regular page layout, which is known as the "grid layout" (see fig. 27-A). According to Peeters, this layout "is what André Franquin has aptly named 'the waffle iron.'" In the case of conventional utilization, "the page is divided into a certain number of lines of the same height (often four), themselves divided into a certain number of panels (from two to five). The overall

arrangement of the page thus creates the conditions for a regular reading (from left to right and from top to bottom)" (Peeters Four Conceptions), and Creators use this layout as a "mold", or as a functionless container, in which they fit their narratives. With this category of utilization, the plot and the page layout *do not necessarily* work hand in hand to create a narrative; in most cases, they function separately, and the narrative relies more on the content of panels rather than on the format of the page, but there are some outstanding exceptions to this convention.[24]

- Decorative utilization: when "the page is considered an independent unit, whose aesthetic organization trumps any other concern", and where the layout is just "a decorative supplement almost independent of the narration" (Peeters). Like conventional utilization, in decorative utilization the layout and the narrative seem to be two separate entities. In the example below (see fig. 39) from Burne Hogarth's *Jungle Tales of Tarzan*, the liana vines that embrace Tarzan "seem to be… a means of making links... between the panels – running across the double page, their lines describe a vast circular motion – but this functions especially as a decorative supplement almost independent of the narration" (Peeters).

- Rhetorical utilization: when "the panel and the page are [not] autonomous elements; they are subordinated to a narrative which their primary function is to serve. The size of the images, their distribution, the general pace of the page, all must come to support the narration" (Peeters). A comic features rhetorical utilization when "the whole page layout is placed at the service of a pre-existing narrative for which it serves to accentuate the

[24] Some comics Creators, like Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons in *Watchmen*, use the "waffle iron" to rebel against comics convention. Instead of changing the traditional layout, they use it to serve their intentions of creating an unconventional work whose unity resides in a network of relationships between panels. As Peeters phrases it, "[o]ne of the strengths of *Watchmen* is to have accepted a traditional framework of pacing by exploding it from within: to the current rules of the comic book, Moore and Gibbons added their own requirements." (Peeters Four Conceptions)

effects" (Peeters). The example below from Hergé's *The Castafiore Emerald* (see fig. 40) is a good example of rhetorical utilization as it shows how Nestor's actions affect the sizes of the panels. The first one is the smallest as it contains normal action; "it supports, through its clear verticality, the body of Nestor descending the staircase" (Peeters). In the second image, the panel widens to match the narration; it is enlarged to contain the new action as Nestor slopes and almost falls. As for the third panel, it is "perfectly square (59 X 59 mm), the horizontal distance separating the servant's left foot from his right hand being about equal to that which, vertically, separates his right foot from his left hand" (Peeters). In this example, narration controls the sizes and the shapes of the panels, and the layout of the entire page serves the narrative. Instead of being boxes of equal size that contain the narrative, they have a rhetorical function; they support the narration.

- Productive utilization: when "the organization of the page seems to dictate the narrative [and when a] particular arrangement generates a piece of narration" (Peeters). In productive utilization, "a characteristic page layout gives rise to a fragment of a narrative which is thus nothing but its consequence" and in that case "narration yields to the dimensions of the page" (Peeters). Unlike the rhetorical utilization where the layout succumbs to the narration (like in the example of Nestor's fall), in the case of productive utilization, the layout affects the images and the actions they contain , as if the layout is given primacy over the narrative. The example that Peeters gives to illustrate this utilization is from Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (the page of February 2, 1908). As shown below (see fig. 41) "it is in order to match the construction of the page that the characters grow and shrink; much more than by deforming mirrors, their own morphology is dominated by the format of the boxes in which they fit. Whereas with

Hergé, one had seen the panels adapting to the dimensions of the characters, here it is the heroes who are made elastic by the apparatus of the page" (Peeters). In other words, the construction of the page comes first, and the characters' bodies succumb to it by changing their sizes and their heights in order to fit in the box, which is the complete opposite of the case of rhetorical utilization where the borders widen or shrink depending on the sizes and shapes of the entities within them or of the action that occurs. In productive utilization, the contents of panels, which make up the narrative, submit to the panel layout and adapt to it.

- In the comic you are studying, what is the relationship between the page layout/ panel layout and the narrative? Did you find page/panel layouts that fit into Peeters's categories: conventional, decorative, rhetorical, or productive utilization? Do the page/ panel layouts have a vital role in constructing the narrative? Are they catalysts? Or are they mere containers that do not have a significant function in narration?

2- As mentioned above, in most cases, "panels can serve to "window the attention" of a reader onto different parts of a narrative representation" (Cohn). In the comic you are studying, do panels, their layouts, and the shifts in their foci, construct the narrative? What role do they play, if any, in revealing the plot or narrative? How can you describe their narrative effectiveness? How can you describe the relationship between panel layouts/ panel foci and narration?

In her article "The Shadow of a Past Time: History and Graphic Representation in *Maus*, Hillary Chute gives an example of how Creators like Spiegelman (in *Maus*, a graphic memoir that features Spiegelman's interview with his father, Vladek, who recounts his experience in Auschwitz during the Holocaust) interweave panel layouts with their plot

so that the two elements can work hand in hand to create a harmonious narrative. Chute writes that in the excerpt below from “The Sheik” in chapter 1 of *Maus I* (fig. 42),

> while the horizontally elongated panel implies a stillness–its page-spanning width eliminates any gutter, where the movement of time in comics happens–it yet registers Vladek’s first moments of dipping into the past. While Vladek verbally refuses to offer "such stories," the panel below, an iris diaphragm depicting his dapper young self … in the early 1930s, pushes up into the rectangular panel of the present, its curve hitting the handlebars of Vladek's Exercycle between his grasping hands… This protruding circular frame can be figured as the wheel to Vladek's Exercycle. Spiegelman points out, “You enter into the past for the first time through that wheel” (Complete *Maus*)

Spiegelman’s panel layout in this case is a rhetorical utilization as the iris panel, which aims at connecting the present moment to the past, which is an essential feature of the memoir, “is placed at the service of a pre-existing narrative for which it serves to accentuate the effects” (Cohn). Do you see similar utilizations of panel layout in the comic you are examining?

It is important to question the relationship between page and panel layouts and their utilization because, as Peeters justifies it, when examining layouts “[i]t is not thus a question of wondering whether a page layout is extravagant or banal, it is a question of examining the way in which a work benefits from the apparatus that it sets up” (Peeters). This means that it is important to find out the role that layouts play in the work you are studying. Some of them do not play a significant role other than being containers, but

many others, as Peeters shows, affect the narrative. Thus, analyzing the role of layouts is an integral part of your critique.

3- According to Will Eisner in *Comics and Sequential Art*, "[t]he shape of the panel and the use of perspective within it can be manipulated to produce various emotional states in the viewer" (92). For example, "[l]ooking at a scene from above it, the viewer has a sense of detachment– he is an observer rather than a participant" (92). Furthermore, "when the reader views a scene from below it, then his position evokes a sense of smallness, which simulates a sensation of fear" (92), and "[a] narrow panel evokes the feeling of being hemmed in– confinement; whereas a wide panel suggests plenty of space in which to move– or escape" (92). Does the comic you are examining prove the truth of this claim, or refute it?

4- Cohn, Gavaler, and Peeters classify page and panel layouts into groups that have definite characteristics. Although those listed page and panel layouts are considered non-conventional basically because they violate familiar reading paths and because they have numerous functions other than being mere containers of content, the classifications above have gradually become conventionalized over time. This is mainly because of the frequency of their usage, and because comics artists throughout history have always copied each other and used familiar or predicted sets of stock page/panel formats in order to meet audiences' expectations. Some Creators though, like Chris Ware for instance, break away from familiar page layout categories (see fig. 43-A, 43-B, and 43-C from *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*) and they consistently experiment with the medium for different reasons: for example, to unravel the medium's capabilities, to exhibit their skills as Creators, or to construct exclusive frames that serve more avant-

garde narratives. If the comic you are reading is similar to Ware's in its unconventionality, how do the layouts of the pages and the panels differ from conventionalized formats? What is the narrative effectiveness of those layouts? Through examining the relationships among the narrative you are studying, its structure, and the page and panel layouts, is there evidence that the Creators criticize the medium and its conventions either implicitly or explicitly?

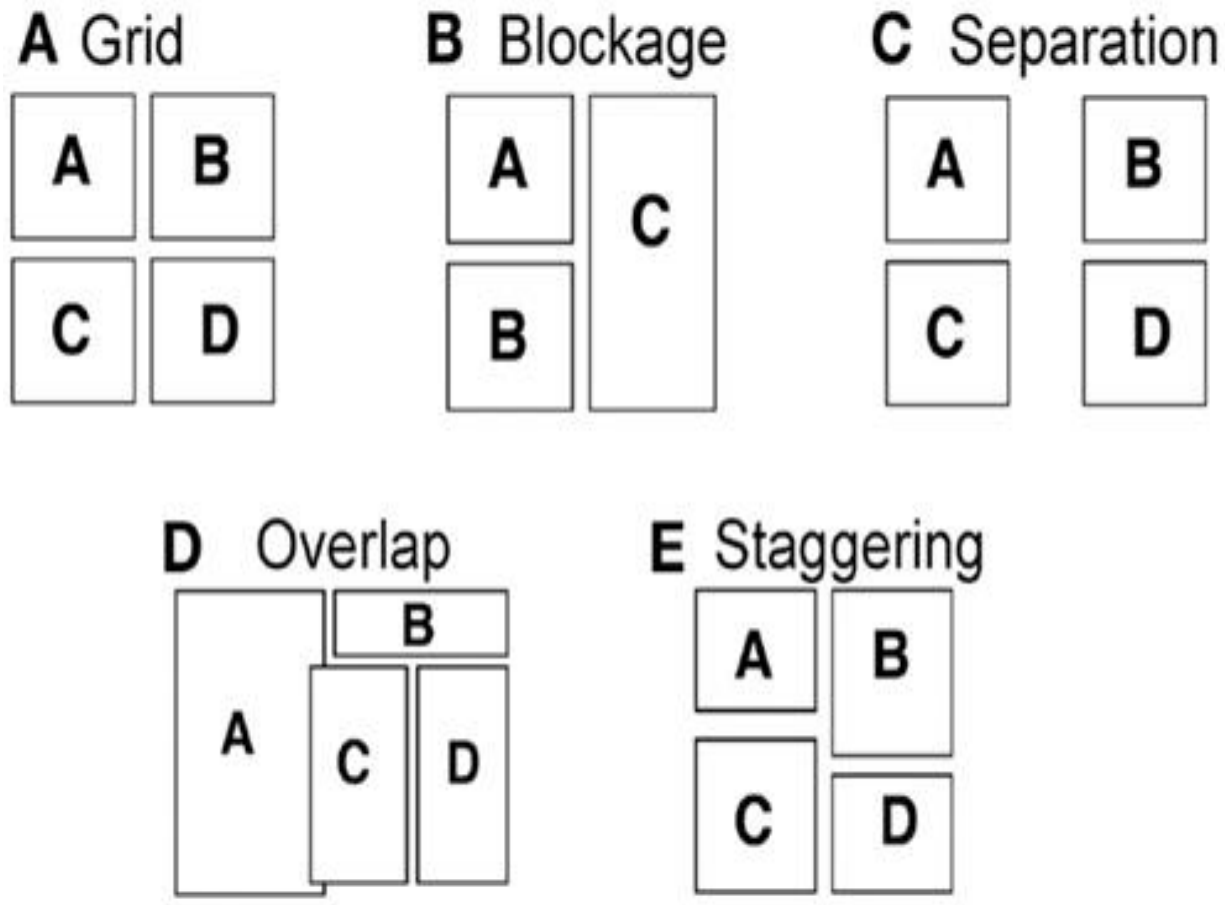


Fig. 27. Neil Cohn's compilation of different manipulations of comic page layouts.

Fig. 28. An example of insets, which features an enclosed panel embedded within another dominant panel

Fig. 29. A diagonal layout, where the panels are neither vertical nor horizontal.

Fig. 30. A comic book page that contains caption panels, which are panels that only contain words.

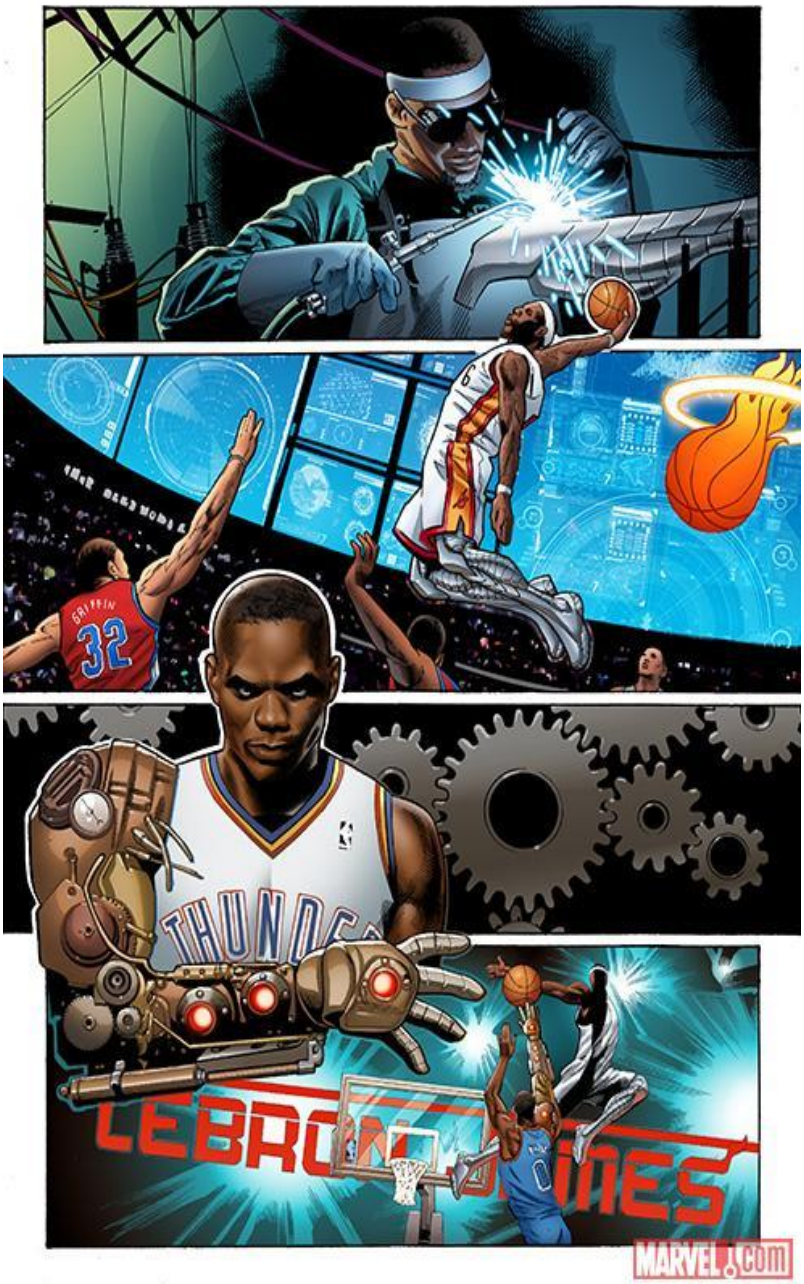


Fig. 31. A comic book page that presents a broken frame, in which the elements of a panel break its border(s) into the gutter or an adjacent frame.

Fig. 32. A comic book page that presents a broken frame, in which the elements of a panel break its border(s) into the gutter or an adjacent frame.

Fig. 33. An example of a full-page panel with a single unified image.

Fig. 34. A two-page panel where two facing pages are designed to be read as a unit.

Fig. 35. A two-page spread in which the two facing pages are not designed as a unit.

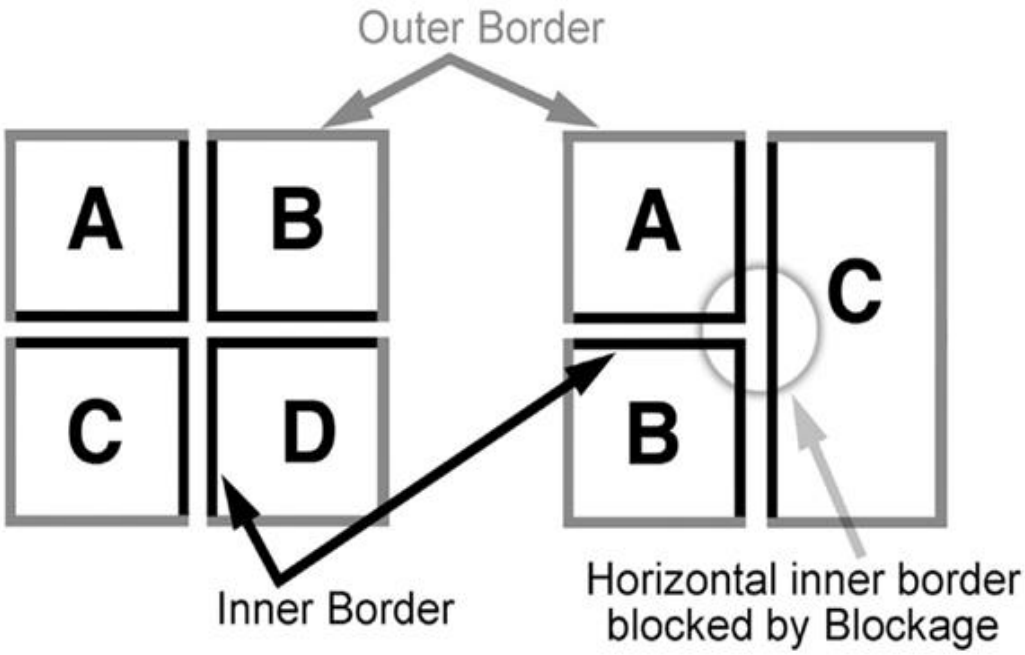


Fig. 36. An example of possible entry points and navigational paths suggested by Neil Cohn.

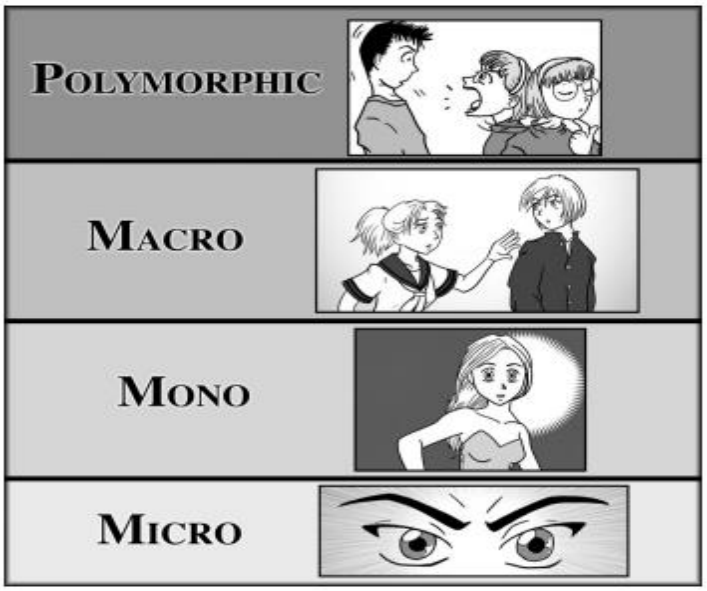


Fig. 37. Cohn's classification of the panels of Japanese manga based on the types of elements they contain.

	NARRATIVE-COMPOSITION AUTONOMY	NARRATIVE-COMPOSITION INTERDEPENDENCE
NARRATIVE DOMINANT	Conventional Use	Rhetorical Use
COMPOSITION DOMINANT	Decorative Use	Productive Use

Fig. 38. Peeters's four general modes of page and panel utilization.

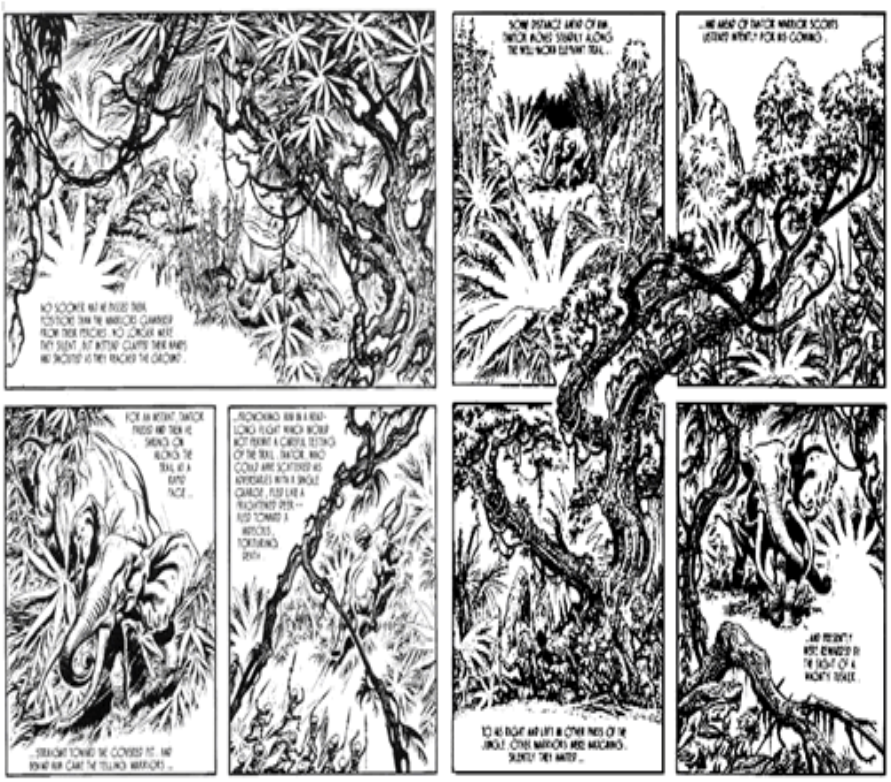


Fig. 39. Peeters's example of decorative utilization from *Jungle Tales of Tarzan* where the layout is just a decorative supplement.

Fig. 40. Peeters's example of rhetorical utilization from *The Castafiore Emerald* where panels support the narrative and serve it.

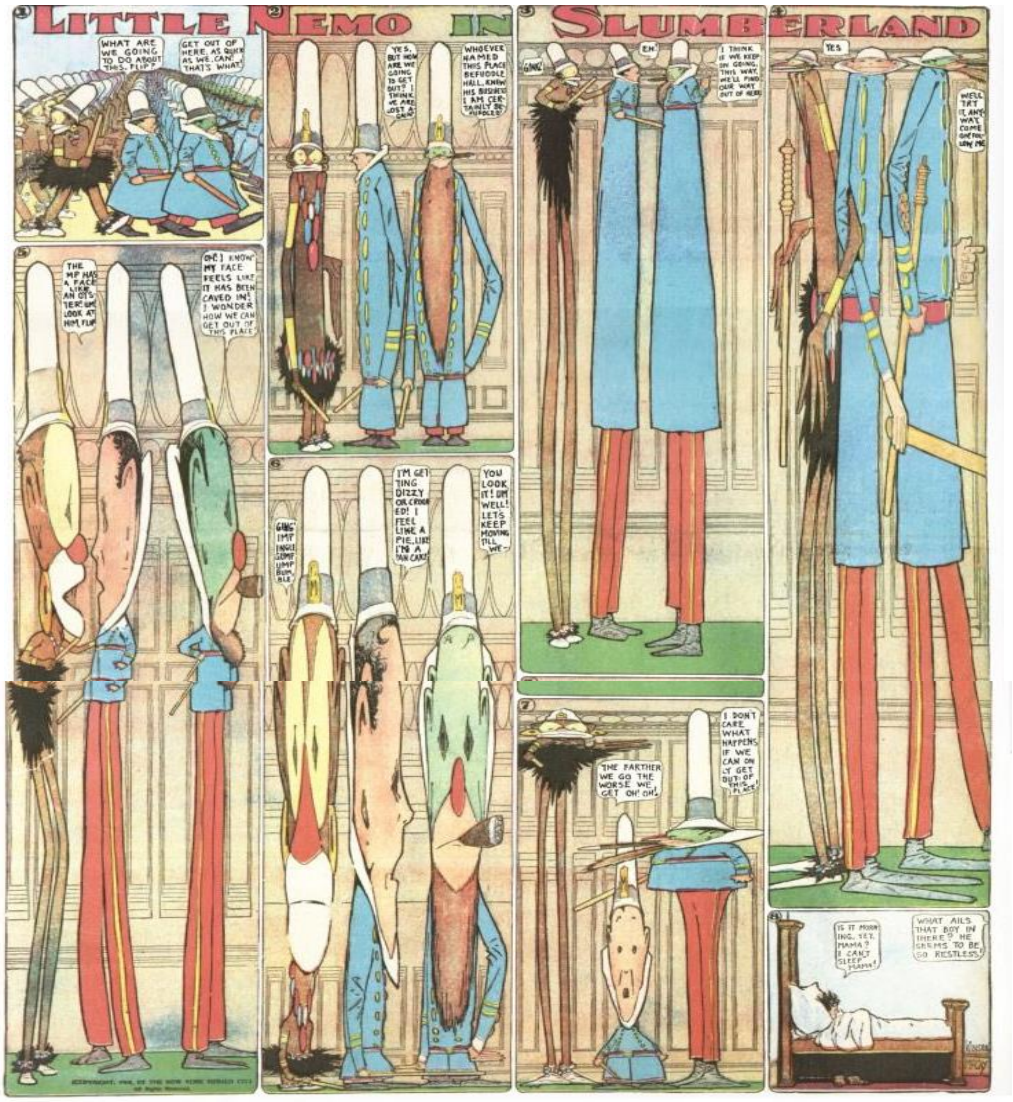


Fig. 41. Peeters's example of productive utilization from *Little Nemo in Slumberland* where the organization of the page seems to dictate the narrative.

Fig. 42. An excerpt from Art Spiegelman's *Maus I* that Hillary Chute uses to demonstrate rhetorical utilization of panel layout.

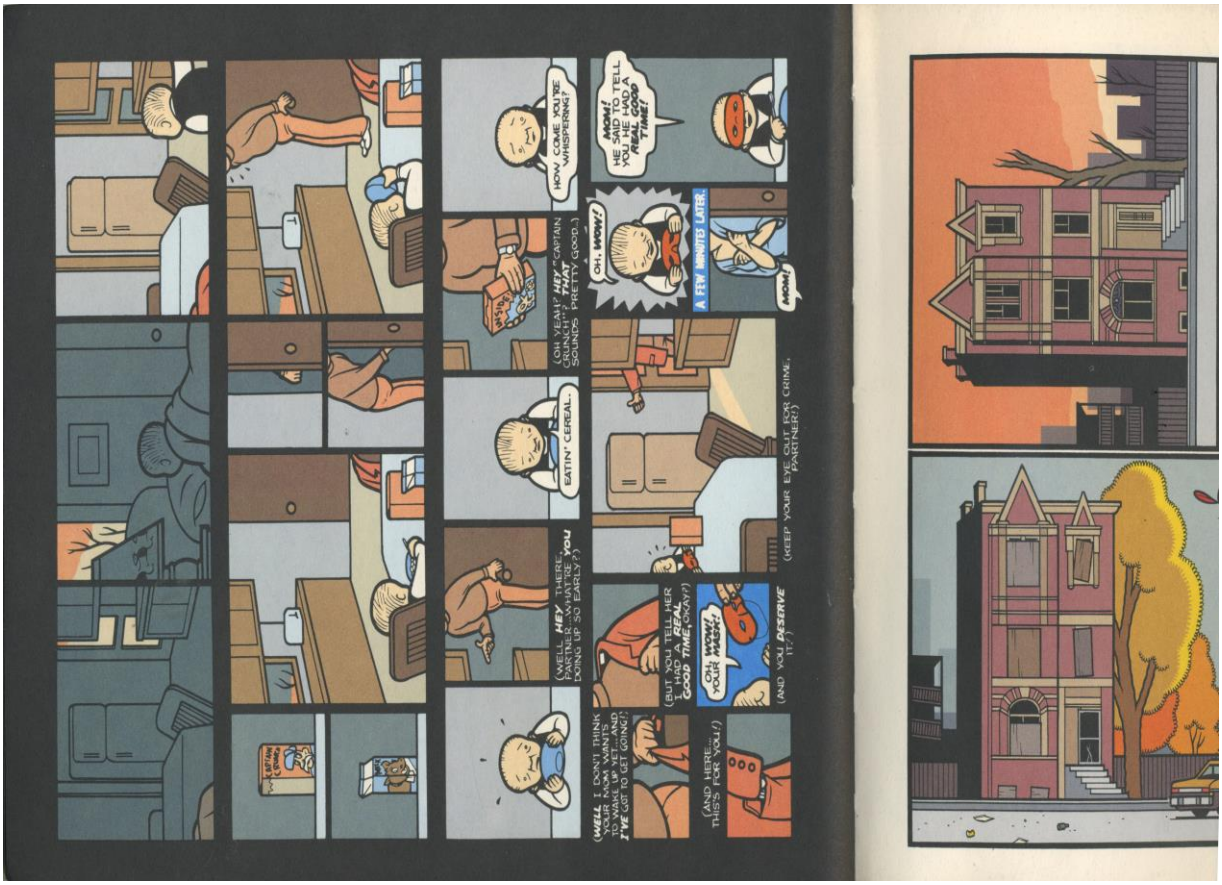


Fig. 43-A. Excerpt from *Jimmy Corrigan* that shows how some creators break away from familiar page layout categories.

Fig. 43-B. Excerpt from *Jimmy Corrigan* that shows how some creators break away from familiar page layout categories.

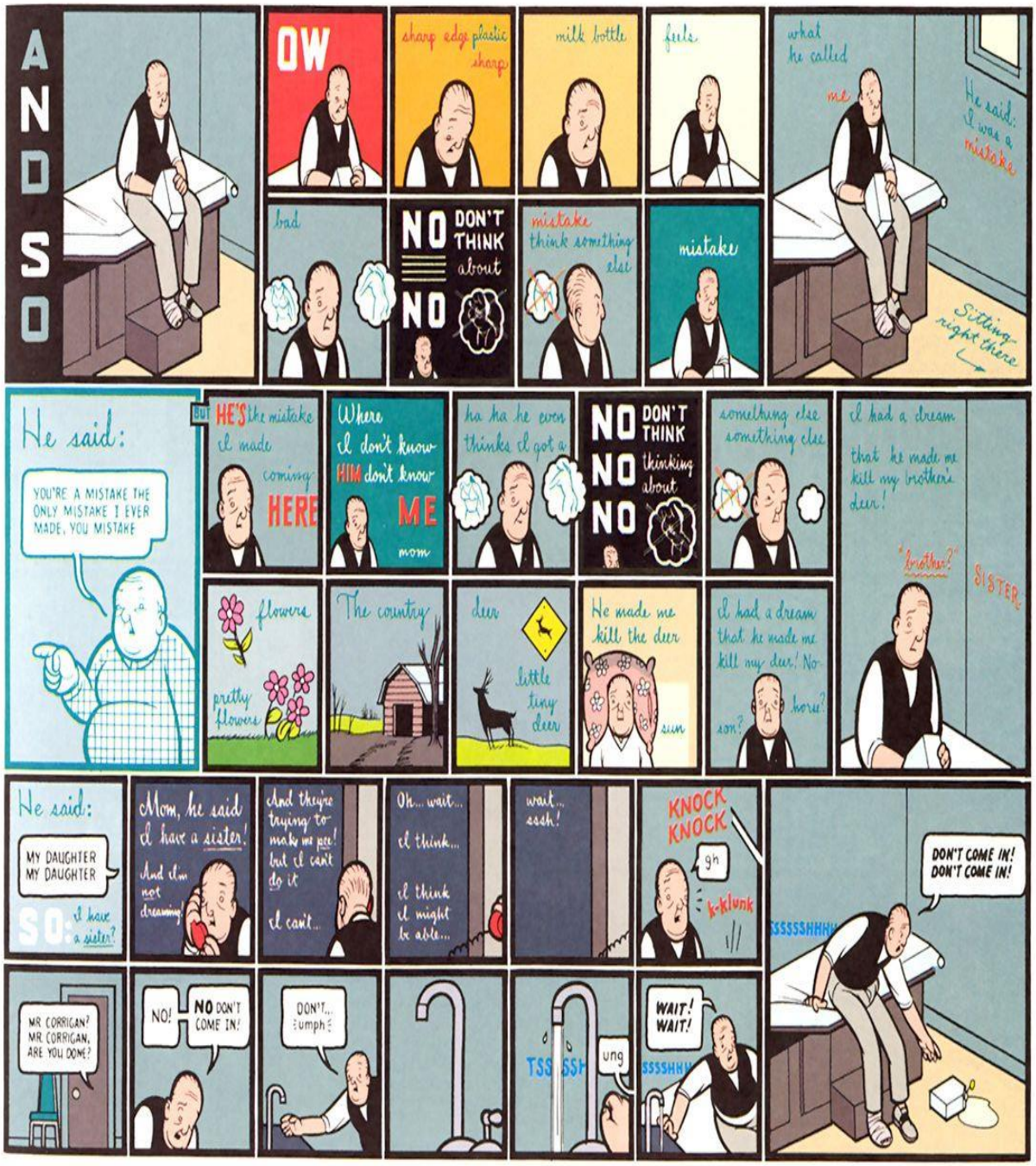


Fig. 43-C. Excerpt from *Jimmy Corrigan* that shows how some creators break away from familiar page layout categories.

Narration & Narrative Structure

Note: This section will be most helpful if you answer its questions after you finish reading the *entire* work you are examining (go to the section Page & Panel Layout for tips on navigation, determining a departure point, recognizing reading paths, and linking layouts to the narrative).

1- *Genre & Subgenres*:

Before analyzing the narrative and its structure, identify the genre and the subgenre(s) of the narrative.

- Is it a work of fiction or non-fiction? If it is a work of fiction, is it a novel or a short story? Is it part of a series? Is it a comic strip? What type of story does it present; superhero/caped hero, adventure, fantasy, science fiction, steampunk, horror, crime, mystery, comedy, tragedy, tragicomedy, social/political satire, western, romance, erotic, adult, YA, parody, or another genre fiction? Is it realistic or non-realistic? Does it merge real elements with fantastic ones through magical realism? Is it a metacomic (a comic whose subjects are aware of being in a fictional world, or a comic about a comics)? Is it a pantomime comic[25] (or a silent comic that does not use dialogue, speech balloons, or narration captions, but primarily tells its story through images)? What are the elements of the narrative that led you to determine its genre?
- If it is a work of non-fiction**,** is it a graphic memoir? If yes, is it a biography or an autobiography? Is it in the form of comic journalism (a travelogue or a graphic journalism comic)? Does it belong to a specific discipline or field of knowledge,

[25] A good example of pantomime comics is Jason's *Almost Silent.*

i.e., politics, history, science, religion, philosophy, psychology.. etc.? Is it an educational comic?

- Does it cross genre borders and combine different genres and subgenres? In other words, are the boundaries between genres and subgenres blurred in the comic you are examining? How does this genre fluidity affect the content?

2- *Narration*:

- Will Eisner and Scott McCloud, the leaders of the definitional or essentialist approach, which is mainly concerned with defining the medium of comics, its vocabulary, and its principal elements, claim that comics is a sequential art that is easily navigated and understood if it is perceived as such. In his seminal work *Understanding Comics*, McCloud builds upon Eisner's concept of sequentiality (which he introduced in his book *Comics and Sequential Art*) and he defines comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence" (McCloud 9). This means that narratives in comics are revealed through tracking a particular order in which juxtaposed images follow one another successively to create meaning and further the plot.
- Thierry Groensteen, the author of *The System of Comics*, which introduces the semiological approach that perceives comics primarily as a language composed of visual codes, challenges the concept of sequentiality that Eisner and McCloud introduce in their works. He tells readers to perceive comics as a network of interdependent relationships, between panels and images, across pages. He prompts them to go back and forth through a comic book to examine the entire system that reveals the narrative and constructs meaning through braiding

scattered particles. Groensteen identifies the panel as "the base unit of the comics system" (location 513), and he presents two central concepts for understanding the relationship between panels, namely "arthrology" (location 333) and "braiding" (location 2011). By arthrology Groensteen means "the different sorts of relations among images in comics" (Hescher 97), and by braiding he refers to "the translinear and distant relationships" between pictorial elements across panels. Through these two key terms, Groensteen claims that meaning in comics is constructed through a system or a network of relationships between panels that are on the same page as well as translinear panels across and beyond the single page (Hescher 98). Thus, unlike Eisner and McCloud who assume a linear logic of progression in comics, Groensteen claims that meaning is made through linking distant images.

- Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen* features several examples of nonlinear progression; for example, one can see different actions happening in two different times at two different locations *simultaneously* on the same page (see fig. 44)[26]. This serves different narrational purposes – for example, visually representing the word "meanwhile" by giving readers access to two events involving different characters that take place at the same time, in different locations, by placing them both in separate panels on the same page (see fig. 45)[27]. In other cases, he uses this technique to combine the past and the present

[26] This example from the second page of *Watchmen* shows the "present moment" in the first two panels that constitute the first tier/row (in which two investigators examine a crime scene), then it presents the past through the first panel of the second tier/row (where readers see how the crime happens prior to the arrival of the investigators). Thus, the past and the present exist simultaneously on this page.

[27] In this example, two actions take place at the same time in the present. Panels keep alternating between showing a funeral scene in a cemetery where most of the main characters are gathered, and another scene where one of the

on the same page (see fig. 44). *Watchmen* challenges sequentiality through presenting *simultaneity*.

- Moreover, *Watchmen* utilizes recurrent visual motifs that create a network or a system that prompts readers to examine their interconnectedness. Every chapter in *Watchmen* contains panels that visually echo ones that readers have seen previously, which can only be understood through deconstructing this network that *Watchmen* establishes. Since *Watchmen* was first published as a series of comic books, the significance of certain visual motifs, especially the blood-stained smiley face[28] shown in fig. 46 and fig. 47, cannot be inferred without braiding interdependent scattered panels across pages.
  - Does the comic you are reading prove the validity of McCloud's and Eisner's claim that it is sequence that allows the narrative to progress and reveal meaning? Or, like *Watchmen*, does it show that braiding, or thinking of the comic as a network, reveals meaning and allows readers to see the complete picture that the narrative delineates? By contrast, does the comic you are examining introduce an innovative narration style that challenges the ones explained here?
  - What drives the narrative you are reading and controls its progression? Is it transition from one panel to the next, or is it the "cross-reference"[29] relationships between images across panels? Is it the verbal track that reveals

main characters visits her mother at the hospital as she "didn't feel like attending the funeral". In this case, the word "meanwhile" is inferred through the visual simultaneity, the verbal dialogues between characters, and the caption boxes in most of the panels.

[28] The blood-stained smiley face appears first in the first uppermost and leftmost panel of the first tier in fig. 46 (which is the first page of chapter 1 in the comics) and shown again in the first uppermost and leftmost panel of fig. 47 (which is the last page in *comics format* in chapter 1 in the comic).

[29] Achim Hescher suggests the use of this concept in *Reading Graphic Novels: Genre and Narration* "to account for the verbal-pictorial linkings in [comics], panel-to-panel and across panels or pages.

the narrative? If the comic you are studying is predominantly visual (a comic that has few words), how does the visual track *narrate*[30]? Is narration the result of the interaction between the verbal and the visual tracks of your comic? Which elements play the most important role in constructing the narrative (page/panel layout & structure, imagery, image-text interaction)?

Fig. 44. An excerpt from *Watchmen* that shows how, through simultaneity, both past and present events are shown on the same page.

[30] Jason's *Almost Silent* is a narrative that is predominantly visual. Words are used minimally, if at all.

Fig. 45. An excerpt from *Watchmen* that combines two different events that take place in different locations on the same page through simultaneity.

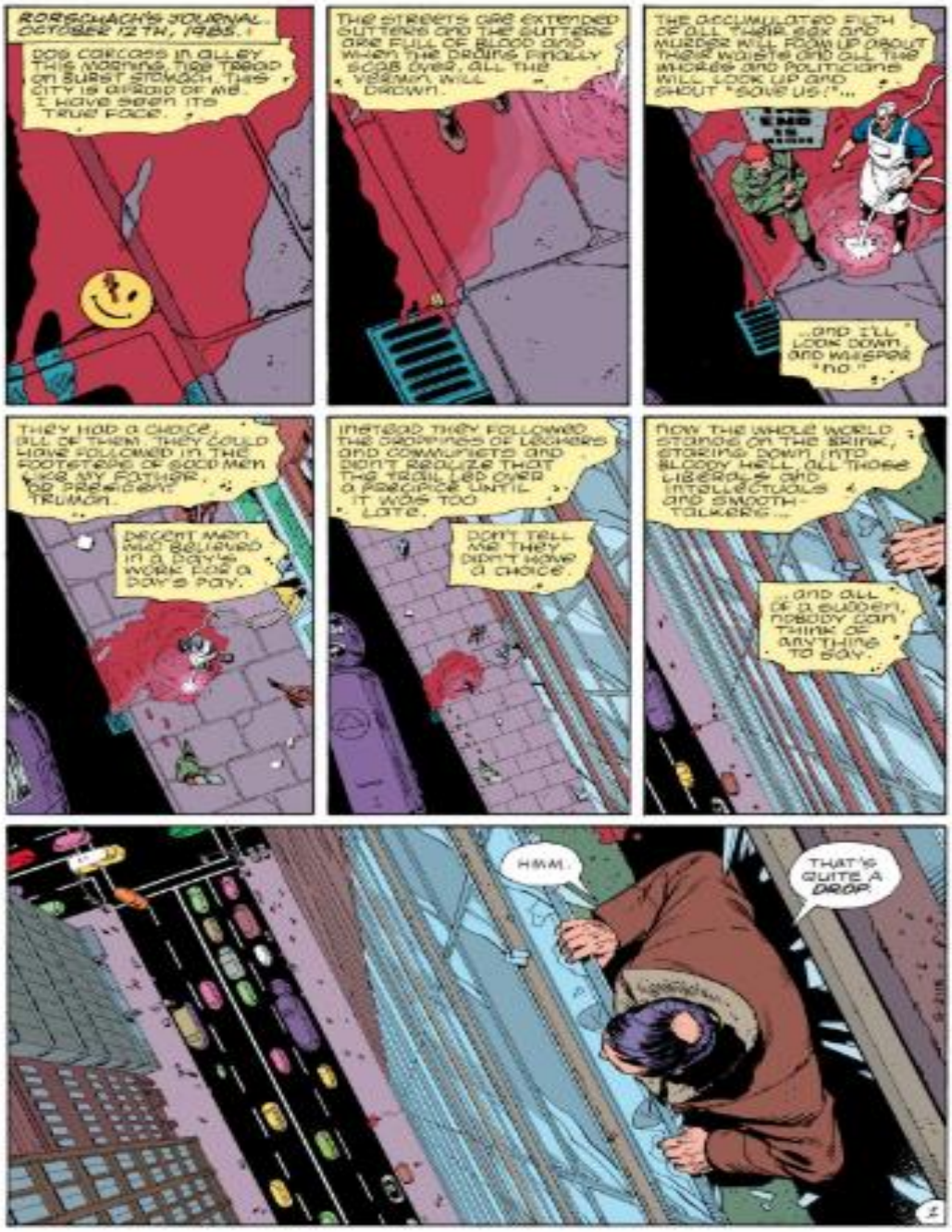


Fig. 46. An excerpt from *Watchmen* that presents the blood-stained smiley face, which is a recurrent visual motif in the narrative.

