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by the Editorial Team





This is the inaugural issue of *Scandinavian Journal of Comic Art (SJoCA)* and we are immensely proud to add an academic journal on comics with a Nordic outlook to the ever-growing field of comics studies in the world.

Scandinavian Journal of Comic Art is an open-access, peer reviewed academic journal about comics and sequential art. The scope of the journal is interdisciplinary, encouraging a wide range of theoretical and methodological perspectives. The language of the journal is English. Although global in its scope, publishing high quality research regardless of national or regional boundaries, the journal is rooted in the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) and has the ambition to reflect and incite discussion in the field of comics studies in these countries.

The background for this journal is in the *Academic Perspectives on Comics, Manga & Graphic Novels as Intercultural & Intermedial Phenomena* at Växjö University (now Linnæus University) in 2009, where Margareta Wallin Victorin and Fredrik Strömberg conceived the idea. Also, Thierry Groensteen's Forum text on French comics scholarship in this issue was originally presented as a keynote speech at the conference. Some of the articles in this issue have a background at another Nordic comics scholarship conference, the *Contemporary Comics* conference at the University of Copenhagen in 2010.

We will publish new issues twice yearly (spring and fall) and we encourage submissions on all aspects of research on comics and sequential art.

Scandinavian Journal of Comic Art welcomes articles for the peer reviewed section as well as texts for the Forum section, which provides the option for authors to present comics scholarship, that for example, has the character of a lengthy personal comment, essay or point of departure for debate. We also encourage reviews of scholarly books about comics, and if you would like to review a book, please contact the editorial staff.

We hope you will welcome this new addition to comics scholarship and encourage comments from our readers.



PAST AS MULTIPLE CHOICE – TEXTUAL ANARCHY AND THE PROBLEMS OF CONTINUITY IN *BATMAN: THE KILLING JOKE*

By Mervi Miettinen

ABSTRACT

This article analyses the graphic novel *Batman: The Killing Joke* by Alan Moore and Brian Bolland, focusing on the way the text comments on the problematic construction of superheroic continuities through a careful and considered application of so-called “textual anarchy”, a denial of hierarchy or order that challenges the entire concept of continuity. This is done on a number of levels, from the visual shattering of panels to the “past as multiple choice” as proclaimed by the Joker. This article discusses the role and relevance of continuity and audience expectations in superhero comics in general, and analyses the way *Batman: The Killing Joke* actively goes against tradition by exposing an anarchistic diversity in the superhero narrative that clearly states the impossibility of a single linear narrative. Instead, the text comes to highlight the endlessly open-ended nature of the superhero universe, both textually and visually.

PAST AS MULTIPLE CHOICE – TEXTUAL ANARCHY AND THE PROBLEMS OF CONTINUITY IN *BATMAN: THE KILLING JOKE*

By Mervi Miettinen





an-ar·chy: *a*: absence or denial of any authority or established order *b*: absence of order
(Merriam-Webster Online 2011)

Anarchy needs to be carefully constructed.

(Alan Moore, Northampton, 2010)

Following the lexical definitions given above, “anarchy” as a concept seems to firmly reject all hierarchies, whether governmental or abstract. There is no order or authority in anarchy – and yet, as comics writer Alan Moore claims, it needs to be “carefully constructed”. Moore’s own work within comics has tended to advocate anarchy, as for example his acclaimed graphic novel *V for Vendetta* (1988) clearly demonstrates. As Maggie Gray (2010, 31) points out, Moore, a “self-declared anarchist”, deliberately aimed at affecting the “particular socio-historic context” in the 1980s through his comics works. While anarchy and anarchism are clearly present in the general themes of *V for Vendetta*, Moore’s other work from the same era offers a distinctively different kind of anarchism on the level of the story structure itself: the deliberate denial of continuity within superhero comics. In *Batman: The Killing Joke* (Moore and Bolland 1988; 2008), together with artist Brian Bolland, the inherently problematic constructions of superheroic continuity are exposed and represented through the notion of textual anarchy that explicitly denies any claims to seamless continuity. Moore displays his trademark levels of intertextuality, seen by Annalisa Di Liddo (2009, 62) as creating “deliberately diverse narrative forms that are open to the multiplication of interpretative levels”, ultimately controlled through his deployment of precise visual structures of cohesion and consistency. Through a careful extrapolation of DC’s over four decades of Batman mythology, Moore and Bolland create a layered text that is simultaneously ordered and denies any order within Batman’s (and the Joker’s) continuity. In this article, I will analyse *Batman: The Killing Joke* and the way it comments on the problematic construction of superheroic continuities through a careful and considered application of so-called “textual anarchy”.