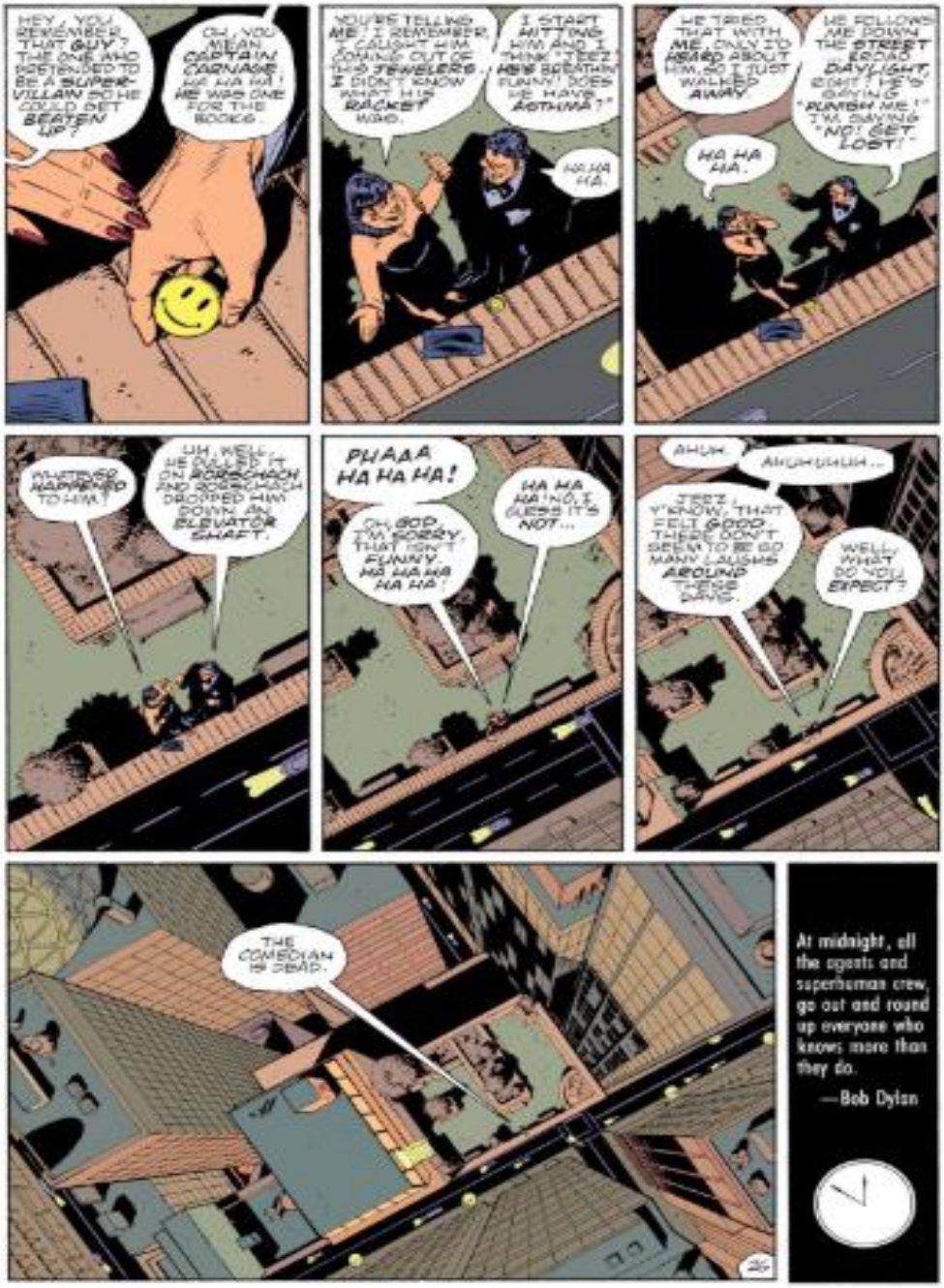


Fig. 47. An excerpt from *Watchmen* that presents the blood-stained smiley face, which is a recurrent visual motif in the narrative.

3- *Narrative Type*:

- In *A Theory of Narrative*, Rick Altman divides narratives into three main types:
  - Single-focus narratives: "narratives [that] resolutely follow the same character from beginning to end" (Altman 21).
  - Dual-focus narratives: narratives that "alternat[e] regularly between two groups whose conflict provides the plot" (Altman 55).
  - Multiple-focus narratives: "when a text follows several characters" (Altman 241).
- To which category of narration does the comic you are examining belong? What elements of the narrative lead you to this conclusion?
- If the comic is a dual-focus narrative or a multiple-focus narrative, does it have a single plot or multiple plots? Does it have multilayered plot and narration?

4- *Narrator*:

- In *Reading Graphic Novels: Genre and Narration*, Achim Hescher writes the following:

> Unlike verbal narrative fiction, graphic narratives have no mediating or transmitting communication system, reified in a 'fictional narrator,' that could be held responsible for the production of the whole verbal and *pictorial* discourse. Therefore, the pictorial track should be ascribed to the artist-writer in the external communication system. Only when there is a figure or character *marked* as a narrator on both the verbal and the pictorial plane (through narrational script and a realistic or iconic shape, or

through pictorial allegory), distinct from the intradiegetic story, should we speak of a narrator (197)

- In the comic you are studying, is there a figure or a character marked as a narrator? If yes, how is this figure or character designated as such?
- Who does the narrative belong to? If it is a story, who is telling it? Does it belong to the "artist-writer in the external communication system" as Hescher puts it, or to figures on the page?
- In Spiegelman's *Maus*, there are two levels of narration. There is the character Vladek, who tells his son the story of his experience at Auschwitz during the Holocaust, and there is Artie, the artist who created the comic and who is himself a character in it (see fig. 48). In such case, who is the narrator and who does the story belong to? If you are reading a comic that is identified as (or that *you* identify as) an autobiographical work, how many levels of narration are there? Is there a character or a figure that is clearly marked as a narrator? If not, who is narrating the story?
- Does the comic you are studying use captions or tags? If so, do they clearly belong to a character in the narrative, or to the Creators behind the work?
- What is the function of the narration tags or caption boxes in the comic? Do they merely duplicate what is narrated through images? Or do they complete the picture by adding information that is missing from the visual track? Do they have an independent function unconnected to the images and dialogue, as well as other verbal elements? Do all the caption boxes in the comic you are studying *narrate*? Or do some of them perform different functions? For example, on the first page

of the first issue of *X-Men*, published in September 1963 (see fig. 49), the first panel in the first tier focuses on a bald man that readers see through the window panes of a building. The image alone does not show who he is, what this location is, why he is there, or why he is the central focus of the first panel. In this case, the caption box plays an informative role, explaining that, "In the main study of an executive private school in New York's Westchester County, a strange silent man sits motionless, brooding…alone with his indescribable thoughts" (1). Thus, the narration tag complements the image. The caption box in the third (and the last) panel of the page plays a very different role. It is rendered in the shape of an arrow pointing towards the edge of the page (indicating that readers are supposed to flip it to go to the next one) and it says "[a]nd, now, prepare yourself for one of the most exciting reading experiences of your life! For you are about to enter the fascinating, unpredictable world of… The X-Men". This caption does not necessarily narrate a part of the story or help in narrative progression, and it does not cooperate with the image of Professor X or the X-Men surrounding him. What it does though is prompt the reader to turn the page to delve into the promised fascinating experience. Do you see similar cases of caption boxes that do not necessarily *narrate* in the comic you are examining?

Fig. 48. An excerpt from Spiegelman's *Maus* that presents two different levels of narration.

Fig. 49. An excerpt from *X-Men* (1963) that presents different types of narration captions that have different functions in the narrative.

5- *Point of View and Perspective*:

- Does the comic you are studying present a single character/figure's point of view, or multiple characters' points of view?
- Is there a character (or a group of characters) used in the narrative as *the* source through which information is filtered? Whose perspective does the narrative follow? What are the factors that led you to your conclusions about point of view and perspective?
- What is the role that both the verbal and the visual tracks play in constructing and displaying perspective?
- Are there points in the narrative where you, as the reader, assume the point of view of the protagonist (or one of the main characters, or even a group of central characters) and see events through their eyes in the displayed panels?
- Do you, as a reader, have the same knowledge that the main character(s) has/have, or do you know more than they know? Are there cases in this comic where framing does not allow you access to what characters can see? Is the case you are examining one of the following classifications of focalization that Hescher defines in *Reading Graphic Novels*:
    - external focalization: "readers know less than a character" (201)
    - internal focalization: "readers know as much as a character" (201)
    - spectatorial focalization: "readers are given a cognitive advantage over a character" (201)

  How does this advantage/disadvantage affect your reading experience and your relationship with the narrative?

Visual-Verbal Synergy

Note: This section will be most helpful if you answer its questions after you finish reading the *entire* work you are examining. Moreover, it will be helpful to read the questions in the previous sections prior to answering the following questions, as you will find that they are interrelated, and that answering some of them might help complement this section.

1- *Relationship*:

- What is the overall relationship between the words and the pictures in the comic you are examining? Do they interact with one another? Is the visual-verbal interaction productive or collaborative: do the two tracks constantly complement and/or support one another, or are there instances where they contrast and/or contradict one another? Do they function equally, or do they have distinct roles? Are there cases of redundancy in the comic you are examining where words and images simply repeat what each communicates solely? Do the two tracks seem unrelated, working independently?
- Are the two tracks set in a structure that allows, as Nick Sousanis puts it in *Unflattening*, the operation of a "dynamic cycle of read-look, look-read" (64)? In other words, do both tracks attract your attention equally and prompt you to read the words then look at the pictures, and vice versa?
- Eisner claims that "[i]t is impossible to tell a story through imagery alone without the help of words." (10), and that in pantomime comics, it is "[t]he rate of speed at which the action moves [that] "FORCES" the reader to supply the dialogue"(13). If the comic you are reading is a pantomime comic that is predominantly visual (like Jason's *Almost Silent*), how does the absence or the

rare use of words affect your reading? Do you find yourself supplying the dialogue (or even the narration tags)? If yes, what are the visual elements that help you do so?

- In *Comics and Sequential Art*, Eisner provides readers with a helpful visual example that shows how images, in many cases, can change the sense of verbal statements (fig. 50). In this example, he shows how change in the visual delineation of facial expressions in the different panels (sad, happy, thoughtful, indifferent) controls the way viewers can perceive and interpret simple statements like "I'm sorry" or "I love you". He then uses another example (fig. 51) to show how words and images are interdependent, arguing that in some comics, "the art without the text would be quite meaningless." (129). In this example, the dialogue and the images are inseparable because without the words, one can hardly imagine that the two fish are having a conversation, let alone a conversation about the existence of God. In the comic you are reading, are there similar cases where it is the image that clarifies the text and gives it meaning, or where the images without the text would be meaningless?
- In *Comics and Language: Reimagining Critical Discourse on the Form*, Hannah Miodrag writes that there is a "suggestion that, because visual and verbal interact, they become an inextricable blend that can therefore be framed as a unified language in itself; a suggestion I refute, by showing that distinction between the two modes and their operations persist, even when they are drawn into collaborative play" (location 217). How does the comic you are examining

respond to these words? Does the visual-verbal collaboration result in a hybrid product, or a work where each track has its distinct characteristics and functions?

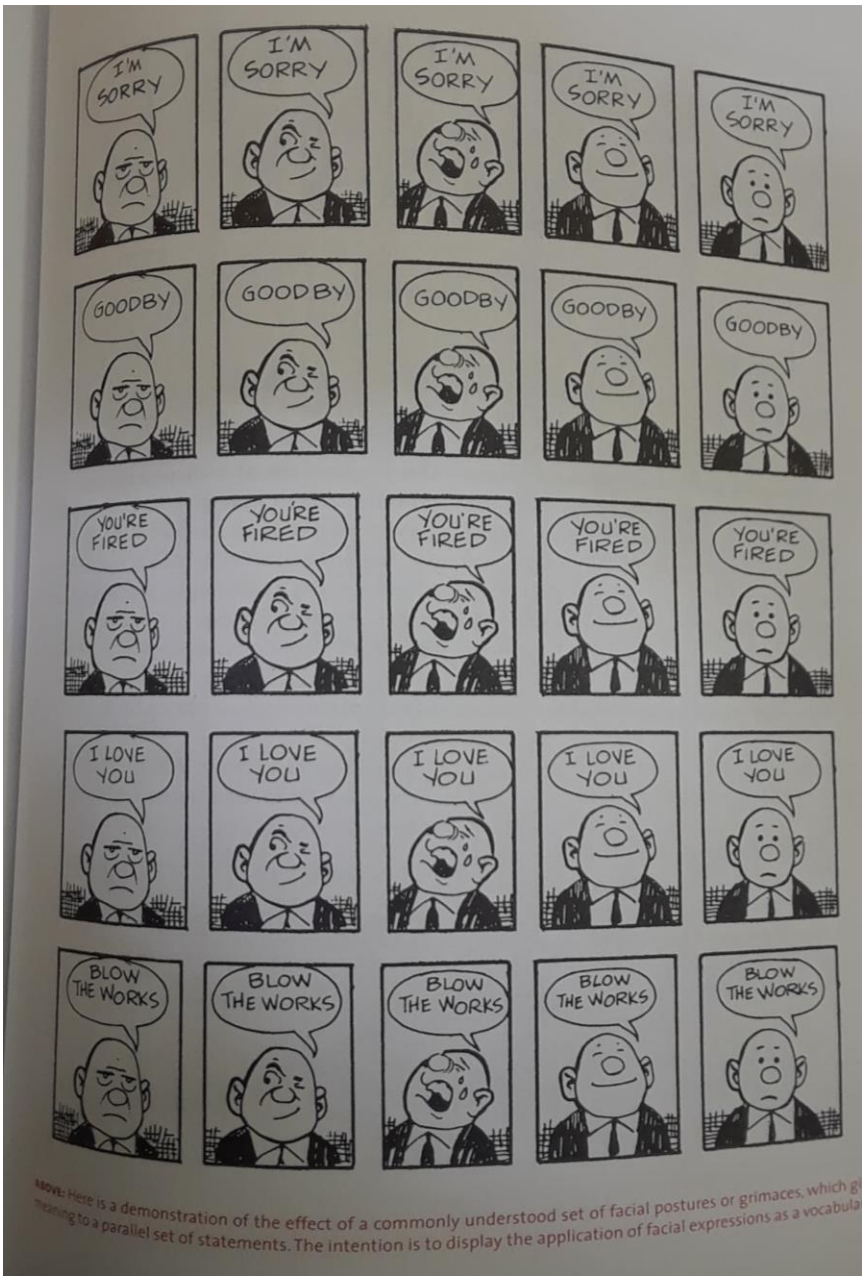


Fig. 50. Eisner's example of visual-verbal interplay that shows how change in the visual delineation of facial expressions in the different panels controls the way viewers can perceive and interpret simple statements.

Fig. 51. Eisner shows how words and pictures in comics are interdependent.

2- *Analysis and Interpretation*:

- Is the contextual information you gathered about the comic you are examining and its Creators reflected through the visual and/or the verbal content? If yes, how so?
- Miodrag writes that "language-in-comics can only be evaluated within media-specific parameters" (Miodrag 1048). She adds, "[c]omics' use of language...needs to be considered according to the specifics of the form" (1145). By this, Miodrag means that one cannot use the critical lens with which they evaluate language in, for example, Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* to evaluate language in Grant Morrison's *All Star Superman*, since, in comics, the text is made to fit the medium's requirements. Since the medium combines words

and pictures, the use of language within it is quite unique. On its own, language in comics may seem fragmented or meaningless, while if one evaluates its function in relation to the images it collaborates with, one's judgement can change. In the comic you are examining, are there examples that illustrate this point? Are there cases in which language usage is more valuable *because* of its existence in a specific context on the comics page?

- The anti-hierarchy approach that Miodrag introduces in *Comics and Language* rejects the belief that visuals in comics are more important than text or vice versa. Rather, it affirms that each track has distinct qualities and functions and that none of them should be hierarchized. Miodrag writes "[c]ritics' ongoing preoccupation with the idea that pictures must definitively tell the bulk of the story…demonstrates the way words as well as pictures are treated as vehicles of meaning whose aesthetic qualities, the 'emotional force and presence that cannot be entirely reduced to meaning' …are neglected" (location 280). Thus, hierarchy can obstruct the aesthetic value of the two tracks. To emphasize the importance of language, she writes that "language is, in many cases, a crucial element in comics, and the common insistence that words are always of secondary importance in every hybrid text is a mistaken move. None of the cartoons discussed [in *Comics and Language*] could convey much of a narrative without their outlandish and engaging textual context" (location 1008).

  Furthermore, Miodrag uses *Krazy Kat* as an example of a comic whose textual context cannot be neglected or devalued; it is worth examining and critiquing because of its ability to create humor through the misuse of language. She writes:

> Herriman is a master of language and an impishly inventive manipulator of features specific to the linguistic system. Under his deft guidance, minimal units are transposed into ungrammatical but *logically* correct formulations and extended in order to further elevate an already elaborate register. Herriman exploits his readers' logocentric tendencies, relying on the fact that we treat language as a conveyor of our chosen meanings and then mischievously unpeeling signifier-signified associations (634-641)

Does the comic you are reading do something unconventional with language the way Herriman's does? If yes, how so? How can neglecting the textual content and its function, or giving the visual track primacy over the verbal track, harm the understanding of this comic?

- According to Charles Hatfield in *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*, "[t]he cartoon self-image… seems to offer a unique way for the artist to recognize and externalize his or her subjectivity. In this light, comics autobiography may not be alienating so much as radically enabling" (Hatfield 115). If the comic you are reading is an autobiography, a semi-autobiography, or self-representational in some way, how does it visually portray the artist's subjectivity and perception? How is this visual portrayal reflected through the verbal track (if it is reflected)?
- In his article "Two Methodologies for the Interpretation of Abstract Expressionism," Francis O' Connor writes the following:

> The work of art must be seen as an overdetermined object[31] that partly documents a specific point in the life course of its creator and that takes its full meaning only when seen in relation to all other similar points across that life course. It is thus to be seen as partly determined by the unconscious process of its creator—which can influence the response of those who encounter it. But it is also to be seen as continuously redefined publicly by the unconscious, free associative process of the passive viewer, and through the unconscious process of the active interpreter, mediated by self-awareness and erudition. This is how art lives psychodynamically (224)

According to this statement, when examining abstract cartoons, interpreters should consider exploring the effect of the "life course" of the Creators, which O'Connor identifies as the "influence of the creator's milieu, religion, socioeconomic status, craft tradition, sexual identity, and life course development" (222). Thus, familiarizing oneself with the context plays a highly significant role in the interpretive process as it helps in revealing the meaning of abstract representations. Furthermore, O'Connor highlights the role of the interpreter in the meaning-making process; meaning does not reside only in the object itself, as the active interpreter's context, psyche, and experience is what gives the object a meaning. In this case, meaning is subjective because it depends on every interpreter's impression. Every time the work of art is encountered by a new reader, it gains a new meaning. Furthermore, O'Connor tells every interpreter to understand that his or her own psychology is a factor in the art of

[31] A Freudian term that refers to an object that has more than one determining psychological factor.

scholarly investigation and interpretation, and that it subjectively influences whatever is to be studied with ostensible "objectivity", or "dispassion," or both", and that "[t]rying to suppress this personal element in the scholarly process (or in the education of scholars) in order to be 'rigorous' or 'scientific' simply suppresses its creative potential." (223-224). He encourages performing "some form of personal 'analysis'" (224). If you apply O'Connor's suggestion to the different forms of visual art in the comic you are studying, how does exploring the Creator's context help you in interpreting them and understanding their full meaning? Since, according to O'Connor, your personal impression matters in interpreting art, how do you perceive the art in the comic you are studying and how does it affect you?

- O'Connor suggests that the interpreter of art sees the artist as "an individual who seeks, through image-making, personal coherence and meaning either passively or rebelliously within the context of received myths, gropingly with the context of a personal myth, or more or less unconsciously within the context of a pathology" (223). Kominsky-Crumb, whose comics are extremely rebellious, proves the validity of this idea. In an interview with Cognac Wellerlane[32], she says "I was always different from everybody else, and I became an artist as a way to survive. I think drawing and painting for me was the way I kept my sanity." Does the comic you are studying, especially if it is a confessional narrative or one where the Creator is telling a personal story, include elements that show that the

[32] This interview can be found on youtube.com on Cognac Wellerlane's channel. To celebrate her work *Drawn Together*, the TV host, Cognac Wellerlane, asks Aline Kominsky-Crumb several questions about her art and about her journey as a comics artist.

artist seeking personal coherence or finding meaning in life by struggling with a certain issue?

- How can you describe the drawing style in the comic you are examining? Is it realistic or cartoonish? Is it exaggerative or simplistic? What is the measure of its simplification or exaggeration? Is it over simplistic? Do the characters look more like caricatures than natural looking people? What is the effect of the drawing style on you as a reader? Does the drawing style match or serve the narrative? If yes, how so? Does the drawing style juxtapose or contradict the narrative in any way? If yes, what is the significance of that?
- Graphic memoirs and autobiographical comics usually give readers access to the psyche of the Creator. The most famous works of this genre trace the memories of their narrating characters. In *Graphic Women*, Chute writes "[i]mages in comics appear in fragments, just as they do in actual recollection; this fragmentation, in particular, is a prominent feature of traumatic memory" (4). If the comic you are examining presents a narrative extracted from memory, how is memory delineated, verbally and visually? If it presents traumatic memory, are images fragmented as Chute suggests? Is there a sequence of events presented through images, or are images scattered in a nonlinear order?
- Chute uses Satrapi's *Persepolis* as an example of comics where even if the narrative traces a traumatic memory, the visuals are not necessarily traumatic. She writes "*Persepolis*'s style shows that the retracing work of historical graphic narrative— even when retracing trauma— does not have to be visually

traumatic" (152). In the comic you are examining, do images reflect the tone of the narrative and vice versa?

- One characteristic that distinguishes comics is the fact that it is a highly self-referential medium. Are there visual/ verbal (or visual-verbal) elements that render the comic you are reading, as Hatfield puts it, a "metatext," as in a text that contains "an interrogation of its own medium" (Hatfield 101)? Does it contain "auto-critique"(when comics contain probes and comments on the medium, on art, or on pop culture in general)[33]? Do these elements interrupt the narrative, or are they weaved into the narrative in a way that renders them compatible with the whole?
- In addition to the verbal metaphors readers are used to in prose, comics use visual metaphors because of their capacity for concretizing abstractions. One of the most famous examples of visual metaphors in comics is Spiegelman's anthropomorphic use of mice in *Maus I* & *II* to represent Jews and cats to represent Nazis. How do the Creators of the comic you are examining use visual/verbal (and/or visual-verbal) metaphors? Are there instances where they interweave the two tracks to create metaphors?
- If, as Groensteen suggests, one thinks of the work of comics as a network or a web whose elements are interrelated and interdependent, some of the major aspects that constitute this interconnectedness are recurrent images as well as visual and verbal motifs. For example, in Bechdel's *Fun Home*, plenty of panels throughout the narrative zoom in on passages from books, book titles, and book

[33] "The Many Faces of R. Crumb" and Daniel Clowes's "Just Another Day" are examples of comics that contain auto-critique.

covers to emphasize the significant role that literature played in shaping the narrating character's life and in being a central link between her and her mysterious father. Does the comic you are reading include such motifs (visual, verbal, or visual-verbal)? What is their function in the narrative, and what is the significance of their recurrence within the context?

- Does the comic you are examining include visual and/or verbal allusions to other comics, to other literary texts, or to other culturally significant topics?

3- *Visual-Verbal Representation*:

- Characterization: in the absence of narrators in the medium of comics, characterization is mostly done through the visual representation of characters as well as the dialogue that gives them a distinct personality. In the comic you are studying, how do Creators construct characters? How do they distinguish characters from one another visually and verbally? Are there instances where you cannot tell the difference between characters? If yes, how does this affect your reading? How do Creators represent characters' gender, nationality, race, ethnicity, color, culture, social status, or age, both visually and verbally? Is there exaggeration in the Creators' delineation of characters? How can you describe character development in the comic you are studying; are the characters developed or do they lack development?
- Self-Representation: If the comic you are reading is autobiographical, how does the Creator delineate his/her identity? Does their cartoon-self resemble what they look like in reality? If not, how different is their cartoon-self from reality? Are their features realistic, exaggerated, or simplistic? What does the Creator's self-

representation say about the way they view themselves? How do they delineate other characters in the narrative?

4- *Medium-specific visual/verbal tools*:

- Balloons and Bubbles: Miodrag writes that "[t]he speech balloon is the special preserve of the comics form in a way that little else is" (location 1613). Speech and thought balloons are the most recognizable features that distinguish comics from other media. In some comics, they are simply containers of the words or the thoughts of characters. However, Eisner writes that "as the balloon form developed, it…became more sophisticated and its shape no longer just an enclosure. It took on meaning and contributed to the narration"(24). Moreover, he writes that when balloons developed "they were given the task of…conveying the character of sound to the narrative"(24). He gives examples of the conventional shapes of balloons that enclose normal speech, thoughts or unspoken speech, and speech that emanates from a machine (fig. 52). How are the balloons delineated in the comic you are reading? Are they simple containers of dialogue and thoughts, or are they rendered in a way that has a narrational effect? Do their shapes affect their meaning? Do their shapes give certain tones to the words they enclose?

Fig. 52. Eisner's examples of conventional speech balloons whose shapes take on meaning and contribute to the narrative.

- Sound Effects (Onomatopoeia): there are several conventional onomatopoeic words that have been used in comics over the years, especially in action comics, to give each movement or act a sound, essentially making sound visible. The most common ones, especially in American comics, are "boom", "pow", "zap", "bang", "crash", "wham", and "crack". In the comic you are reading, how is sound verbally and/or visually represented? Do Creators use sound effects similar to these popular onomatopoeic examples? If the comic you are examining is from a non-Western culture, what type of sound effects does it use (if it uses any)? Do these onomatopoeic words represent sounds you are familiar with? Is sound represented through other elements?
- Emanata: another medium-specific element is the "emanata", or, as Mort Walker puts it in *The Lexicon of Comicana*, "signs placed near a character's face to convey an emotion or physical state" (Hescher 190). Examples of these are sweat drops on the faces of characters, or "speed lines" that "indicate motion" (Eisner 17). Many of these visual signs and their like have become conventionalized, and the more one reads comics, the easier they become to recognize and to know

what they signify. Miodrag writes that "[l]ike language, such signs are culture-specific" (2644). In the comic you are reading, do emanata help in conveying meaning? Can they be described as "universal" in the sense that they are not confined to a specific culture or tradition? If your comic is from a non-Western culture, do you find it difficult to understand what the emanata stand for, or can their meaning be easily inferred through their context and interaction with other elements?

- Color: if the comic you are reading is in color, what kind of palette do Creators use? Do colors make the comic you are reading look more realistic, or do they add to the fictionalization of the narrative? What is the relationship between the colors and the narrative? What is the function of color in the narrative? Do the colors affect the tone of the narrative? Do they enhance a certain tone? Do they contrast the tone of the narrative? Do colors act as markers of certain characters, like in superhero comics where costumes have specific contrasting colors that distinguish the hero? According to Altman, "comic strip artists regularly take advantage of color… to justify modulation from one character to another"(25). Do the Creators of the comic you are examining use colors as such, like in *Watchmen* where Dr. Manhattan's speech balloons are blue to match his non-human blue color?
- Black and White: if the comic you are reading is in black and white, do Creators utilize these two colors in a way that contributes to the main theme(s) of the narrative? Some Creators skillfully use the contrast between these two colors, and the fact that mixing them creates grey, to serve their specific narrative and/or

to evoke a particular emotion, or to set a specific mood. Is this the case in the comic you are reading?

Inferred Content

1- *Theme(s*): What is the overarching theme of the comic you are examining? What are the subthemes (if there are any)? How are the themes displayed verbally and visually? Are the themes and the subthemes interconnected visually and/or verbally?

2- *Recycled characters and concepts*: comics constantly recycle and reproduce specific characters and concepts. For example, the superhero character, as well as the superhero concept, have been recycled over and over since the late 1930s. Numerous comics have created a God-like unbeatable character who has superpowers, and who wears a unique costume to hide his/her other identity, which is usually that of a normal human who has no special powers; in contemporary comics, however, most superheroes' identities are known. The superhero is traditionally a savior who beats crime, brings justice back, and defends those in need. Traces of these superheroic traits can be found in some other genres of comics. Chester Gould's detective newspaper comic *Dick Tracy*, for instance, echoes the superhero adventures of fighting crime, and the superhero concept is represented in it through the characters of Dick Tracy as well as the kids who name themselves the "Crime Stoppers" and whose activities are similar to the vigilante activities of mainstream superheroes. Sometimes, superheroes reappear in genres that are more serious, sophisticated, and mundane. When they do, in many cases, they reappear in disguise; they appear as visual/conceptual metaphors. According to Charles McGrath's article "Not Funnies", "[t]he graphic novel…is a place where superheroes…, as in

"Jimmy Corrigan" and "David Boring,"… exist only as wishful emblems of a lost childhood" (McGrath "Not Funnies).

- Another theme that keeps getting recycled in comics is that of Frederic Wertham's attack on the medium. Wertham, author of *The Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) was a practicing psychologist and a public intellectual who started an anti-comics campaign as he claimed that comics were dangerous for children (Hescher 28-30). The influence of Wertham's attack on comics and antagonism towards it was strong to the extent that "numerous careers [of comics artists] were blighted, and some people never got over how their field was so publicly denigrated" (Hescher 30). For example, "Jack Cole, the creator of the character Plastic Man, took his own life in August 1958" (Hescher 30) According to Hescher, "Wertham and the anti-comics crusade are a recurrent theme in modern graphic novel production" (Hescher 30).
- In the comic you are studying, do you notice traces of one of these characters and/or concepts? What is their role in the narrative, and what is the effect of recycling them? Are they parodied or critiqued? Are they used as a tool for critiquing the medium, its genres, and its subgenres?

3- *Tone*: what is the overarching tone of the comic you are examining? What are the visual and/or verbal elements that are employed to create this tone? Are there several tones in the narrative that contrast each other (for example, a dull tone conveyed through color and a more cheerful tone conveyed through dialogue)? If yes, how are the different tones conveyed? Does the Creator succeed in making contrasting tones harmonious and coherent?

4- *Humor*: What is the source of humor in the comic you are examining? Is it the text, the images, or the interaction of the two tracks? What specific formal elements create this comic effect? According to Eisner, "[h]umor deals in exaggerated simplification" (130). Do you find this true in the comic you are reading? Some comics have overtly grim and dramatic subject matter, yet they can still include elements that create comic relief and prompt laughter. If this is the case in the comic you are reading, what are those elements? What is the significance of this juxtaposition between the subject matter and the humorous aspects?

- McGrath writes the following in "Not Funnies":

> In fact, the genre's greatest strength and greatest weakness is that no matter how far the graphic novel verges toward realism, its basic idiom is always a little, well, cartoonish… the very best graphic novels don't take themselves entirely seriously. They appeal to that childish part of ourselves that delights in caricature, and they rely on the magic, familiar but always a little startling, that reliably turns some lines, dots and squiggles into a face or a figure. It's a trick of sorts, but one that never wears out (McGrath "Not Funnies")

Is the fact that comics are "cartoonish", and that they "don't take themselves entirely seriously" the reason why they tend to be funny no matter how serious their subject matters are? Is it true that they "appeal to that childish part of ourselves that delights in caricature"? How so?

5- *Setting/ Mise en Scene and World Creation*: How can you describe the setting or the surroundings of the actions and events in the comic you are studying? Is it a detailed

setting? Is it realistic? Is it at the same level of realism as the characters or does it contrast them by being less or more realistic? What exactly is the *mise en scene* like? How are scenes arranged, and how much background do panels allow you to see? Does the setting play an important role in the narrative? Can the narrative stand alone if the setting was absent, or the setting is an integral part of the events?

- Some comics, especially superhero comics and comics that are set in alternative universes, create fictional lands for their events like Gotham City and Corto Maltese. Is this the case in the comic you are reading? If yes, what is the function of creating a fictional world for this specific narrative? How would this narrative be different if it were set in a world that readers are familiar with? Is the setting a parody or a replica of a real location known to readers? What is the effect of fictionalizing this world?

Time

1- How is time structured in the comic you are studying? How does it progress? Is there a linear progression of events, or do you keep going back and forth in time through a series of flashbacks and/or fragmented memories?

2- How can you describe narrational time? What is the relationship between narrational time and the internal time of the narrative's events?

3- According to McCloud "time and space are closely linked" (107), and the shape and the content of panels, as well as the motion depicted in them, define the duration of events. Moreover, Hatfield writes that "time elapses not only between the panels but also *within* them… [t]hanks to composition and verbal/visual tension" (52). He also writes that time can be presented in comics through

"synchronism", when "a single panel represents a sequence of events occurring at different "times" (52). Does the comic you are examining support or refute any of these claims about time in comics? How so? Does time function differently, or is it presented differently, in the work you are reading? How so?

4- How is change in time presented in the comic you are reading? How do Creators contrast past, present, and future? Is this done through juxtaposing images, or are other elements at play that create this contrast?

Single Panel Cartoons

As mentioned above, Eisner defines comics as a sequential art, and McCloud defines the medium 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) These definitions exclude single panel cartoons (see fig. 53 and fig. 54).

1- Do you think that single panel cartoons *are* comics that are worth studying? To answer this question, consider the following points:

- Rick Altman writes in *A Theory of Narrative* that there is a difference between what we might call *"some"* narrative [and] "*a"* narrative. He Explains:

  Daytime television soap operas offer a good example of 'some' narrative. No matter when we tune in, we are rapidly convinced that we are dealing with a narrative text; yet no matter how long we watch, we never reach closure. Unlike most novels and films, soaps are all middle; we nearly always confront them in medias res and leave them before a satisfactory conclusion is reached. Yet we never doubt their narrativity. At every point we

acknowledge that they are narrative in nature; that is, we recognize in them 'some' narrative (18)

- Can't one consider single panel cartoons (fig. 53 and 54) "some" narrative that are confronted in medias res and have no closure? Of course, soap operas and single panel cartoons are two quite different forms. However, they both are "middle;" they window the attention to a particular event, and they rely on the audience's concept of closure to supply the beginning and the end that complete the narrative.
- Concerning "closure", McCloud himself writes that the "phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole has a name. It's called closure… In our daily lives, we often commit closure, mentally completing that which is incomplete based on past experience" (63). If this is true, why can't one say that by operating "closure", and by relying on past experiences, readers can mentally supply the missing panels that are supposed to precede and/or that follow the image that is captured in single panel cartoons?

Fig. 53. A single-panel political cartoon that can be considered “some” narrative.

Fig. 54. A political cartoon that begins in medias res.

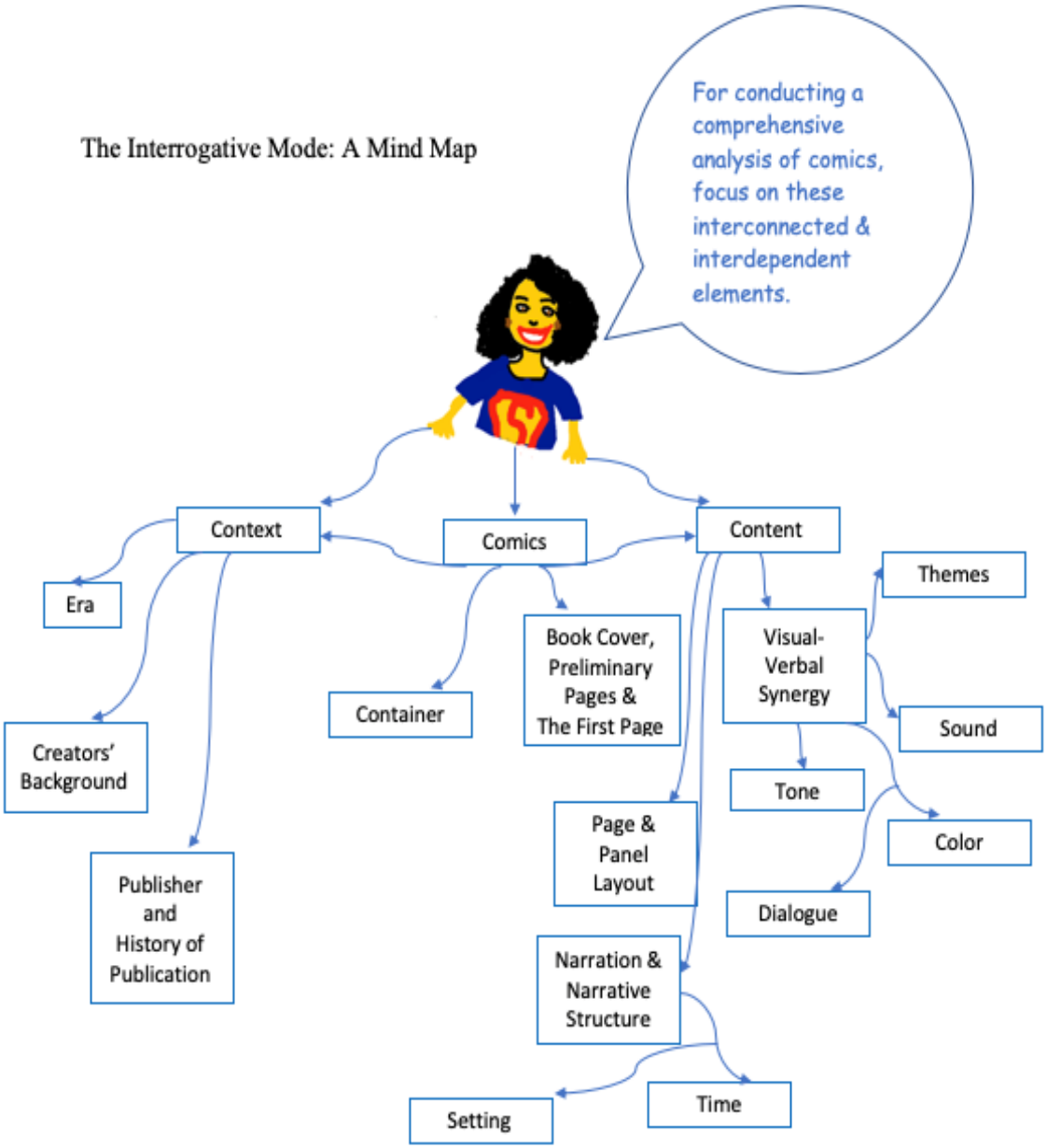


Fig. 55. A mind map that sums up the foci of the interrogative mode.

Concluding Statement

The questions that the interrogative mode comprises are not the only questions that can be asked when examining comics. These questions are meant to be a point of departure, and a model that can be followed when studying comics. You might find aspects in the comic you are studying that have not been covered in the questions above, which is expected because Creators will keep experimenting with the medium. The more you read comics and explore its capacities and possibilities, the more you will need to add questions to the interrogative mode. The interrogative mode is not *the* ultimate mode of critique. In fact, such a mode does not exist and should not be sought. While using questions from the sections above, you are encouraged to add others that attend to aspects that have not been discussed here. Incorporate more questions that attend to other elements in the comic you are studying. Moreover, you are encouraged to tweak the questions to fit the case you are studying. Make the required changes that will render this mode more applicable to the comic you are examining.

As you have seen, the interrogative mode uses examples from various comics, and the propositions of prominent critics to form its critical questions, which is something you can do on your own beyond the interrogative mode by exploring more comics and gaining exposure to more critical views. Sousanis says as much in *Unflattening*, where he notes that "each new engagement generates another vantage point from which to continue the process anew" (150). The incompleteness of the interrogative mode is a merit, as, according to Sousanis, "[i]ncompleteness reveals that there is always more to discover" (150).

Chapter III

Applying the Interrogative Mode to Cross-Cultural Comics

This chapter tests the applicability of the interrogative mode by using it for the analysis of a wide variety of comics. The comics selected for this experiment are different in form, genre, language, publication format, target audience, context, and time of publication. Those texts are *Daytripper* by Fabio Moon and Gabriel Bá (a book length graphic narrative[1]), *The Essential Calvin and Hobbes* by Bill Watterson (a collection of daily newspaper comic strips), *A Child in Palestine* by Naji al-Ali (single panel cartoons), *Ms. Marvel Vol. 1* by G. Willow Wilson and artists Adrian Alphona and Jamie McKelvie (a contemporary superhero comic), *Dirty Laundry Comics #1* by Aline Kominsky-Crumb (underground comix), *Qahera* by Deena Mohammed (webcomic), *Buddha Vol. 1* by Osamu Tezuka (manga), *Almost Silent* by Jason (pantomime comic), *I Remember Beirut* by Zeina Abi Rached (graphic memoir), and *Blake et Mortimer: Le Secret de L'Espadon* by Edgar P. Jacobs (bandes dessinées). Because this chapter discusses ten different comics, it obviously does not answer *all* of the questions that the interrogative mode presents in studying each work. It only selects the ones that address the most significant elements of each comic, and that help in showing how those elements work together to construct the narratives.

Daytripper

Using the interrogative mode to analyze *Daytripper* reveals that the most significant elements of this comic are narration and narrative structure, colors, and the use of magical realism. These elements are interconnected, and they work together to construct the main theme

[1] *Daytripper* was first published as a monthly series (a limited series) of comic books, then it was compiled in one volume. Since it is available to readers today in a single volume, like *Watchmen*, it is discussed here as a complete book-length graphic narrative.

of the narrative: redefining life and death. The comic's publication format urges one to ask the interrogative mode's question on the relationship between the book cover and the content of the narrative. Since *Daytripper* was first published as a series of comics then it was compiled in one volume and was sold under the label "graphic novel," one must pose the question on the comic's history of publication, and on how the reading experience is affected when a monthly series is collected in one volume. Because narration in *Daytripper* is nonsequential, answering the interrogative mode's questions on narration shows how this comic's nonlinearity refutes Eisner and McCloud's concepts of sequentiality and highlights Groensteen's concepts of braiding and arthrology. Moreover, the question on the role of colors in comics leads to discussing how colors in *Daytripper* highlight the theme of redefining life and death, and enhance the dreamlike effects of the elements of magical realism in the narrative. The interrogative mode shows how these elements that are weaved together help in understanding the narrative's main theme.

The front cover of *Daytripper* gives readers a general feel of the narrative's mood, as well as hints that can prompt some expectations. The cover shows a man sitting on a bench with a dog sitting by his feet. The man is holding what looks like a newspaper whose papers are flying with the wind in the shape of birds. It looks like this bench is in a park, but the setting is omitted. The background is a blank white page, which gives the impression that the bench exists in a void. It is not quite blank though; behind the man, there is an image of what can be perceived as smoke or steam. Because this figure is directly behind the man, it looks like a thought bubble emerging to reveal his memories, his current thoughts, and some of the most important things that make up his life (see fig. 56). At the center of the smoke figure, there is a large typewriter that dominates the entire image, which, if connected to the newspaper and the bird like flying papers, can reveal that the narrative has something to do with writing and authorship. Above the

typewriter, one finds a couple of flying coffee cups, and next to it, there is an ashtray full of filter ends of smoked cigarettes. On the keys of the typewriter, three little boys run as if they are chasing something, and in front of them are three birds that look like they are trying to escape. On the top of the smoke figure, there is a silhouette of two lovers holding hands and standing in an anchored boat in the sea. Below that, there are images that belong to an urban setting: tall buildings, a street light, and a utility pole, which contrasts the beach setting above them. Outside the smoke figure, there is a sun on the top, and a moon on the bottom. The most dominant colors within the smoke figure are sepia (which gives the feel that the image is from the past), as well as pink, purple, and blue (which, through the way they are mixed together, give the feeling that this whole image is part of a dream). The whole image gives the impression that the thoughtful man is either having a dreamy recollection of past memories, or is musing to create a story of some sort.

In addition to the names of the Creators and the title of the comics, the cover has some blurbs for promotional purposes. The cover says that the comic is a *New York Times* bestseller, an Eisner award winner (best limited series), and presents a quote by Gerard Way[2] that says "[b]eautifully written and utterly gorgeous, *Daytripper* completely blew me away". In the upper right corner of the cover, the insignia of the publisher, Vertigo, is put next to the two holding hands lovers in the middle of the smoke figure. One the very bottom of the cover, and below the title, there is a line that says "[i]ntroduction by Craig Thompson (*Blankets*)". All of these texts can be helpful as marketing tools and means to attract a specific type of audience. Vertigo is known as the section of DC that published comics "intended for an exclusively adult audience" (Polo 2019), so seeing its label on *Daytripper* tells that particular audience that this story is for

[2] Way is a comic book writer and co-founder of DC comics's *Young Animal* imprint. He is also the author of *The Umbrella Academy,* illustrated by Gabriel Bá.

them. Moreover, putting Craig Thompson's name on the cover and stating that the introduction is by him speaks to *Blankets*' audience promising them that *Daytripper* is worthwhile. Besides, the Eisner award[3] is an acclaimed one that always went to the best works of comics like *Watchmen*, *Sandman*, *Blankets*, and *Building Stories*. Thus, knowing that *Daytripper* is among those names invites readers to expect a similar reading experience.

On the back cover of the book there are some blurbs from different sources, and a promotional piece of 4 short paragraphs that clarifies the image on the front cover and answers some questions about it as it gives a brief synopsis of the book's plot. It reveals that the protagonist "spends his days penning other people's obituaries and his nights dreaming of becoming a successful author himself—writing the end of other people's stories, while his own has barely begun." This explains why the typewriter as well as the other items that typically often accompany writers in fiction and in movies (coffee and cigarettes) dominate the front cover. The background of the promotional piece is an image of a young man; by comparing the features of the man on the front cover to the one on the back, one can see the resemblance and can realize this is a younger version of him. He is in the sea, swimming in one direction, while a school of fish swims in the opposite direction. Above him, one can see the bottom of a boat, which is a reminder of the lovers' boat on the front cover. The colors used in this image are white and blue. Everything under the sea is blue, including the young man, which makes him look like he is one with his surroundings at this moment, but he is swimming against the current, or against the natural flow of sea creatures. This can be viewed as another hint about this phase in the man's life, his youth, as he goes against the norm.

[3] Eisner awards are named in honor of Will Eisner. It is awarded annually at the San Diego Comic-Con for creative achievement in American comic books. The prizes are presented in more than 30 categories, including best limited series, best humor publication, best writer, best writer/artist, and best coloring.

One realizes that the images on the cover are a collection of the most important elements of the protagonist's life after reading the whole narrative and understanding the relationships between them and what they mean to the main character. *Daytripper* presents the story of a fictional character named Bras de Olivia Domingos. Unlike the prominent graphic memoirs that have been falsely labelled as graphic novels, *Daytripper* is not a memoir; it is a fictional narrative that does not present the Creators' true life stories. Although each volume of the series can stand alone (because each usually ends with the death of Bras, a quite satisfying end to a short story if one is not expecting a follow up volume), the real satisfaction occurs when links are drawn between the separate parts. When *Daytripper* is examined as a complete novel, one realizes that although each volume of the series is in some way self-contained, it is the act of connecting them to one another that gives the narrative its meaning. This comic was first published as a series of monthly comic books, which means that the reading experience at the time of its publication was quite different, especially when readers see Bras dying at the end of the first volume. Readers had to wait for a month before realizing that the death they have seen is a metaphorical death; a death in the psyche of the protagonist. However, for the reader who gets the whole narrative in a single volume, suspense ends as soon as they flip the page and see Bras alive again. However, this does not mean that the single volume lacks suspense completely; readers do not realize the difference between the various metaphorical deaths and the character's real death until they read the whole narrative back and forth to find out where Bras's life begins and where it really ends.

Narration in *Daytripper* is non-sequential, and the passage of time and the progression of action are non-linear. Eisner and McCloud's concepts of sequentiality apply to some sections of each chapter. However, when the book is read in its entirety, Groensteen's concept of braiding

and arthrology is more useful for several reasons: 1) memories from Bras's past lives come back to the present; readers see his past unravelling as the action progresses, and they see how memories act as the base of his actions and how they constantly affect the present. Thus, in order to see a panoramic view of the different phases of his life and realize that all of them are interconnected, one has to read backwards sometimes, or else keep going back and forth in the narrative to connect the different pieces of the puzzle. 2) *Daytripper* is abundant in visual metaphors that are an integral part of the narrative as they emphasize the main themes and remind readers of the central foci of the plot. Braiding is what gives those metaphors significance. Readers see some of them first on the front and back covers of the comic, then they reoccur repetitively in the narrative, and they gain meaning once all of the different parts are braided. . For example, smoke and steam are prevalent metaphors; they are a reminder of the father/son relationship between Bras, his father (a famous writer that Bras looks up to), and Bras's own son. The cigarette smoke and the steam that evaporates from coffee are, as mentioned above, a reminder of authorship. Readers see them for the first time on the book cover, and they stay throughout the narrative. They are also brought up in the dialogues; towards the end of the narrative, Bras's son asks his father (who is too old at that point) "[d]on't you think it's time you quit smoking?", and Bras answers, with a cigarette in his hand and a steaming coffee cup next to him "I don't. These things are part of who I am. They're just like writing" (Bá et al 238). What is noteworthy about these two visual metaphors too is that they go beyond the visual and create a sense of smell that stays throughout and connects all parts together. Flowers are another dominant visual metaphor in the narrative. By linking the scattered scenes in which flowers appear, one can see how they represent life and death, which reminds one of the main themes of the narrative. Flowers appear at the beginning of the narrative as part of celebrating

life and love, and they come back later in a funeral scene as a reminder of death. They are scattered all over the narrative, and so they hold it together. 3) The narrative starts when Bras is 32, and then dies (a metaphorical death, but readers do not know so until they see Bras dying multiple times throughout the narrative). In chapter 2, the narrative goes to his early adulthood when he is 21, young, naive, and loving life. A few chapters later, specifically in chapter 5, readers meet an 11-year-old Bras. This nonlinearity prompts readers to find links between incidents that happened in Bras's childhood (through chapter 5) that had an effect on his character to make him the 32-year-old man they meet in chapter 1. Thus, again, Groensteen's arthrology and braiding come handy for understanding those connections and this particular style of narration and narrative structure.

This narrative style that oscillates between the past and the present is supported by a coloring style that oscillates between creating a happy mood and a sad one. Both elements are interconnected and they support the theme of redefining life and death. Coloring was not done by the twins Moon and Bá, but rather by Dave Stewart, with lettering by Sean Konot. Although Moon and Bá get most of the credit for this work since they wrote the plot and created the images, Stewart's coloring is part and parcel of the success of this work and deserves more critical attention. Every page of *Daytripper* is evidence that colors can speak and tell a story of their own. For instance, the most dominant colors in Stewart's palette are different shades of blue, purple, pink, green, yellow, orange, and red. These colors follow the protagonist in both the happiest and the saddest moments of his life, and although it is the same palette used in juxtaposed contexts, it still fits whenever and wherever it is used. Because the main theme of the comic is redefining life and death, colors are redefined in the narrative; colors that are often associated with happiness change in tone and become sad colors in sad moments, and colors that

are sometimes associated with sadness and depression, like blue, take a brighter tone in happy moments and they completely change the mood of narrative. For example, purple, orange, pink, and blue are used in fig. 57 when both the protagonist and his best friend think that life is good, and they create a dreamlike feeling that accompanies this moment in the narrative and in Bras's life. A few pages later, as shown in fig. 58, the same colors are used in the sad scene in which Bras learns from a psychic boatman that his just-begun love story is doomed because he and his lover "are not one" (Ba et al 54). In this scene, the happy colors are not happy anymore; they intensify the sad feeling of loss and separation. A slight change in tone and brightness gives a new meaning to the same colors, which, again, highlights the theme of redefining life and death, and how a slight change in perspective can give each of the two concepts a new meaning.

Magical realism is another striking element of *Daytripper*. It is hard to draw a line between what is real and what is just a dream in Bras's mind. Bras's pessimism about his future is embodied through a series of dreams, or rather nightmares, that never end well, and in fact always end with his death. Readers have to suspend their disbelief about those deaths though when they realize that they're all metaphorical; they all shed light on the hardships of life that could be as painful as death, but they are part of growing up and learning to adapt. Moon and Bá incorporate elements from their culture's mythology to blend reality with imagination. At the beginning of the narrative, Bras meets Iemanjá, Brazil's Goddess of the Sea, who is celebrated by large crowds in Salvador every year in a huge festival. Traditionally, people give offerings to Iemanjá so that their wishes and dreams come true. If the offerings continue to the sea, it means that Iemanjá accepted them and that one's dreams will be fulfilled. If the tides bring them back to the shore, it means that Iemanjá rejected the offerings, and that one is doomed. In fact, Iemanjá

rejects Bras's offering and does not grant him his wish of living a happy life with the young lady he falls in love with, and this is why they break up in the following chapter.

Bras meets Iemanjá again in one of his dreams when he's 38 years old. This time, she gives him a piece of advice that acts like a wake-up call that changes his life. While sitting with him in a boat, in a scene towards the end of the story that reminds readers of Chapter One when Bras meets Iemanjá for the first time, she tells him: "Welcome Bras/ This is your life/ You are this boat floating on an endless ocean/ These baskets contain wishes, desires…/ ...Forces that drive your will to move forward/ However, if you stay here just staring at them.../ ...Sooner or later… They're all going to sink/ In order to go after your dreams---/ --you must live your life/ Wake up before it's too late." (Ba et all 203). The caption at the end of this page says "[a]nd that's how it really began" (Ba et all 203); this wake-up call from Iemanjá is what helped Bras put his life back together and start living instead of dreaming. This merger of reality and imagination is predominant throughout the comics, and its effects are intensified through the nonlinear narrative structure and the colors that create a dreamlike effect throughout, but one willingly suspend disbelief because although the whole narrative resembles a dream, it poses profound questions about the meaning of life and death.

The questions of the interrogative mode on narration, colors, and on the use of magical realism helped in understanding how these different elements work together in *Daytripper* to highlight the main theme.

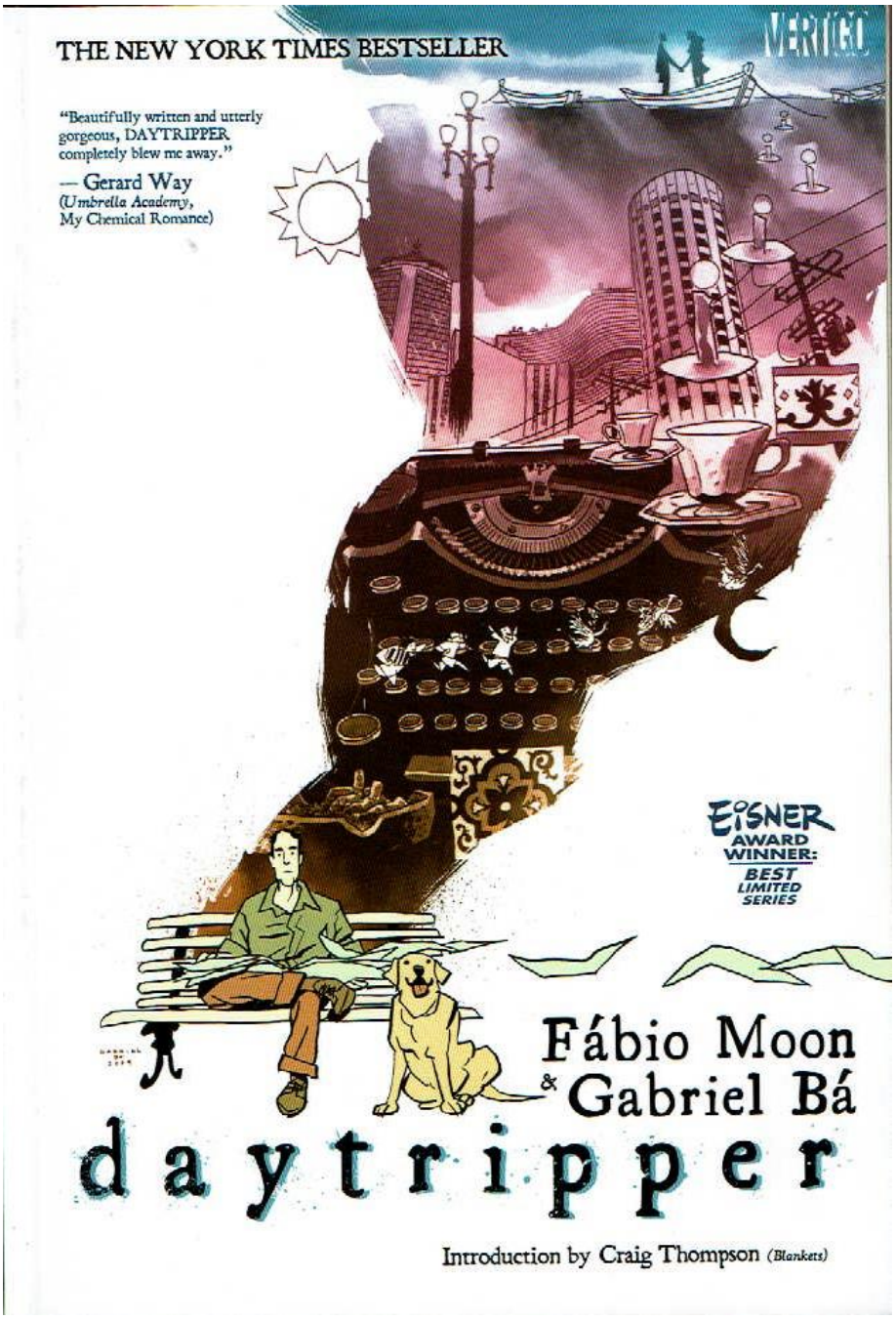


Fig. 56. The front cover of the book-length version of *Daytripper*.

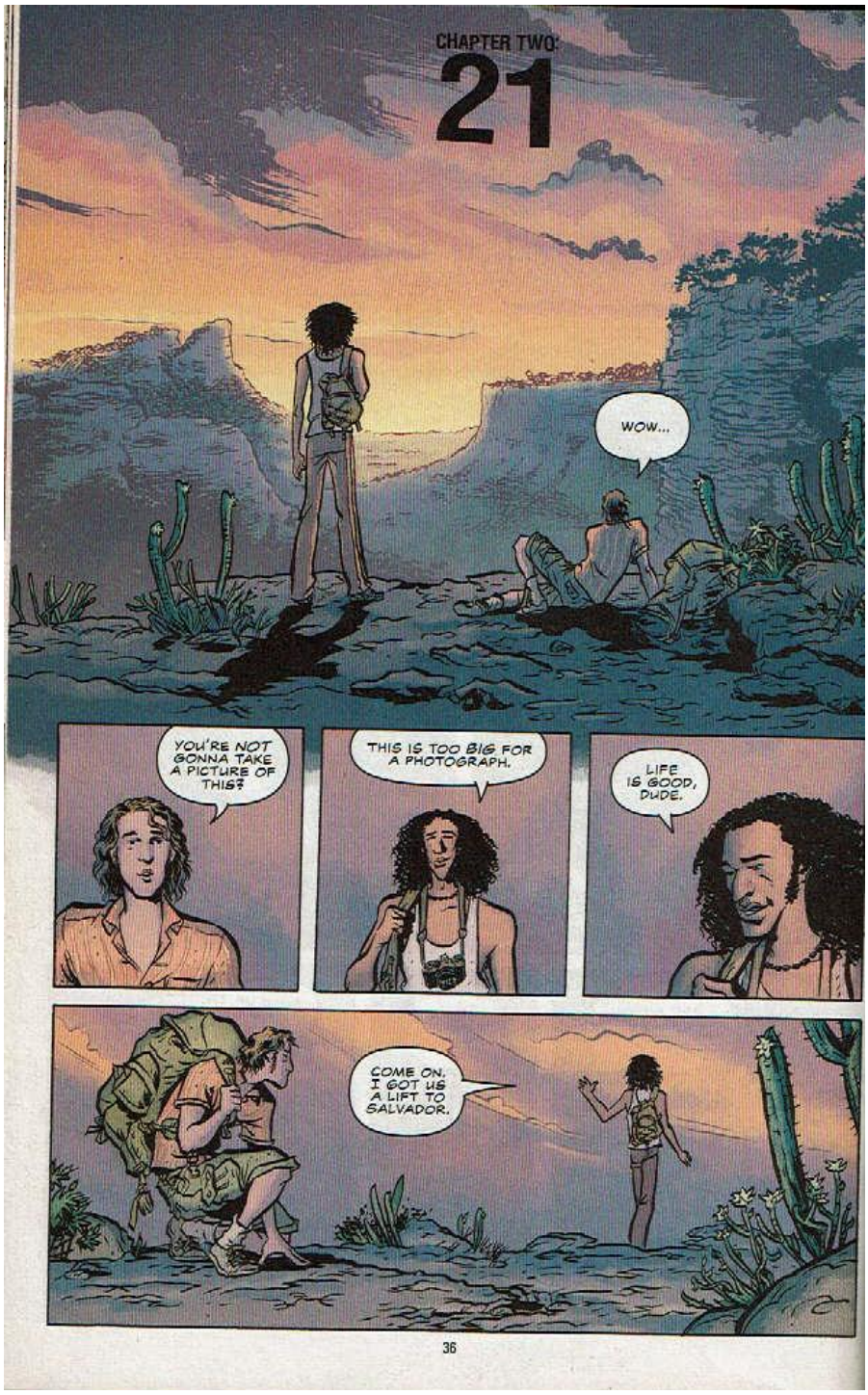


Fig. 57. An excerpt from *Daytripper* that shows how colors play a significant role in giving scenes a certain tone.

Fig. 58. An excerpt from *Daytripper* that shows how a slight difference in tone and brightness gives a new meaning to the same colors.

The Essential Calvin and Hobbes: A Calvin and Hobbes Treasury

The questions of the interrogative mode on the relationships between panel layout and the narrative it encompasses show how *The Essential Calvin and Hobbes*, a collection of Bill Watterson's famous newspaper comics, uses a conventional panel layout for framing nonconventional narratives that are intricate, unlike their traditional containers. Furthermore, answering the interrogative mode questions on the overall relationships between words and images lead to understanding how these comic strips can be understood on two different levels by different audiences: the surface level, which is humorous and simple, and a deeper level that is serious and sophisticated. The "Calvin and Hobbes" comic strips create seemingly childish scenarios, presented through cartoonish drawings and conversations that sound simple and common in a child's world, to ponder profound philosophical and political questions.

The panel layout of "Calvin and Hobbes" strips fits what Benoît Peeters describes as a conventional utilization (Peeters "Four Conceptions"). It follows the traditional conventions of newspaper comics. This makes navigation easy as the same simple pattern is repeated constantly. Like most newspaper strips, the single-tier strips of "Calvin and Hobbes" are read from left to right (see the first tier of fig. 59), and multiple tier Sunday strips follow a smooth Z path reading pattern (fig. 60). This layout that follows traditional standards of newspaper comics rendition matches the content of the panels if one reads them on the surface level as simple narratives that follow a hyper active child, while if one closely examines the questions and the messages that the panels contain, one sees the contrast between the simple rendition of panels and the sophisticated messages of the narratives.

By examining Watterson's drawing without reading the dialogue or trying to infer the main themes of the strips, one can easily assume that the target audience of these newspaper

comics is children under the age of 7, and that the strips are exclusive for that age range and might not really appeal to an audience who is older. The drawing is cartoonish. The characters are unrealistically simplified, and their facial expressions and reactions involve humorous exaggerations, which are characteristics that can appeal to children entertained by funny pictures, even if they cannot read. Both the cartoons and the dialogue in some strips, because of their apparent simplicity, might appeal to grade school children who can read. like the example in fig. 59, in which the following conversation occurs between Calvin and his father as soon as the latter puts Calvin to bed:

Dad: Good night, Calvin.

Calvin: 'Night, Dad!

Hey! Aren't you going to say good night to Hobbes?!

Dad: Good night, Hobbes.

Hobbes: That's it?! No Story? No Smooch??

Calvin: Go to sleep, you sissy (Watterson location 19)

There is nothing too complicated about this conversation. It is simply Calvin asking his dad to say goodnight to his best friend, something that a lot of kids would do. On a deeper level though, this strip potentially reconnects adults with their childhood, a phase they left behind long ago with all of its fantasies, and it allows their grown up selves to examine their child selves from a new, "knowing" perspective. Moreover, there are plenty of other "Calvin and Hobbes" strips, however, that are far more complicated in terms of language and themes that contrast the cartoonish drawings and the seemingly simple conversations. Some of them ask big philosophical questions, including existential questions about life and death. For instance, Calvin tells Hobbes "I wonder where we go when we die." The two spend a long moment of silence to

think (shown through a silent panel that just shows the backs of Calvin and Hobbes), then Hobbes suggests with uncertainty "Pittsburgh?" So Calvin asks "[y]ou mean if we're good or if we're bad?" (Watterson location 35). It takes an adult reader to understand the depth of this question, and the joke that resides in this conversation. What connects the child reader with the adult reader in this case is that both may be asking the same question without reaching an answer that is good enough, and this is how the "Calvin and Hobbes" strips can speak to different generations differently, and can be understood on different levels of sophistication. Children can find something of interest in the drawings, the bright colors of the Sunday strips, and some of the questions that they themselves ask, and adults can find many questions to ponder about childhood vs adulthood, about the meaning of this life, and many more. However, since the main audience that newspapers cater to is adults, the central messages that the strips attempt to convey are always tailored towards that specific audience.

The majority of the strips showcase how "Calvin and Hobbes" can speak to different audiences equally, and contain different levels of sophistication. For instance, in one of the strips, Calvin asks Hobbes "[d]o you believe in fate?" Hobbes responds with a question for clarification -- "[y]ou mean that our lives are predestined?"-- so Calvin says "[y]eah… That the things we do are inevitable", and Hobbes exclaims"[w]hat a crazy thought!"(Watterson location 23). One can hardly imagine that in overhearing a conversation between two children, words like "predestined" and "inevitable", or even the word "fate" itself will be used, unless the children are repeating words/conversations they heard their parents using or having. But a dialogue like this one is more likely to occur between adults. Thus, again, these strips that might be very catchy to the eyes of children speak a language that requires the expertise of adults. The visual-verbal

synergy in these strips fit the child's world that is portrayed, but it contrasts the serious inferred messages that cater to the adult reader.

This level of sophistication of the narratives intensifies when the strips discuss politics. An example of this is a strip in which Calvin, while sitting with his dad at the dining table, says, "[s]omewhere in communist Russia I'll bet there's a little boy who has never known anything but censorship and oppression./But maybe he's heard about America, and he dreams of living in this land of freedom and opportunity!/ Someday, I'd like to meet that little boy.../And tell him the awful truth about this place!!" (Watterson location 97). This is a serious political statement put in the mouth of a child who is never taken seriously. Calvin's dad responds to these words by saying "Calvin, be quiet and eat the stupid lima beans" (Watterson location 97). Statements like this invite a more sophisticated reading of the strips. The relationship between Calvin and his dad in this specific instance can be read as a metaphor of the relationship between the government and its people (which the statement itself hints at) who are not taken seriously or whose opinions are often censored or oppressed. Watterson uses this seemingly childish cartoon world, which has a long history of not being taken seriously by adults, to pass such strong political messages.

The questions of the interrogative mode that are applied to these examples of newspaper strips in *The Essential Calvin and Hobbes* show how the conventional panel layout, the cartoonish drawings that can be viewed as overly simple and childish, and the storyworld that follows an imaginative child who develops an imaginary friend can pose serious irresolvable questions that can puzzle children and adults alike. In these strips layout and form contrasts the themes and the inferred messages.

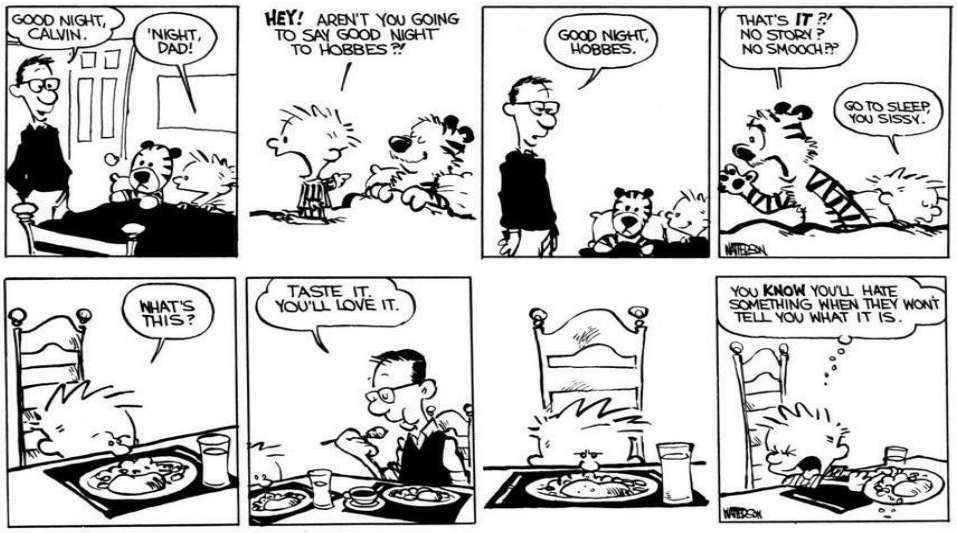


Fig. 59. Single-tier strip of "Calvin and Hobbes".

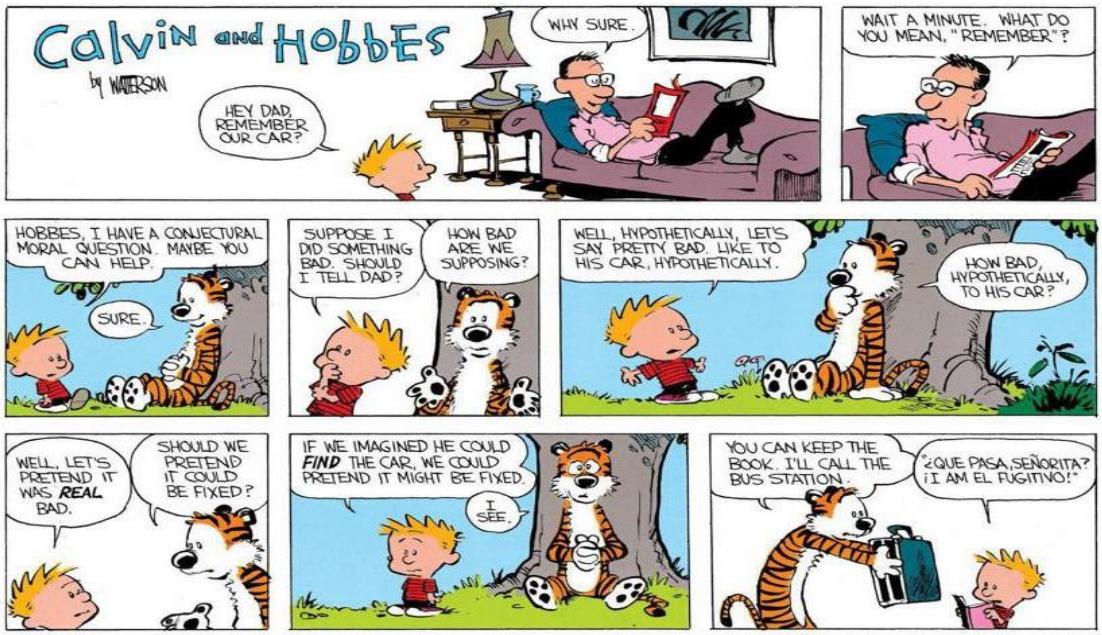


Fig. 60. Multiple-tier Sunday strips of "Calvin and Hobbes".

Qahera

Qahera is a webcomic created in 2013 by Deena Mohammed, an Egyptian female comics artist. This webcomic falls in the category of superhero comics, which urges one to pose the interrogative mode question on how the concept of the superhero is constantly recycled and deconstructed by comics artists. Because *Qahera*'s creator is Egyptian, the question becomes "how is Mohammed's superhero different from/similar to her Western counterparts?" Knowing Mohammed's background also triggers one to follow the interrogative mode's prompt to gather contextual information about the creator and their work as that information can affect one's understanding of the narrative. Moreover, since *Qahera* is a webcomic, the interrogative mode's question on how reading webcomics flouts most of the conventional reading paths that readers know through exposure to print comics, and on whether the comic uses vectors or arrows to guide readers' eyes or not, leads one to discuss the question of whether Mohammed delineates an easy to follow reading path for the readers of her webcomic or not. Mohammed utilizes the web format in a creative way that is worth pondering through the interrogative mode's questions on comparing webcomics to print formats. She makes *Qahera* a conversational webcomic; the webcomic has a comments section in which fans ask Mohammed questions, and she responds to them through in drawing. Most of her responses, as shown below, are comics.

In *Qahera*, Mohammed adopts the Western concept of superheroes and creates an authentically Egyptian superheroine whose power resides in her ability to recognize misogyny, inequality, and oppression, especially when they are disguised in the robes of customs and traditions, and to eliminate them from Egyptian society. The way this webcomic deconstructs and reconstructs the concept of the superhero is one of its most significant features. The superheroine's name in the webcomic is Qahera, which is the Arabic word for Cairo. In Arabic,

the word “Qahera” is a feminine word that means the conqueror, and thus the choice of this name for the superheroine is not random; she is named after her hometown (Cairo), in a way that expresses her femininity and her superpower, as the conqueror of sexism and oppression in all their forms. What makes this superheroine stand out is that she uses the traditional costumes that many Muslim women choose to wear (or are sometimes forced to wear), the Hijab[4] and the Burka[5], as her superheroine costume. Unlike the costumes of Captain Marvel and Wonder Woman, Qahera’s costume is much looser and unrevealing. The most important difference between hers and Western costumes though is that hers has a social and a religious significance. The topic of whether Muslim women are obliged to wear the Hijab or the Burka or not is one of the most controversial topics in the Muslim world. Another characteristic that distinguishes Qahera, in addition to her costume, is that she fights for justice using a sword (fig. 61 and fig. 62). The image of a covered woman holding a sword, if one does not understand the background of Qahera’s creation, can be very easily accused of being an image that reinforces Islamophobia and that participates in the political discourse that labels Muslims as violent terrorists. In contemporary media, Islam is often associated with violence and terrorism, so an uninformed reader who examines Qahera and does not see how Mohammed uses her character to deconstruct this association might think that she reinforces it through the superheroine she presents.

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[4] The hijab is a headscarf that some Muslim women choose to wear in public as part of being modest and pious. They cover their heads with a scarf and they wear loose clothes that cover their bodies completely. The only parts they show are their faces and their hands.

[5] The Burka is thought of by some Muslim women as an advanced form of hijab. In addition to covering the whole body and wearing loose garments, women who wear burka cover their faces with a piece of cloth, and they wear gloves to cover their hands. The only thing they show is their eyes (although some of them cover their eyes too with black mesh). Women who choose to dress like that believe that they reach the highest peak of faith by not allowing any man (other than their husbands, their fathers, their brothers, and their closest relatives) to see any part of their bodies.

Gathering contextual information about the creation of *Qahera* can help one see Qahera, the superheroine, in a different light. Instead of seeing her as a violent terrorist, one can understand how and why her creator meant to portray her as a savior. About the headcover and the sword, in an interview with Deena Mohammed on BBC Radio, Ernie Rea asks her the following question: "Islam portrays itself as a religion of peace, and yet here we have a woman who wields a sword, who brings punishment on people who [do] things that she disapproves of, and I wonder how those things [are] compatible" (Beyond Belief). This is how Mohammed responds to explain her rationale:

> It's important to think of Muslims as just people and not just ambassadors of a religion...To be fair, I don't think anything she does is incompatible with Islam because it is, you know, also part of our religion to fight for justice and fight for your rights and things like that. And so when I gave her a sword, I was literally thinking "I dunno… Deadpool has swords! Let's just give her swords!" But unfortunately a lot of the feedback I got from like Islamophobes and white supremacists was like "SHE HAS A SWORD AND THAT'S REALLY SCARY AND ISLAMIC AND BARBARIC" and I just never like, it never occured to me! (Beyond Belief).

I contacted Mohammed[6] and had an exclusive interview with her in which I asked her a similar question, which is:

> In one of the strips, Layla[7] asks Qahera "why the sword?" This is a question I think that many readers will have. Why the sword and why is Qahera that violent?

[6] Deena Mohammed's email is available on *Qahera*'s website. I contacted her and conducted an interview with her via email in which she provided me with the information that this section presents.

[7] Layla is a character who appears in a few *Qahera* strips.

> And, as often happens, her violence could be linked to some negative views of Islam that claim it's a violent religion that knows nothing but using swords for killing its opponents. How do you respond to all of this? Any why the sword?

This was her answer:

> Here's the thing. I grew up in Egypt. I never actually faced real Islamophobia. I gave her a sword because I was thinking "what weapons do superheroes have" and I was like... swords? spears? Ninja turtle things? This was my real thought process. After the comic spread online, I met real Islamophobia. People who think Muslims just go around with swords. To me, that thought was genuinely absurd. *Qahera* isn't even a violent comic!... It literally uses superhero tropes, and rarely to the lengths actual superhero comics go to. So to see the difference in response has been a master class in how people perceive Muslims and how Islamophobia functions.

Superhero comics, whether starring a male or a female, have a long history of violence, which is one of the reasons why they were censored in the 1950s. However, because superheroes like Superman and Captain America were emblems of the saviors of the nation who guaranteed security, they were still accepted and welcomed by Western audiences despite their violence. Yet, a superheroine like Qahera, who represents a religion that most Western media platforms portray as a threat to the security of Western nations, cannot be easily accepted by a Western audience, even if her violence is mild in comparison to that of the Marvel or DC heroes. *Qahera* sheds light on those double standards, and prompts readers to dig deeper into the concept of superheroism by asking questions about who exactly it represents, who it excludes, who decides whether a specific superhero is violent or not, and whether there is such a thing as "benign

violence". The interrogative mode's question on deconstructing the concept of the superhero leads to these significant observations.

Reading a webcomic like *Qahera* is a unique experience because of the delay in revealing the plot and its major points that happens as a result of reading comics on a screen. Unlike paper comic strips, in which one can typically see an overall picture of several plot points on a single page (or can sometimes see the end of a series of actions), in *Qahera*, the computer screen does not allow one to see the whole picture. It leads one to focus on very few panels at a time, 2 or 3 at most. In order to make connections between actions and plot points, one has to keep scrolling up and down the screen. This delay allows one to spend more time contemplating panels and noticing the work of Mohammed's brush strokes. It also gives readers some time to understand how the action flows and to find a smooth reading path to follow.

To eliminate any confusions about the intended reading path, Mohammed numbers most of her comic strips (see fig. 63), which helps with navigation, especially that there are two versions of this webcomic, an Arabic and an English one. Those who read comics in Arabic are used to seeing them read from right-to-left, which is the direction of writing in Arabic, and to the kind of reverse z path seen in Japanese manga. In the first comic that Mohammed translated from English to Arabic, "On Harassment", she kept the order of the panels intact and only translated the words used in each, but she also added numbers to lead readers to follow a z-path instead of its reverse (fig. 63). With the second translated comic, she abandoned this system and started creating mirror images of the English comics to provide the readers of the Arabic ones with the reverse z-path they expect. She still numbers the panels of most strips though to avoid any confusions. Numbering panels is not confined to Arabic strips though. Mohammed numbers some of her English strips as well to lead her readers' eyes in the direction she designs for them,

especially in cases when she decides to break the basic layout pattern through inserting variations of panel sizes and shapes (see fig. 64).

As mentioned above, Mohammed uses her webcomic as a conversational comic as she corresponds with her fans through it. Digital platforms allow for commenting and posting questions on the fans' end, and responding and interacting with fans on the creator's end. Instead of responding to fans through text, as most creators do on Twitter or through comics' letters pages, Mohammed does something creative with her responses: she draws them. For example, one of the fans wrote that she loves that the protagonist in *Qahera* is a hijabi because this image communicates that hijab protects women from getting sexually harassed. Instead of typing long paragraphs, Mohammed created a comics response (see fig. 66) of 5 panels in which Qahera, the character, explains to the fan that the comics never say that hijab prevents sexual harassment. On the contrary, what does prevent harassment is, according to Qahera, "placing the blame solely on the harasser where it belongs, so they can face social, moral and legal consequences for their actions." Qahera ends this explanatory comic webpage on a light note by saying "and superpowers, I guess" as another means for protecting women from harassment (see fig. 67).

The interrogative mode allows one to see how Mohammed recycles and reconstructs the concept of the superhero in a way that fits her purpose of discussing critical issues in her society, like sexual harassment. It also shows how gathering contextual information about a comic like *Qahera* can help one understand its main character in a different light, especially if the character is presented in a way that can be accused of reinforcing stereotypes and stigmas. Moreover, the interrogative mode helps one understand how Mohammed creates a reading path for her readers in a format that flouts traditional reading patterns, and how she uses the web platform to

communicate with readers through drawing more comics in response to their comments and questions.

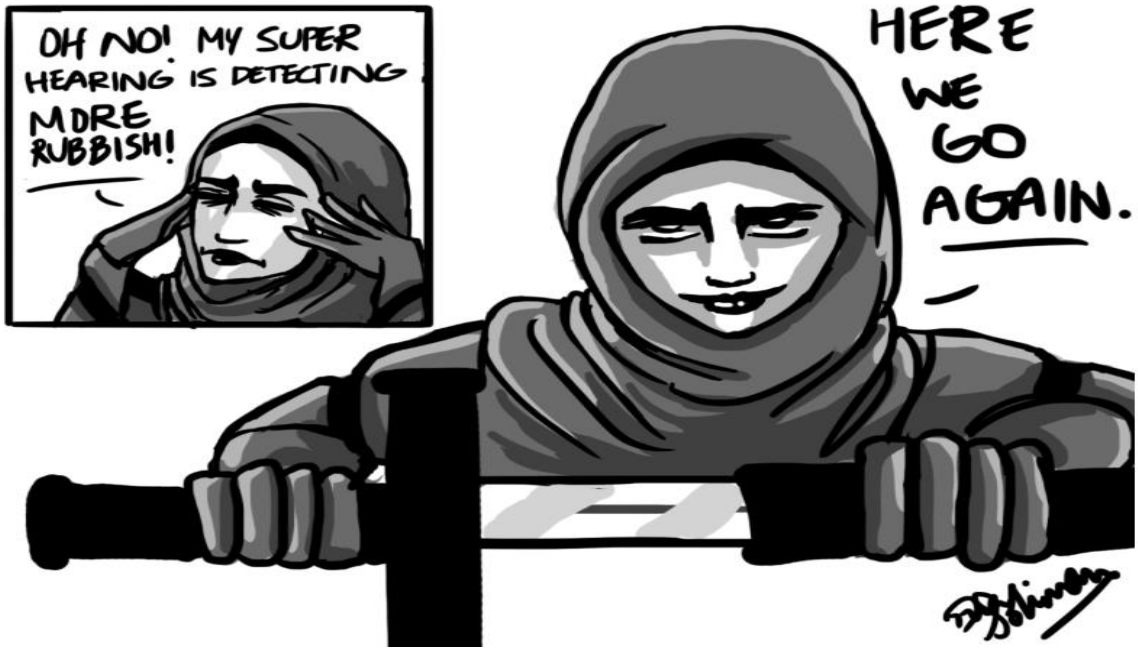

Fig. 61. Qahera fights for justice using a sword.