Continuity has always been an issue within superhero comics: as the same characters go through the hands of innumerable writers and artists, accumulating the entire history of a character becomes increasingly challenging. Decades upon decades of superhero comics may lead to a complex continuity involving hundreds of characters, alternate worlds and multiple variations of the same events. The superhero comic is a serial production that has often been produced for decades. While the characters remain the same, their surroundings are adjusted to the



contemporary, and though some artists and writers may spend long periods of time with a character, each superhero will eventually have had a large number of writers and artists working on him or her, “crossing decades in American history” (Klock 2002, 27). The open-ended nature of comic books means that they can never be completed, and as Klock (*ibid.*) notes, this presents some fascinating paradoxes that each new narrative of the old hero needs to solve. DC’s attempts to contain some of these issues resulted in the infamous *Crisis on Infinite Earths* in 1985–1986, which divided the DC continuity into pre- and post-Crisis eras, completely erasing such characters as Supergirl and Barry Allen/Flash. In more recent history, DC announced the complete reboot of its entire fictional universe in the fall of 2011, canceling all its existing titles and debuting a total of 52 number 1 issues.¹ This reboot has received both praise and criticism, and undoubtedly one of the reasons behind the criticism arises from the transgression of established continuity.

As Richard Reynolds (1992, 38) argues in his book *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*, continuity forms an essential aspect of both the consumption and enjoyment of superhero comics and other serialised fiction, but especially in superhero comics, this aspect takes on a level of complexity beyond any other forms of serialised popular culture. However, while such moves as DC’s recent “reboot” appear to act as a solution to this complexity, it is this very continuity and its various levels that, according to Reynolds (1992, 38), form the key component in what “has become an expected and integral part of the pleasure of the superhero narrative”. Reynolds locates three distinct levels of continuity within superhero comics: serial continuity, hierarchical continuity and structural continuity. Serial continuity is by far the most common of these, consisting of all previous stories, which the current storyline must take into consideration in order to preserve coherence and consistency within the narrative. As serial continuity is diachronic and develops over time, it creates the most challenges for the creators, as the accumulating amount of previous issues has to be taken into consideration with each new issue (Reynolds 1992, 34–40). Serial continuity establishes the canonical level of superhero narratives, and can sometimes result in debates about whether or not a certain story is a part of the hero’s official continuity or an “imaginary” tale outside the official continuity.² *Batman: The Killing Joke* contains a famous example of controversial continuity, as Barbara Gordon, the Bat-Girl at the time, was shot and

¹ As of January 2012, a part of these new titles have already been canceled due to poor sales, while new titles are being introduced. For more, see: Khouri, 2012.

² These “Elseworlds” tales usually explore such issues that explicitly break the “oneiric climate” (Eco 1979, 114) of the superhero world by introducing time into the narrative, such as marriage, aging or death. As Reynolds points out, texts that do not fit into the continuity can be divided either into texts that exist separately from the official continuity (like the Batman TV-series from the 1960s) or purposefully rewriting certain stories within the official continuity (like the 1950s Captain America; Reynolds 1992, 43–44). Ultimate solutions to the problems of continuity can be seen in DC’s *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, which dismantled the entire continuity structure.



crippled by the Joker. Sanctioned by DC's official editors (by the infamous phrase "cripple the bitch"³), the event made it into the official continuity, as Barbara Gordon was reintroduced into the DC universe in *Suicide Squad* #23 (January 1989) with her injury and taking up the alias of "Oracle".

Reynolds denotes "hierarchical continuity" as the overall hierarchy of the various interrelationships between superheroes and villains within the superhero universe, whilst "structural continuity" is essentially comprised of both serial and hierarchical continuity. More than that, structural continuity contains "those elements of the real world which are contained within the fictional universe of the superheroes, and (for the truly committed) actions which are not recorded in any specific text, but inescapably implied by continuity" (Reynolds 1992, 40–41). This kind of "extra-textual continuity" is, according to Reynolds (1992, 43), a "vital key to the way in which the mythology of comic books is articulated in the mind of the reader". In other words, a dedicated reader has the ability to envision an ideal superhero metatext, which sums up all the existing texts as well as the gaps those texts have created – but this metatext can never be complete, as no-one can read every single canonical text ever produced and because new canonical texts are being added each week, meaning that no superhero universe is finite until the day superhero texts are no longer published (Reynolds 1992, 43). However, the serialised publication of superhero comics explicitly denies the narratives any finite quality, as the stories accumulate an infinite amount of narratives that comprise the continuity.