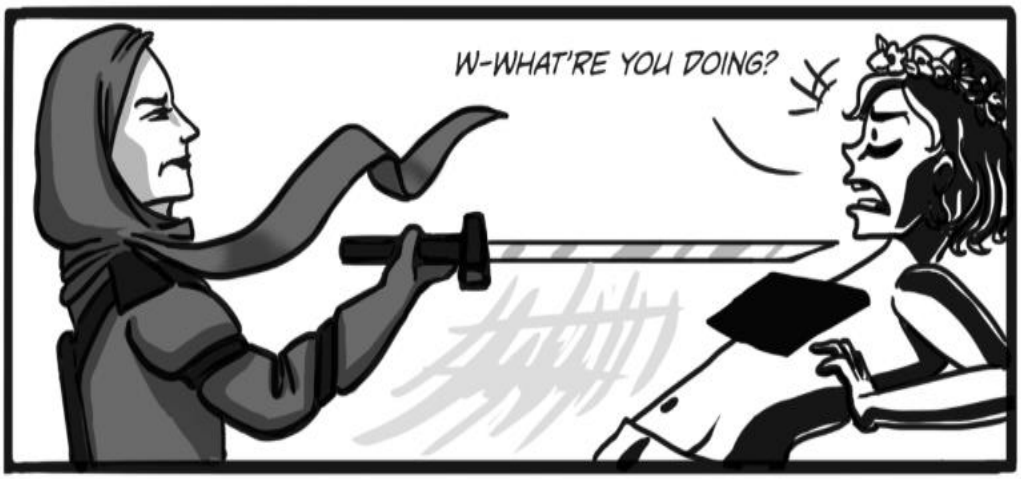

Fig. 62. Qahera fights for justice using a sword.

Fig. 63. Deena Mohammed numbers her panels to help readers navigate her webcomic easily.

Fig. 64. Mohammed numbers both her English and her Arabic webcomics.

Fig. 65. Mohammed breaks the basic layout pattern through inserting variations of panel sizes and shapes.

Fig. 66. Comic response to *Qahera*'s fans.

Fig. 67. Comic response to *Qahera*'s fans.

Almost Silent

Almost Silent is a pantomime comic by the Norwegian comics creator Jason. As the title of this collection indicates, Jason's comics are silent, but not quite. He rarely uses words (dialogue or narration captions) in his comics, if at all. Since the verbal track is absent from the majority of Jason's comic strips, it is important to understand how the narratives and their plots are constructed through images, which urges one to pose the interrogative mode's question on how pantomime comics make meaning and create stories. Furthermore, the interrogative mode quotes Eisner who writes in *Comics and Sequential Arts* that in pantomime comics, it is "the rate of speed at which the action moves [that] FORCES the reader to supply the dialogue" (Eisner 10). Jason's comic strips prove the validity of Eisner's claim, but it also shows that the definitional approach's concept of sequentiality as well as Groensteen's concepts of braiding and arthrology also play a significant role in helping readers supply dialogues to understand narratives. Although *Almost Silent* lacks words, the majority of the strips are humorous, which leads one to discuss the question on where humor emerges from in comic strips that are predominantly visual like Jason's. The interrogative mode helps in finding answers to these questions.

Most of Jason's short strips prove the validity of the definitional approach's notion of sequentiality as most of them are composed of a single tier that contains no more than 3 panels that are set in sequence like the examples in fig. 68 and fig. 69. As mentioned above, Eisner claims that "the rate of speed at which action moves" in pantomime comics forces readers to supply dialogue. This is true in most of Jason's silent comic strips. However, in some examples, especially in narratives that follow a single character, what is missing is not dialogue; it is narration captions that explain the action. In those cases, sequentiality forces readers to supply

narration captions and construct narratives through juxtaposed images. For example, the 2 strips in fig. 68 are short 3-panel strips that contain 3 simple consecutive sequences of action that are juxtaposed, and therefore highlight McCloud's definition of comics. However, sequentiality is not applicable to all of Jason's pantomime comic strips. Many of his longer comics where narratives are spread over more than 2 pages, cannot be understood unless one goes back and forth in the narrative to find the connections between images that hold the narrative together and create meaning. The majority of those longer strips prompt using Groensteen's concepts of braiding and arthrology, and of treating the comic as a network of interdependent relationships, as the best means for understanding narratives. Because Jason's characters look exactly like everyone who lives in their world, sometimes they tend to be visually confusing. Unless one goes back to the very first panel and sees where the story starts and which character exactly it follows or if any characters possess distinctive features, the plot might not make any sense. This is evident in many of the longer stories of the "Meow, Baby!" chapter where, in the first story, all of the characters, mostly birds and dogs, look alike. Reading the panels in sequence in that case does not help in telling them apart. What helps in creating a narrative in one's mind and in understanding its meaning is examining the images very carefully and braiding the different scenes to track where the action starts, where it progresses, and where it ends (if it does). Because Jason creates a web whose threads are spread on different pages in his long strips, the reader undertakes the task of constructing a meaningful narrative through connecting those threads. Therefore, one can understand Jason's pantomime comics through Eisner's concept of the rate of speed at which silent actions move, the definitional approach's concept of sequentiality, and Groensteen's concept of braiding and arthrology that the interrogative mode weaves together.

Jason's comics mostly feature a number of nameless anthropomorphic animals: birds, cats, dogs, wolves, and rabbits. Although they are nameless, most of them have characteristics that readers are familiar with through exposure to literature and popular culture, so even in some cases when the background of the panels they appear in is blank, or when its elements do not belong to a specific world, one can tell which type of storyworlds they belong to. For instance, there is a vampire, a werewolf, a zombie, an angel and a devil, an alien, a caveman, a gangster, and others (fig. 68, fig. 69, and fig. 70). There are characters who do not have roots in pop culture or literature, but their worlds are still known to readers because they stand for certain universal concepts; there is a skeleton and a mummy who are alive and who represent death and the afterlife. Moreover, in some strips, Jason presents well known celebrities or fictional characters (whose names are known to most readers) in a cartoon format, and he creates unexpected storyworlds for them as well as humorous scenarios, like Elvis Presley and Godzilla (fig. 71). Many of the stories that involve those characters are just gags; yet, their jokes are witty and intelligent. They all lead to the question of where humor emerges, and how it is created through images. The answer to this question resides in the images themselves. First, most scenes defy logic and reason, and they give impossible or fantastic responses to some of the hardest questions of life, or its darkest and most mysterious themes. Those responses are always humorous. For example, if one examines fig. 70, where a skeleton is fishing from what looks like a pond, and what he catches is a fish bone. This sequence of images creates humor through building a fantasy world where the skeleton of a dead man would still go fishing after death (possibly out of boredom, or out of hunger), and through presenting a visual joke with a punchline: in the world of the dead, skeletons fish in dead water, and they catch fish bones. Although questions about the afterlife usually lead to sad thoughts, Jason's comics respond to

them in a lighthearted way that escapes all of the common depressing answers, and that makes one laugh about such a serious matter. This echoes what Watterson does in “Calvin and Hobbes” comics where he poses serious existential questions through a funny and inquisitive child.

Another humorous example is the “Godzilla VS. Elvis” strip (fig. 71). Readers come to this comic with a package of what they know about Elvis Presley and the fictional figure Godzilla. The strip challenges everything readers know and it puts Elvis and Godzilla in combat. Against reason and logic, Elvis punches Godzilla in the face, which makes the monster cry like a baby. What completely shatters logic and makes the strip funnier is that Godzilla comes back to the triumphant Elvis, holding the hand of his enormous mother (and it is obvious that it is his mother because of her beautiful done up nails that the last panel shows), and pointing at Elvis, the villain who made baby Godzilla cry, so that the mother takes revenge and ends the fight. Humor in this strip resides in the ability of this sequence of images to revive the child living inside every adult reader. According to Charles McGrath in “Not Funnies” that the interrogative mode quotes, comics “appeal to that childish part of ourselves that delights in caricature” (McGrath “Not Funnies”).Thus, seeing the last scene in which Godzilla resorts to his mother brings back childhood memories that are usually abundant with easy solutions to most problems in life. The adult reader who knows that those solutions would never work with the intense problems of adult life will most probably find Godzilla’s logic absurd, yet funny.

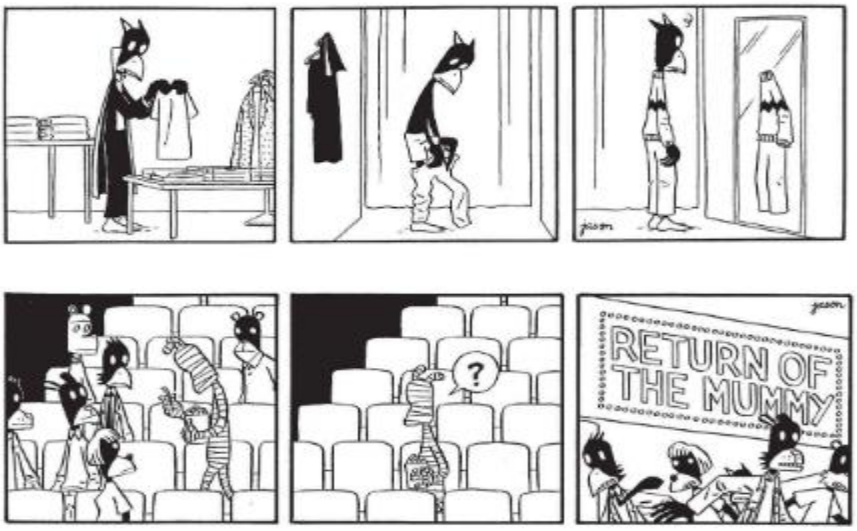

Fig. 68. Single-tier strips that contain 3 panels set in a sequence.

Fig. 69. Jason's single-tier strips that contain 3 panels set in a sequence.

Fig. 70. A sequence of images that creates humor through presenting a visual joke with a punchline.

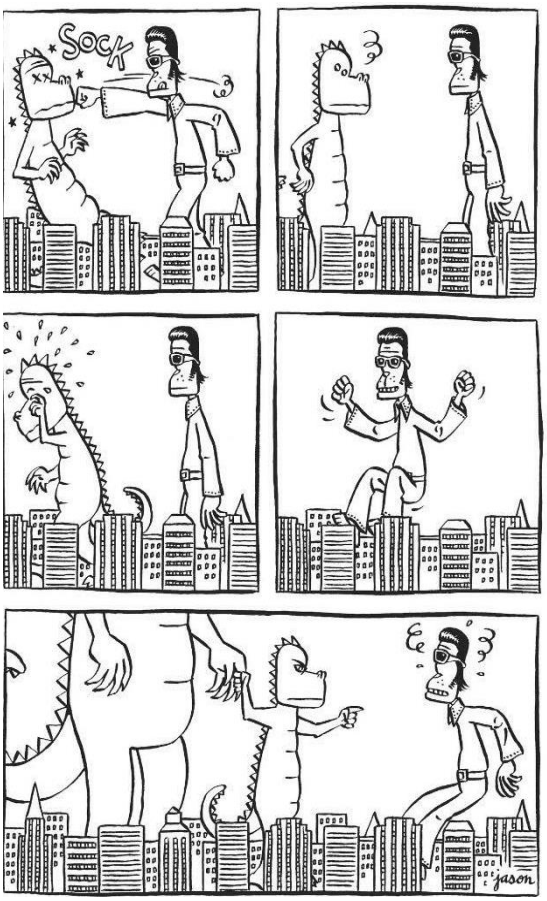

Fig. 71. Jason's "Elvis Vs. Godzilla" humorous strip.

Ms. Marvel Vol.1

The interrogative mode's question on how different comics Creators recycle and reconstruct the concept of the superhero and either change or maintain its conventional attributes for various thematic purposes, helps one understand *Ms. Marvel Vol. 1: No Normal* as its most significant feature is that it creates a superheroine who defies the modern conventions of the superhero genre by reviving the concepts that the original Superman embodied. The interrogative mode also prompts readers to adopt questions, concepts, and/or critical lenses from disciplines other than comics studies to understand and analyze comics that require that. Thus, in the following discussion of *Ms. Marvel Vol. 1: No Normal*, Assef Bayat's definitions of Neo-Orientalism and "Orientals" are used for understanding the nonconventional superheroine that the comic presents.

"The Superman exists, and he is American." (Moore & Gibbons). Many comics readers will remember this quote from Alan Moore's and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen*. These words go beyond the storyworld of *Watchmen* though, as they accurately describe what most American comics communicated before the intervention of creators who reconstructed the concept of the "superhero", broadened the inclusiveness of what the word "American" means, and even challenged the long held notion that the superman *must* be American. G. Willow Wilson is one of the leaders in this direction. Her comics pose the question "what if?" in various ways. What if the superhero genre was not limited to the adventures of the white hero/heroine who owned and dominated the medium since the 1930s? What if the superhero genre broadens the spectrum of the political issues it discusses by including the voices of minorities? Wilson uses fantasy in the *Ms. Marvel* comic book series of 2014 to subtly pose political questions in order to defy today's neo-Orientalist thinking, to prompt readers to question and rethink the notion of the superhero

(both characters and the genre at large), and to showcase the vast capabilities of comics as a medium that allows authors and illustrators to embody and concretize what seems politically impossible in life. *Ms. Marvel Vol. 1: No Normal* deconstructs the concept of the superhero as most readers know it.

Kamala Khan in *Ms. Marvel Vol. 1: No Normal* can be categorized as an oriental superhero. In order to understand the subversive messages that the creation of this character communicates, one must adopt the label 'oriental' for describing her instead of any of today's widely known and more accepted national affiliations. This is because the terms "oriental" and "orient" were historically used by Westerners to paint all of the countries of the East with the same brush. According to sociologist Asef Bayat:

> [i]n the classical 19th century Orientalism, the Orient…was presented as essentially monolithic, fundamentally static, and basically traditional society and culture. The Orient was then a 'peculiar' entity, a universe essentially 'different' from the West; it was exotic and feminine, irrational and emotional, despotic and basically inferior to the West. A fixed and unchanging Islam stood as the key determinant of the Orient's culture and society. Engrained in the people's psyche, such Islam shaped Muslims' values and day-to-day conducts, ensuring a fundamental cultural uniformity and a spectacular historical continuity throughout the Muslim world (Bayat "Neo-Orientalism")

Bayat clarifies that in that earlier period, "[e]ven though the Orientals were 'strange', 'emotional', or 'irrational', they were still harmless" (Bayat "Neo-Orientalism). Today, in the age of globalization and increasing cultural hybridity, this image of "Orientals" has not vanished; it has actually become associated with worse values. Bayat states that:

> [i]n [the] current neo-Orientalist imagination, the Muslim Orientals are not only trapped in archaic traditions, a frozen history and irrational behavior; they are, far from being exotic or benign; dangerous; they are threats to the cultural values, civilizational integrity, and the physical well-being of the West… [although they] have become part of the social and cultural fabric of the Western nations…the 'natives' look at them in apprehension as being here with us, in our backyard, menacing our well-being (Neo-Orientalism)

This neo-Orientalist image is what Wilson challenges in *Ms. Marvel*. In Vol. 1: *No Normal* (2014), Wilson introduces the oriental superheroine Kamala Khan, whose personal qualities and characteristics object to the conventional connotations of the label 'oriental'. In collaboration with editors Sana Amanat and Stephen Wacker, and illustrator Adrian Alphona (penciller), Wilson gives superpowers to an American-Pakistani teenager, a Muslim girl in Jersey City, New Jersey. Kamala uses the teachings of her conservative family and verses from the Koran to justify heroic acts of saving those in need. The imaginary world of *Ms. Marvel* allows a brown Muslim girl to have a significant role in her society, a role that she might be deprived of in reality because of familial, religious, and political restrictions.

Wilson starts the first volume of the *Ms. Marvel* series with a short interaction between Kamala and her foil, Zoe Zimmer, a popular, white high school girl with a snobbish attitude who bullies most of her school mates, especially the nonwhites. Zoe is portrayed as a character who does not respect cultural differences, and who can easily base her harsh criticism of someone on their ethnic identity. When Kamala sneaks out of her house to attend a mixed-gender high school party with the cool kids (which her father would never allow her to attend), Zoe publicly shames Kamala for her cultural traditions, and makes fun of her family. Although Kamala could have

hated Zoe for that and could have decided to take revenge as soon as Captain Marvel grants her extraordinary superpowers, Kamala decides to choose kindness over righteousness, which is what the holy Koran teaches her as a Muslim, and what her dad tells her in order to instill noble Islamic values in her character. When she becomes the new Ms. Marvel, the first person that Kamala rescues is Zoe. As soon as she sees Zoe on the verge of falling in the Hudson River (fig. 72), Kamala immediately thinks to herself "[t]here is this ayah from the Quran that my dad always quotes when he sees something bad on TV. A fire or a flood or a bombing/ "Whoever kills one person, it is as if he has killed all of mankind—/ "And whoever saves one person, it is as if he has saved all of mankind/ When I was a little kid, that always made me feel better" (location 32). As she rushes to get Zoe out of the water, Kamala adds [b]ecause no matter how bad things get/ There are always people who rush in to help/And according to my dad…/ … They are blessed" (location 33). By displaying Kamala's motives as such, and showing how the core of her creed and her upbringing lead to kindness and forgiveness, Wilson rectifies the image of the ethnic minorities that has been distorted by the neo-orientalist notions imposed on readers through different media and institutions. This representation of the oriental superhero urges readers to reconsider the image many of them may have about people around them who have oriental roots, and to not base their judgement on preconceived notions.

Wilson did not reinvent the wheel though by creating Kamala. On the contrary, she did something very similar to what the first superhero creators aimed at achieving through their comics, which is to create an extraordinary identity for ordinary people who may seem invisible in real life. According to the documentary *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked*, "In 1938, the first and greatest superhero of them all, Superman" was created by two 17 year old Jewish kids from Cleveland, Ohio, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, who were obsessed with science fiction and

who dreamed of "fame and fortune" (Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked). "Many years later, Jerry Siegel wrote about his inspiration. He recalled 'I had crushes on girls who didn't care I existed, so it occurred to me, what if I was really terrific, jumping over buildings and throwing cars around" (Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked). This statement may seem shallow, but in fact, it highlights the satisfaction that both Siegel and Shuster gained by creating a character who was admired by the entire country, which is something none of the two young men could achieve in real life as their Jewishness, at the time, was an obstacle in their way to success and to attaining respect. Wilson took it upon herself to give Muslim women and girls this same satisfaction that Siegel and Shuster gained through seeing their cultural identities manifested in the form of a superhero. Superman was an alter ego for both Siegel and Shuster through which they experienced the impossible and obtained the unattainable. Similarly, Kamala Khan is meant to represent the powerful alter ego that provides underprivileged groups an authority that many of them are denied access to for political reasons. Through Kamala, Wilson raises the following question: what can possibly happen if traditionally hidden or silenced characters penetrate the superhero world and are granted powers that render them superior, at least once?

The superhero genre, with its invincible heroes, started off as a hub for the disadvantaged. Thus, what Wilson does is not quite a redefinition of what the genre and its characters originally represented; it is a deconstruction of the current definition that overlooks the history of superhero comic books and its creators' motives. What Wilson does is literally bringing the genre and its heroes home. Yes, the genre always represented privileged white supermen and women, yet when one digs deep into the details of constructing those heroes, or the particulars of the lives of their creators, one finds that, in several cases, the concept of the superhero was meant to empower the weak. As the *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked*

documentary suggests "if you go behind the mask and beneath the cape, you'll see a more complicated story" (Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked). For instance, very few readers associate Superman with the story of immigrants who left their countries and came to America seeking a better life. However, Michael Chabon, the author of *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, classifies Superman as an emblem of immigrants. He explains "Superman comes from this other place to America. He can never go back there. It's been destroyed very much as the Europe that especially the European Jews left behind was eventually destroyed… Even if you don't look at him as an allegory of the immigrant, he is an immigrant. He did come to America and he did make good" (Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked). This is further evidence that the concept of the superhero was not intended to be confined to a certain dominant group. What happened is that the notions that it stands for changed over time with the abundance of comic book creations that portrayed a wide variety of characters. This is why Wilson calls through her comics for questioning and rethinking the contemporary definition of the superhero. Superhero comics have always been home for raising political questions and responding to political incidents. The late Stan Lee stated that comics in the 30s and the 40s were overtly political, and they started their own political fights on the comics page that the American government was not involved in, or at least not yet. He says "we were fighting Hitler before our government was fighting Hitler… we could just see what a menace Hitler was" (Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked). The *Comic Book Superheroes* unmasked documentary supports Lee's statement by telling the audience that "[a]lthough America wasn't involved in World War I in Europe, many superheroes were" (Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked). It also tells the story of how the creators of Superman "thought the man of steel could stop the war in two pages. In a special story for *Look* magazine in February 1940, Superman simply grabs Hitler and his then

ally Stalin and drops them off at the League of Nations. End of story. End of War." (Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked).

Like her predecessors, Wilson uses the medium of comics, especially the superhero genre, to not only raise political questions, but also to create a world in which the political issues that seem impossible to solve in reality can be solved and transcended. Through Kamala, Wilson dismantles the identity crisis that many second generation ethnic Americans suffer from. Like Kamala, they are a group that is torn between adhering to their cultural and familial values and meeting the expectations of the American society they live in that has its own cultural values. They are defined by their cultural hybridity that makes them have one foot in each camp, which is hard and sometimes exhausting. Through the fantasy inherent in comics, Wilson portrays this cultural hybridity as the source of Kamala's strength. After a long period of struggling to find who she wants to be, Kamala realizes that there is nothing better than embracing her identity and being herself as this is what makes her unique and what gives her true power. She discovers that true happiness is not in adopting a different identity that changes who she is; true happiness resides in doing good deeds as her religion and her family teach her. When she is initially transformed into the blonde Ms. Marvel who rescues Zoe Zimmer, Kamala thinks to herself

> being someone else isn't liberating/ It's exhausting/ I always thought that if I had amazing hair, if I could pull off great boots, if I could fly—/—That would make me feel strong. That would make me happy. But the hair gets in my face, the boots pinch/—and this Leotard is giving me an epic wedgie/ What made me happy…/What made me happy was seeing Zoe take a breath of air. Even though she makes everyone feel like crap…/… I'm glad I was there. I'm glad she lived (Wilson vol. #1)

Wilson's comic offers a solution to shows ethnic minorities that they should not strive to physically change who they are. They should, however, aim to be the best versions of themselves and to do good, even to those who they may consider enemies. Through the Kamala/ Zoe plot, Wilson concretizes the possibility of reconciliation between seemingly opposing poles.

Fig. 72. The scene where Kamala helps Zoe in *Ms. Marvel #1*.

I Remember Beirut

The interrogative mode can help one understand the drawing style in *I Remember Beirut*. The question on describing the drawing style, interpreting its effect, and finding out whether it serves the narrative, leads one to see how Zeina Abirached's simple drawing matches and reflects her work's main theme: recollecting and archiving her childhood memories of war. In one of its questions, the interrogative mode quotes Hillary Chute who writes in *Graphic Women* that in graphic memoirs that are extracted from memory, images "appear in fragments, just as they do in actual recollection; this fragmentation, in particular, is a prominent feature of traumatic memory" (Chute 4). Based on this quote, the interrogative mode asks "if the work you are examining presents a narrative extracted from memory, how is memory delineated?" Memory in Abirached's memoir, as discussed below, is presented through a stream of consciousness technique; it is fragmented, and narration in the entire comic is nonlinear. She has a unique way of expressing traumatic memories, and of defining the concept of survival. The interrogative mode also asks one to gather contextual information about Creators and their works. Knowing that Abirached's native language is Arabic leads to pose a question about the significance of writing this comic in French then translating it into English.

Zeina Abirached's graphic memoir *I Remember Beirut* presents a collection of images accompanied by brief narration tags and short dialogues that concretize Abirached's childhood memories. In this memoir, Abirached connects with her childhood self to portray her visual recollections through a child's perspective. Because all of the memories are filtered through a child's eye, Abirached's drawing style throughout is mostly quite simple. Although this style is innovative in many ways, one can very easily detect the traces of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* in the drawings of *I Remember Beirut*. Yet, Abirached's style is much simpler. Her cartoons are not

very detailed, and they are nonrealistic. She draws herself, her family, people in her neighborhood, objects, and the backgrounds of panels, in an uncomplicated manner using simple lines, dots, circles, ovals, and a variety of very basic shapes (fig. 73). She even uses stick figures in some panels, especially the ones through which she shows readers a certain scene from a distance. There are very few instances in the narrative where her drawings are more sophisticated than the childish drawings that dominate the narrative, and those occur when, for instance, she depicts the tapestries that were hung on the walls of her childhood home, patterns on balcony curtains, and patterns on wallpaper. The tapestries and the wallpaper are a recurrent motif in this comic. They seem to be the two most memorable visuals from the childhood home that Abirached remembers with their minutest details. To a child, they represent some elements that are part and parcel of the composition of the family house, but to the adult, they represent home. They represent the place she used to live in during the Lebanese Civil War that Abirached was born in the middle of, in 1981.

Although this comic focuses on wartime, none of Abirached's images portray violence. The family and the children are sheltered and protected within the walls of their house. Whenever the war intensifies, the family packs its suitcases and travels to other parts of Beirut, or even outside the country as Abirached shows. Although violence is not depicted, as the child did not witness it, the images of this comic embody trauma through zooming in on both the mundane and ordinary moments in the child's life that the family enjoyed because they occurred despite the war, as well as the unpleasant moments that the family had to cope with and to consider ordinary in order to survive. For example, in spite of the war and everything that was happening outside their house, young Abirached and her little brother still got some snippets of ordinary life every once in a while and lived like normal kids some days. This is evident in a

scene where they are just being kids; they insist on watching cartoon on TV although it is their bedtime (fig. 74). Like what happens between most parents and kids, Abirached's father keeps repeating "[k]ids, I said bedtime!", and the kids won't listen. Little Abirached says "[b]ut Daaaaad! The robot's on!", and her brother says "pleeeeeese?" (Abirached 17). Those moments that kids living in ordinary circumstances might take for granted are much more valuable and extraordinary for children, like the Abiracheds in the story, who do not have the same luxuries due to the war. On the following page, the two kids are still sitting in the living room in front of the TV, but the room goes totally dark, and the TV switches off. The caption says "I remember blackouts too" (Abirached 18), which is proof that during war, those moments of joy were always temporary and had to be enjoyed for as long as they lasted, which was not long.

Moreover, an example of how the family had to accept unpleasantries because at wartime they have no choice is a part in which Abirached shares the memory of her brother who, instead of collecting toys and playing with them like kids his age, has been collecting shrapnel throughout wartime. Whenever he leaves the house, Abirached's brother asks the neighbors if they have shrapnel that he could add to his collection (fig. 75). In the child's eye, this collection is "pretty" (Abirached 39), as shown in fig. 75, while for adults reading this comic, seeing a child collecting shrapnel is quite sad and it shows how wars ruin childhood, even for the kids who survive. The family just lets their kid collect shrapnel because they know they cannot change the situation and provide their kids with a better life in which they can play with actual toys. They have to accept the status quo, and as long as they are not in danger, those little things don't matter.

On some pages of this memoir, Abirached neither draws people nor writes a single word; she just draws a single object or a couple of artifacts that, in spite of their simplicity, convey

powerful messages. For example, to say that the Lebanese civil war caused total destruction and left a sense of loss in her own neighborhood, she neither describes the atrocities of that event through words nor does she show horrific scenes of the aftermath through drawing. She simply presents totally blank black pages in the middle of the narrative, then in the following pages, she adds single objects in white against the black background to highlight the things she misses the most after the destruction as well as the things she remembers the most. In general, blank black pages are meaningless; they represent nothingness. However, in this specific memoir, they are very meaningful. They represent the long days of total darkness that Abirached's family experienced, physically and emotionally. *I Remember Beirut* is drawn and colored in black and white, like many comics. However, black is the predominant color throughout. Unlike most black and white comics whose panel backgrounds are mostly white, the majority of panel backgrounds in this comics are black, which matches the main themes of the work: war, fear, loss, darkness, and vulnerability.

Narration in this comic resembles the work of memory, as it too is nonlinear. Unlike many graphic memoirs that resemble diaries in their use of dates or in showing a linear progression of action, Abirached presents disconnected snapshots that sum up her childhood. Every brief memory she recounts begins with a narration caption on the top of the page, or on the top of a panel in the middle of the page, that says "I remember". Some examples are: "I remember when there was no electricity or gas, we used kerosene for heating" (Abirached 19),"I remember that during the war, my father got into the habit of cranking up the volume on his music/ I remember assuming that he cranked up the volume in order to drown out the chaos outside"(Abirached 29-30), and "I remember our teachers were as scared as we were" (Abirached 36). Most of the memories are fragmented and scattered. However, in some scenes,

Abirached changes her narration style and moves to a stream of consciousness technique, which she uses to contrast a happy childhood memory with a sad one associated with the war. For example, in one scene the narration caption says "I remember how to fold a paper boat:" (Abirached 56), and the entire page below this caption is what Chris Gavaler classifies as "a full-page panel." This full-page panel shows the reader, through visual instructions, how a paper boat is folded (fig. 76). The following page starts with a narration caption that says "I remember the boat that we took in 1989 to go to Cyprus" (Abirached 57). This caption shows only the feet of some passengers waiting at what looks like a port to get on board a big boat. This juxtaposition that the stream of consciousness narrative technique shows how it is hard for Abirached, the adult, to dissociate the memories of the hardships of the war that led to escaping home frequently, from the memories of the activities she enjoyed as a child.

The traumatic memories of the war stay with Abirached for years, beyond surviving the war. The events that she and her family cope with during the war and consider mundane to survive haunt her for life when the war ends. Towards the end of the narrative, readers see a much older Abirached who has left Beirut and who lives with her lover in Paris in 2008. The scene begins with a narration tag that reads "I remember the noise of bombing" (Abirached 88). The page below the caption is a full-page panel that shows Abirached and her lover in bed. Twenty-three years after the war, Abirached hears some sounds outside the window, so she shivers, gets closer to her lover, and hides under the sheet to take shelter (fig. 77). Her lover tells her "Hush, Now… It's just a storm/ Go back to sleep, baby" (Abirached 88). This scene brings up the question of survival. Does surviving mean not being killed or wounded in war? Abirached subtly answer this question in this scene which shows that people like her with PTSD relive traumatic events every time something triggers the memories of their horrible experiences. To

the world, the Lebanese civil war ended in 1985, but to Abirached, the war never ends. It remains in her memory, which hurts. Physical wounds can heal, even if the healing process takes a while, but emotional wounds can sometimes be much harder to cope with.

By sharing the memories of the Lebanese war in this comic, Abirached does not present a historical account that depicts a significant historical event. *I Remember Beirut* is more of a familial history than a national one. Unlike Spiegelman's *Maus* that archives a second hand experience, Abirached archives a personal history that she experienced herself. It resembles a photo album that compiles unforgettable moments in the lives of the four members of the Abirached family and their neighbors during the war, then the focus shifts to Zeina Abirached alone as she leaves the family home and lives in Paris. Although Abirached's native language is Arabic, she wrote *I Remember Beirut* in French, which is the language of her education. When it was translated, it was translated into English, but never into Arabic as, according to Abirached, in Lebanon, "comics are not commonly seen as a medium for serious subjects" (therumpus.net). The availability of *I Remember Beirut* in English and French allows the comic about the Lebanese Abirached family to travel the world and become a universal story. What pays homage to her nation though is that Abirached still includes Arabic words and phrases here and there in her memoir, which shows that the Arabic language with its cultural package are an integral part of Abirached's memory. In this comic, she stores Arabic in an international archive.

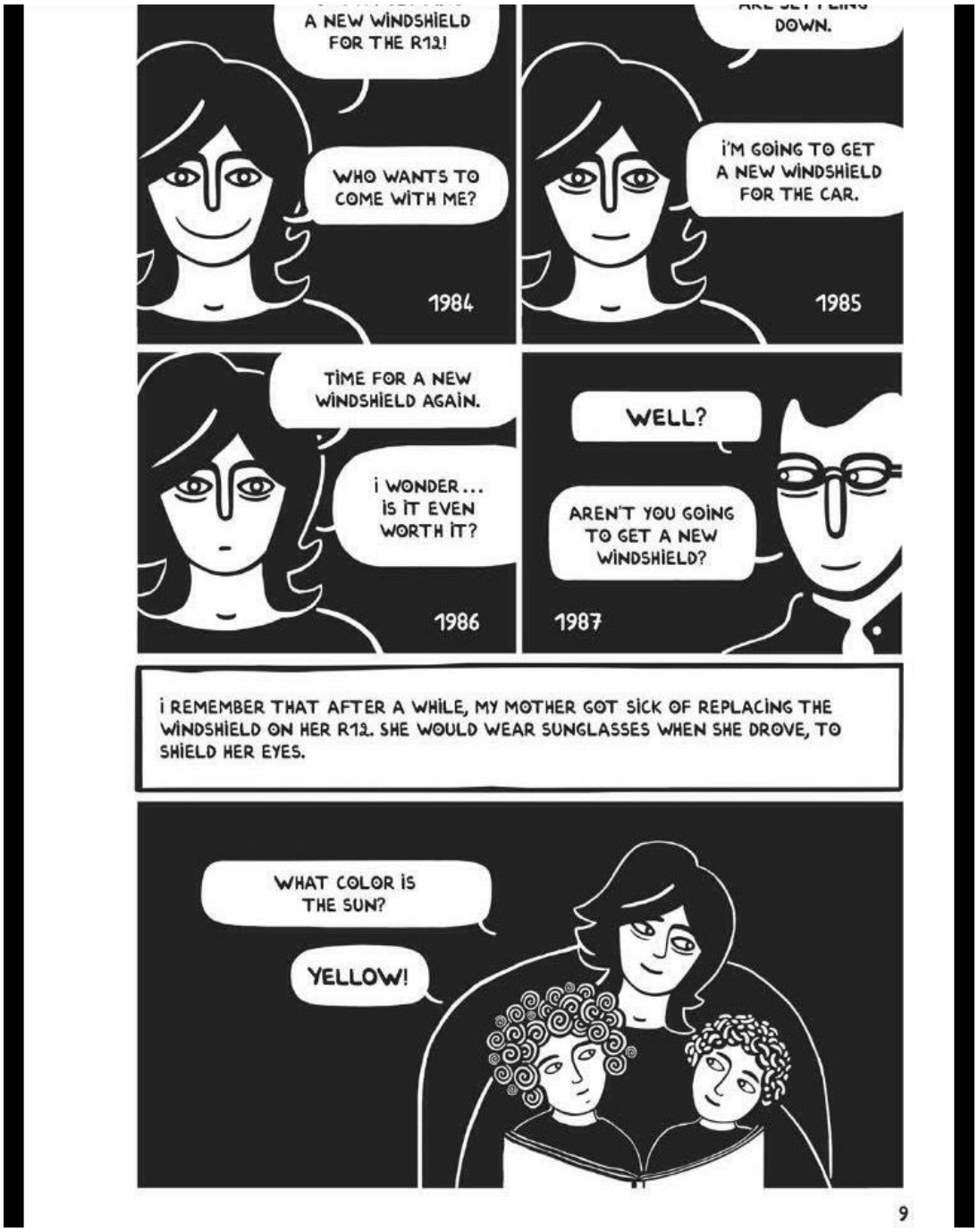

Fig. 73. Zeina Abirached uses very basic shapes to delineate complex subjects and figures.

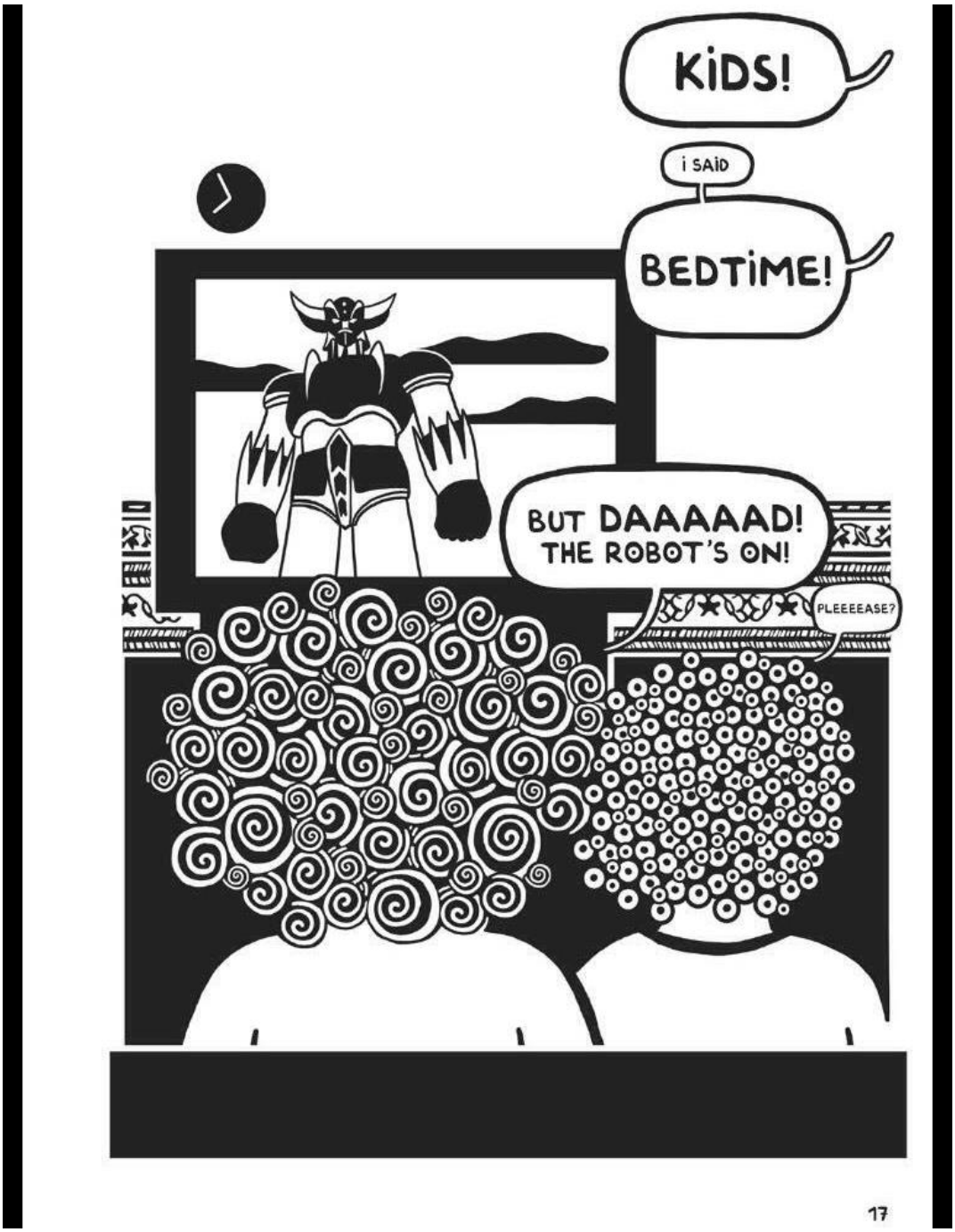

Fig. 74. A scene that represents Abirached's childhood memories during the war in *I Remember Beirut.*

Fig. 75. A scene from *I Remember Beirut* in which Abirached's brother collects shrapnel to add to his collection.

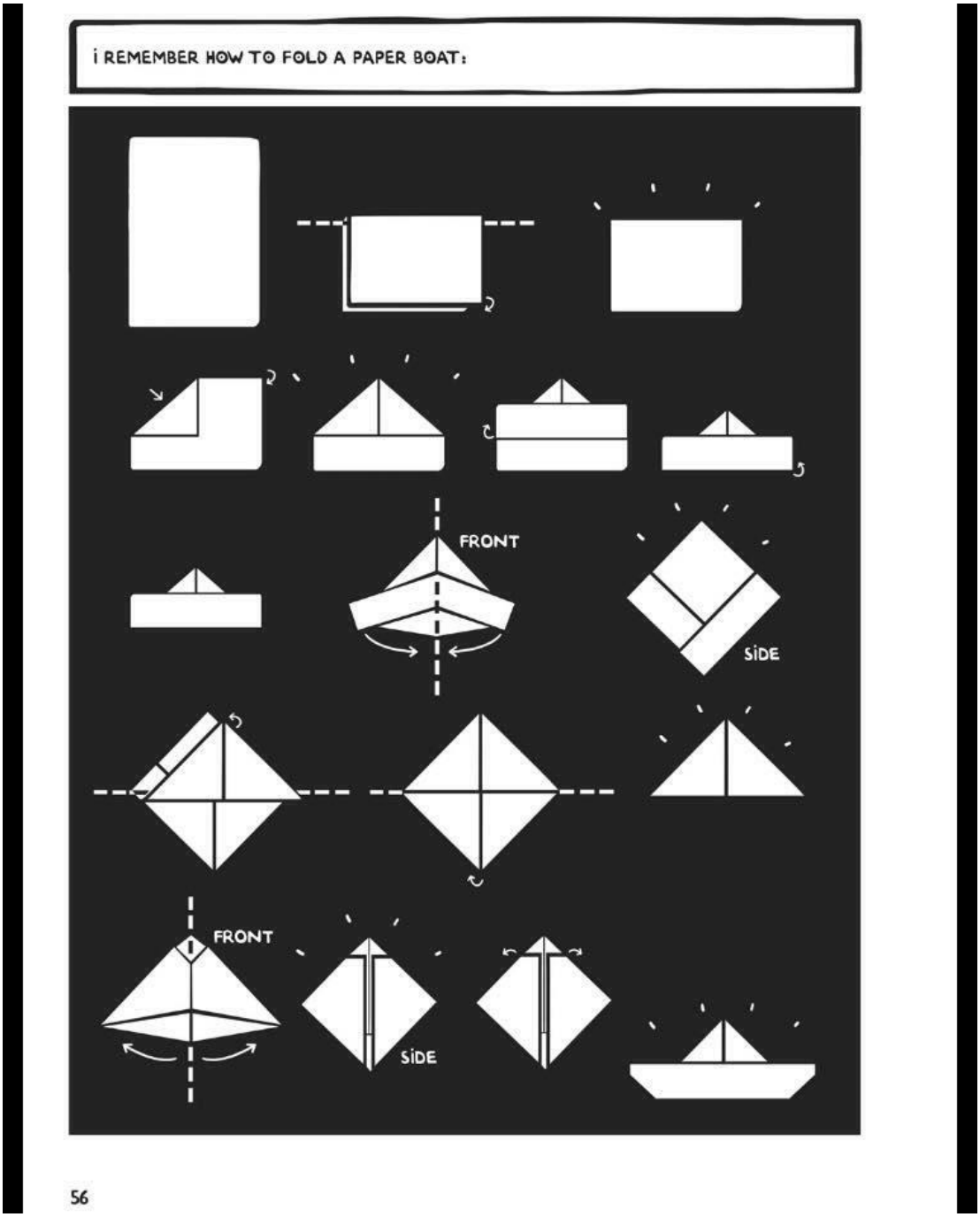

Fig. 76. Abirached presents her memory of making paper boats to connect it to the theme of travelling later in the narrative.