Within this framework, *Batman: The Killing Joke* represents an interesting anomaly, as the text, despite being canonised as a part of the serial continuity, was published as a single, 46-page album instead of as one of the traditional weekly/monthly serial issues. This was a rare occasion within superhero comics, and perhaps at least partially owing to the emergence of the "comics grow up" PR phenomenon that took the press by storm in 1986 and 1987 (Sabin 1993, 87). The publication of such works as *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) by Frank Miller and *Watchmen* (1987) by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons was much publicised in the press as the rise of "serious" adult comics, representing what Roger Sabin (1993, 97) has referred to as "revisionist superhero comics". While the press hailed the "new" phenomenon, Sabin identifies this as more of a distinct marketing move aimed at selling certain works as "graphic novels" instead of "comics" in order to attract older audiences with more money to spend; one such way to do this was to publish works in the album-format long preferred in the field of European comics, which were seen as more culturally respectable and read by all ages (as opposed to just kids; Sabin, 1993, 93). When *Batman: The Killing Joke* was published in 1988, the rise of this new marketing trend

³ This phrasing has been confirmed by Moore in at least one interview by *Wizard Magazine* in 2006, where he identified DC's Len Wein as the editor in question (quoted in Felton, 2007, 28).



was at full swing, and undoubtedly contributed to the decision to publish the text as a single volume instead of separate issues. As Sabin notes, after the “boom” initiated by Miller and Moore’s work, the “graphic novel” became a buzz term and “virtually everything” was either published or re-published in the trendy format (Sabin 1993, 96).

A finite story published in a single volume, however, means that *Batman: The Killing Joke* goes very clearly against the traditional “mythic form” of serial superhero continuity that enables an infinite amount of narratives (Gray 2010, 35). More than that, the narrative subverts the superhero tradition by underlining its construction from an infinite serial continuity by “exposing the cracks in the sanity of organization” (Klock 2002, 59). It is this unique combination of tradition and subversion within *Batman: The Killing Joke* that creates the “textual anarchy” of this article’s title: while anarchy, as defined in the beginning of the article, appears to reject all notions of order and continuity, the text quite clearly deploys a substantial level of order and control in order to establish its denial of order. While the narrative itself is carefully ordered through a meticulous panel division and detailed artwork, the narrative simultaneously contains an anarchic level that problematises the very serial continuity it is built on.

By drawing deliberate attention to its structure as built from decades of Batman lore, *Batman: The Killing Joke* highlights the conventional and continuous nature of the story itself (the Joker attempts to commit a crime, Batman arrives to stop it). This type of contrasting could be argued to produce an effect very similar to Darko Suvin’s (1979, 6) notion of cognitive estrangement, as the comic deliberately draws the reader’s attention to its own open-ended nature. This level of estrangement of course calls for a more skilled reader, one who is aware of the genre conventions and character history of Batman and the Joker. The characters themselves contain an unusual amount of self-reflexivity as Batman himself wonders where their never-ending feud will ultimately lead them:

I’ve been thinking lately. About you and me. About what’s going to happen to us, in the end. We’re going to kill each other, aren’t we? Perhaps you’ll kill me. Perhaps I’ll kill you. Perhaps sooner. Perhaps later. (Moore and Bolland 1988, 4; hereafter cited as *TKJ* in parenthetical references).

This self-reflexivity, combined with the narrative’s deliberate focus on the iterative nature of the narrative and its impossibility for a linear, singular past creates a subversive narrative that ultimately questions its own existence.

Batman: The Killing Joke accomplishes this subversion of superhero tradition by presenting the reader with an origin story for the Joker, Batman’s arch-nemesis (although I will argue that the



narrative is not about the Joker's origins, but a meta-commentary on the very elements of superhero comics themselves). Loosely based on the Joker's first origin story "The Man behind the Red Hood" from *Detective Comics* #168 (1951), Moore and Bolland's origin story depicts the Joker as a failed comedian who agrees to rob a chemical factory to support his pregnant wife. He disguises himself as the Red Hood and is pursued by Batman. He escapes by swimming in a polluted channel where the chemicals from the plant alter his appearance for good, making his skin white and his hair a garish green. Seeing his reflection, he becomes insane.⁴ While some, like Reynolds, view the Red Hood origin story from the 1950s as the definite version, others see the Joker as a character defined precisely by his unclear and undefined origins. For example, Brian Bolland himself stresses in the afterword of the 2008 Deluxe Edition that the story of *Batman: The Killing Joke* is "just one of a number of possible origin stories" (Bolland 2008, 48). This is a trope that has gained in popularity within the last decades, as testified by the widely successful Batman movie *The Dark Knight* (2008, dir. Christopher Nolan), where the Joker (played by the late Heath Ledger), purposefully retells his origins twice (his third attempt is cut short), and both accounts are vastly different. Instead of reinforcing a unified and linear narrative by repeating a canonised origin story that reasserts the continuity, the movie underlines the conflicting ambiguity behind the Joker's chaotic character, suggesting that the ambiguity of the Joker's past and his confusing origin stories have in themselves acquired the status of a "resonant trope"⁵ within the Batman mythos.

In *Batman: The Killing Joke*, Moore and Bolland take the Joker's 1950s "origin story" and frame it with a "present" (insofar as any superhero narrative can exist in the present) story, where the Joker tries to prove that "all it takes is one bad day to reduce the sanest man alive to lunacy" (*TKJ* 1988, 38), suggesting that something similar happened to him. In order to accomplish this, he shoots and paralyzes Barbara Gordon, and exposes Commissioner Gordon to images of her, naked and suffering, in an attempt to drive him mad. Ultimately the demands of continuity and genre win, as the Joker fails and Gordon remains sane. Batman defeats the Joker in battle, restores the status quo and waits with him for the police cars to take him away. After capturing the Joker, however, Batman slightly breaks the expected narrative by suggesting rehabilitation to the Joker instead of sending him back to prison. This suggestion, if carried through, would mean the end of

⁴ A similar version of the Joker's origins is presented in Tim Burton's movie *Batman* (1989). The Joker, played by Jack Nicholson, is revealed to have been Jack Napier, a local gangster, who falls into a chemical solution after Batman has stopped him and his men from raiding a chemical factory. The solution disfigures his face, which drives him mad. In an attempt at closure, it is revealed at the end that Jack Napier (and not Joe Chill as in the comics) was also the criminal who shot and killed Bruce Wayne's parents, and in effect created Batman. Thus, the theme of origins is strongly present in the movie.

⁵ Peter Coogan (2006, 7) defines a resonant trope as "familiar and repeated moments, iconic images and actions, figures of speech, patterns of characterisation [that] have gained this resonance through repeated use" within superhero comics.



Batman/the Joker -stories, as without the villain the hero has no purpose. In order for the infinite continuity to remain that way, the narrative must be repeated and the characters are not allowed to change.

THE PAST AS MULTIPLE CHOICE

I mean, what is it with you? What made you what you are? Girlfriend killed by the mob, maybe? Brother carved up by some mugger? Something like that, I bet. Something like that... Something like that happened to me, you know. I... I'm not exactly sure what it was. Sometimes I remember it one way, sometimes another... If I'm going to have a past, I prefer it to be multiple choice! (TKJ 1988, 39).

In *Batman: The Killing Joke*, the Joker refers to his past as one of “multiple choice”, which highlights the character’s shattered past as his origins and past exploits have been written and rewritten so many times even he cannot keep up with them. This multiple choice is not restricted to comics, but follows the character through various other formats, such as animation, TV-series and cinema. Who he is and how he came to be the Joker is unclear even to him. This disorganisation of non-linear forms that characterise the Joker’s past can be read as kind of textual anarchy, a refusal to obey the traditional meanings and linear histories. The past as multiple choice is ambiguous, open to new interpretations, new readings of the same character. As Philip Sandifer has argued, the high-compulsive retellings of the superhero (or villain) origin story within superhero narratives can be read as symptomatic repetitions of the origin trauma that refuses to stay still in a historicised past, returning in constant repetition in order to provide a stable center for the narrative in question (Sandifer 2008, 178–181). In other words, the origin trauma functions to both characterise and motivate the hero and his actions, and the repetition of this trauma at regular intervals grounds the narratives to Eco’s (1979, 114) “oneiric climate” of the ever-present, erasing the notion of time. The character origins of the hero (and usually the villain) must be fixed (Batman’s origin trauma will always be his parents’ murder, etc.), as it will form an “all-important moment of transformation” which will then mark the hero’s future actions and adventures (Reynolds 1992, 48). In contrast to this, the Joker’s origin story tends to have multiple permutations (as mentioned above). This leads to his solution of a “multiple choice past”, which may be compulsively retold like the hero’s, but due to its unstable nature, it cannot offer similar stability to the narrative, but instead questions the entire structure of the narrative by exposing its fabricated nature.