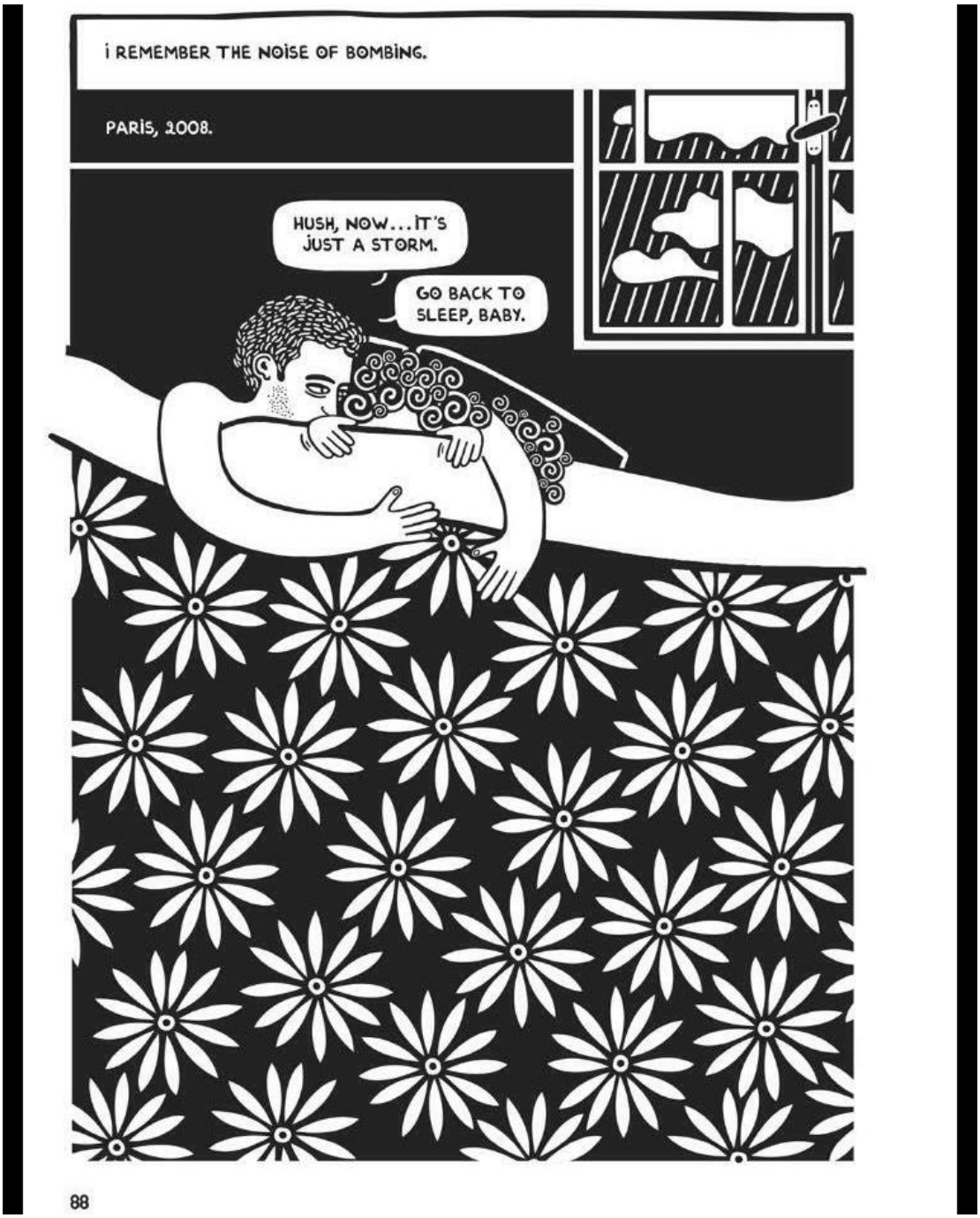

Fig. 77. A scene in *I Remember Beirut* that introduces Abirached's PTSD.

Buddha Vol. 1

Buddha is a manga series created by Japanese cartoonist Osamu Tezuka. This critique examines Vol. 1: *Kapilavatsu*, the first book in the series. Several elements that constitute this comic can be understood through answering the questions of the interrogative mode. First, answering the questions in the section on the inferred content, especially the ones about the overarching themes and the subthemes and how they are visually and verbally presented leads one to see that the main themes in Tezuka's comic are inequality, classicism, and discrimination. The subthemes, that are presented visually and verbally are the Buddhist themes of impermanence, interconnectedness with nature, and the futility of war and violence. Second, the questions on genre and subgenres, and on how some creators cross genre borders and create hybrid genres leads to understanding how Tezuka takes the real story of Siddhartha Gautama and creates a new version of it that can be categorized as historical fiction as well as fantasy literature. Third, the questions that present Cohn's suggested reading strategies helps one see how this comic in its current form flouts most of the conventional reading paths. Fourth, the questions that introduce readers to the different categories of page and panel layouts, which quote Gavaler and Peeters, guide the process of analyzing Tezuka's rhetorical utilization of panel layouts, especially irregular layouts, to fit his narrative that is abundant in rapid action and movements. Fifth, the interrogative mode's question on categories of panels in manga, as presented by Cohn in "Japanese Visual Language" facilitates interpreting the rhetorical effects of Tezuka's utilization of macros, monos, micros, and polymorphics. Finally, answering the question on the source of humor in comics shows how Tezuka creates comic relief that juxtaposes the serious focus of the narrative, which is the theme of discrimination.

The title of Tezuka's series implies that the main focus of this comic is the story of the life of Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism universally known as Buddha. The first volume of the comic, however, starts before the birth of Siddhartha. Tezuka presents in *Kapilavastu* his own interpretation of life in ancient India before Buddha came to the world. He shows how the Aryans created a society that was characterized by classism and inequality, which entailed the birth of a savior who could lead the oppressed and who could teach them how to cope with the status quo. The society was divided into the Brahmin, or is the highest class that constitutes "the leaders of the society" who considered themselves "the purest of blood" (Tezuka 11), and "underneath them the Brahmin created classes like 'warrior,' 'commoner,' and 'slave,' introducing discrimination among fellow humans" (Tezuka 12). Tezuka takes those themes of inequality, classism, and discrimination and makes them the overarching themes of vol.1, dwelling on them throughout the narrative to emphasize the necessity of change and redemption.

This narrative fits the category of "multiple-focus narratives," which Rick Altman defines as narratives that follow several characters (Altman 241). Tezuka creates a number of fictional characters in *Kapilavastu* to tell this story of inequality and oppression. What the comic presents is historical fiction that fuses a true story with fantasy and adventure of Tezuka's creation. The main fictional characters that *Kapilavatsu* follows are Chapra, a slave of the shudra caste who attempts to change his social status and to become a skillful warrior; Tatta, a young thief of the lower pariah caste who is engaged with nature and has the ability to possess animals and birds; Naradatta, a monk who is sent by his master Asita at the beginning of the narrative to find a man who has the power to save the world, but Asita is cursed at the end of the narrative and he gets transformed into an animal as a punishment for killing numerous animals just to save one person. Although the narrative focuses mainly on these characters, it gives readers snippets

and snapshots from the castle of King Suddhodana where Prince Siddhartha (Buddha) was born. Tezuka's aim is not simply to retell history through fictional tropes. Rather, he utilizes a familiar story to shed light on important Buddhist themes. Besides the overarching themes of classism and inequality that he condemns throughout the narrative, Tezuka discusses impermanence, interconnectedness with nature, and the futility of war and violence. Through the character of Chapra who succeeds at climbing the social ladder and becoming a soldier, then loses the high status he gained through deception, Tezuka concretizes the Buddhist theme of impermanence in life and underscores the notion of constant change. He also defies essentialism and the idea that if one is born into a certain class, one has to remain in it until death. Through the characters of Tatta and Naradatta, through anthropomorphism (as all of the animals in the narrative have human attributes), and through scenes in which nature takes revenge due to the recklessness of humans, Tezuka points out that all living organisms are interdependent and emphasizes the importance of creating ecological balance to avoid crises that can affect man and nature alike. The pointless battles that take place in the narrative that lead to nothing but losing lives and cultivating more violence show the futility of constant warfare, and they hint at the dire need for peace and tranquility, which explains Buddha and his teachings on how to save oneself and others from inner and outer harm.

Reading *Kapilavatsu*, whether in paper format or on an electronic device, can be a little confusing at the beginning. The book reads from right to left like many Japanese manga that are translated into English. However, it does not keep the original structure of the manga intact; it presents mirror images of the original comics to facilitate the process of reading from left to right to the Western reader who reads in English. Instead of facilitating this process though, this structure complicates things when one starts reading. Because one expects most translated manga

to read from right to left, one thinks that the speech bubbles within panels will follow the same direction of the pages. However, in this specific comic, the path of the speech bubbles and their placement in panels opposes the direction of pages and the way one turns them. It might take readers some time to figure out an entry point and to understand that the images are mirror images. Attempting to follow the strategy suggested by Neil Cohn in "Navigating Comics", where he says that if the work one is studying comes from a culture whose comics read from right to left on should start from the top right corner or the rightmost panel, might not help in this case. This reading experience definitely differs from one reader to another, but once a reader figures out the structure, the reading process becomes much easier.

This comic combines a variety of page and panel layouts that play different roles in the narrative. It starts with a two-page panel meant to be read as a unit, which is a design that is suitable for the content of the first two pages as it introduces the setting of the comic. In the middle of the page on the right, there is an oval narration caption that says "[a]t the foot of the great Himalayas, the roof of the world whence the Indus River originates, there lived a people known as the aryans some 3,500 years ago" (Tezuka 8). Thus, this panel layout provides readers with an exposition and necessary background information. The rest of the panels throughout the narrative do not follow a specific pattern; they are irregular. For example, some pages constitute blockage layouts, where horizontal panels block the creation of a row of panels, some others contain diagonal layouts, where panels, as Chris Gavaler describes them "do not follow vertical or horizontal divisions, and so are neither clearly rows nor columns", and there are many that contain broken frames, in which "image elements of one panel extend beyond its frame into the gutter and/or into the frame of an adjacent panel" (Gavaler Analyzing Comics 101).

This irregularity in panel layout serves the content of the story well. The story is full of chases and adventures, and it includes a lot of action and rapid motions. Thus, a regular z-grid pattern or any traditional layout might have not played the same functioning role that Tezuka's irregular layouts play. In fig. 78, for example, the diagonal panels play an important role in highlighting the fast pace and the unruliness of the battle between Chapra and Tatta's gang. In the uppermost leftmost panels, Chapra throws stones at the kids at a speed that one's eyes cannot keep up with; his hands merge with the emanata (speed lines) to indicate extraordinary motion. The rest of the diagonal panels on this page show the kids' pain powered leaps and then their plunges, tumbles, and nosedives, which gives a humorous effect and enhances the intensity of the action. A conventional layout cannot match the craziness of the scene like the diagonal layout does. Tezuka's is not the conventional utilization of page and panel layouts that Benoit Peeters describes in "Four Perceptions of the Page" as a layout that creates conditions for a regular reading. The way he uses the pages and the panels falls more under Peeters's category of "rhetorical utilization" as in *Kapilavastu* the panels and the pages "are [not] autonomous elements; they are subordinated to a narrative which their primary function is to serve", so "the size of the images, their distribution, the general pace of the page, all must come to support the narration" (Peeters "Four Conceptions"). For example, the border of the lowermost panel in fig. 79 complies with the ungovernable dash of the tiger and allows his foot to step out of line. Moreover, the inner corners of the first two tiers of panels allow the growl of the tiger and its burst sound bubble to explode the inner borders to indicate high volume. The majority of the pages and panels in *Kapilavastu* conform to the narrative as such throughout.

Furthermore, the four categories of panels that Neil Cohn presents in "Japanese Visual Language: The Structure of Manga" are utilized in *Kapilavastu*. Tezuka mostly uses macros, or

“panels that show multiple characters or a whole scene”(Cohn 13) to display the setting of a scene to shift focus to the surrounding landscape. He uses monos, which “show only individual entities” (Cohn 13) to zoom in on characters’ facial expressions and/or to shift perspectives (Cohn 13). Micros, which “contain less than a whole entity, such as in a close-up of a character where only part of the person is shown at a time” (Cohn 13), are abundant in this comic. Most of them are used to direct readers’ attention to a detail that might not be clear without zooming in. For instance, when Chapra extends one of his hands to grab a stone from the ground to fight with it, he tries to not let the villains see his motion. Tezuka wants his readers to have access to this slight movement though, so he uses a micro panel that zooms in solely on Chapra’s hand. He also utilizes a great amount of polymorphic panels, which “depict whole actions through the repetition of individual characters of various points in that event” (Cohn 13). In fig. 78, the fifth diagonal panel and the bottom horizontal panel are polymorphic panels; their use adds to the cartoonish style of this comic and it creates comedy along with the numerous other comedic elements. Humor in this comic emerges from its witty use of slapstick comedy. Most of the fighting and the chasing scenes rely heavily on physical comedy: pain powered leaps, slips, getting hit in the crotch, and nosedive falls. However, none of them is an aimless farcical scene. They act as a comic relief, which contrasts the seriousness of the scenes that portray and highlight the themes of inequality and descrimination.

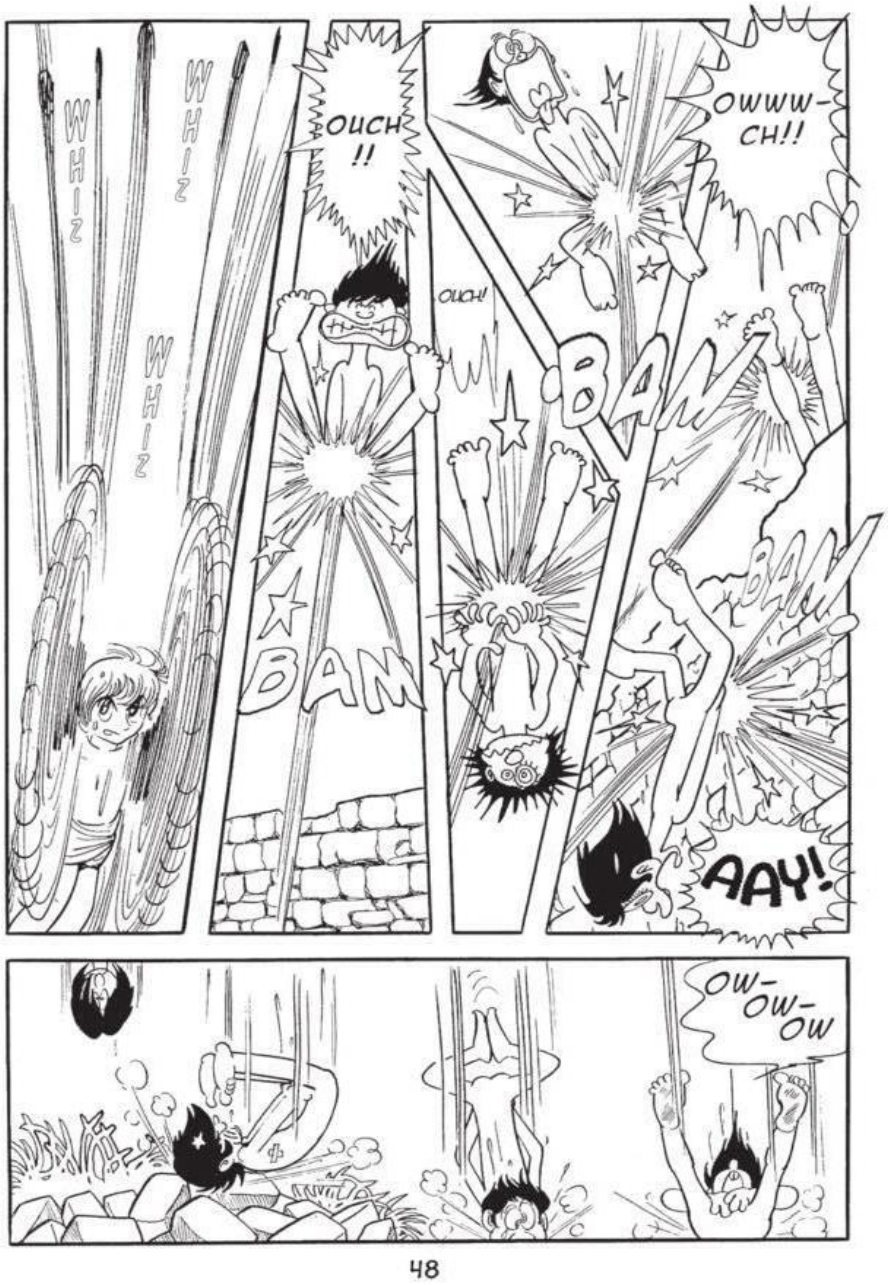

Fig. 78. An example from *Buddha Vol. 1* that shows how diagonal panels highlight the fast pace of the battle between Chapra and Tatta.

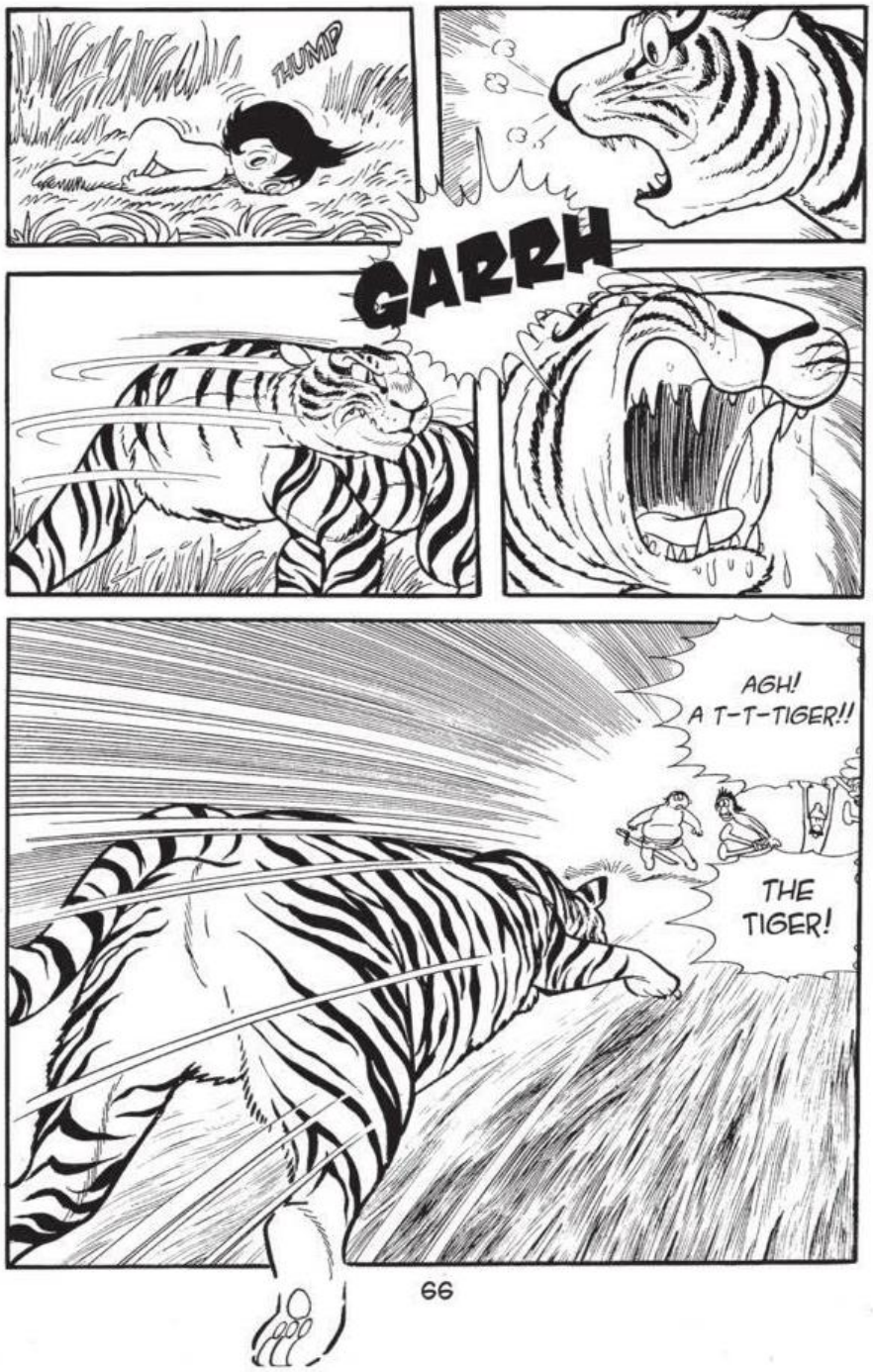

Fig. 79. An excerpt from *Buddha Vol. 1* that falls under Peeters's category of "rhetorical utilization" of panel layout.

Blake et Mortimer: Le Secret de L'Espadon

Blake et Mortimer is a Franco-Belgian comics series, or *bandes dessinées*, created by the Belgian writer and artist Edgar P. Jacobs. *Les Aventures de Blake et Mortimer: Le Secret de L'Espadon Tome 1 (La Poursuite Fantastique)*, translated as *The Adventures of Blake and Mortimer: The Secret of the Swordfish Volume 1 (The Fantastic Pursuit)*, the first book of the series, is the focus of this critique. Using the interrogative mode's question about the cover of the comic book and its size reveals the difference in size and shape between Franco-Belgian comics and their American counterparts; it also reveals how reading *bandes dessinées* on electronic devices deprives readers of seeing this difference. Further, in answering the question on visual-verbal synergy, and on whether one of the two tracks plays a larger role in driving the narrative, one sees how in this comic the verbal track is predominant and the visual track plays a secondary role. Through the questions on genre and subgenres, readers see that this comics fit in the categories of alternative history and espionage narratives (or spy fiction). The interrogative mode's questions on narration and narrative structure show how Jacobs creates what Rick Altman calls "dual-focus narrative," Achim Hescher's "spectatorial focalization," and the notion of simultaneity that the medium of comics allow to make readers act as spies. The question on the work's history of publication helps one understand that it is part of a series, and this is why its end is inconclusive. Finally, the question on the time of publication shows that this comic is Jacob's response to the major event of its time, which is WWII.

Before analyzing the content of this comic and its structure, it is important to note the difference between its size and the shape and those of its American counterparts. The standard size of American comic books is 10.8X6.6 inches, whereas *Les Aventures de Blake et Mortimer* is much larger, at 12.2X9.2 inches. This is a common feature of Franco-Belgian comics in

general: they are large in size, and printed as comics albums. This feature would not be noticed when reading the comic on an electronic device, as digital versions minimize the pages so they fit a small screen.

Another noticeable feature of this comic that can be visually striking to American readers is the amount of writing in it, both in narration captions and in speech balloons (fig. 80). The verbal track in this comic is predominant as the dialogue and the narration tags are quite lengthy. Once one starts reading, the text in most panels can distract from the images. Unlike comics in which words and pictures work hand in hand to create the narrative, in *Le Secret de L'Espadon*, the majority of the images play a secondary role; they mainly support the text as illustrations, but most of them do not really affect the progression of events. One can hardly find wordless panels. However, the rare ones that exist fit well with the genre of the comics: spy fiction. Because *Le Secret de L'Espadon* involves espionage, the silent panels it comprises give the audience access to information that the characters that the narrative follows (or focuses on at particular moments) are unaware of, which makes the audiences themselves work as spies, especially when the narrative gives them access to the secrets of the characters it identifies as the enemies. Those textless panels and their images create what Achim Hescher identifies as "spectatorial focalization", or a case in comics in which "readers are given a cognitive advantage over a character" (201).

Readers are given this privilege of knowing information before all the characters do for a good reason in this comic. *Le Secret de L'Espadon* is a dual-focus narrative, which is, according to Rick Altman's definition, a narrative that "alternates regularly between two groups whose conflict provides the plot" (Altman 55). The two groups that *Le Secret de L'Espadon* alternates between are, on the one hand, "Les Jaunes", or the yellows (whose leader is Emperor Basam

Damdu) and Colonel Orlik (the chief of security whose nationality is never identified in the narrative), and, on the other hand, the Britons, namely Captain Francis Blake (a British officer) and Professor Phillip Mortimer (a British scientist), who serve the British military. These two opposing groups are part of an alternate reality that the comic creates in response to the events of its time: the end of World War II and the global tensions that were leading to the Cold War. The narrative constructs an alternative history in which a third world war arises between the Yellow Empire and the free world or the Western Bloc. The events start in medias res; no exposition or background information is provided. Readers find themselves in the middle of events as the Yellows are preparing for an attack to take over the world. Meanwhile, (a few pages later) the British army, thanks to Mortimer, the scientist, secretly works on developing a weapon meant to defeat the Yellows, called "L'Espadon", or "The Swordfish". While the two opposing parties are busy doing their business at a different location, readers see a wordless panel in which a traitor from the Yellow Empire military spies on them (fig. 81). On this page, the two vertical wordless panels in the middle of the second row show the traitor who looks behind him to make sure nobody can see him in the upper panel, then in the lower panel he uses a telephone that is installed and hidden behind the portrait of one of the generals of the Yellows to contact Blake and Mortimer to warn them against the attack that will hit their military base in England so that they evacuate the location. Although one of the Yellows informs Orlik that this man is a spy immediately before readers sees him calling Blake and Mortimer, while he is executing his plan, neither Orlik and his men nor the Britons can see him; the readers are the only witnesses at that moment, and they are, in a way, his partners in crime. Nevertheless, because the narrative prompts readers to take the side of the Britons from the very beginning, spying on the Yellows does not count as a crime; on the contrary, it is a win against the group that the narrative

identifies as the enemies. Thus, using wordless panels as windows for the readers to access secret information that can benefit Blake and Mortimer (which is an example of Hescher's "spectatorial focalization" that the interrogative mode presents), and being the only bearers of that information, at least for a while until the enemies find out, intensifies suspense, engages readers in action, and plays well with the acts of espionage that the spy fiction genre involves.

The comics medium is well suited for this kind of dual-focus espionage narrative. Because of the notion of simultaneity, which is an exclusive feature of the medium, readers can see the opposing groups at the same time and have the knowledge of what each is planning for the other. Although there is an omniscient narrator in this comic whose narration acts like a voiceover that accompanies most of the dialogue-less panels to describe events, simultaneity gives readers an omniscient role as well; it makes them omniscient viewers. For example, in fig. 82, in the first uppermost and leftmost panel, readers see Colonel Orlik, inside a plane talking to one of his men about his desire to find Blake and Mortimer who are trying to escape from him and the Yellows to save the documents that include the secret of the superweapon, the swordfish. The same panel shows Orlik trying to spot the Britons. Right next to it, on the right, the following two panels in the same tier show Blake, Mortimer, and their companions walking in a desert near Iran in an attempt to find a good hiding spot because they know they are wanted by the Yellows. The first panel in the second tier takes readers to a third location and gives them a different viewing perspective. In this panel, readers are inside a truck with Hussein, the commander of the Iranian army (and one of the allies of the Yellows), and they know that Hussein and his companions have spotted the Britons. The second panel in the same tier (the second tier) shifts to Blake and Mortimer who have just realized they have been spotted. The rest of the panels alternate between the Britons and the Iranians consecutively, and readers, as

omniscient viewers, are present everywhere and know everything that the characters themselves do not know. Readers can even see what Lieutenant Ismail, one of Hussein's men, can see through his binoculars. As shown in fig. 82 in the first panel of the third tier, there is a panel within the main panel, and the sub panel shows the Britons spotted through the lenses of Ismail's binoculars; thus, in this case, the binoculars themselves are the panel or the window that give readers access to the scene. All of these different perspectives are presented simultaneously on one page, which is a suitable rendition for a war among groups whose actions are fast paced and unpredictable. Through simultaneity, readers are aware of every move the protagonists make to escape and hide, and of every cunning scheme on the enemies' part.

Because *Le Secret de L'Espadon* is part of a series of episodes, the end of this comic is a cliffhanger. After several attempts at escaping that work at times and fails at others, the narrative ends with Blake and Mortimer still trying to hide and to protect the secret of the swordfish. In the last page of the comic, readers see Blake and Mortimer in a house in Herat, Afghanistan, in which they take refuge after pretending to be locals. The think they are safe until they see through the house's balcony that a traitor has revealed their hiding place to Yellow troops, so they try to escape. The very last panel in the comic shows two soldiers from the Yellows standing next to the traitor in shock. They face the readers, with speech bubbles with question marks above their heads. Because they are facing the readers, readers cannot know what the cause of their shock is. Did they find Blake and Mortimer? Did Blake and Mortimer escape? Did they both escape and leave something in the room that shocked the soldiers? All of these are questions that arise in response to this inconclusive ending, and they remain unanswered to enhance suspense. The page ends with few words though below the last tier of panels in the comics (located outside the borders of the tier) that read "[v]ous lirez-la suite de cette aventure

dans la deuxième partie: l'evasion de Mortimer" (Jacobs 58), ["you will read what happens next in the second part of this adventure: Mortimer's Evasion"]. This urges readers to read the next volume to find answers to their questions and to see what happens next to the Britons in this seemingly unending chase.

Before it was collected in book form in 1964, *Les Aventures de Blake et Mortimer* appeared in the first edition of the *Tintin* magazine of 1946 (published by Le Lombard publishing company) that featured a number of different comics by different artists. *Tintin* magazine has always been promoted as a magazine for youth; its cover logo describes it as "[l]e journal des jeunes de 7 a 77 ans" ["the magazine for youth aged 7 to 77"]. Although this logo is not on the cover of the first edition in which *Les Aventures de Blake et Mortimer* first appeared, one can tell by reading the narrative that its target audience is young readers, particularly teenagers and young adults. This is evident through the fact that although it is a war comic, the violence portrayed in it is very mild. Yes, there are scenes of explosions and crashes, but there are no scenes of killing or injuring. It is nothing like the reality of the war that the world had just experienced. For an older reader, this comic's rendition of war, although highly political in many ways, might seem like a betrayal to the reality of the atrocities of the time's war, but this portrayal might also be the artist's way of escapism.

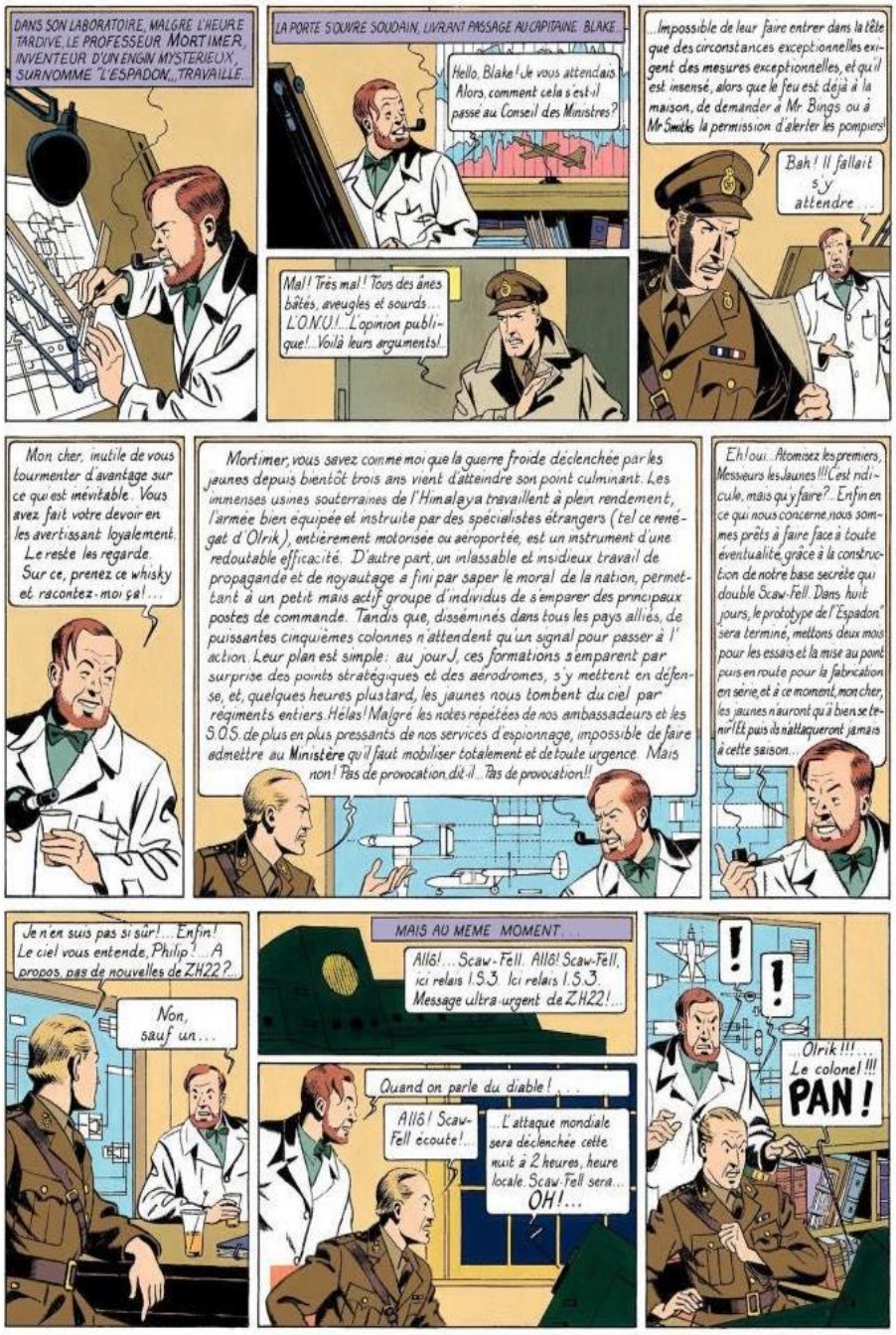

Fig. 80. An excerpt from *Blake et Mortimer: Le Secret de L'Espadon* that shows how the narrative contains lengthy narration tags.

Fig. 81. An excerpt from *Blake et Mortimer: Le Secret de L'Espadon* that shows the significant role that wordless panels play in espionage comics.

Fig. 82. A scene from *Blake et Mortimer: Le Secret de L'Espadon* that shows how the narrative presents different characters' perspectives simultaneously on the same page.

Dirty Laundry Comics #1

The interrogative mode prompts readers to gather contextual information about the comic they are studying and its creators, and to learn about the historical moment in whic1h the comic in question was published as these steps can help readers understand the work better and/or see it in a new light. Gathering contextual information before reading *Dirty Laundry #1*, as the interrogative mode suggests, leads readers to seeing how this comic counts as a historical document that archives the bare truth of its era, which is something that the mainstream comics of its time did not dare to do. Moreover, it helps one understand that this comic, starting with its cover, is a representation of the counterculture of the 60s and the 70s; through this comic, the Creators concertize the notion of airing one's laundry in public to defy the mainstream culture of their time.

Dirty Laundry Comics is a collaborative work between Aline Kominsky Crumb and her husband Robert Crumb. This critique focuses on the first volume of the series that the two creators published in 1974. *Dirty Laundry Comics* falls under the category of underground comix of the 1960s and 70s, which are comics that were usually either self-published by their Creators, or were published by small press and that depicted extremely bold topics that mainstream publishers at the time could not agree to publish because of their subject matters that involve drug use, obscene sexual activities, violence, and offensive language. Underground comix were part of a counterculture that defied the mainstream comics of the time whose narratives were censored, and whose covers were required to bear the seal of the Comics Code of Authority[8] to guarantee that they were appropriate for children and teenagers. Despite its explicit eroticism and

[8] The Comics Code Authority was created by the Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA) to censor comics. The seal of CCA had to be placed on the top right cover of comic books to signify that the publishers of the work had corrected all of its errors and that it was safe for children to read it (Hescher 10).

its disturbing scenes of violence, *Dirty Laundry Comics* is still worthwhile as it sheds light on an important phase in comics history. Many of the themes that mainstream comics of the 60s and 70s hid from the audience due to censorship is explicitly portrayed in this work and its like. Thus, this comic can be viewed as a historical document that archives a truth that mainstream media always filters and does not present it in its rawest state like Crumb and Kominsky-Crumb do in their work.

The Creators' defiance and challenge of the norms of their times and of the long held notions of socially accepted behavior starts with the cover of their first comics and the title they chose for it. They take the theme of airing one's dirty laundry in public, an idiom that refers to general social disapproval of those who discuss or argue about private and sensitive topics in front of others, and make it the core of their work. If one examines the cover of the book (fig. 83), one sees how it visually and verbally summarizes the Creators' purpose for coproducing this comic. On the cover, Crumb and Kominsky-Crumb draw their cartoon selves, Aline and Bob, nearly naked; the only clothes they wear are their socks, shoes, and necklaces, and Crumb wears his hat and eyeglasses. They face each other, standing next to a clothesline on which air stained underwear (each has a yellow spot on it) so filthy that it attracts flies. It is not only the aired underwear that is smelly and dirty, but also Bob and Aline themselves. The smell is indicated through the emanata that represents stench (which is termed "wafteron" by Mort Walker in *The Lexicon of Comicana*), and which rises from the clothes and Bob and Aline's hair. The cover shows a conversation between Aline and Bob through speech balloons; Robert says "[h]ere I stand, naked to the world", and Aline responds "if you can do it buddy so can I !" Behind the fence of their yard stands an old woman, who must be their neighbor, whose speech balloon says "It's not a pleasant sight! Get dressed!" This brief scene shows that Aline and Rob aim to present

the naked truth about who they are in their comix without filtering or sugar-coating. They stand naked in front of their readers and in front of the old lady who, in this case, represents societal customs, traditions, and norms. They are aware that they are being judged by that old lady (and by readers like her), but they ignore her and readers like her to do what they feel. Their comix gives society the cold shoulder and presents their private life as is in order to challenge censorship that hid the true face of the reality of the 60s and 70s.

The cover features two logos on the top that resemble the CCA seal, which can be read as a visual attack on the seal and what it stands for. The logo in the uppermost and rightmost corner says "Cartoonists Co-op Press", and the logo on the leftmost corner says "[a] member of the united cartoon workers of America". The Cartoonists Co-op Press was a small press owned by Crumb, Kominsky-Crumb, Justin Green, Trina Robbins, Spain Rodriguez, and a number of other underground comix creators. The United Cartoons Workers of America was an informal union that underground comix creators organized as a counter brand that labels their non-mainstream comics that boldly presented taboos like rape, sadism, incest, and misogyny, and many other unaccepted themes. These two logos represent underground comix artists' desire to own the medium and create their own rules in response to the anti-comics campaign that Frederic Wertham started in the 1950s that disgraced comics for years. In the 50s, because of the attack on comics "numerous careers were blighted, and some people never got over how their field was so publicly denigrated" (Baetens and Frey 30).This anger towards stigmatizing comics lasted for decades, so it is only normal for the Crumbs and their contemporaries to use logos like these two to remind readers of the seal, and to visually make a counter statement that challenges it.

Dirty Laundry Comics #1 is autobiographical and self-representational. As mentioned above, Crumb and Kominsky-Crumb create characters to represent themselves. What is striking

about their self-representation is that their cartoon selves are exaggeratedly ugly, especially Aline's persona that is quite disproportionate. In comparison to Crumb's drawing of himself that is more professional, Aline's looks like a child's drawing as it is crude, uneven, and less realistic than Bob's drawings. On the first page of the comic, in the self-referential meta strip titled "Let's Have a Little Talk", the Crumbs show the readers that they are aware that this criticism might arise, and they respond to it in advance. In this strip, in the borderless title panel, Aline tells Bob "I'm afraid my drawing looks too crude and ugly next to yours/ People will make fun of me", and Bob responds in the first panel by saying "[w]ell fuck them! You should have enough faith in your own work to not let a few nitpickers get you down." In the next panel, he adds, "[I]t's a nice blend… Very pleasing to the eye... Besides, it's innovative… Nobody's ever done a comic like this before! It's a historic break through!" (Crumb 7). This scene shows that the Crumbs, unlike mainstream comics artists who cater to the audience's expectations and are restricted by specific conventions, do not care about pleasing anyone; as long as their work is original and expresses what they feel, this is all that matters to them. This is one of the features that makes their work stand out in comparison to mainstream comics. Theirs is raw and unfiltered in every way. They did not want to add more super alter egos to the medium; they wanted to replace them with ids.

In addition to anticipating criticism for Aline's childish drawing, in "Let's Have a Little Talk" the Crumbs also expect criticism for their frank and sometimes shocking depictions of sexuality. In the penultimate panel, Aline faces the audience and tells them "I also want you to know that I thought up the most depraved panel where he pushes my head in the vomit!" (Crumb 7). Below the speech bubble in which she says this, there is a box with an arrow pointing at her head that encloses the words "[p]roud of being gross" (Crumb 7). In the following panel, the last

one in the strip, Bob faces Aline and says "Quite true! Your women friends are gonna give you hell for consorting with a male "pig" such as myself, and the guys will tell me I'm pussy-whipped… But, y'know, you're bound to be maligned and misunderstood in this business no matter what you do… That's the media for you [...] you gotta be tough" (Crumb 7). Through this strip and its dialogue, the Crumbs show that they are aware of the negative reactions that their work stirs, but they carry on because their work captures their truth. They are aware that feminists might view this work as misogynistic, and that they will attack Aline for degrading herself in the work (fig. 84). Thus, Aline responds to feminists in advance by telling them that this life is a choice she made consciously and willingly, and that she is proud of it. If feminism entails that women make their own choices in life freely, this abnormal sexual relationship with Robert Crumb is what Kominsky-Crumb chooses for herself.

Dirty Laundry Comics and its like are fair representations of the era in which they were written. This is evident in an interview with Crumb[9] in which he explains that because of the availability of drugs and the craze about it in the late 1960s and the early 1970s, most of his comics and his generations' comics were inspired by LSD. This explains why in the middle of *Dirty Laundry Comics Vol. 1*, there is a strip titled "Aline 'n' Bob's Funtime Funnies" in which readers see the Crumbs having a bad trip, traveling to another planet on a spaceship. The strip gives readers access to the effect of a drug that was so popular at that point in history.

Furthermore, Crumb states in the interview that he participated in the sexual revolution of the 70's. He says "I was part of a collective mindset of that time, " so his comics reflect that era. He also says that underground comix artists believed they were free to draw what they wanted,

[9] This interview can be found on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CwFzJlIBaSg&feature=share

especially that their work was not going to be censored. Their work was not meant to be published by official publishing houses; they were usually distributed and sold in headshops, which gave artists freedom to explore anything and everything, especially their sexual desires and fetishes. Thus, *Dirty Laundry Comics* is a historical artifact that allows readers to relive an era they cannot revisit. Some readers might view it as lowbrow art, but this does not change the fact that it captures a historical phase that is absent from most of its era's censored, mainstream art works.

Fig. 83. The front cover of the *Dirty Laundry Comics #1*.

Fig. 84. A scene from *Dirty Laundry Comics #1* in which Aline and Bob present their uncommon sexual practices.