At first reading, the Joker’s origin story in *Batman: The Killing Joke* seems to do the very opposite of what I have just argued. The narrative levels alternate between the present (where the shooting



of Barbara and the kidnapping of Commissioner Gordon take place) and the past “flashbacks” illustrating the Red Hood origin story from the 1950s. In a familiar style from both comics and cinema, these two narrative levels of *now* and *then* are separated through their colouring schemes: the present is in full colour, while the past is sepia-toned.⁶ The transitions between scenes, both in the present and between the past and the present rely almost completely on visual markers: the panels echo similar images, or in the case of flashbacks, more concretely transfer the character’s pose and stature from the present to the past, indicating an active “memory” through the juxtaposition of two consequent panels. These flashbacks tell an origin story of the Joker, and accordingly, almost all the visual transitions between the present and the past in the narrative are done through the Joker’s character. On page 8 (fig. 1), the two images from the past and the present are striking in their similarity, and the positioning of the characters and the mirror image of the Joker’s face in both panels very clearly invites the reader to interpret this shift as an active visual memory of the Joker, depicted to the audience through internal focalisation by juxtaposing past and present events similarly. Within comics, internal focalisation often results in “the reader actually witnessing the character’s conscious memories” (Miettinen 2006, 52–53). However, as this type of focalisation is attributed to the character, it cannot be equated to the narrator, and it can therefore mislead the audience, as character misperception can be presented as factual within the narrative (Branigan 1992, 102–103).

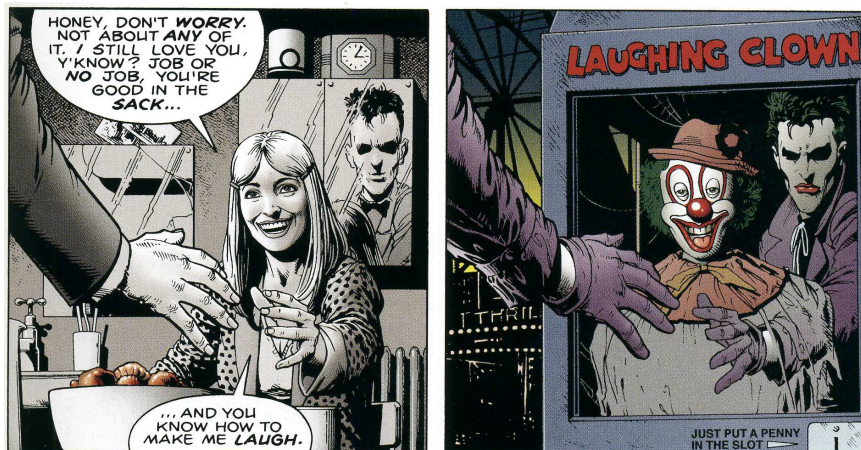


Figure 1. The juxtaposition of panels suggests an active memory. Bolland, Brian and Moore, Alan, *Batman: The Killing Joke*, DC Comics, 1988/2008, p. 8. © DC Comics.

⁶ This is significantly more pronounced in the 2008 Deluxe Edition, which was completely recolored by Bolland. The original coloring from 1988 by John Higgins displays a much brighter, occasionally almost neon-colored palette, and the distinction between the present and the past is much less visible. According to Bolland, the 2008 edition resembles more closely what he had intended than the technicolor version of the 1980s.



This narrative device of shifting focalisations possesses a deceiving narrative authority, as the visual clues clearly suggest that the flashbacks originate from the Joker's consciousness. Consequently, his identity would become "fixed", and go against the established trope of the Joker's mysterious origins. Furthermore, revealing the Joker's origin creates a feeling of empathy within the reader, thus undermining his status as a villain:

[W]hen an author elaborates on the action or condition of an antagonist, a villain, an enemy, he/she almost necessarily begins to develop a subjectivity for that antagonist, thus dulling the contrast with the hero. In this way, the sorts of opposition that would ordinarily block empathy tend to be undermined through ordinary literary exposition. Villainy in particular is difficult to sustain. For each new discussion of the villain renders him or her more subjective, and thus less villainous. (Hogan 2001, 139)

Following Hogan's argumentation, then, presenting the reader with a representation of the Joker's origin has the substantial risk of making him more sympathetic and, disappointingly, less evil. However, before we go on lamenting this loss of villainy, I suggest a more careful reading, which reveals this initial reading to be false, and instead opens up a variety of interpretations that work against the seeming unity of the narrative structure and ultimately sustain the Joker's villainous nature.

The images and text create an interesting contrast through what initially appear to be the Joker's assumed "memories". The visual narrative no doubt very consciously deploys the visual cues that lead the reader to assume the Joker as the source of the flashbacks, yet the textual narrative very clearly denies this. Indeed, whilst in *Batman: The Killing Joke* the transitions between past and present are depicted as if through the Joker's internal focalisation, his monologue on page 39 actively denies any such consciousness within the story ("If I'm going to have a past, I prefer it to be multiple choice!"). The visual cueing implicates him as the source, while the textual narrative actively denies this, creating a strong dissonance that causes the reader to become aware of the problematic nature of the origin story and to question the source of these "memories". Of course, who is to say that the Joker can be trusted when he claims no memory of his past? Clearly labeled insane, he is far from a reliable character. Ultimately, the source of the origin story cannot be located within the diegetic level of the narrative, and must be attributed to the carefully constructed anarchy of the extradiegetic narrator/author(s).



TRANSGRESSIVE VISIONS

The dissonance between the visual cues and textual denial in the Joker's origin story is but one of the ways *Batman: The Killing Joke* extrapolates the expectations of continuity within superhero comics. The visual narrative repeatedly underlines the impossibility of containing the narrative in a linear continuity by carefully extending chosen actions just slightly over the panel frames: sound effects break out of the panels, as do the pictures of the naked and suffering Barbara Gordon (TKJ 1988, 25). The final confrontation between Batman and the Joker, of course, takes place at a derelict carnival, where the Hall of Mirrors serves as the highly symbolic climax.⁷ A significant image comes on page 40 (fig. 2), where Batman breaks through a mirror, sending shards of broken glass beyond the frames. In a very symbolic reading, this scene can be read as signifying the deliberate shattering of the attempt of a single, unified image of the narrative. Instead, shards of the mirror are flying everywhere, each one projecting a slightly different visage of the characters than the others.

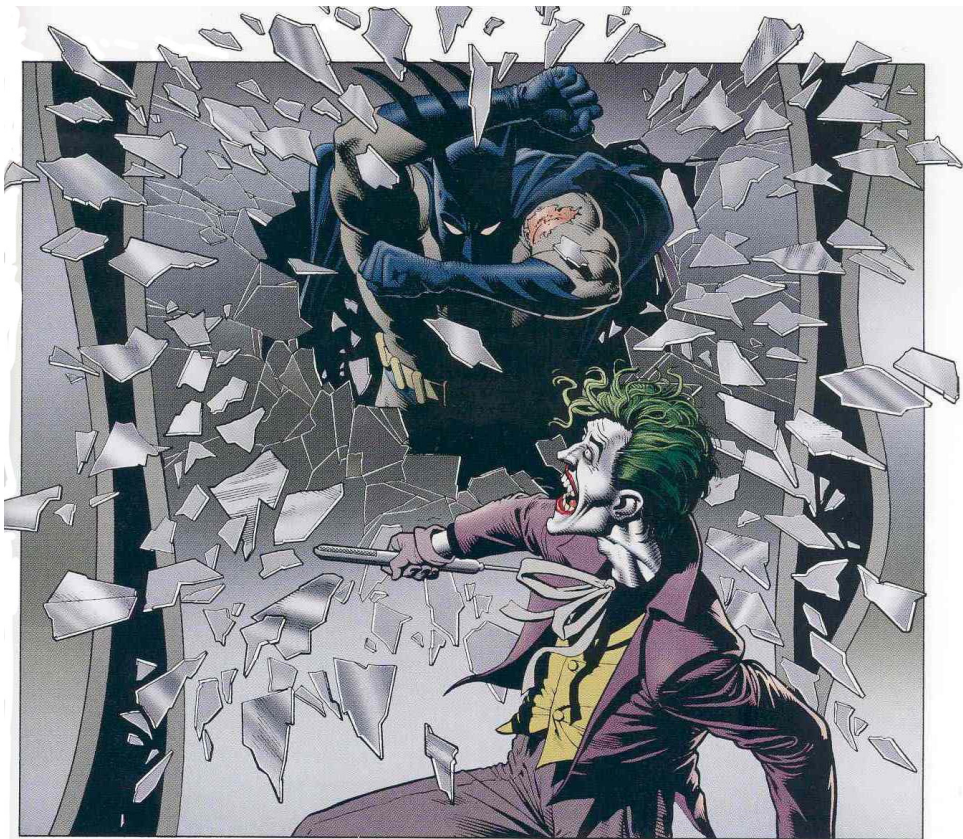


Figure 2. The mirror shards symbolise the deliberate shattering of a unified image of the narrative. Bolland, Brian and Moore, Alan, *Batman: The Killing Joke*, DC Comics, 1988/2008, p. 40. © DC Comics.