A Child in Palestine: The Cartoons of Naji al-Ali

Naji al-Ali is a Palestinian cartoonist whose single-panel political cartoons appeared in various newspapers throughout the Arab world and in London. He never identified himself as a comics artist, nor referred to his work as comics. However, when one examines his cartoons, compiled and published posthumously in a single book in 2009, one finds elements that make them worth interpreting and critiquing with the same analytical tools used for comics, regardless of whether they fit into the definition of comics or not. Some comics scholars and critics might object to the inclusion of single-panel cartoons as comics, especially those who agree with Scott McCloud's claim that comics is "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence" (McCloud 9). In comparing single-panel cartoons with comics, McCloud writes "they are not the same thing! One is an approach to picture-making–a style, if you like–while the other is a medium which often employs that approach" (McCloud 21). McCloud excludes single-panel cartoons his definition of comics, though he does not shut down the whole debate. As he writes, "[o]f course, if anyone wants to write a book taking the opposite view, you can bet I'll be the first in line to buy a copy" (McCloud 21), which leaves wiggle room for further research, and, more importantly, it concedes that the other viewpoint could well be true.

Ironically, McCloud makes some statements that suggest including single-panel cartoons in comics studies. His full definition of comics is "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (McCloud 9). If the first part of this definition does not apply to single-panel cartoons (which is still debatable), does not the second part of it apply? Single-panel cartoons convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer. Thus, if the purpose of making comics and single-panel cartoons is similar, then they both can be part of the same

conversation. The interrogative mode argues that single panel cartoons can be studied as comics. This critique studies the cartoons of Naji al-Ali to prove the validity of this argument.

Some of al-Ali's cartoons present juxtaposed pictorial images in deliberate sequence within one panel. For example, in fig. 85, within one borderless panel, the audience sees a sequence of actions. The first one, on the right (since this cartoon is meant to be read from right to left as its intended audience is Arab readers), is an image of an Arab leader who has convinced Hanthala (al-Ali's iconic character who appears in all of his cartoons as an embodiment of the Palestinian people), that he has excellent archery skills that Hanthala should trust. Hanthala is portrayed with an apple on his head, with his back to the viewer and his hands behind his back as usual, and the Arab leader looks like he aims for this apple. Next to this image, in the middle of the scene, there is part two of the action, in which the Arab leader, instead of shooting the apple off Hanthala's head, misses the apple and, like William Tell, kills the little boy. On the very left, viewers see the final action in this sequence as the Arab leader happily eats the apple that falls off of Hanthala's head, and Hanthala lays on the ground, bleeding, with an arrow piercing his body. If one draws a line between these three sets of action, or if each of them is enclosed within a panel, they can easily count as a comic strip. What al-Ali does though, as shown in this figure, is remove panel borders. This is not an unusual comics convention. Many comics artists include borderless panels in their comic books (and even in their comics strips in newspapers). Moreover, this scene resembles polymorphic comics panels that "depict whole actions through the repetition of individual characters of various points in that event" (Cohn 13). Like comics artists who, despite the availability of space in comic books that allow them to add new panels, choose to utilize polymorphic panels to compile different events in a single panel, al-Ali combines three events in a single-panel cartoon that involves action, a sequence of events, and a

progression of time. These features make this single-panel cartoon fall under McCloud's definition of comics.

Furthermore, McCloud writes the following in *Understanding Comics*

> "[a]ll of us perceive the world as a whole through the experience of our senses/ Yet our senses can only reveal a world that is fragmented and incomplete/ Even the most widely travelled mind can only see so much of the world in the course of a life/ Our perception of "reality" is an act of faith, based on mere fragments… this phenomenon of observing parts but perceiving the whole has a name. It's called closure/ In our daily lives, we often commit closure, mentally completing that which is incomplete based on past experiences/ Some forms of closure are deliberate inventions of storytellers to produce suspense or to challenge audiences/ Others happen automatically without much effort… part of business as usual (63)

If one takes McCloud's definition of closure and looks at another example of al-Ali's cartoons, like fig. 86 for instance, one will notice that even if this cartoon is a single image that is not part of a physical sequence drawn on the paper, by employing closure viewers can complete the picture and create a virtual sequence in their mind's eye. Fig. 86 depicts an Israeli soldier operating a bulldozer to uproot an old Palestinian farmer, and the young plant he tries to protect, from the land. In the background of the scene is a sign that says "المستوطنات", which translates as "The Settlements," and there are four tall buildings in front of it. Hanthalla stands in front of the settlements, in his same familiar posture, as witness. The scene itself does not provide a narrative with a beginning, a middle, or a climax and an end. However, readers who know the context, which is the Palestinian-Israeli conflict over the ownership of the land, and the fact that

Palestinians reject what they view as "illegal Israeli settlements and misappropriation of Palestinian land" (*A Child in Palestine* 14), through exercising closure, will create an invisible panel in their minds that precedes this cartoon (containing the history of the conflict), and another imaginary one that follows the cartoon (containing the future of the farmer who loses his land). Because single-panel cartoons are timely and respond to events that the audience has information about, or can find information about through some research, they do not need to be part of a sequence in order to "convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (McCloud 9). They are self-sufficient, and they prompt readers to come up with the rest of the pieces of the puzzle to create a whole picture on their own. They are, in a way, part of a sequence that is formed by the reader's interaction with them. Even if readers are not familiar with the historical context, comparing and contrasting the consecutive cartoons that the book compiles provides alternative threads that can create a whole picture.

In *A Theory of Narrative*, Rick Altman writes:

> There is a difference between "what we might call *"some"* narrative [and] "*a"* narrative. "Daytime soap operas offer a good example of "some" narrative. No matter when we tune in, we are rapidly convinced that we are dealing with a narrative text; yet no matter how long we watch, we never reach closure. Unlike most novels and films, soaps are all middle; we nearly always confront them in medias res and leave them before a satisfactory conclusion is reached. Yet we never doubt their narrativity. At every point we acknowledge that they are narrative in nature; that is, we recognize in them "some" narrative (18)

Many of al-Ali's cartoons, like soap operas, can be considered middle too; they are examples of "some" narrative instead of "a narrative". For instance, fig. 87 depicts the household of a Palestinian fighter who lost his two legs. His wife, and the mother of his child, sits next to him weeping, and she gathers him into her arms to comfort him. Although the mother is crying, there is a smile of hope on her face, especially that her son, who is in the foreground of the scene, "dons his father's combat boots to continue the struggle" (*A Child in Palestine* 21). Hanthala stands next to the family, in his usual posture, witnessing. In the background of the scene, on the imaginary wall that al-Ali does not draw but closure helps one visualize, there is a poster that says "عائدون", which translates as "we shall return". This is a scene that starts in medias res. Viewers are in the middle of the event; they are not given information about how the father loses his legs, and they do not get a satisfying closure that tells them what happens to the family now that the father is disabled, or to the child who wants to follow in his father's footsteps to continue the struggle. This is not a complete narrative, but it fits into Altman's description of "some" narrative, and after all, visual narratives are the main concern of comics scholars.

Al-Ali was assassinated in London in 1987, and his murderer has never been identified. However, it is obvious that his images annoyed many people, Arabs and non-Arabs alike, which proves the power of images. Knowing that he was killed for creating visuals is in and of itself a good reason for comics scholars to examine his work to understand why his political drawings might have led to his murder. Single-panel political cartoons are very powerful, and they are part of a larger narrative that readers experience on a daily basis, a narrative that comics critics should unravel and look at very closely.

Fig. 85. A Single-panel cartoon by Naji al-Ali that presents a sequence.

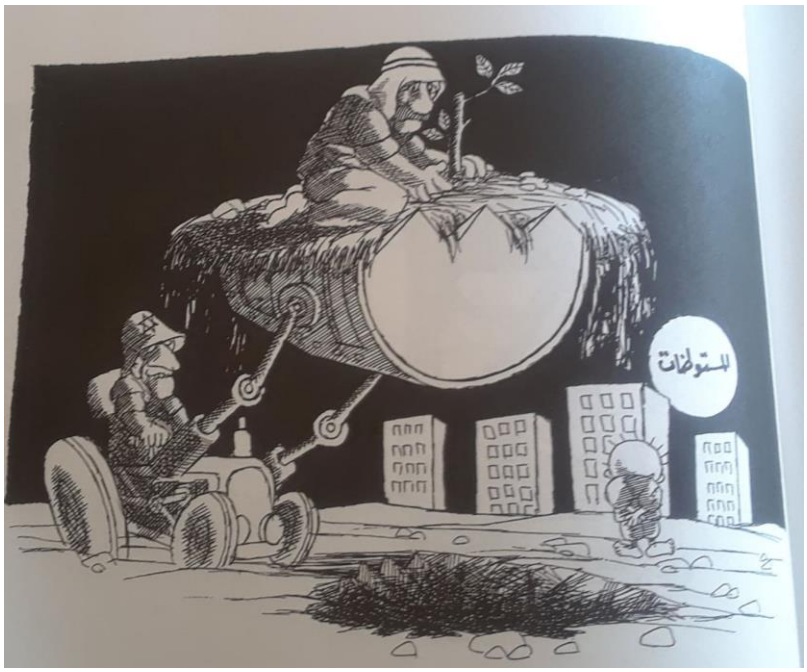

Fig. 86. A single-panel cartoon by Naji al-Ali that prompts readers to supply the missing sequence of events based on the political context they are familiar with.

Fig. 87. A single-panel cartoon that starts in medias res and urges the readers to imagine a sequence through closure.

Chapter IV

Comics in the Classroom: A Pedagogical Approach

This chapter engages in a critical conversation with comics pedagogy in order to show how the interrogative mode responds to them. Critiquing the different approaches that pedagogical texts present, I explain what makes some of them useful pedagogically, and why some of them are lacking in crucial aspects. Through this critique, I emphasize the importance of teaching various critical approaches in the comics classroom and explain why teachers should not limit themselves to using McCloud's *Understanding Comics* as the ultimate tool for critiquing comics. I then shift to my own experience in teaching comics; I discuss the teaching strategies that I found successful, explain why some of my teaching ideas did not work as I expected them to, and present a revision plan that shows how those ideas can either be developed, improved, or substituted with new ones that can be more efficient; most importantly, I explain how the interrogative mode can help in solving some of the issues that I struggled with in the comics class I taught. The chapter ends with a demonstration of how the interrogative mode can be used in the classroom through an example, and presents a sample syllabus for a comics class that uses the interrogative mode as its kernel (see Appendix).

Comics Pedagogy

One of the most noticeable issues with current comics pedagogical scholarship is that many of those texts view comics as a means to an end, and not an end in itself. They mostly speak of comics as a teaching tool, and not necessarily as a medium whose format is inherently worthwhile, on its own terms. The question of how to teach different subjects *through* comics has been answered thoroughly and extensively over the past few decades, but the question that

still needs to be discussed more thoroughly is how to teach students to read, interpret, and critique the medium itself. Because of the scarcity of pedagogical comics scholarship that focuses on form rather than content (or that gives *equal* attention to both), many comics teachers go to class with the assumption that reading comics is intuitive, since they assume that many students, especially in the U.S., grew up reading comics and never had problems understanding them. However, when they start teaching, they discover that this assumption is false; students need a scaffolding technique that leads them through the process of reading visual in addition to textual material.

Teachers searching for a practical guide on teaching comics might find this title quite appealing: *Teaching Comics and Graphic Narratives: Essays on Theory, Strategy and Practice*, edited by Lan Dong. The title can be misleading, though, as one might think the entire volume offers practical reading strategies. However, as Robert G. Weiner states in the volume's foreword, the book's main objective is to showcase and prove the effectivity of utilizing comics in teaching different topics. As Weiner writes, "[t]he essays in this volume provide perspectives from various disciplines and teaching areas. The authors of these fine essays share practical advice and pedagogical methodologies for *using*[1] graphic narratives with some of the following topics: diversity issues, American studies, gender, literature, history, poetry, composition, and journalism" (location 55). Later in the foreword, he stresses that this volume views comics as a teaching tool that is worthwhile "*Teaching Comics and Graphic Narratives* brings into focus the importance of not discounting the medium of sequential art as a teaching tool" (location 55). Thus, the primary objective of these essays is to show how different disciplines can be taught *through* comics. In this case, the question of comics critique and analysis is secondary. The

[1] My italics. This is to emphasize that the focus of the volume is demonstrating the usability of the medium for teaching various topics, and not to show teachers how to facilitate the process of analyzing and critiquing comics.

authors pay more attention to the content of various comic books (the narrative) rather than the form of the medium. The topics that each essay discusses show the breadth and the diversity of the fields of study that can be taught through comics, like the following examples, for instance: "Art and Commerce in the Classroom: Teaching an American Studies Course in Comics"; "Drawing Attention: Comics as a Means of Approaching U.S. Cultural Diversity"; "Our Graphics, Ourselves: Graphic Narratives and the Gender Studies Classroom". As the titles demonstrate, contributors to the volume present comics as a useful tool for teaching their disciplines. Many of them mention that they use *Understanding Comics* as a scaffolding method in their classrooms, but they do not go into the details of how they use that text and whether reading McCloud enhances their students' abilities to analyze comics or not.

The volume includes, however, a few articles that take the importance of leading students to think about the form of the medium, as well as the role it plays in constructing narratives, into consideration. For example, Christina Meyer's article "Teaching Visual Literacy Through 9/11 Graphic Narratives" focuses on the importance of prompting students to reflect on the role played by frames and framing in 9/11 comics, namely Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*, Eisner's "Reality 9/11", the collaborative project "9 A.M. EST" and the work "T" by Nick Bertozzi (location 914). In discussing Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning's "9 A.M. EST", for instance, Meyer points out the role played by frames as she writes "[w]heareas frames and gutters in comics usually function to suggest motion in time, here the frames and gutters serve as a means of juxtaposition to suggest simultaneity" (location 57). She gives an example of how she trains students to think of the form by stating that, in working on Spiegleman's *In the Shadow*, "[she] suggests that students compartmentalize the pages and start with a description of the general outline of each page, the 'mise-en-page' to borrow Groensteen's term" (location 55).

However, she does not elaborate on that process. Meyer's article is one of the few that urges teachers to think about formal analysis, but the analysis she provides in this text is quite brief. She does not give in-depth details of the processes she deploys or the types of exercises she uses in class to facilitate the analytical process. She emphasizes the importance of the analysis, and she discusses its effect on learning, which is the main objective of her essay, but she does not provide her readers with the how-tos. This is not a drawback in Meyer's work by any means, but it highlights the necessity of providing teachers with more guidance on how to facilitate comics analysis.

Adrielle Anna Mitchell's article "Exposition and Disquisition: Nonfiction Graphic Narratives and Comics Theory in the Literature Classroom" is another example of the articles in this volume that do not confine comics to the "teaching tool" role. Mitchell raises the question of why the visual analysis of comics is necessary, and why forgetting that comics is a "dual-track medium" prevents students from appreciating the value of art and from understanding its function. She also stresses that teachers need to educate themselves first, and to get some training in visual analysis, prior to teaching comics. She writes, "[t]he visually expressive nature of graphic narratives demands that we turn our critical eye to images, which, for those of us relatively untutored in the visual arts, will require extra training and constant vigilance" (location 3534). She also states that the source of the problem of neglecting the visual aspects of comics is habit; literature students and teachers are traditionally used to the verbal analysis of a written text, and this is why transitioning to visual analysis, or critiquing the interplay of words and pictures, is not an easy process. Because of their training, the most important content, for them, resides in the text. Mitchell describes the problem as follows:

> In the literature classroom, it is all too easy to forget that one is working with a visual text, particularly when the content covered by the text is sufficiently interesting to students and instructor alike. Habituated to textual analysis, the reader may unwittingly elide important information contained in the panels, speed-reading the text boxes, speech balloons, and voice-overs, forgetting to linger on the crucial data contained in the pictures (location 3534)

Mitchell shares an idea on how she leads students to engage with visuals in comics. She writes that "strengthening visual analysis starts by slowing down the reading process. Pausing to interrogate panels, pages, and image series… adds layers of meaning to one's reading of a given comic" (location 3541). In her classroom, she uses *Understanding Comics* to familiarize students with the components of the medium and the vocabulary they can use to write about it, then she introduces students to the concepts of "arthrology" and "iconic solidarity" that Groensteen devised to explain the reading process. In addressing teachers who might not be well versed in visual analysis themselves, she shares an example of how she got around this issue in her own experience: "in my teaching practice, I consider collaboration with art department faculty as another way to do justice to the medium. Inviting a colleague to help everyone to "read" pictures more accurately should delight students, and will deepen cooperation between disciplines (fine arts and literary arts) which already share an often overlooked affinity" (location 3350). She also suggests reading art history, namely the works of Victor Shklovsky, Roger Fry, John Berger, and W. J.T Mitchell, and she mentions the names of "comics theorists who are paving the way" in the field of visual analysis: Bart Beaty, Roger Sabin, Charles Hatfield. Candida Rifkind, Joseph Witek, Thomas Inge, Thierry Groensteen, Hillary Chute, and others (location 3550).

Although the idea of "slowing down the reading process" sounds valid, Mitchell does not explain the steps of this process. How does slowing the reading process guarantee that students will see the value and the function of visuals in comics? Mitchell does not elaborate on the teaching process; she does not share the how-tos, and she does not give an example, a classroom scenario for instance, in which she tested out this strategy. In other words, she sheds light on the problem, and stresses the importance of lingering longer with images to appreciate them, but she never extrapolates the procedure of "[p]ausing to interrogate panels, pages, and image series," and she does not demonstrate her methodologies. While the idea of teaching *Understanding Comics* alongside Groensteen's concepts can be a good strategy that provides students with a critical lens for reading comics, the scope of this lens is limited. Both McCloud and Groensteen view comics as a visually dominant medium, so instead of leading students to view comics as a dual-track form, this lens might lead them to appreciate the visuals, yet think of the text as a less important component, or they might ignore its existence altogether. Instead of solving the problem of neglecting the visuals, this strategy might create a new problem: neglecting the interplay of words and pictures. Because, again, Mitchell does not share with readers the results of her experiment, it is hard to evaluate its effectiveness, and to see how it engages with text. However, it is easy to detect that by only providing students with critical texts that view comics as a visual medium, and by not bringing in excerpts from critics like Hannah Miodrag, for instance, who calls for the importance of interpreting the text as well, students might not pay attention to the collaboration of words and pictures in constructing narratives.

According to Mitchell, collaborating with art department faculty can benefit the comics classroom, and can enrich students' reading experience. However, this idea might not be very practical as it will always depend on teachers' availability; how can a teacher of a given comics

course guarantee the availability of faculty who can help with teaching? Another important question that Mitchell does not answer clearly is: what are the measurable objectives and the benefits of this collaboration? Mitchell writes that this collaboration can help students read pictures more "accurately," can "delight" students, and allows for more collaborative work between disciplines. It is not clear to me, however, what reading "accurately" might entail; does such a reading exist (either with verbal or visual texts?). Is leading students to read images more "accurately" really what comics teachers aim at? If this is the case, how can teachers assess accuracy? What is the criteria? The idea that this collaboration should "delight" students is also problematic because it is vague, and it raises more questions about the teaching objectives that can be achieved through a comics classroom. Yes, this teaching strategy allows for collaboration between disciplines, but how exactly do students benefit from this? This is another question that Mitchell does not answer.

Mitchell suggests that literature teachers should do more reading in art history. The main drawback with this suggestion, though, is that she does not elaborate on how the works of Shklovsky, Fry, Berger, or Mitchell, informed the way she teaches visual analysis. Besides, although she mentions the names of critics whose works focus on visual analysis, she, again, does not share with teachers how they can use these works to guide students to have a better understanding of what critiquing visuals entails.

Some pedagogical texts on teaching comics are written by educators who aim to provide fellow teachers with ideas and materials that they can adopt and use in their own classrooms. One of those texts is Maureen Bakis's book *The Graphic Novels Classroom: Pow!erful Teaching and Learning with Images.* In this book, Bakis shares her experience in teaching comics "to exhibit the possibilities of what can be accomplished with graphic novels in the classroom"

(Bakis 6). Bakis's target audience is high school teachers who teach English Language Arts classes (ELA) that are meant to improve students' basic language skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. She shares with comics teachers (and with educators who never taught a comics classroom and need resources) a number of lessons, activities, study guides, class discussion questions, sample assignments, and quizzes. The book has a companion website on which Bakis shares numerous documents that facilitate teaching the following texts (and some others): *Understanding Comics, Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative, A Contract with God, American Born Chinese, Persepolis, Maus I & II, Batman: The Dark Knight Returns,* and *V for Vendetta*. In addition, the website has links to online resources related to the books Bakis teaches: authors' websites (as well as interviews or TED talks), contextual and historical information about the books and their authors, videos like the *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked* documentary, student writing samples related to the lessons in each chapter, writing lessons and composition projects, and many other teaching aids.

According to Bakis, the main questions that urged her to teach a comics class were: "why won't [students] read?" as well as "how to teach students basic writing skills, how to get them to think critically, and how to get them to solve problems" (location 136). She found out that through teaching comics, students can gain those skills and can acquire expertise in visual literacy and metacognition. To show how she found answers to her preliminary questions by teaching comics classes, Bakis devotes each chapter of her book to show how a specific text can develop students' skills, like applying new concepts, problem solving, making inferences, innovation and creativity, metacognitive reflection, and reading complex texts, and can lead to class discussions of significant topics, namely identity, violence, existentialism, coming of age, war, religion, gender, nationalism, hero and superhero narratives, stereotypes, survival, and many

others. Bakis writes that her pedagogy "is informed by Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory and a reader response approach to teaching literature" (4). To define transactional theory, Bakis writes "[w]hen I use the term *transactional theory*, I am referring to Louise Rosenblatt's explanation of the reading process in *Literature as Exploration* (1995) as transaction between a reader and a literary text. The reading process is "a constructive, selective process over time in a particular context" wherein "[t]he relation between reader and signs on the page proceeds in to-and-fro spiral, in which each is continually being affected by what the other has contributed" (p. 26). Bakis describes her reader response approach as follows: "[w]hen I refer to my pedagogical approach as based on reader response, I mean that my role as teacher is to design lessons and a classroom environment that presupposes that my students' experience with a text is transactional as Rosenblatt (1995) defines it. Readers' personal, distinct responses are of primary importance in contrast to a teacher imposing his or her interpretation of a text or leading students to understand a text in one, correct, authoritative, or predetermined way" (4). Thus, Bakis does not expose her students to the works of comics critics (other than the definitional works of McCloud and Eisner), and she does not ask her students to incorporate such works in their assignments; students' analyses rely completely on their own understanding and interpretation of the texts in question in addition to the contextual information the teacher makes available to them. Although this book is a highly useful resource, especially to inexperienced teachers, ignoring the significant works of comics critics, other than Eisner and McCloud, makes it difficult for college teachers who want their students to engage in the ongoing conversation on comics criticism to use it for designing their courses without consulting other pedagogical texts. To support her approach, Bakis writes: "critical thinking, analysis, and writing must come from students rather

than from a field of ‘experts’ from whom they might ‘borrow’ interpretations, a common problem when teaching traditional texts or classic works of fiction” (3).

Bakis’s book is effective in helping teachers see the benefits of fostering students’ confidence in interpreting texts and in composing essays about them. Hers is a student-centered approach that teaches students to appreciate the medium through exposure to its diverse topics and through creating comics themselves. She “realized that in order for students to truly understand and appreciate comics as a storytelling and communications medium [she] had to let them try their hands at composing sequential art” (6). The sample assignments that Bakis provides include questions that are similar, in many ways, to some of the probing questions the interrogative mode poses. For example, one of the assignments she designed for discussing *V for Vendetta* includes the following prompt: “[t]hink about how form relates to content or how different combinations of words and images affect the meaning of the story” (136). The central difference between her approach and that of the interrogative mode, though, is that, as mentioned above, she does not incorporate the works of comics critics in the materials she provides students with nor in the questions she poses. She makes it seem as if there are no critical conversations about comics outside her classroom that students need to be aware of, which is a common practice in intro courses in various disciplines; it is not unique to teaching comics. Moreover, most of her questions focus on the themes of the narratives she teaches, and she very rarely directs her students’ attention towards form. Unlike the interrogative mode that leads students to think about the medium more broadly, the analytical approach she presents is heavily topic-centered, which leads to analyses whose content is quite similar to what students write about imageless literature. The majority of the examples she presents of her students’ reading responses lack analyses of formal aspects, like panel layout, for instance. As a result, in their

reading responses, some students complained about not understanding some panel layouts. After reading Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, one of Bakis's students wrote "when reading I sometimes have trouble understanding the layout of all panels. There are sometimes when I don't know which text to read first" (109). Bakis thinks that this is a good problem to have as it demonstrates "some of the difficulties involved in reading such an intertextual and complex graphic novel" (104), but she never tells teachers how to resolve this issue if it arises in their classrooms, which is one of the main concerns of the interrogative mode as it includes guiding questions about navigating the medium and understanding the function of page and panel layouts. Besides, because Bakis chooses to teach the print book-length comics that are falsely labelled as "graphic novels," the question of medium or publication format rarely arises in her classroom. If this is the only format of comics that students are exposed to, discussing format in class or in writing might not occur. The interrogative mode responds to this by devoting a section to format to raise readers' awareness that there are numerous formats other than the book-length comics that have dominated markets since the late '80s and early '90s.

Bakis's deliberate inattention to the works of comics critics beyond Eisner and McCloud is because the students she caters to are "high school age students," and the courses she designs are meant to prepare them for college. This emphasizes the need for a more complex pedagogical text, designed for college teachers, that immerses students in the existing critical conversation and that exposes them to approaches beyond the definitional approach that views comics as a primarily visual medium. If Bakis's reader response approach that is based on transactional theory is merged with the interrogative mode that exposes students to comics criticism, the results can be much better as students will integrate other people's work in their analyses, which is one of the most important skills that college students are urged to develop. Although readers

play an integral role in interpreting texts and images, basing their reading on theory and conversing with critics in their work results in informed analyses that avoid the problem of arguing in a vacuum.

The best part of Bakis's book, which benefits college teachers as much as high school educators, is the rationale she gives for teaching controversial comics that include topics like violence, drugs, sex, religion, politics, or any subject matter that some teachers, school boards, and parents still consider taboo:

> Students today have grown up with images of burning towers collapsing following a terrorist strike, easily accessible pornography on the Internet, and television commercials and sitcoms soaked in sexual innuendo that flash before their eyes at an alarming rate. Rather than nostalgically wish for a simpler way of life (or resort to an entirely traditional curriculum) our responsibility as educators is to help students navigate this world, a media-saturated and often violent one… Though it seems safer to force young people into prescribed borders or not let them find out about the worst in this world when they are impressionable and still developing moral and ethical limits, students need to be familiar with what is beyond those boundaries in order to understand the context in which they are negotiating and establishing their own set of behaviors. Mostly, students feel respected that their teacher acknowledges their maturity to handle such imaginative, intellectual, and moral experimenting (127-128)

This statement can be included in course proposals as it points out how and why most students today (especially teenagers) are not as sheltered from controversies as some adminstrators, school boards, parents, and some educators still think. Parts of it can be used in course syllabi as

well to explain the significance of using the literature classroom as a safe environment for discussing those heated topics that are part and parcel of modern day life, which student might not get a chance to discuss and analyze as freely in nonacademic contexts.

Unlike Bakis, whose target audience is high school teachers of ELA courses, James B. Carter addresses a broader audience that includes college teachers in his article "PIM Pedagogy: Toward a Loosely Unified Model for Teaching and Studying Comics and Graphic Narratives," published in the *SANE Journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education*. This article includes several teaching ideas and suggestions that intersect with the interrogative mode in its aim to provide nonexpert readers with guided questions that can help them conduct comprehensive analyses, and can be a model that shows them how to create more critical questions about the medium on their own.

In this article, Carter suggests that both high school and college teachers should use a scaffolding technique when they teach comics. Against the claim that scaffolding might stifle creativity, Carter argues that, "[v]ia scaffolding, an instructor may reduce possible freedom on the onset, but over time and as student competency grows, one gradually releases more independence back to students. Indeed, this process is called 'gradual release'" (3). Carter's suggestion aims at veering students' attention towards the aspects they need to focus on when they analyze comics; however, this is just to provide them with a starting point and a way of thinking about the medium. Once they gain enough experience and are exposed to current critical conversations, they will create their own questions and decide their own point of departure depending on the works they decide to examine beyond the course's assigned texts.

Carter neither suggests using McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, as many pedagogical texts do, as *the* primary critical text in the comics classroom, nor does he dismiss its usefulness.

What Carter suggests, however, is braiding McCloud's ideas with other critical propositions from other texts and presenting them all to students in order to build students' skills in multimodal analysis:

> *Understanding Comics* and *Making Comics* are pivotal in many comics courses but should be braided with others' work. (As Horrocks suggests, McCloud's definition of comics and system of studying them needn't be the official definition. Others exist). While McCloud's suggestion[s] for analysis are well-established in comics studies, I suggest braiding New London Group[2]-informed multimodal analysis with McCloud's six types of panel progressions and rudimentary imagetext theory to fully frontload/scaffold comics courses (6)

This is a place where Carter's propositions and the interrogative mode intersect. Carter sees the insufficiency of McCloud's work when it is used by itself in a comics classroom as a universal critical lens, and he stresses the importance of merging it with the rest of the existing critical lenses that can broaden students' understanding of the medium and its different aspects, which is precisely what the interrogative mode does. To show what he means by braiding different interpretive lenses, Carter introduces a model for teaching comics to nonexperts that he refers to as "PIM Pedagogy" (6). This teaching mode comprises "panel and page analysis (P), imagetext[3], (I) and multimodal notions of image study [as well as McCloudian theory: M]" (6). To explain how this model works and to point out its significance, Carter writes "braiding basics from

[2] This is a group of ten academics who gathered in 1994 to develop a new literacy pedagogy that involves studying and analyzing multimodal forms of composition instead of being confined to reading and writing as the primary means of communication.

[3] Carter here refers to W.J.T Mitchell's imagetext theory. Carter writes that, in his work, Mitchell "illuminates two basic image-text distinctions: imagetext, in which pictorial and alphabetic language work in consonance and form composite, logical co-scaffolds, and image/text, in which the imagistic and the alphabetic seem to cleave from one another, working in dissonance to suggest rupture or discord" (6).

McCloud's panel progression theory, Mitchell's imagetext, and multimodal theory may strengthen discourse and analysis initially and throughout a course, as they offer students structural, formal, and theoretical vocabulary" (9). In addition to the PIM strategy, he also "offers a model for evolving through classes once heavy reading begins" (9). This model involves four recursive stages of reading (which he found in "the ubiquitous *Bridging English*" (9) and finds applicable to reading comics): reader response (a primary reading for pleasure), working in an interpretive community (for understanding), formal analysis (for appreciation), critical synthesis (for expansion and reconstruction) (9). Through this model, Carter suggests that students will have to read a work of comics multiple times for a different purpose each time (pleasure, understanding, and reconstruction), and they have to repeat these processes several times in order to conduct a thorough analysis. To illustrate the recursive stages of reading he suggests, Carter provides teachers with a "visual articulation of the [reading] model, a loose hierarchy or taxonomy, if you will, of comics study" (11) (see fig. 88).

Carter explains the applicability of this four-stage model of reading comics as follows:

> [a] progression through these modes - through guided questioning, written responses, Socratic discussion, or group activities - may properly scaffold a reading of any graphic novel. Further, students can build and hone their budding knowledge of comics formalism/structuralism throughout the model...As well, just as critical theory often builds historically from formalist to post-structuralist, applying this four-pronged loose progression affords professors opportunities to integrate new critical concepts with students who have a foundation (9-10)

The "guided questioning" that Carter writes about as one of the supplements to the 4 stage reading model is what the interrogative mode offers. It provides readers with critical lenses in a

question form to guide them through the reading process. Additionally, like Carter's reading model, the interrogative mode is adaptive and transferable; if students use it successfully at least once, they should be able to form new questions, similar to the interrogative mode's question in function but different in content, when they encounter new texts, and to use the interrogative mode in new critical situations other than the ones discussed in class.

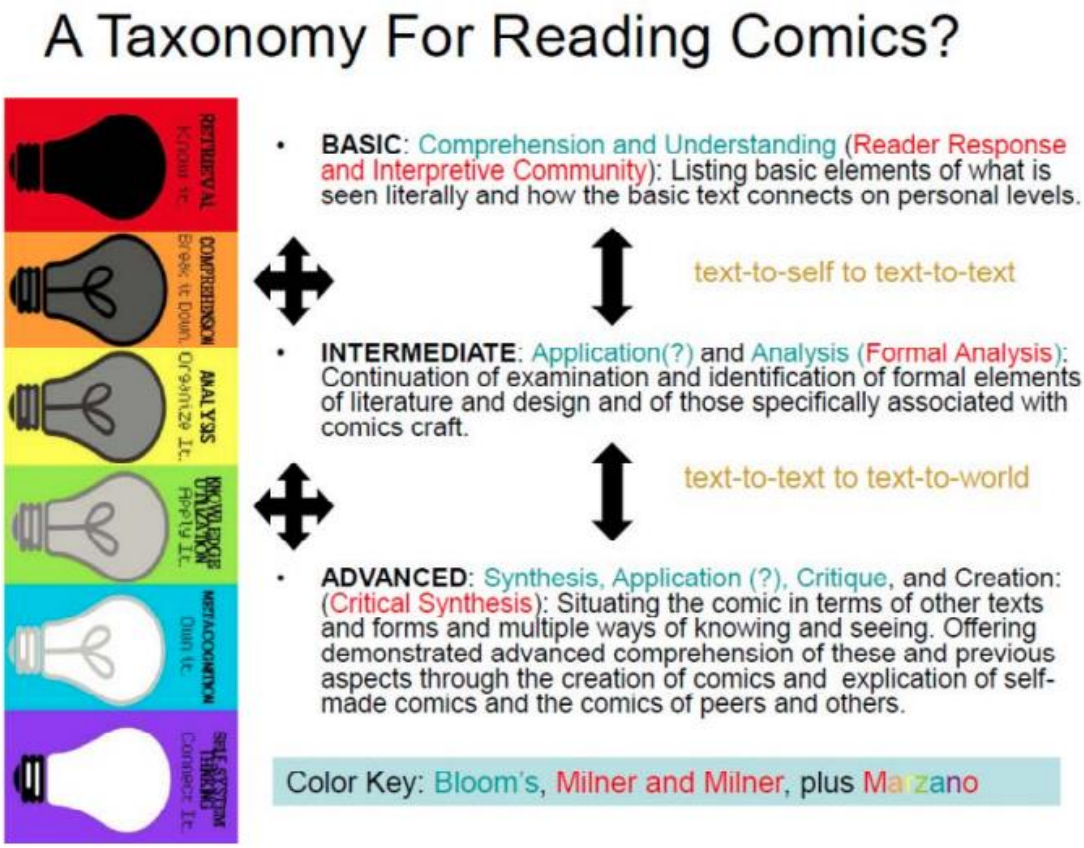

Fig. 88. Carter's taxonomy for reading comics.

Carter's summary of his approach intersects with what the interrogative aims to accomplish through its informed questions. He states the following:

> students need scaffolds. Via teaching formal elements and vocabulary of comics and design and "PIM pedagogy" to get them started, offering myriad opportunities to explore the form- *as* a form *and* [connect it] to other texts in

> meaningful ways (such as through critical lenses, guided big questions, history, or thematic foci)- and presenting opportunities to consider, critique and create informed by multiple theories or lenses (thereby extending the value of PIM), educators can offer students pedagogically informed comics courses (12-13)

The interrogative mode applies what Carter suggests. It starts with scaffolding (by answering the question of "where is the first panel on this page?"), and it teaches readers comics vocabulary by identifying the basic terminology. It also provides readers with multiple, linked theories and lenses to lead them to a comprehensive reading of comics, and asks various questions about the central elements that comprise comics. Although Carter does not present a mode that implements his suggestions, he calls for the creation of an interpretive tool that does. Thus, the interrogative mode responds well to this need.

In addition to the PIM pedagogy and the reading model that Carter offers in his article, he highlights the importance of understanding through creation. He suggests that comics teachers should ask their students to create comics themselves as this increases their appreciation of the medium and explains to them the creative process through practice. Based on his personal experience with his students, Carter writes, "I find tasking students with creating comics essential to their understanding of the complexity of the form... [This activity] helped them respect the form and challenge lingering preconceived notions of worth and rigor. Stated simply, comics making is hard work" (10). Carter is not the only educator who sees the value of assigning students to create comics themselves. Many comics teachers have found this technique helpful in fostering students' understanding of the complexity of making comics, and, in the process, of reading and interpreting them. As shown above, Maureen Bakis also let her students "try their hands at composing sequential art" (Bakis 6) although they "were concerned that they

would be graded on their drawing skills" (5). To get around this concern, Bakis "reassured them (as many graphic artists do at comics workshops) that stick figures are perfectly acceptable, and [she even] drew alongside them for reassurance" (5). Drawing comics for the classroom does not have to be confined to responding to the plots or the themes of graphic narratives that students encounter. Teachers can extend that to, as Carter suggests, asking students "to produce small comics to illustrate mastery of certain concepts...throughout the course [in order to] note their understanding of new critical elements of comics or the critical theories they present " (Carter 10). Chris Reyns-Chikuma is another advocate for understanding comics by creating them. In "Teaching Comics from Constraints: Oubapo and other Experiments in Form, Style, and Technique," he advises instructors to "encourage students to dare to act by experimenting and experiencing, instead of explaining and theorizing everything" (283), and he writes that "students can use plenty of techniques to avoid the 'drawing well issue,' such as stick figures, caricature, and the use of ready-made materials—such as cut-out figures, stamps, etc.—and of course, computer drawing programs" (282). He writes that numerous educators have experimented with this teaching technique, and many of them agree that it has been successful in making students aware, as Reyns puts it, "of the impact of the formal constraints" of the medium (280).

The main difference between the taxonomy for reading comics that Carter presents and the interrogative mode is their target audience. While the interrogative mode targets teachers, students, and nonacademics, and also prompts critics to address nonexperts, Carter's target audience is teachers. He states very clearly that "[t]he taxonomy is offered to facilitate instruction rather than as something to be taught to students" (12). He does not mind sharing the taxonomy with students as it can help them gain "metacognitive awareness of how they study and create comics," (12) but he also writes that "metacognition of the taxonomy itself may not

need exploring" (12). This notion obviously contrasts the interrogative mode; not only does the latter aim to provide teachers with an applicable apparatus, but it also targets students by giving them critical questions to ponder, and by allowing them to expand those questions by adding more probing queries through their exposure to comics and comics criticism.

Unlike Carter's article that presents a model that facilitates the process of reading comics in a classroom, most of the essays in *Graphic Novels and Comics in the Classroom: Essays on the Educational Powers of Sequential Art*, edited by Carrye Kay Syma and Robert G. Weiner, show how comics can be used as a tool for teaching different topics and disciplines. However, some of the essays discuss the challenges that comics teachers face, and they suggest practical ways (that the authors of the essays tested out in their own classrooms) for responding to those challenges . This volume also includes essays in which teachers share the structures of their courses as models that can be adopted. The topics that the essays discuss include teaching language arts through comics, teaching specific literary concepts (like intertextuality and parody) through comics, teaching art history through comics, the challenges of teaching specific themes through comics (like survival and historical atrocity), teaching comics in special contexts (like the Medieval and Renaissance classroom), and others. One of the essays that stand out in this collection is David Whitt's "I can get college credit for reading *Batman*? That's a joke, right?": Confessions of a Fanboy Professor Teaching Comic Books." In this essay, Whitt addresses the challenges that teachers face in "designing and teaching an entire course on comic books for an undergraduate audience" (location 1153). The first challenge Whitt identifies is that, in most cases, comics teachers have to design their entire courses from scratch because, unlike what is available for teaching more traditional courses, many institutions do not have materials for teaching comics, like "instructor's manuals with sample syllabi and assignments, computerized

test banks, and CD-ROMS" (location 1168). The second challenge Whitt discusses is when students (especially first-year college students) are not interested in taking a comics course or do not see the value of studying graphic narratives but take the comics course regardless because it is, for instance, listed as a school requirement. Or, as in Whitt's case, the school "has a unique system of registration whereby students rank in order their top five course topics and then a computer selects which students are placed in which classes"; because "the system is not perfect," some of the students who rank the comics class lower get mistakenly placed in it, which makes them "disappointed, and sometimes upset, at having been placed in a course s/he never wanted to take in the first place" (location 1182). Because of the misconception that first-year students (and their parents) have about comics, Whitt's "hurdle each semester is attempting to justify the value of a college course on comic books and convince the students their time and money are being well spent" (location 1197).

Because the majority of the authors of texts on teaching comics state that they start their course by teaching McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, Whitt, like most teachers, used this book to introduce his students to the medium. This was his response to the challenge of designing an entire comics course from scratch since his school did not have an instructor's manual or teaching materials. In his opinion, through the paneled format of *Understanding Comics* "students become 'trained' to read comic books" which eases "their transition into reading other graphic novels" (location 1125). He also states that "McCloud's book becomes a foundational text for the entire course" and that he makes "reference to concepts such as closure and iconic abstraction when creating various critique questions" (location 1225). Alongside *Understanding Comics*, the comics he teaches include *Pedro & Me*, *Watchmen*, *The Dark Knight Returns*, *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*, *Akira: Volume One*, *Sandman: Preludes*

and Nocturnes, and *Maus*. Whitt's rationale for choosing these specific comics included reasons like, for instance, wanting students "to be introduced to graphic storytelling not through costumed superheroes, but through real people, facing real challenges," (location 1241) aiming to show students some comics creators' "deconstruction of the superhero genre," and analyzing the overarching themes that each of these comics revolve around (like the psychoanalytic themes in *Arkham Asylum*). After putting these texts together, Whitt "ultimately decided to conduct the class like a book club, with some slight variations" (location 1168) that he presents as follows:

> First, although the entire class reads the same graphic novels, two or three students are assigned to one specific book, each responsible for covering specific chapters or sections. Depending on the book's length each graphic novel could be covered in two or three class periods, with class discussion generating additional analysis and interpretation. Next, students write a short paper (3-4 pages) on this graphic novel based on specific questions I assigned. These questions require students to move beyond description of plot and character and reflect upon a graphic novel's themes, symbolism, and art. In addition to these short papers students are also required to write a paper on their history with and attitudes toward comic books due the second week in the semester, and also develop a major research paper… based on a graphic novel(s) outside the regular course readings due before the end of [the semester] (location 1182)

Whitt finds this independently designed course successful as a response to the challenge of not knowing how to design and teach a comics course. His main aim through this teaching experience is to change some students' misconceptions about comics. He writes, "[i]f at the end of the semester a student reflects back upon their experience and views comic books in a more

positive way, I have done my job" (location 1316). To prove the success of his strategy, he shares a brief anecdote at the end of the essay about a student who he thought disliked the course who changed his preconception of the medium and even sent Whitt some comics "(*Spiderman, Superman Annual,* and *Sandman*)" as a gift (location 1316). To face the challenge of students' depreciation of comics and their displeasure in taking the course, especially if it is a requirement or if they are accidentally misplaced in it, Whitt spends the first day of class discussing "the domestic and international appeal of comics" (location 1197), and he provides "an initial foundation for the scope of comic books" (location 1211). After that, he spends several class periods exploring "the medium's history by watching the video *Comic Book Confidential* (1988)" and "The History Channel's *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked* (2003)", then students read *Understanding Comics*.