⁷ A very similar theme is present in Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), where the final battle is similarly located in a House of Mirrors. The mirror metaphor is obvious, as the two characters have often been read as reflections of each other.



The Joker, too, repeatedly breaks out of the frames, which clearly functions to underline his uncontrollably chaotic and anarchistic nature (TKJ 1988, 6; 25; 32; 45). The effect of this is clearest on page 32 (fig. 3), where the black lines of the frames disappear completely as the Joker manically laughs while he is “born”. There is no frame, and even the assumed frame that holds his laughter cannot contain him, as he escapes beyond the limits imposed upon him by the frame.

Traditionally, the panel frame has been seen as the indicator of such aspects as closure and separation (Groensteen 1999, 39), and therefore the deliberate defiance of this indicates a decisive transgression. The majority of the visual narrative is very much contained within the panels, making it even clearer that the panel frames are intentionally breached. *Batman: The Killing Joke* very discreetly produces broken frames, denying the consistency of the image within. As the page layout is otherwise quite regular and extremely contained, the “sudden and spectacular ruptures from the initially given norm” are clearly highlighted and loaded with meaning (Groensteen 1999, 97). The images break the limits dictated by the frames, producing an anarchy that is no longer textual but visual, yet doing it so slightly that the reader may not even be aware of it. The transgression of the limit set by the panel frame encompasses in a way the whole space of its trajectory; as Foucault (2003, 445) writes, “transgression has its entire space in the line it crosses”, and the line and its transgression are interdependent, and neither would be possible without the other. The existence of a limit enables a break away from it; similarly, the existence of a narrative genre formula and its continuity enable a break from it, and this break simultaneously enhances the formula itself.



Figure 3. The Joker exceeds the panel in a decisive transgression of its boundaries. Bolland, Brian and Moore, Alan, *Batman: The Killing Joke*, DC Comics, 1988/2008, p. 32. © DC Comics.



Lastly, the graphic novel declares its subversive character and resistance to adapt to serial continuity through a mode of visual “anarchy”, which can be found in artist Brian Bolland’s way of appropriating existing artistic renditions of the Joker and Batman from different eras into the comic. Consequently, the ambiguity of the past and the denial of the order of continuity is not restricted to the conflict in the Joker’s origin story, but can also be traced in the visual design. While the entire superhero genre can be characterised as “borrowing” or “cloning” from each other in the form of imitation (Bradford W. Wright [2001, 18] calls imitation within superhero comics “company policy”), in *Batman: The Killing Joke* Brian Bolland goes even further. Instead of imitating a particular house style or character, Bolland carefully and deliberately copies the illustration styles of previous Batman artists from the 1940s and 1950s in a mixture of homage and pastiche. By inserting other artists’ distinct styles into the panels and the visual look of the narrative, Bolland delicately exposes the vastness of the Batman continuity that exists on the visual level alone. The “cracks of organization” are exposed as the different and recognisable visual styles are contrasted within the text. For example, the Red Hood flashbacks present a Batman who is markedly different than the one in the “present”, resembling more closely the original art of Bob Kane, Batman creator, than the Batman of the comic’s present.

Batman: The Killing Joke deploys a kind of “layering of iconography” by consciously referring to images from different periods of the character’s visual history, consequently revealing a “discursive discontinuity” (Collins 1991, 175–177). The iconographic layers of the narrative can be located for example in the photographs within the comic book: one such instance is the image of a family portrait of sorts in the Bat-cave, showing Batman, Robin and Commissioner Gordon with some 1950s characters (such as the Bat-Mite or Ace the Bat-Hound) that have since then been written completely out of the story’s continuity. The portrait also contains Batwoman, Kathy Kane, and the first Bat-Girl⁸, Betty Kane, whose inclusion to the Bat-Family in the 1960s has been read as a response to the infamous accusations of homosexuality between Batman and Robin by Fredric Wertham in his 1954 book *The Seduction of the Innocent*, in which he famously labeled their relationship as “a wish dream of two homosexuals living together” (1954, 189–190). As Mark Best (2005, unpaginated) notes, the roles of Batwoman and Bat-Girl were reinserted as “the structural position of heterosexual love interest” for Batman and Robin, respectively. In fact, as Geoff Klock (2002, 59) points out, the portrait is an exact replica of an actual pinup created by Sheldon Moldoff in 1961 with a recognisable signature from Bob Kane in the right-hand corner, deliberately underlining the fact that Batman’s own history, too, is one of multiple choice. In this

⁸ Several Bat-Girls have existed since the character’s inception, Betty Kane being the first. Currently, DC’s reboot has seen Barbara Gordon reclaim the title after recovering from her paralysis caused by the Joker in *The Killing Joke*.



homage to previous artists, Bolland also exposes the impossibility of a complete and whole past for the characters by allowing “Batman’s dialectic history to stand in suspension” (Klock 2002, 59).