Whitt's claim that after reading *Understanding Comics* students become "trained" to read comic books, and that McCloud's foundational text eases their "transition into reading other graphic novels" might apply to the traditional comics he selected for his course, but once his students read comic books that challenge comics conventions, especially avant-garde and experimental texts, they will find out that McCloud's definition of comics is limited. It is unclear how Whitt's students found McCloud helpful when they were asked in their assignments to "reflect upon a graphic novel's themes, symbolism, and art" (location 1182). Such assignments require more foundation and more exposure to critical works that can *train* students to ponder these aspects, which, again, is what the interrogative mode aims to do. What is adoptable in Whitt's experience, though, is the way he got around student's misconceptions about comics by showing them *Comic Book Confidential* and *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked*. The latter can be an excellent resource for showing nonexperts the value of comics and its historical

significance, and a great response to the claim that comics have always been "just for kids" as it shows, for instance, the political statements that the stories of Superman made, especially during WWII. The documentary does not only give an insight into the world of superheroes, but it also sheds light on why comics has always been a fitting medium for their nonhero counterparts. Instead of coupling this documentary with *Comic Book Confidential*, though, whose overall production, as Whitt says in the article, "makes the video both look and sound dated" (location 1211), I would use *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked* with *American Splendor*, as the former tells where superhero comics started and the latter shows how the medium developed over the years and kept accepting different genres until, like the "auto-graphic novel," for instance.

"'Interdisciplinary' Teaching: *Comics Studies and Research Pedagogy*" by Phillip Troutman is another essay in this collection that is quite useful for comics teachers for several reasons. Troutman designed a first-year college composition course in which he used "the peculiarly interdisciplinary status of comics *as a scholarly field* in order to introduce students to academic writing and research" (location 2716). He uses Charles Hatfield's term "indiscipline" to describe the field of comics, and explains that its qualities of liminality are what makes "comics studies a rich point of departure for undergraduate students working to understand and enter realms of academic discourse" (location 2716-2729). By "indiscipline" Hatfield means comics' "current state of principled eclecticism, its 'mere multidisciplinarity' as opposed to a principled interdisciplinarity… But rather than calling for fuller disciplinary development, Hatfield is optimistic about the field's potential for thoughtful, purposeful interdisciplinary work: a self-conscious, practiced *in*discipline" (location 2743). Troutman summarizes Hatfield's approach in the following lines:

> [t]he most 'provocative' and most promising mode for comics studies Hatfield sees is a *conceptual interdisciplinarity* that challenges disciplinary boundaries themselves in order to 'carve out a new intellectual 'space.'' Here he argues for a 'rigorous pluralism' and a studied 'eclecticism' in scholarship that encourages the 'questioning of the disciplinarity system , ongoing self-critical engagement with one's own discipline and its approach to knowledge production, and continual expeditioning across disciplinary borders,' ultimately transforming the disciplines 'from within' (Para 34-39) (location 2758)

This status of comics studies, as described by Hatfield, urged Troutman to introduce his students to this ongoing critical conversation in order to teach them how to construct arguments, and how to support their claims by responding to other communicators' claims. In practice, Troutman starts his course by assigning McCloud's *Understanding Comics*. However, instead of presenting it as a foundational work on comics analysis, he tells his students that it is simply a text that presents "an argument" that can be refuted, argued against, or proven flawed, "not a set of facts to accept at face value" (location 2829). The assignment is not simply to read the text; he assigns students to write "a five- to seven-page critical essay developed by analyzing selected formal qualities of a comic book...in response to Scott McCloud's claims" (2802-2816)

The rationale he gives for choosing McCloud's text for this first assignment is the following:

> *Understanding Comics*, both in its ideas and its presentation, is so compelling that on first reading it seems unassailably authoritative, like all the other textbooks students have been asked to absorb over the course of their high school writing careers. Yet semester after semester, students who begin with very little sense of where McCloud could be wrong or incomplete wind up, over the course of four

> weeks and seven pages, revealing new categories of image/text interaction, new types of panel transition, and examples of character depiction that have no place on his iconic/realistic pyramid. Even more modest, hedged claims–that certain techniques, in certain cases, don't have the effect McCloud claims for them–are significant and show students how they might listen in and add to the critical conversation, respecting and using what knowledgeable writers have already said, but also finding a way to make a real contribution. The amazing thing, really, with using *Understanding Comics* for these purposes is that all it takes for students to turn his sweeping truths into contestable claims is to read some comic books… Inevitably, with very little direction in most cases, students find examples that don't quite fit McCloud's definitions, categories, and claims, and from there they start to build their own analysis (location 2844)

Troutman's is one of the few pedagogical texts that address the limitations of McCloud's book, and that argue that once students start reading comics, they will be able to see the drawbacks of McCloud's propositions, and will come up with their own analytical frameworks that are applicable to the works they examine, especially if those works are unconventional.

The model that Troutman presents here is what the interrogative mode, when used in the classroom, aims to do, not only with *Understanding Comics*, but with the various approaches to comics criticism that are available today and those yet to appear. Like Troutman, the aim of the interrogative mode, and of similar types of synthesizing teaching strategies, is to invite students to become active contributors to the critical conversation, especially considering that comics studies is nascent and still evolving.

After reading McCloud's book and responding to his claims, Troutman asks his students to write two 300-word abstracts of academic articles on comics. To help them accomplish this task, he asks them to find arguments in journals like *The Comics Journal*, the *International Journal of Comic Art, ImageText*, the *Journal of Popular Culture*, as well as journals from other disciplines that include articles that have a "special emphasis on formal analysis" like the *Journal of Gender Studies, A Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy, Rethinking History*, and others (location 2885). In this assignment, students are required to "focus on analytical methods, conceptual concepts, and interpretative claims" (2885). Because this research reveals multiple gaps in the existing scholarly literature and shows the scarcity of articles written on specific topics, the following assignment prompts students to write research papers in which they identify gaps in comics studies and respond to the works of others. By doing this research and composing argumentative essays, students "begin to position themselves as creators and not just consumers of knowledge, potentially adding to the field," (location 2900) practicing "Kenneth Burke's metaphor of the parlor[4]" as they learn "the notion that researchers write in response to what others have written" (location 2957). The format of those assignments shows another link between Troutman's teaching objectives and what the interrogative mode aims at: training students to become potential critics in a fairly new field of study that invites contributions and calls for more critical voices that can help it grow.

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[4] Many composition textbooks use Kenneth Burke's metaphor of the parlor to introduce students to the notion of considering other existing arguments and counterarguments prior to taking a stance or constructing an argument. Troutman includes this metaphor in his essay and he links it to his approach as follows: "you arrive at a party late; an animated argument is underway; you listen to catch the drift; you jump in, participate, and influence the conversation; eventually you leave and the discussion continues on (Harris 2006, 34-36). In practical terms, this means we must teach students 'to think of the page as crowded with others,' as David Bartholomae puts it, but also to take the words of those others 'as points of deflection, appropriation, improvisation, or penetration' (1995, 63, 66). This may require a reorientation on our part as instructors" (location 2957).

Troutman explains that in order to apply this teaching strategy successfully, educators should "trust that [their] students have greater capacity for doing original research and making original contributions than the system of undergraduate education has generally given them credit for" (2957); with enough guidance to conduct research "for argument, not for information," (2971) students "can add to and enrich the conversation" on comics criticism (2986). This approach responds well to Maureen Bakis's high school comics teaching strategy that does not expose students to critical conversations and that relies heavily, especially in designing course assignments, on reader response and transactional theory. Although it is not a media studies or genre studies course, Troutman's first-year composition course immerses students in the current critical conversations about comics, trains students to argue about comics, and prepares them for becoming potential critics. In fact, some of Troutman's students, as he shares, published the essays they wrote for his class in comics journals, which is impressive.

One of the most quoted, and, too, most useful, books on teaching comics is *Teaching the Graphic Novel*, which presents a collection of pedagogical essays edited by Stephen Tabachnick. The collection is divided into five parts each focused on a different comics-teaching topic: theoretical and aesthetic issues, social issues, individual creators, courses and contexts, and resources. Perhaps the most useful essay in this collection is Charles Hatfield's "Defining Comics in the Classroom; or, The Pros and Cons of Unfixability". In this essay, Hatfield criticizes comics teachers' insistence on starting their comics classes with an attempt to define comics, and their reliance on McCloud's limited definition as if it represents the entire medium with its diverse genres and forms. It seems that most literature teachers automatically begin with definitions out of habit. When introducing students to a unique literary genre or a nonliterary medium (like film, for instance), they usually begin with definitions, as if there is a universal

belief that defining subjects will (presumably) make understanding their examples much easier. The problem with that conviction though, especially when teaching comics, is that sometimes attempting to define the medium complicates things rather than simplifies them. Comics theorists and critics are still struggling to agree on a uniform definition of the medium (and this struggle might not end, which is what keeps critical conversations going). They are even struggling with agreeing on one term to use for labeling the different subgenres of comics, like graphic novels, memoirs, or reportage. Accordingly, reading different critics' definitions of comics with the purpose of finding a universal definition could confuse students, as they will hardly find a definition that all critics can adopt and agree on. Yet, the idea of providing students with a single definition by one critic, like the definition in McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, does not solve the problem of definition either. As mentioned above, a single definition can never be sufficient for comprising all types of comics. In both cases, it will be a struggle for students to effectively define the medium.

Pondering this struggle led me to consider the problem of definition by asking the following questions: why do comics teachers have to start courses with teaching definitions? Why cannot the defining process (if it is necessary) wait until the end of a course, after students have been exposed to a variety of comics that can give them a fair idea of the medium's constituents? Why do teachers want students to agree on a unifying definition of a medium that constantly resists universal definitions? Hatfield's essay discusses these questions and responds to them by sharing his teaching experience. On the question of definition, he writes:

> Clarity in teaching is a virtue, of course. Yet inevitably there is a tension between wanting to pose a clear, workable, formal definition for students' sake and recognizing that comics flout ideas of formal purity and are almost impossible to

> pigeonhole. Comics *shouldn't* be easy to define, as they are an interdisciplinary, indeed antidisciplinary, phenomenon, nudging us usefully out of accustomed habits of thought and into productive gray areas where various disciplines— such as literature, art, semiotics, and mass communications— overlap and inform one another (23)

Instead of using *Understanding Comics* as an authoritative text that presents an accurate definition of comics, Hatfield tries to "wrench open McCloud's definition of comics and get students to see the force of its exclusions, its limits" (22). After that, he incorporates other critics' definitions of comics, like those by R. C. Harvey, Colton Waugh, Will Eisner, and David Kunzle, to "try to help students get into that sometimes ornery conversation" (22). Hatfield labels this teaching strategy as "teaching the conflicts"[5], which means "putting competing definitions of comics on the table, discussing the tactical nature of definitions in general, and helping students see why the question of comics' definition has been so aggravated" (22). He writes that one of the principal pros of this approach is that "it avoids a too exclusive, naively presentist, or a historically inauthentic definition of comics" (22). He also adds that, as teachers, "[i]n our haste to confer literary respectability on comics narrative, we ought not give students a false impression that comics have a history neatly encapsulated by a single definition. To do so would be to undercut our very claims about the artistic vitality and importance of comic art" (26).

If teachers adopt Hatfield's strategy, the focus of their classroom will shift from defining to exploring the diversity of the medium and its critics' approaches. Teachers must be careful, however, when "teaching the conflicts" to make it clear to their students that the purpose of examining various definitions is not to find the most accurate one, or the one that attends to all of

[5] Hatfield borrows this phrase from Gerald Graff.

the types of comics that the medium constitutes; no such unifying definition exists. The purpose of examining conflicting definitions is to help students realize the medium's interdisciplinarity and the difficulty of containing its capacities within definite boundaries. Once students learn that comics "*shouldn't* be easy to define", they may be more willing to approach the medium with an exploratory or investigative attitude rather than with a set definition in mind. They will think of comics critically and pose questions instead of trying to make every comic they read fit into the definitions of McCloud, Eisner, Kunzle, or others.

Like Hatfield, I agree that teachers should not completely dismiss McCloud's *Understanding Comics* from their syllabi. On the contrary, that work provides students with the vocabulary required to write about the medium. Before teaching this text though, teachers should clearly explain to their students, both in the syllabus and in the classroom, that the purpose of assigning McCloud's text is not to help them define comics, but to help them learn a new vocabulary for writing papers about comics. Another way to use this text is to teach it in comparison with others. To help students see the limitations of McCloud's definition of comics, and to encourage them to explore more perspectives for understanding the medium, teachers should assign Nick Sousanis's book *Unflattening* either alongside *Understanding Comics* or immediately after students finish reading it. The principal advantage of teaching *Unflattening* with (or right after) *Understanding Comics* is that the dialogue that will take place between the two texts when put in conversation, and the way in which Sousanis responds to McCloud's limited definition of comics, will lead students to view the difficulty of defining comics as a trigger for critical investigation that fosters and enhances their understanding of the medium, not as a struggle that obstructs understanding. In *Unflattening*, Sousanis addresses the problem of limited or exclusive definitions:

> A fixed viewpoint/A single line of thought/can be a trap/where we see only what we're looking for/Blind to other possibilities… Consider instead/ Distinct vantage points, separate paths, joined in dialogue, thus not merely side by side, they intersect, engage, interact, combine, and inform one another, as the coming together of two eyes produces stereoscopic vision/ outlooks held in mutual orbits, coupled, their interplay, and overlap, facilitate the emergence of new perspectives. Actively interweaving multiple strands of thought, creates common ground. A richly dimensional tapestry, from which to confront and take differences into account, and allow the complex to remain complex. (36-37)[6]

Sousanis's invitation to explore other possibilities will help students understand that with every comic they read, their understanding of comics will change, and a new definition will emerge. Thus, they will embrace the impossibility of finding an accurate definition for the medium in critical texts, and they will be more eager to come up with multiple text-specific definitions that fit the works they read. Teachers should never fall into the trap of giving students the impression that defining comics, in and of itself, is an end. They should always see it as one among various means that lead to a larger end, which is understanding comics. If students get stuck at the definitional phase, they might struggle when they are exposed to a comic book that falls outside the traditional definitions of the medium.

The interrogative mode applies what Hatfield refers to as "teaching the conflicts" as it puts different critics' statements in a conversation that displays the variety of voices that make up comics criticism. It turns those statements into questions that students are prompted to think

[6] Because this quote is originally written in separate tags (that look like narrative captions) in *Unflattening*, I use slashes here to indicate the breaks between them.

critically about and to not view as authoritative, unquestionable, or uncriticizable; The questions defy the notion of a single universal "airtight" definition that attempts to put limitations to a medium that has always crossed defined boundaries. The interrogative mode also intersects with Hatfield's notion of teaching the current conversation among critics. Instead of using a single critical approach and dismissing or ignoring others, the interrogative mode immerses students in the ongoing conversation and prompts them to think and respond to it critically in their analyses. Moreover, the interrogative mode is interested in engaging with various disciplines for conducting a comprehensive analysis of comics, which is linked to Hatfield's argument that since comics is an interdisciplinary phenomena, it urges one to create "productive gray areas where various disciplines— such as literature, art, semiotics, and mass communications— overlap and inform one another" (Hatfield 23).

Experience in Teaching Comics

The pedagogical texts discussed above helped me find answers to several questions I had after teaching my first comics class, especially the question of how to lead students to conduct a comprehensive analysis of comics that attends equally to the various elements that constitute the medium. They also led me to revisit that teaching experience for evaluating it. In the Spring semester of 2018, I co-taught an upper-level undergraduate comics course titled "Special Topics in Genre: Comics and Graphic Novels" in the Department of English and Philosophy at Idaho State University. In that course, students were assigned to read McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, eight books of comics, and a number of secondary readings that included critical articles and excerpts from longer texts about the medium and the assigned primary texts. My purpose in teaching this course was multifold: to teach students the art of generating questions about comics, to familiarize them with different methods of reading and interpreting visual texts, to

demonstrate the significance of the comics medium in comparison to other media, to expose students to the process of making comics so that they see the medium from a creator's point of view, to lead students to develop their own mode of critique or set of strategies for critiquing comics, and to teach them to shift focus from analyzing plots to conducting more comprehensive analyses of the various elements that constitute a comic.

I decided to start the course with *Understanding Comics* as I believed it would be a good introduction to the medium because of its scaffolding effect. In other words, I thought that it would be a good threshold as it provides the necessary vocabulary and tools needed for reading traditional comic books. The first two weeks of class were devoted to discussing the concepts McCloud introduces in his book, and to briefly expose students to excerpts from early comics, namely *The Yellow Kid* (1895-1898), *Krazy Kat* (1913-1944), *Gasoline Alley* (1951), *Dick Tracy* (1931), and early superhero comics from the 1930s and 40s. This introduction was meant to give students a brief overview of the history of comics and how the medium originated and developed. Starting the third week of classes until the end of the semester, students read the 8 assigned comics and the additional critical readings. The assigned comics included: Art Spiegelman's *Maus I&II*, Shigeru Mizuki's *Onward Towards Our Noble Deaths*, *March: Book One* by John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell, Marjane Satrapi's *The Complete Persepolis*, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, Craig Thompson's *Blankets*, Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*, and G. Willow Wilson's *Cairo: A Graphic Novel*. I chose these texts because they raise important questions about multiple topics like identity, race, gender, sexuality, civil rights, war, survival, trauma, memory, the concept of "home," the individual and society, and the relationship between fantasy and politics, just to name a few. Each work also presents a unique artistic style, which leads to several questions

about the formal and aesthetic aspects of comics. Moreover, they are all works produced by creators from various national and cultural backgrounds and of different genders, which displays the inclusiveness of the medium. Alongside these comics, students were required to read the following critical texts: Thierry Groensteen's "Why are Comics Still in Search of Cultural Legitimization?"; Hillary Chute's "History and Graphic Representation in *Maus*"; Neil Cohn's "Japanese Visual Language: The Structure of Manga"; the introduction of Charles Hatfield's *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*, Marie Ostby's "Graphics and Global Dissent"; Robyn Warhol's "The Space Between: A Narrative Approach to Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*"; and Isaac Cates's "Comics and the Grammar of Diagrams."

Students were also required to write weekly assignments: reading responses and critical questions. In the reading responses, students were required to either create a 2 page comic strip or to write 2-page double spaced written responses in which they analyze and interpret specific aspects of the assigned comics and to discuss a topic related to the medium at large. The critical questions assignment asked them to come up with 5 critical questions about any aspect of the comics they read every week, and 5 questions about the medium that can lead to a sustained discussions. Those weekly assignments, in addition to class discussions, were designed to prepare students for the course's two major assignments: a midterm essay (5-7 pages) and a final essay (10 pages). Below is a description of the assignments, taken from the course syllabus:

<u>Reading Responses (due the end of the 1st week of discussing a new text)</u>

You are expected to come to class at the end of the 1st week of discussing a new text with a brief reading response pertaining to that text and the issues it raises about comics more generally. These responses should be provided to the instructors at the end of class, in hard copy. Because of the nature of this class, and the non-traditional medium it will focus on, your responses can

take one of two forms. You can either create a 2-page response in comic strip format, in which you critique, analyze, and interpret the assigned text as well as the medium of comics more broadly (see examples on Moodle), or you can submit a 2-page double spaced written response in which you fulfill the same goals of critiquing, analyzing, and interpreting the text and the medium. The two types of responses will be graded by the same standards, so the choice is yours. The most important thing is that your response engages with the reading and its major themes, characters, setting, plot and/or subplots, as well as its form, illustration, images, use of colors, etc. Both types of responses will have to critique, analyze, and discuss the specifics of the texts as well as the medium in general. For more information on how we will evaluate your responses, both in written and in comics form, please see the grading rubric posted to Moodle.

- You do not have to be a talented artist to create a comic strip response. Stick figures will count (see examples on Moodle[7]). What matters most in the response is your critique, your analysis, and your interpretations of the text, not your talent in drawing.
- At the end of the semester you will have submitted 9 responses.

Critical Questions (due at the beginning of the 1st week of discussing a new text)

You are expected to come to class at the beginning of the 1st week of discussing a new text with a set of 5 discussion questions about the text of the week, and 5 critical questions about the medium of comics more broadly. These questions should be in hard copy only – you'll discuss them during our class session, and then submit them to your instructors at the end of class. For more information on how we will evaluate your questions, and on what makes for a good, productive set of questions, please see the grading rubric posted to Moodle.

[7] Moodle is the companion website where I uploaded the course materials.

- At the end of the semester you will have submitted 9 responses.

Midterm Assignment

Your midterm assignment will be to write a 5-7-page paper in which you come up with your own mode of critique and strategies for reading comics and graphic novels. This mode will be based on the questions we discuss in class, and the weekly responses you will have finished by the time this assignment is due, as well as the critical questions you will create in response to each text. (see detailed prompt on Moodle).

- Note: this assignment **MUST** be submitted in a written format.

Final Assignment

Your final assignment will be a 10-page paper in which you apply the mode of critique you designed and the strategies you came up with for reading comics and graphic novels to a new text of your choice **that we have not read or discussed in this course** (see detailed prompt on Moodle).

- Note: this assignment **MUST** be submitted in a written format.

Concerning the reading responses, I explained to students at the beginning of the semester that the objective of composing these assignments in a comics format is not to demonstrate their drawing talent, and that their evaluation would not be based on an ability to draw; the main objective, rather, was that they engage with the readings and to experience some of the challenges that Creators' face to better understand the creative process. In order to encourage students to give it a try, I uploaded two examples to the course website drawn in an amateurish

style. This was to show students that in comics, the most basic level of drawing is acceptable as long as it communicates a message and has a clear, distinguishable function in relation to the text it accompanies. The first example was a set of comics that I created as a graduate student when I took my very first comics class (fig. 89). The second example contained excerpts from Allie Brosh's *Hyperbole and a Half* because Brosh's style is extremely simple, and she uses the Paintbrush program to create them, a resource students could access themselves (fig. 90).

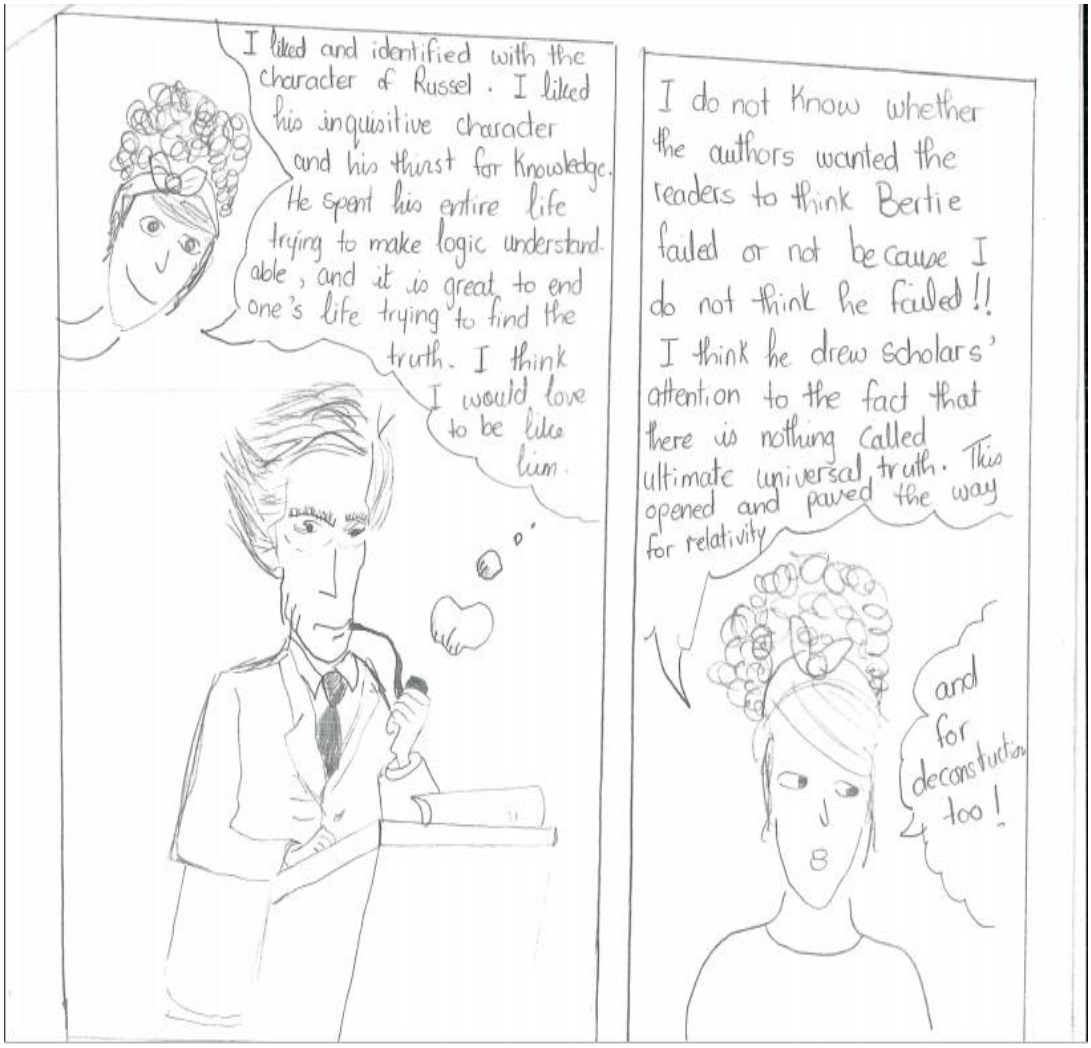


Fig. 89. A reading response created by the instructor of the course in a comic strip format.

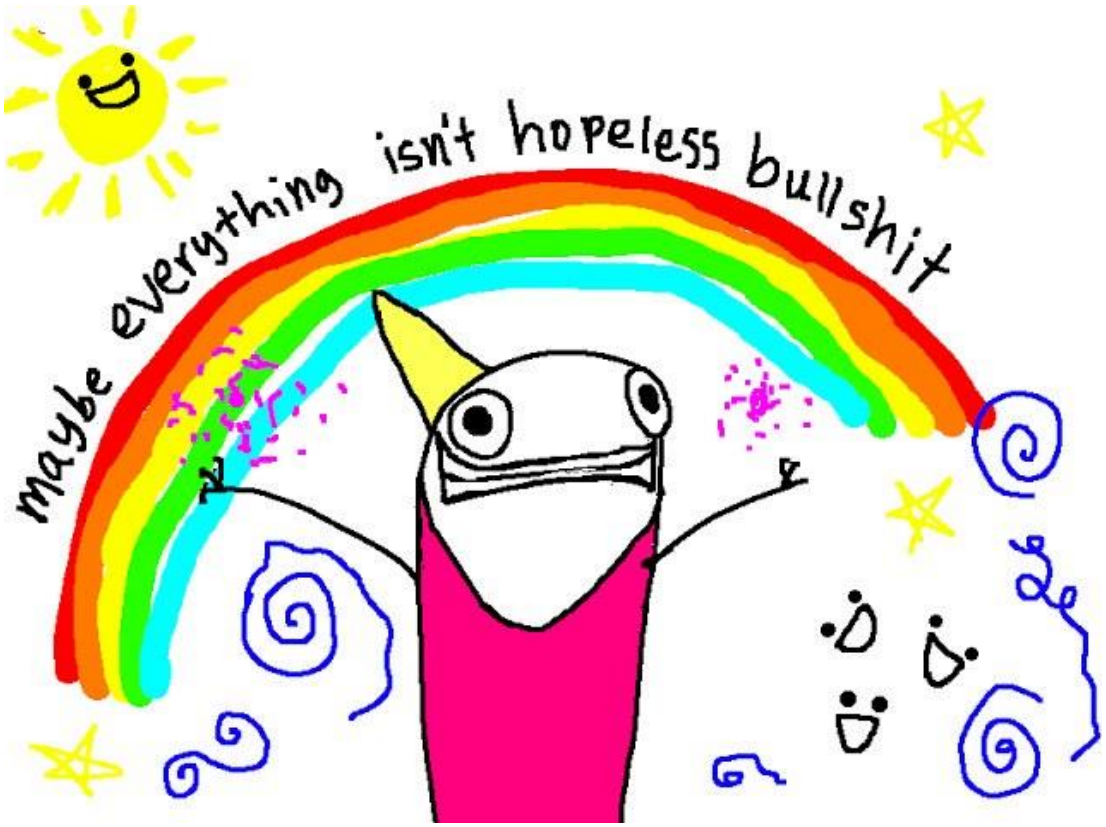


Fig. 90. An excerpt from Allie Brosh's *Hyperbole and a Half* that shows students that drawings in comics can be simple and cartoonish.

In terms of assessment, I shared rubrics with students on the course website, which showed the criteria for evaluating each assignment. The reading responses, whether presented in comics form or as a standard essay, were evaluated on the basis of their ability to do the following (as stated in the rubric):

- Response provides a clear, detailed interpretation of the reading.
- Response connects the reading to a broader issue for comics as a medium.
- Response provides evidence from the reading to illustrate its claims.
- Response analyzes that evidence, providing an interpretation of it.
- Response is clearly written, with no grammatical or factual errors.

Similarly, the 10 critical questions were graded according to the following criteria, also shared with students on the companion website:

- Questions devoted to the assigned text are specific, complex, and relevant.
- Questions devoted to comics are specific, complex, and relevant.
- Questions could lead to a sustained, detailed class discussion, in which all students could conceivably participate based on their reading for the class.
- 10 questions total provided (5 on the text, 5 on comics).
- Questions are clearly written.

The midterm essay was evaluated for its ability to present a way of interpreting and critiquing a single page of one of the comics we had read in class at that point in the semester. This mode of critique had to be specific, clearly defined, and applicable to the comic page selected. Students had to present a rationale for this mode of critique that was persuasive and well supported; it had to explain how and why this strategy can be applied to comics. The application of the critique had to be logical, argumentative, and clearly organized. Furthermore, the paper had to analyze specific elements of the page of comics under discussion; that is, it had to examine specific aspects of the page's visual appearance or text. It also had to be clearly written, with few grammatical issues and no factual errors. The same criteria were used for assessing the final assignment of the course. The main differences between the midterm and the final essay were that the latter allowed students to revisit and revise the mode of critique they created for the midterm before applying it to more comics (or to come up with a completely new one that is informed by what they learned in the second half of the course), and it gave them the chance to critique a new work of comics of their choice that has not been discussed in the course.

This teaching experience was successful on several levels and for several reasons. First, it developed students' skills in analysis through both the critical questions assignment and class discussions. At the beginning of the semester, students' questions were not sophisticated enough, and I spent a significant amount of time during class showing the difference between open ended questions that can lead to sustained class discussion and closed questions whose answers are easily predictable. A good number of students understood the task quite early in the semester, and they submitted good questions that I used in class as discussion starters. For example, after reading *Understanding Comics*, I used the following questions, which I copied word-for-word from my students' critical questions assignment, in addition to a few others that were also created by students, to conduct the first classroom discussion of the text:

- If you craft a definition of "comics" other than McCloud's, what would it be and why?
- Hieroglyphics are pictures without the use of words. Would you consider hieroglyphics to be comics with a bunch of silent scenes, or do you believe that words are essential to making something a comic?

With guidance and instructions, and through seeing their peers' questions that were chosen for class discussions, students' questions got much better toward the end of the semester, and they led to much more sophisticated discussions. The following are questions that one student submitted for the discussion of *Cairo: A Graphic Novel*, which was our last comic of the semester. One of the questions focuses specifically on the comic itself, and the other leads to thinking about the medium of comics more broadly:

- One of the most interesting themes in *Cairo* is the juxtaposition of the old world and the new. Page three of the comic introduces us to this theme as we see a new up armored

Humvee, an old truck, and then a pack of camels. How does this influence the reading of the novel in terms of setting and tone?

- Should there be age ratings for comics, like there are for movies and video games, because they depict scenes of a graphic nature?

I consider these two questions evidence of the success of the critical questions assignment, and of the teaching strategies that prompted students to come up with questions rather than provide answers. The first question shows how some students started to consider the impact of images on one's understanding of the story world, which is something they might have not been trained to do before taking this course. The second question shows that after taking this class, students understood that the idea that "comics are just for kids" is false. On the contrary, some comics may be completely inappropriate for children. Through seeing these questions and many like them, I realized that most students, after taking the class, learned how to form the type of questions that can lead to engaging discussions of comics, and started seeing the entire medium in a new light.

Another example that confirmed that students' perception of comics had changed after taking this course is the in-class reflections they wrote on the last day of class. The students can be easily classified into the following categories: the superhero comics fan (who self-identified as such), the manga fan, the all-types-of-comics reader, the practicing artist (a comics creator in the making), the literature student (whose primary training is in literary analysis of print texts), the A+ student (who does not care much about the medium and only cares about getting an A in the end), and the "I don't know why I am here" kind of student who accidentally ended up in the course. Each of these types of students came to the class with a package of expectations about the medium, and about studying comics in an academic setting, that, in most cases, changed

toward the end of the course, and that change, in my opinion, was a positive one. Below are some examples of the reflections they wrote on the last day of class in response to the question "did your perception of comics change over the semester?":

- Student 1: To be perfectly honest, I didn't think about comics much before. The only one I really got to know [was] *Calvin and Hobbes*. When I came into this class I expected more popular stories, superhero comics and such, but was surprised that the medium branched out as far as it did. I love to read, so it was great to read each one, and be shown a new world that didn't exist for me before.
- Student 2: My respect for comic books has increased exponentially and I am more willing to engage with comic books as a critical literature source.
- Student 3: Comics can encompass many aspects of life.[They] can directly address and attack social issues, as well as having no obvious point at all. The art of comics doesn't have to be aesthetically pleasing or a draw to the reader. It can be simplistic and actually quite ugly. But in this aspect, comics can be as complex and highly nuanced as life.
- Student 4: I came into this class having no background in reading comics, so as this semester went on I found a new appreciation for comics as a form of literature. It has opened my eyes to see how topics like the holocaust can be represented in a different way, but have more of an impact on me as the reader.
- Student 5: A mass majority of the popular [comics] are about superheroes, but they can be about anything the author sets their mind to, including life stories. Text to picture ratio is <u>so</u> important. There is text heavy and picture heavy and ones where it's balanced and the amount changes the way a comic's perceived.

Color versus black & white is also so important, along with panel shapes and sizes. Word bubbles or text boxes [are] also more important than I realized.

- Student 6 (self-identified as a superhero comics fan): How I think about comics now is that they are a catalyst for cultural exploration. They help to expand on social issues on all fronts [and] they help to expand on way[s] to deal with personal problems as well.

These reflections proved to me that taking this course and studying its readings was a positive experience for most students, particularly in showing them that the comics medium is a good fit for much more than the superhero genre.

By the end of the course, students also learned to define and employ a "mode of critique," an analytical concept with which many of them were not familiar. We spent several sessions discussing ways of coming up with analytical tools, and I used examples from students' critical questions assignments to demonstrate the types of questions that can be applied in critiquing an entire comic. This kind of discussion led students to come up with questions for their final essay like the following:

- How do superhero comic books respond to extreme political and ethical issues, fictional or real? In order to answer that, several questions have to be [posed]. First and foremost, how does one decipher right from wrong in a book that practically thrives in gray area? Second, how do factions of characters respond to events based on history? I believe that all these questions can only be answered with the magic "what if".

The student who came up with this question applied it to a single volume of the superhero comic *Civil War*. Although we did not read or discuss superhero comics in class, this student

transferred the skills he gained from classroom training to a new context, and conducted an analysis of a new comic book independently. Reading the final papers, and seeing that most students understood what the idea of creating a mode of critique and supporting it with a rationale entailed, was a significant sign of the success of this course.

Furthermore, although I was worried that students might not be comfortable in creating their reading responses in a comics format, many of them surprised me by their willingness to try their hand at it. I had a student who submitted 9 out of the 10 reading responses in comics format, which was an exception as this student was a very talented artist who always created comics even before taking this course. The rest of the students alternated between the written text and the comics form throughout, but the majority of the students gave it a try at least once. Doing this assignment helped students see that comics creation is not an easy task. The difficulty they faced was not in creating good drawings; it was in being able to create comic strips that communicate arguments both visually and verbally, and not to rely on one mode more than the other. It took students several trials to be able to communicate well through comics, which showed them how complex the creative process is.

Although this teaching experience was successful, there are several things that I would change when I teach comics courses in the future. First of all, I would pay more attention to the interplay of words and pictures rather than giving the verbal content and the plot primacy. One of the central goals of this comics course, as mentioned above, was to teach students to shift their focus from only engaging with the plots of the works we read to conducting comprehensive analyses that address the various elements that constitute comic books, and to engage with both the visual and the verbal tracks of comics equally. This is something that I tried to emphasize every time we discussed a text. It was always on my agenda to discuss the art and to pose

questions about the visuals: images, layout, format, and so on; many sessions were solely devoted to doing that. However, I have to admit that most of the time, the focus easily shifted back to a literary analysis rather than an analysis that pays equal attention to both aspects. I tried to change that by prompting students to think about the questions raised by the secondary texts they read for the course alongside comics, like the introduction of Charles Hatfield's book *Alternative Comics*, which argues that many scholars still interpret comics the same way they read prose, as it is hard for many of them to adopt the tools of formal analysis. Nevertheless, I noticed that students were a little resistant to the idea of using secondary material either during class discussions or in their reading response assignments, in which they were required to respond to the assigned reading by interpreting its most significant elements (including the formal aspects), and to connect the reading to broader issues for comics as a medium. When students were reminded to read the additional critical works that were assigned bi-weekly, a few of them did, but the majority did not, which was evident through their unresponsiveness during class discussions. Students rarely referred to the secondary readings in their reading responses, which is another proof that they were less engaged with theory than they were with the primary texts. This is not the students' fault though, as I am responsible for this as well. As a teacher with a literature background, my eyes are naturally driven to the words of a comic rather than the pictures, and I am trained to focus on plot and narrative rather than on form and visual structure. Thus, even on the days in which I put the words "discussion of the art in X" on the board to remind myself and my students that that day's discussion would be devoted to art, the discussion always drifted to plots, characters and characterization, themes, and other literary concepts without linking those aspects to the visuals in the text in question. Because those discussions (of themes and plots) were rich and engaging, I often forgot to go back to focusing on interpreting

the art and the interplay of word and picture, and when I did, the discussion was usually shallow and/or unguided by theory or by the ideas of the secondary readings (because students rarely read them). It always seemed that the additional readings were literally "secondary" or even unimportant to the discussion. I succeeded in teaching different topics and skills *through* comics, but I did not quite succeed in leading students to conduct a comprehensive reading of comics that attends to the visual aspects as much as I had hoped. Throughout the course, we discussed the fact that comics reading requires a medium specific mode of critique, and that comics should not be analyzed with the same tools we use for reading imageless literature, however, we ended up using the tools we are familiar with. We could not step out of our comfort zone.

Another mistake is that I started this course by having students read *Understanding Comics*, as most comics teachers do. My aim in teaching that text was to lead them to think of a definition of comics. I thought that defining the medium could help students with critiquing and analyzing the comics we read. As Hatfield points out, one of the first things teachers try to do when introducing their students to a new academic discipline or a new subject matter is to start with definitions. Thus, out of habit, I spent a large amount of time in the first two weeks trying to help my students define comics. Although they were able to get an idea of what comics are, the definition they were provided in McCloud's text was exclusive and limited. When I asked students to think critically about McCloud's definition, one of them raised his hand in class and asked me "why does McCloud's definition exclude single panel cartoons? Does the fact they are not 'juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence' make them a different form of art? Why can't we include them in the conversation about comics?" I responded to his question by saying that McCloud invites readers and critics to respond to his claims with counter-arguments, which makes his definition valuable. However, because I didn't couple McCloud's

definition with other critics' definitions that could have extended this conversation and engaged students in the conversation about the difficulty of defining comics, this conversation ended by the end of the first two weeks, as soon as we started reading the first graphic memoir and focused on its content. Moreover, McCloud's definitional approach fell short again toward the end of the semester when we read Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*, which defies and deconstructs the notion that comics is a sequential art; it shatters the core of McCloud's definition. Ware's comic is abundant in flashbacks and eventless moments and scenes, and time in the comic does not flow in a linear fashion. In addition, it is full of textless pages, and it follows two parallel storylines, one in the present, and another in the past. Thus, it is more complex than the types of comics that McCloud refers to and includes in his definition of the medium. Thanks to assigning Isaac Cates's "Comics and the Grammar of Diagrams," excepted from *The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing is a Way of Thinking*, it was easier for students to understand Ware's formal experimenting and its significance. McCloud's text by itself, however, was not helpful at all in guiding students to analyze and critique *Jimmy Corrigan* as its limited definition does not refer to exceptional works that break the rules of comics making by utilizing the medium for formal experiments. I had to rely on other sources that are more inclusive than McCloud's, and it was at this moment when I realized that McCloud's text, with its definitional approach, is insufficient for analysis and critique on its own. This was one of the critical moments that inspired me to develop the interrogative mode and, as Hatfield suggests, to teach the conflicting approaches of comics criticism in a way that students can easily comprehend and apply to various kinds of comics including avant-garde and experimental comics.

In addition to not doing well in teaching students visual-verbal analysis, and relying too much on McCloud's insufficient approach, I did not expose my students to a sufficient number

of genres that could exhibit the diversity and inclusiveness of the medium. The fact that the title of the course, "Special Topics in Genre: Comics and Graphic Novels," did not promise students a survey class gave me the freedom to focus on a specific type of comics: book-length autobiographical/semi-autobiographical comics and graphic memoirs. The only exception was Wilson's *Cairo*. Back then, when my knowledge and expertise in comics studies was more limited, I thought the comics I choose to teach were the only genres worth critiquing. Thus, I did not include superhero comics (older or contemporary), single panel cartoons, pantomime comics, newspaper comics, underground comix, horror comics, sci-fi comics, detective comics, webcomics, or any other genres or formats, on the reading list. As it turned out, some of my students were more aware of the value of studying those other genres of comics than I was at the time. This was evident through their comments in the course evaluations. Here are the two examples that brought up the issue of a lack of generic diversity in the course's reading list:

- Student 1: "The class periods were well structured, and the instructors were always able to begin conversations that allowed us to dive deeply into the comic books. However, my main complaint is that the class was supposed to be a survey of comic books, but instead we continuously read many of the same things. The majority of the reading materials were akin to memoirs, not to mention extremely depressing. While books or graphic novels of this type are valuable, the class is not "Survey of Graphic Memoirs," I feel like there were some important sub-genres of comics in general that were blatantly ignored. For instance, while academia may sneer at superhero comics, it is too large a portion of comics and the notoriety of comics to be ignored...As it was titled a survey class, I feel like

we the students should have been given a more holistic view of comics, rather than the repetition of the same type of comics."

- Student 2: "I… would have enjoyed a more versatile selection of comics, rather than sticking to one genre"

Although the course was never titled a survey course as Student 1 claims in their comment, I agree with them, and with Student 2 as well, that the course should have included genres other than graphic memoirs, and more types of comics other than book-length graphic narratives. By failing to do this, my comics course repeated the problems of McCloud's approach: I limited the definition of comics to a specific genre and a single format, and thereby excluded too wide an array of others that are truly exemplary of the diversity and inclusiveness of the medium.

Revision Plan

When I teach a similar comics course in the future, I plan to use the interrogative mode as a teaching guide. Because it deliberately leads students to think about the aesthetic value of the visuals in comics, and to ask questions about the form, page and panel layouts, visual-verbal interplay, and others that direct students' attention to the visual track, it will be hard for them to skip it or think of it as less important than the text. Moreover, because the interrogative mode invites addition and revision, I will prompt students to add more questions to it. They can derive additional questions from the comics we read as well as from the critical readings I assign them. I will make sure not to fall again into the trap of reading comics using the traditional strategies my students and I are familiar with thanks to our English classes and to our training in traditional textual analysis. To achieve that balance, I will also assign excerpts from texts on aesthetics,

visual analysis, and art interpretation, to lead students to reflect on the function of the visuals in the comics we read and their relationship with the text.

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, I will neither begin my course with teaching *Understanding Comics* nor will I use it as *the* text that presents *the* ultimate interpretive tool. I will substitute McCloud's text with the interrogative mode, which will expose students to the definitional approach of McCloud and Eisner alongside, or rather in contrast with, other prominent critical approaches; in other words, I will teach students "the conflict" as Hatfield suggests. Because the interrogative mode is a model, and because it does not encompass everything that has ever been written in the field of comics criticism, I will assign students excerpts from the works that the interrogative mode does not include or thoroughly engage with, and ask them to form more questions based on those texts' propositions. Once they form questions that attend to the various aspects that constitute comics, they will then use them to analyze a comic they never read before. As for the vocabulary that McCloud's book provides students, the interrogative mode borrows this vocabulary. Thus, if students acquire comics vocabulary through the interrogative mode, then they will not need to read McCloud's text expressly for that purpose.

In addition to these revision strategies, I will also make radical changes to the reading list of my prior comics course. As mentioned above, I will substitute it with a list that includes more genres and formats of comics. A single comics course will definitely not be able to cover all the types of comics that are out there, however, it can at least try to give students a general idea of the diversity of the medium, and to make it clear to students through class meetings and through a statement on the syllabus, that what the medium comprises is much larger than what a single course can cover. My future syllabus will not stick to the graphic memoir; instead, it will show

students the development of comics through time. It will start with early newspaper comics and it end with contemporary graphic memoirs and novels, avant-garde comics, digital comics, and interactive comics. I will still teach comics from different cultures, languages, and genders as I did the first time. I will also continue to include comics that address a variety of significant topics and themes. However, instead of primarily aiming to teach those topics and to exhibit this diversity *through* comics, my main objective will be to teach students to *read* comics efficiently.

The Interrogative Mode in the Classroom and Teaching the Conflict

The interrogative mode is tailored in a way that facilitates teaching comics, especially to beginners. In the following section, I present a strategy for using the interrogative mode in the classroom to teach students how to interpret comics and how to benefit from "the conflict" among comics critics by engaging with it in their work, thereby expanding the critical conversation. First, I suggest that teachers spend the first 3 weeks of classes introducing students to the medium. By "introducing" here I do not mean attempting to define comics; rather, I mean familiarizing students with the medium. Instead of assigning *Understanding Comics* in the first week and limiting students to McCloud's definition, I suggest assigning the documentary *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked.* This documentary presents for students, especially those who come to comics classroom thinking that the medium is confined to the types of stories they see in contemporary Marvel and DC films, a brief history of superhero comic books, the history of Superman and his creators, and it shows what early comics creators aimed to achieve through their work. It demonstrates that creators took comics seriously, and that they hoped readers would do the same. This is evident in an interview with Stan Lee, in which he discusses how superheroes went to war in comics before America did in WWII. It emphasizes that superhero

comics were not solely created for children and younger readers as some students might think, and that not all of them are trivial reads as some unfamiliar audiences still think. The documentary leads viewers to respect the medium and its pioneers, and it allows them to meet some prominent creators, like Lee, Will Eisner, Frank Miller, and Jim Steranko. The significance of starting with a discussion of superheroes is that it helps with scaffolding. Most students are probably more familiar with this genre of comics than others; thus, it is helpful to start with exploring familiar examples before exposing them to other genres that can be new to many of them. This is a good introduction to the medium that can allow for a rich and engaging conversation on week 1. The teacher's questions and concluding statements after each discussion should be tailored to refuting misconceptions about the medium as well as, by drawing evidence from the documentary, emphasizing the cultural value of comics and answering the question of why studying comics is worthwhile. Alongside this discussion, teachers can give a brief history of the medium at large, and they can share excerpts from pre-1930s newspaper comic strips (like *The Yellow Kid*) to show students examples of the art style and the themes of early comics that preceded the superhero genre.

On week two, teachers can continue sharing extracts from different comics that show the development of the medium and the emergence of new genres over the years. A good source to assign students on the second week with this discussion is the film *American Splendor.* The film is a biographical account of the life of the comics creator Harvey Pekar, based on his *American Splendor* comic book series. Although the film stars Paul Giamatti as Pekar, the real Harvey Pekar appears in the movie as well to recount his story and to comment on key moments in his life that affected his comics. The importance of this film as a teaching tool is that it shows students how comic artists struggle to create the work that some of them think is petty or

unworthy. I choose to assign the film and not the comic because at this stage, it might be hard for some students, especially those who have never been exposed to the medium, to read a comic book. Like *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked, American Splendor* helps students see the seriousness with which comics creators take their work, and it also, through the story of the Crumb-Pekar collaboration, shows how, in many cases, writers collaborate with artists to create a single work of comics.

One of the most significant parts of the movie is the one that focuses on the story behind the production of *Our Cancer Year*, an installment of the comic book *American Spelendor* published in 1994. This section of the film illustrates how writing comics was Pekar's means to overcome cancer, and how Pekar's wife, Joyce, collaborated with him in writing the comic to show him that it was only through representing the struggle with cancer on paper in a comic (the same way Pekar represented the everyday struggles in comics for years) that he can overcome illness. When students see the role that self-representation in comics plays in helping some artists sort out their struggles, this can hopefully lead them to appreciate the medium and see it in a new light. They might also consider the effect of the comics that deal with serious matters (like cancer) on the readers who can relate. When these matters become part of the subjects of discussion in the comics classroom, students will more likely see value in studying comics, and they will take the medium seriously. *American Splendor* can be another answer to the question of whether studying comics is worthwhile or not.

After familiarizing students with the medium in the first two weeks, and after showing some examples in class of some of the genres it comprises, the third week will be a good time for teachers to introduce students to the interrogative mode so they can start reading the first assigned comic. Before sharing the questions of the interrogative mode with students, and before

introducing them to the conflict among different critics' approaches that Hatfield discusses, teachers should do some scaffolding. One successful scaffolding technique, which I use in many of my composition courses, can help explain how comics communicate ideas to readers. In this exercise, I play John Lennon's "Imagine" in class, and ask my students to answer the questions "what is this song about?" I give them the freedom to either write down their answers or to draw pictures that exemplify Lennon's words. Once they are done writing/ drawing, I ask them to exchange what they created with their classmates. After that, I display on the screen Pablo Stanley's illustration of the song as a comic, available on the artist's website.[8] Discussing this specific strip leads to numerous, useful conversations. Not only do we discuss the relationship between words and pictures, but we also arrive at the necessity of having prior knowledge of different elements of the strip in order to fully understand it. For example, the following part of the strip might not make sense if readers do not know who these characters are, what they did in their lives, and why Stanley used them as examples that embody the "people" that Lennon sings about (fig. 91). More seriously, if they do not know who John Lennon is, they will not recognize him in the strip (fig. 92).

[8] http://www.stanleycolors.com/category/comics-2/music-2/

Fig. 91. Pablo Stanley's comic strip delineation of John Lennon's song "Imagine".

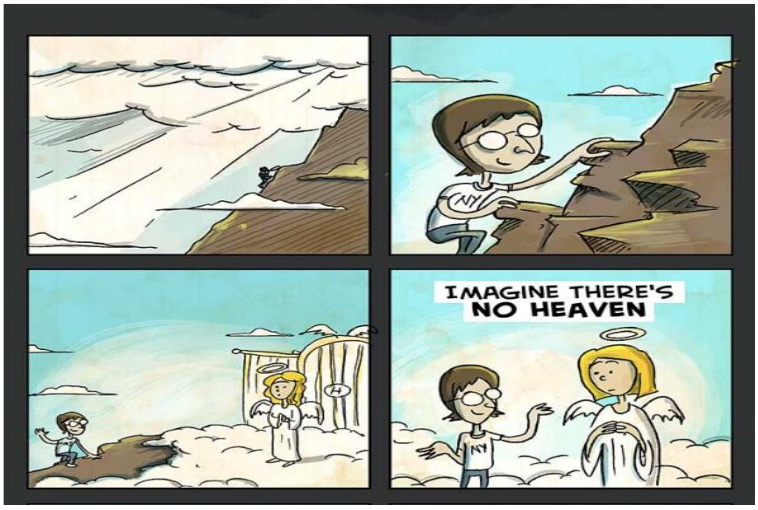


Fig. 92. Pablo Stanley's comic strip delineation of John Lennon's song "Imagine".

Once the instructor and students reach an agreement on the need for sources beyond the comic strip itself for a better understanding of the work, the teacher can use this as a transitional point to talk about the conflict among comics critics. They should explain that because, as shown in

the example, comics is bimodal and interdisciplinary, every critic looks at it through their discipline's lens (or, in many cases, they focus on a specific element of comics without necessarily giving attention to others), which does not always do justice to the multiple aspects that constitute comics, and this is why the interrogative mode compiles the conflicting approaches to lead to a much more comprehensive reading of comics. At this point, teachers can share some of the questions of the interrogative mode with students to show them how it works. First, teachers should explain what the interrogative mode comprises, why it is needed, and what its significance is. Then, the interrogative mode will help teachers introduce students to the conflict; they can explain what the conflict among critics is, why there is a conflict, and why and how this conflict is healthy and useful for enriching the field of comics studies. Teachers should also explain that students will play a role in expanding the interrogative mode by adding more questions to it, and that they will be able to come up with these new questions through reading comics and reading the works of critics. They should also know that they can critique the interrogative mode, point out any drawbacks, and constantly test its applicability. To show students how to apply the interrogative mode to comics, teachers can use it in class to help students read the first assigned comic. I suggest that this first reading be a collection of newspaper comics for 2 reasons: 1) historically, newspaper comic strips preceded comic books. 2) It will be easier to start with shorter narratives in the first few weeks.

Weeks 4 through 14 can be devoted to a discussion of a wide array of comics in different genres and formats, and that represent the work of different authors of different genders, cultures, and nations. They should also show the development of the medium throughout history in terms of form, style, and subject matter/themes. The list is also organized chronologically to show the development of the form over time, and to how some comics respond to historical

events. In the syllabus below (see Appendix), I suggest specific titles that teachers might assign, including a newspaper comic, single panel cartoons, a pantomime comic, a superhero comic, an underground comix, an alternative comic, an experimental comic, a graphic memoir, a Franco-Belgian comic (BD), a Japanese manga, and a webcomic. In addition, I suggest that teachers assign short critical texts that represent various critical approaches to the medium that can help students think critically about comics and come up with questions for conducting analysis.

I suggest that teachers design 5 major assignments for this course: weekly critical questions, weekly reading responses, a conference proposal (midterm assignment), a conference paper (final assignment), and a final conference presentation. In the critical questions assignment, students will engage with the course readings (comics and critical texts) and will come up with 10 discussion questions to be submitted at the beginning of each week. 5 questions should be about the content of the text(s), and the other 5 should raise questions about the medium of comics at large. Teachers should stress that the assignment will be graded down and will be considered incomplete if it does not engage with critical texts. Teachers can share with their students examples of the type of questions they expect this assignment to generate; two good examples of the first type of question and two of the second will be helpful. Some of these examples can even be borrowed from the interrogative mode as it includes a wide array of this type of critical questions. In my own teaching experience, I used students' questions in class for discussion, and I encourage teachers to use this method as it maintains a student-centered classroom, gives students confidence, and trains students to improve their question asking skills. With practice and weekly feedback, questions will develop in complexity and should lead to more sustained class discussions. Teachers also should take some time to explain to students that

every research starts with questions, so if their questions are well thought-out, and if they work on improving them throughout the semester, they will be able to write a successful final paper.

Concerning reading responses, I suggest that teachers require students to submit a reading response at the end of every week that engages with the work that is discussed throughout that week: comics, critical texts, and the questions/subjects that are brought up in class discussion. Again, students must engage with the works of critics in order to receive full credit for the assignment. Because in my own experience, and in the experiences of the educators and scholars cited above, giving students the freedom to create comic strips for this assignment has been quite successful in familiarizing them with the creative process and in helping them understand the medium, I suggest that teachers give students the opportunity to do that. They can give students the choice of creating a two-page comic or writing a two-page, double-spaced response, and tell them that the two versions will be graded equally. Most importantly, teachers should stress that artistic talent will not be a grading criterion, and that stick figures will be accepted as long as the comic they create communicates a persuasive argument. What is more important than drawing well is engaging with the works in question and having a purpose in mind for each element that they create in the comic format responses. The excerpts I shared with students from *Hyperbole and a Half* helped them understand that there are published comics creators whose comics are successful despite their amateurish artistic style, so I recommend sharing excerpts from this work with students to encourage them to not shy away from drawing and sharing their work with others. I will share with my students the comics I created when I took a comics class for the first time, and I suggest that teachers, before teaching a similar comics course, create comics themselves and share them with students at the beginning of the semester. If the teacher participates in this way, students will likely be more willing to follow. Teachers should also

continue creating and sharing comics with students throughout the course to encourage reluctant students to give it a try themselves at least once.

The midterm assignment I suggest for this course is a conference paper proposal and annotated bibliography. The prompt for this assignment will be a "Call for Papers (CFP)" shared at the beginning of the semester, and students' proposals will be a response to this CFP. A conference proposal can either make an argument about a specific comic, or it can identify a problem in comics criticism or in the medium at large. The proposal must demonstrate that the paper will conduct a critical analysis of a work of comics to support a claim about it, or will analyze a comic to support an argument about comics criticism and interpretation in general. In any case, the proposed paper *must* critique *one* work of comics. The proposed argument or the identified problem should be supported by logical rationale, persuasive reasons, and clear evidence from comics and critical texts that should be presented concisely in a 300 word abstract. This abstract should also give an idea of how the conference paper will be structured, and how the proposed argument will be presented, supported by examples, and defended; they should identify their methodology. The most important thing about this assignment is that it should be written about a comic that *has not been discussed or examined in class*. In addition to the proposal, teachers should assign students to submit an annotated bibliography that includes 10 sources. Five of these sources can come from the course's reading list, but students have to come up, through research, with 5 new ones that have not been discussed in class. There should be a note in the CFP that makes it very clear to students that if the problem they identify is related to comics criticism, they have to engage with and refer to a work of comics to prove the validity of their argument or to illustrate the problem. This is to clarify that the assignment must engage with a comic and with critical texts equally. Students should submit this proposal on a

shared Google document that everyone will have access to view and comment on. They should receive feedback through the shared Google doc from the teachers and from their peers with suggestions on how to make this paper presentation successful. Teachers should share examples of good conference proposals so that students understand the criteria on which their proposals and their peers' proposals will be judged, and they should share a rubric that explain the assignment and how it will be assessed. This type of peer review will be helpful as students can sometimes learn from one another much more than they learn from their instructors. Teachers should point out that the critical questions assignment will prepare students for this midterm proposal, as research always starts with a critical question. Thus, students can use one question from their critical questions assignment as the basis for their research and proposal. If teachers see a good question in their students' assignments that can be developed and used as the core of the midterm and the final assignments, they should let them know (and, with permission, share it with the entire class) so that other students learn how to structure questions that can lead to substantial research. Moreover, using the interrogative mode in the classroom starting the third week of classes will have prepared students for this assignment and will have familiarized them with the types of questions that can lead to conducting academic research and analysis. This assignment will teach students to conduct independent research, and to apply what they learn from class discussions (and from the critical questions and the reading response assignments) to a new context in which they engage with works they are not familiar with. It will also prepare them for the conference experience early in their academic career so they can do it well in the future if they decide to apply to academic or scholarly conferences in any field.

The final paper will be the actual conference paper (10-page double-spaced paper) that students will have submitted a proposal for in their midterm assignment. In this paper, students

will conduct an analysis of a work of comics to prove the argument they proposed, or to make a claim about a drawback in comics criticism and interpretation that they will support through analyzing that comic. Instructors should devote at least 15 minutes a week, after the midterm, to Q&A about the final assignment, and they should invite students to their office hours to discuss the paper and to work on drafts, if they need to , prior to submitting and presenting the papers. The penultimate week of classes can be devoted to in-class workshops in which students conduct a peer review session, supervised by the teacher, to comment on one another's revised drafts and to give each other suggestions. The teacher should work with each group to make sure that all members are on the right track for writing papers that fulfill the assignment and that present arguable perspectives on their topics.

Once the papers are revised and polished, students should present them as they would in any academic conference. I have a couple of ideas for the final paper and the conference presentation assignments that I intend to test out when I teach this course, and I hope that other teachers will do the same. First, before the semester starts, I will book a conference room (or any room with technology: a computer, a projector, and a screen) for 2 or 3 days so that students present their final papers in a new location in front of an audience as if they are at an actual scholarly conference. However, the audience of this conference will not be confined to students' classmates; I will invite faculty members, staff, and other students in the institution to attend this conference to support the work of the students. This mock conference will look exactly like professional conferences: it will be timed, it will have different panels for papers whose topics are similar, one of the presenters will be asked to moderate the panel, and there will be time for Q&A at the end of each panel presentation. I will give this conference the title "The Comic Strip Conversations Conference" (the CSCC conference). Second, other than presenting, I will give

students the opportunity to continue refining and revising their papers, and getting them peer reviewed by more people, beyond the course and beyond the conference, to get them published on a private Google Site that I will create especially for the course, which I will title "The CSCC Journal." This Google Site will be an archive for the works of students who present well-thought-out arguments and well revised and reviewed papers.

This work , both the conference and the journal, can grow over the years. The conference can start as a small effort(or a mock-conference) to prepare students for a similar context in the future. However, if it is taken seriously, and if it succeeds after few trial and error initial attempts, it can grow later and become a conference for undergraduates that students from other institutions (or even other states and/or countries) can attend and participate in in the future. Although the conference will require resources, and will depend on the institution's budget, it can start small, and as it grows, attendees and presenters can be asked to pay registration (and other) fees to support the conference. Moreover, the Google Site can also begin as a simple online publication venue, but this project can also be expanded later, especially if the university helps in supporting it, and it can become an actual online journal that undergraduate students anywhere can send their work to. This way, undergraduate students can become real contributors to comics studies. Today, because comics teaching is rapidly growing and evolving in academia, one of the biggest audiences of comics is students. Thus, their thoughts and contributions should be considered as part of the larger critical conversation, and the ideas and projects that I suggest here can be small steps towards making that happen. I invite teachers of comics to try this out in their classrooms and institutions. Some might think that most undergraduate students are not qualified to make substantial contributions to the field. However, Philip Troutman's "'Interdisciplinary' Teaching: *Comics Studies and Research Pedagogy*" proves the opposite. It

asserts that the work of undergraduates should not be underestimated, and that when students are given a chance to make a real contribution, and when their teachers tell them that their work matters and can influence the way scholars think of the field, the work they come up with can be very well constructed and presented.

Concerning the assessment of each of these major assignments, I suggest the following: the reading response assignment (whether it is drawn or written) can get the full grade if it pays equal attention to the two modes that comprise comics, namely the visual and the verbal track. It should examine and analyze the visual and the textual elements thoroughly and extensively. In addition, it should engage with the assigned critical texts, and it should explicitly converse with them either in the comic strip or in the written response. Both the drawn and the written responses should have an intended message and a purpose that they communicate with the reader. As for the critical questions, they will get full grades if they are a set of well-structured questions that can lead to a sustained discussion (like the questions of the interrogative mode that students will be trained to use in class). They have to be open ended questions that engage equally with comics as well as critical texts. They should be able to lead one to think critically about the work(s) in question and about the medium of comics in general. They should show that the student is constantly searching for research questions that can lead to writing a good conference paper that presents a solid argument. The conference proposal assignment will be successful if it presents a logical argument, supports its claims with a persuasive rationale, and defines its methodology in no more than 400-500 words. The annotated bibliography will be assessed based on three major elements: 1) the sources the student selects inform their argument, 2) students show an understanding of the selected work through their annotations, and 3) students select works that are reliable and that present an original perspective on comics that is

persuasive and that can help in thinking critically about the medium or about the work the proposed paper analyzes. Similarly, the final paper will be assessed based on its ability to conduct a comprehensive analysis of a given comic by linking various critical approaches, or its ability to thoroughly analyze a specific comic to illustrate a critical claim. The final presentation assignment will be judged based on the student's ability to present their ideas clearly, their ability to engage with the audience, and their ability to respond to questions during the Q&A session. Teachers should create detailed prompts and elaborate rubrics that explain each of these assignments in detail and share them with students.

This course, in its current state, is meant for undergraduate students, however, teachers can easily tweak it to fit their audience. If they teach first-year students, teachers can reduce the number of readings and spend more time walking students through the reading process. However, if teachers use this teaching strategy for an upper-division course, the current number of readings should be fine. If the audience for this course is graduate students, teachers can still use the same number and types of texts suggested here, but they might want to ask their students to write a longer final paper and to engage with more than one work in the conference paper. That is to say that teachers should feel free to make any changes to the strategy I suggest here that fit their teaching contexts, and, of course, know that it might take a few trials and errors at the beginning until one achieves the desired outcomes from this teaching experience. I share a sample syllabus for this suggested comics course below (see Appendix).

Conclusion

The Future of the Interrogative Mode

The interrogative mode leads to thinking differently about comics criticism. It promotes, through a detailed example, the idea of connecting different critical threads and approaches that currently seem scattered and unrelated to construct a reading strategy that attends to the multiple aspects that comprise comics. Not only does it link critics' propositions, put them in conversation with one another, and prompt the reader to test their validity and applicability, it also includes the perspectives of comics creators as part of this critical dialogue. It aims at a reading process that considers and appreciates the bimodality and the interdisciplinarity of comics through braiding approaches from various disciplines that represent diverse voices. Nevertheless, the interrogative mode is not meant to be the ultimate tool for interpreting and critiquing comics. Its questions are not the only inquisitions that can be made about comics, and it does not attempt to make any final statements about comics criticism. On the contrary, the interrogative mode is a blueprint, a model that readers can always change, develop, and challenge through their own work and research. In other words, with every new reading of a work of comics, and with the advent of more critical approaches in the future, the interrogative mode can be expanded, and some of its critical questions can be argued against and potentially refuted. This openness of the interrogative mode, and its explicit invitation for invention and development, keeps the current intellectual conversation about comics criticism continually alive and vital, and implies that there will be even more sophisticated conversations in the future.

The interrogative mode addresses a variety of audiences: critics, teachers, students and beginning scholars, and the general public who may be interested in reading comics more efficiently. In approaching critics, the interrogative mode acts as a model that invites them to provide their readers with more practical approaches to comics. Currently, most of the prominent critics of comics write to one another; it seems like many of them do not consider students and the general public as part of their addressees, which is probably a standard practice in comics criticism within the academy. In addition, their critical propositions seem divorced from practice; they do not show readers how the thoughts they present can be utilized as analytical frameworks for reading and critiquing comics. Thus, comics criticism at present appears as an inaccessible realm for many individuals who are not part of the groups of critics who address one another in their work, and who use a language that is sometimes hard for students and beginning scholars to understand and incorporate in their writing. This is why the interrogative mode aims to prompt critics to bridge the gap between theory and practice, and to consider writing for a wider audience who might be interested in engaging with the medium but lack the expertise. Chapter 1 shows critics what the drawbacks of the current critical approaches are, and it shows them why some of their propositions might not be very practical when it comes to critical analysis. While Chapter 2, which introduces the interrogative mode, gives them an example of how theories and critical thoughts can be phrased differently to lead to a practical analysis. One of the main objectives of creating the interrogative mode is to call for making the humanities more accessible to the general public. If critics and theorists address this audience, they can broaden the scope of the humanities by making it as inclusive as it actually should have been long ago. Comics might be the best place for this "humanities for the public" movement to evolve and thrive because the

medium gained its fame and its appreciation from the general public before forcing its way through the academic sphere.

Teachers are another target audience of the interrogative mode. There is currently a high need for guidance on how to teach comics, especially as many educational institutions are adding comics to their curricula; there is a growing interest in teaching different subject matters *through* comics (where comics are used as a means to an end), but also in studying comics as a medium that is inherently worthwhile (where the analysis of comics is the primary end). Although some good resources on comics pedagogy are available (like the ones I discuss in chapter 4), many teachers are still looking for methodologies that fit their specific teaching contexts and conditions, and that can enable them to teach comics effectively. As I mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation, I personally met several comics scholars and teachers at conferences who expressed their interest in finding a medium-specific mode of critique (other than what McCloud's *Understanding Comics* suggests) that can help them facilitate the reading process of comics to their students. Moreover, my own teaching experience (which I share in detail in chapter 4) showed me that unless I find a methodology that emphasizes the importance of viewing comics as a bimodal and interdisciplinary medium, and of interpreting the interplay of the different elements of comics without neglecting any of them, I cannot ask my students to conduct comprehensive analyses that attend to the various aspects of comics equally. Thus, I created the interrogative mode to attempt to solve this problem. The interrogative mode provides comics teachers with an easy-to-use guide that responds to their needs and to the difficulties they face when they teach this complex medium, especially to learners who might be dealing with comics for the first time. Not only can teachers share with students the different sets of questions that the interrogative mode presents (to teach them how to form questions about the medium in

general and about the various works they read), but they can also use some of the examples in Chapter 3 to show their students how the interrogative mode can be utilized and applied to multiple examples of comics that are different in genre, language, subject matter, format, and time of publication.

Most students are trained to read words and to compose texts using them, and, in most disciplines, the written text is the main communicative mode through which students receive and deliver information. Thus, when they read comics, their eyes naturally search for the mode they are more used to for collecting information and constructing meaning. Accordingly, they unintentionally, and probably unconsciously, ignore the visual track, which is as important as the verbal track in comics, depriving them of a full experience of the medium or of the work put into creating it. This is why the interrogative mode urges students and non-expert readers to pay more attention to the art, and to think critically about it by utilizing the questions in the section on visual-verbal synergy that emphasizes the correlation of the two tracks. Furthermore, the interrogative mode does not only help students and general readers understand complex works of comics; it also helps them understand the propositions of comics critics that might seem forbiddingly sophisticated if they read them with no guidance and/or facilitation. The interrogative mode summarizes the key points of the works of critics and presents them in a question form using a language novice readers can easily understand and engage with, which, I hope, makes comics criticism much more accessible and applicable both in the classroom and beyond. In addition, the interrogative mode hopes to teach students how to conduct academic research. It aims at showing them, through classroom experiments and applications, how every research project starts with an open ended question that leads to making arguments and constructing informed claims, inlcuding research in comics. Besides, the structure of the

interrogative mode, which critiques and questions the works of major comics critics whom students might view as authoritative and indisputable, encourages students to think critically about those approaches and their like. It teaches them that they should not take critics' propositions for granted by showing them that those propositions are simply statements that can be questioned, challenged, and even proven wrong. I encourage teachers to use the interrogative mode as a method that helps students realize their impactful role as contributors to the field of comics studies. I recommend that they prompt students to compose conference papers that can be polished beyond the comics course and published in the future (as illustrated in chapter 4). Teachers can even take the initiative to create online archives for publishing outstanding student papers. This will expand the field of comics studies by making it more inclusive and diverse. Since students today comprise a high percentage of comics readers, their voices, that their academic critiques will present, can be a highly valuable contribution to the field that may impact the way critics think and write about the medium. This online archive can simply be a page on a social media platform, or a blog, that can be created specifically for disseminating student scholarship. I also recommend establishing a comics conference for beginning scholars, including undergraduate students, graduate students, and independent scholars (i.e., people interested in graduate studies but not enrolled in a program) that exhibits their research projects to an audience of fellow students and teachers as well as nonexperts. Such a project can boost students' confidence about their work, and can prepare those who are genuinely interested in the field and its scholarship to continue contributing to it in the future.

In time, I hope the interrogative mode will expand in key ways. I am planning to enhance its interdisciplinarity by encompassing perspectives from diverse disciplines, like art history, visual arts, visual studies, digital studies, film studies, political science, philosophy, and religion,

just to name a few, to construct a wide ranging analytical methodology. The rationale for this interdisciplinary interest is that comics are quite diverse; they are not confined to a single genre, discipline, or mode of publication. There is a wide array of graphic narratives whose contents merge disciplines, like, for example, Art Spiegelman's *Maus I & II*, or Justin Green's *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*, the latter of which raises numerous questions about religion as it explores the main character's strict Roman Catholic upbringing. In a text like Green's, for readers to notice that a comics creator breaks a certain religious taboo in their work, either through writing or drawing, the question of the graphic representation of religion has to be brought to their attention, which can be done through conducting research that examine religious texts that focus on that specific taboo. The purpose of engaging with works from different disciplines is to challenge the traditions of comics criticism that typically avoid fields beyond the sphere of literary studies. In order to augment the comprehensiveness of my methodology, I will draw upon relevant material in other fields of study and will add it to the questions that the interrogative mode asks to allow comics studies to expand its disciplinary parameters and thereby negotiate conversations across the disciplines.

The scope of the interrogative mode is also not confined to print comics; it should pay equal attention to their newly born digital counterparts, like the webcomics *Hark! A Vagrant* by Kate Beaton, *Stick Figure Hamlet* by Dann Carroll, and *Poorly Drawn Lines* by Reza Farazmand, to name only a few. The rise of digital comics urges one to pose questions about how reading practices have changed, especially as e-readers deprive readers of the joy of figuring out a logical order of panels on a given page; the Amazon Kindle, for instance, zooms in on one panel, and once the reader taps the screen, the device takes them to the next panel (whose order is preset by the creator and the publisher), and then to the next page, and so on. Unlike the

paper comic, where the main options available to readers are to spend some time with the network presented on the page to figure out the order and significance of the page structure, or to go back and forth in the comic until the structure and order of panels make logical sense, digital comics have the potential to change the reading process as they allow readers to read the work as a sequence of consecutive single panels, and not as an intricate web whose elements are interdependent. Besides, the rise of interactive digital comics, like Andre Bergs's *Protanopia*, changes the way one thinks about the reading process; the subjects in this specific comic are not static; they move if readers shake the device they are reading it on. Thus, it flouts the current navigation and reading strategies that are available to readers. This change in the reading process necessitates new critical questions, and it requires broader inquisitions in the interrogative mode that prompt readers to compare different reading processes across formats and media, and to discuss how these processes affect their understanding of the graphic narratives they examine.

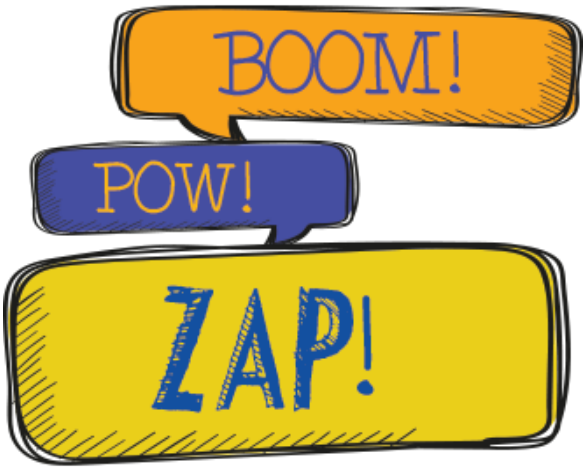
To cope with today's technological advancement, and with the rise of e-comics, I intend to make comics analysis accessible through different media. To this end, I am planning to develop a mobile app and a website to serve as a companion to the interrogative mode. These features will help those interested in reading comics access the interrogative mode and its updates through their phones or other device. Because print is no longer the sole medium for learning, and because future students will be born into a world in which digital formats for literary and artistic works are readily accessible, it is important to reckon with this advancement by making works of comics criticism available as digital content.

Like this dissertation, which examines comics as a global phenomenon, my future research will apply the interrogative mode to a wide range of international comics. It will analyze print and digital comics produced outside traditional American and European frameworks. My

fluency in multiple languages allows me to read examples of comics from the Francophone world and to put them in conversation with Anglophone works, whether these are works of criticism or comic books. In addition, because Arabic is my native language, my book will examine more comics written in Arabic that have never been translated into English, and which, for the purposes of space, I could not include here. I will engage with translated works too, especially Japanese manga and Indian comics. It is important to read these comics from multiple languages and cultures because most comics criticism is either monolingual or is focused on only a scant few national traditions. Examining international comics is another factor that will widen the scope of the interrogative mode and increase its applicability in the future.

I would like readers to walk away with both questions and a call-to-action that, I hope, will urge further research on comics criticism. Are there other drawbacks in comics criticism that this dissertation has not addressed and that need to be pointed out to develop the interrogative mode? What kind of questions can be added to the interrogative mode to increase its applicability and inclusiveness? Are there other strategies and/or approaches that one needs to consider to conduct more comprehensive analyses of comics? To answer each of these questions, I encourage readers to test the interrogative mode in their own research, or in their own comics classrooms, to determine the measure of its applicability as well as its shortcomings that need to be addressed and worked on in the future. As mentioned above, the interrogative presents a model for interpreting comics, but this model is just a blueprint that can be expanded and developed through adding more perspectives and approaches from various disciplines.

Appendix



Boom! Pow! Zap!: Comics Exploration and Analysis through "The Interrogative Mode"

Course Introduction and Description

What is your relationship with comics? Are you familiar with the medium? Do you know what it comprises? Are you one of those who call themselves "big comics fans"? Did you grow up reading comics? Did your parents own huge stacks and piles of comic books that you never understood as a kid but now you are starting to like them? Or are you the type of reader who always had a hard time understanding comics and navigating through them? Do you believe that comics are for kids? Do you even care about comics?

No matter what your answer to these questions is, and no matter which audience you belong to, the 'Boom! Pow! Zap! Comics Exploration and Analysis through "The Interrogative Mode"' course is designed for you. In this course, you will gain exposure to a wide variety of comics that are different in form, genre, national and linguistic backgrounds, publication formats, target audience, context, and publication era. To navigate those texts, you will be introduced to an analytical framework called "The Interrogative Mode". If you are familiar with the medium of comics, this mode of critique will lead you to rethink the notion of "reading comics" as you know it; it will show you what it means to think critically about the various aspects that make up comics as well as how to interpret the interplay of the verbal and the visual tracks in the bimodal medium of comics. If you are new to the medium, the interrogative mode will walk you through the process of learning how to read and understand comics as well as how to engage in academic conversations about the medium. Thus, whether you are a newbie or *"an expert"*, this course will offer you something new that will change the way you viewed comics.

The main purpose of this course with its selected texts and its main theoretical frame, the interrogative mode, is to teach you how to come up with critical questions about the medium, and to suggest some modes of critique with which comics can be analyzed and interpreted, so you can participate in and contribute to the current scholarly critical conversations about the

medium. This course will not only focus on the narratives that comic books present; we will not only attend to the verbal content, the story, or the major themes that the works emphasize. The course will show you how to delve deep into the medium to examine its form (both textual and visual) as well as its context, in an attempt to develop different methodologies for reading it.

Required Texts

1- Newspaper Comics: *The George Herriman Library: Krazy & Ignatz 1916-1918*
By George Herriman
2- Single Panel Cartoons: *Dr. Seuss Goes to War: The World War II Editorial Cartoons of Theodor Seuss Geisel*
By Richard H. Minear et al.
3- Superhero Comics: *Superman: The War Years 1938-1945*
By Roy Thomas
4- Underground Comix: *Aline and Bob's Dirty Laundry Comics #1*
By Aline Kominsky-Crumb and Robert Crumb
5- Alternative Comic: *Love and Rockets: Heartbreak Soup*
By Gilbert Hernandez
6- Graphic Novel; *Watchmen*
By Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons
7- Graphic Memoir: *The Complete Persepolis*
By Marjane Satrapi
8- Experimental Comic: *Here*
By Richard McGuire
9- Pantomime Comics: *Almost Silent*
By Jason
10- Webcomics: *Poorly Drawn Lines*
By Reza Farazmand
11- Franco-Belgian Comic (BD): *The Adventures of Tintin in America*
By Hergé
12- Japanese Manga: *Black Jack #1*
By Osamu Tezuka

Additional Texts

Articles, excerpts, and videos that you will find on the course's companion site.

1- *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked* (Documentary)
2- *American Splendor* (feature film)
3- Excerpt from Hannah Miodrag's *Comics and Language: Reimagining Critical Discourse*
4- Neil Cohn's "Navigating Comics: An Empirical and Theoretical Approach to Strategies of Reading Comic Page Layouts"

5- Chris Gavaler's "Analyzing Comics 101 (Layout)"
6- Benoît Peeters' "Four Conceptions of the Page"
7- Excerpt from Hillary Chute's *Graphic Women: Life, Narrative, and Contemporary Comics*
8- Interview with Robert Crumb (YouTube Video)
9- Francis O' Connor's "Two Methodologies for the Interpretation of Abstract Expressionism"
10- Excerpt from Charles Hatfield's *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*
11- Excerpt from Thierry Greenstein's *The System of Comics*
12- Excerpt from Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*
13- Excerpt from Nick Sousanis' *Unflattening*
14- Excerpt from Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art*
15- Excerpt from Neil Cohn's "Japanese Visual Language: The Structure of Manga"
16- Excerpt from Andrei Molotiu's *Abstract Comics*

--- The "Interrogative Mode" questions are available on the companion website---

Goals and Outcomes:

- Learning how to conduct a comprehensive analysis of comics and graphic narratives.
- Learning the art of generating critical questions about works of comics and about the medium at large, that can lead to constructing a mode of critique for analyzing comics.
- Learning how to engage in a critical conversation about the visual-verbal interplay in comics.
- Learning how to use the interrogative mode as an interpretive tool that attends to the various aspects that comprise comics.
- Learning to appreciate the form, and to shift one's focus from simply analyzing a work's narrative to conducting a comprehensive analysis that attends to all of the elements that constitute a bimodal text.
- Learning how to compose a conference proposal, a list of annotated bibliography, and a conference paper on a topic related to a specific comic, or to a question that critical works raise, through which you can contribute to the current on-going critical conversation about the medium.
- Learning how to give an effective conference paper presentation in a comics/popular culture conference.

Assignments:

- <u>Weekly Critical Questions</u>
  *Due at the beginning of every week.
- <u>Weekly Reading Response</u> (Written/ Comic Format)
  *Due at the end of every week
- <u>Midterm Assignment</u>: Conference Proposal & Annotated Bibliography
  *Due at the end of Week 8.
- <u>Final Assignment</u>: Conference Paper

*Due at the end of Week 17.

- Conference Presentation: The Comic Strip Conversation Conference (CSCC)

--- Assignment prompts and grading rubrics are available on the companion website---

Schedule
(Subject to Change)

Week 1: Introduction to Comics

- *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked*

Week 2: Introduction to Comics Contd.

- *American Splendor*

Week 3: The Interrogative Mode + Newspaper Comics

- The "Interrogative Mode"
- *The George Herriman Library: Krazy & Ignatz 1916-1918* by George Herriman
- Excerpt from Hannah Miodrag's *Comics and Language: Reimagining Critical Discourse*

Week 4: Single Panel Cartoons

- *Dr. Seuss Goes to War: The World War II Editorial Cartoons of Theodor Seuss Geisel* by Richard H. Minear et al.
- "Navigating Comics: An Empirical and Theoretical Approach to Strategies of Reading Comic Page Layouts"
- Chris Gavaler's "Analyzing Comics 101 (Layout)"

Week 5: Superhero Comics

- *Superman: The War Years 1938-1945* by Roy Thomas
- Benoît Peeters' "Four Conceptions of the Page"

Week 6: Underground Comix

- *Aline and Bob's Dirty Laundry Comics #1* by Aline Kominsky-Crumb and Robert Crumb
- Interview with Crumb (Online).
- Excerpt from Hillary Chute's *Graphic Women: Life, Narrative, and Contemporary Comics*

Week 7: Alternative Comics

- *Love and Rockets: Heartbreak Soup* by Gilbert Hernandez
- Excerpt from Charles Hatfield's *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*

Week 8: Graphic Memoirs (Midterm Assignment Due)

- *The Complete Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi
- Francis O' Connor's "Two Methodologies for the Interpretation of Abstract Expressionism"
- **Conference Proposal & Annotated Bibliography Due.**

Week 9: Graphic Novels

- *Watchmen* by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons
- Excerpt from Thierry Groensteen's *The System of Comics*

Week 10: Experimental Comics

- *Here* by Richard McGuire
- Excerpt from Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*

Week 11: Pantomime Comics

- *Almost Silent* by Jason
- Excerpt from Nick Sousanis' *Unflattening*

Week 12: Webcomics

- *Poorly Drawn Lines* by Reza Farazmand
- Excerpt from Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art*

Week 13: Franco-Belgian Comics

- *The Adventures of Tintin in America* by Hergé
- Excerpt from Andrei Molotiu's *Abstract Comics*

Week 14: Japanese Manga

- *Black Jack #1* by Osamu Tezuka
- Neil Cohn's "Japanese Visual Language: The Structure of Manga"

Week 15: OFF (BREAK)

Week 16: WORKSHOP- PEER REVIEW SESSION

Week 17: Final (Conference Paper Due)

- **Comic Strip Conversation Conference (Information available on companion site)**

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