Batman: The Killing Joke is heavily infused with intertextuality within the characters’ own history, up to the point where it could be seen as veering to the point of pastiche and thus risks becoming a mix of references that becomes an end in itself (Di Liddo 2009, 62). However, Di Liddo (ibid.) for one argues that Moore’s use of intertextuality shares more features with “Bakhtinian heteroglossia (or plurivocality) and dialogism” where the narrative is opened to multiple interpretational levels and the possible significances of the text are not removed. Indeed, in revealing the construction of the very narrative from multiple intertextual possibilities, Moore and Bolland provide an effect that again resembles cognitive estrangement by showing us a (fictional) world we recognise and enjoy. Yet at the same time, Moore and Bolland force us to come to terms with the constructed and open-ended narrative structure that deliberately reveals the narrative’s inability to seamlessly fit into the previous continuity, both textually and visually, through the appropriation of various resonant tropes from visual imagery to plot structure.

Indeed, *Batman: The Killing Joke* retains several of the classic tropes and images of the Batman universe. Especially the visual tropes resonate strongly: the Bat-cave is showed with glimpses of some of the classical memorabilia of past foes, such as the giant U.S. penny and a mechanical Tyrannosaurus Rex⁹. Similarly, the iconic image of the Joker’s grotesquely grinning face is instantly recognisable and familiar, echoing the very first images of the character decades ago. But, as noted above, Bolland again cleverly uses various different artists’ visions of the Joker in the comic, as the various screens in the Bat-cave show the Joker in various visual styles. The images in *Batman: The Killing Joke* paradoxically both conform to the continuity and familiarity and deny it by deliberately exposing the inability to conform to a single, unified vision. Other resonant visual tropes include the playing cards (especially the Joker card), as well as the derelict amusement park and the house of mirrors as the setting for the battle between Batman and the Joker. All these visual tropes resonate strongly within the Batman saga of past decades, and visually tie the text firmly into the familiar continuity of the comic. However, the conscious disjointedness produced through a variety of visual styles within the narrative at the same time forces the reader to face the impossibility of continuity within the narrative continuum. In a combination of the familiar and unfamiliar, *Batman: The Killing Joke* reassesses the established characters of both Batman and the Joker, leading to the paradoxical situation in which the text is composed completely of the very formulaic elements of the genre which still, when assembled, are able to

⁹ The giant penny is an early item of Bat-memorabilia from a battle against the Penny Plunderer (*World’s Finest* #30, Sep. 1947), while the mechanical Tyrannosaurus Rex appears in *Batman* #35 (June/July 1946) in a story called “Dinosaur Island”. Both have since then become a standard visual trope of Batman lore, appearing frequently in the Bat-cave’s background.



contradict the narrative conventions and audience expectation attached to the genre, creating a hybrids that could be labeled “post-generic” (Collins 1991, 179).

ON COMIC BOOK CONTINUITY AND AUDIENCES

Since its conception, seriality and continuity have characterised the traditional superhero narrative. As Umberto Eco (2004) famously analysed in his essay “The Myth of Superman”, the so-called Golden Age (circa 1938–1954) tales of Superman relied heavily on the use of the iterative scheme, where each story took up from a “sort of virtual beginning, ignoring where the preceding event left off” (Eco 2004, 157). This way, the characters never had to age, and, inevitably, die – and as a part of this timelessness, Superman could never marry Lois Lane or permanently thwart Lex Luthor, as that would be a sign of permanent change, and therefore, of time. Similarly, then, Batman could never kill or rehabilitate the Joker, for that would signal permanent change, an end to the serial continuity that is characterised by the timeless, oneiric climate of the superhero universe. It could be argued that this demand for a “timeless” storytelling within superhero comics has less to do with continuity, and it could actually be characterised as a “discontinuous circularity” where separate stories take place in a nonlinear story world without any preceding or following narratives. “Continuity” as Reynolds defines it begins to appear more fully in the so-called Silver Age (circa 1956–1970s) of superhero comics, which began to feature very deliberate and exceedingly complex continuities within superhero comics. As Reynolds himself writes, this continuity went beyond anything that had been seen before, “an appreciation of the importance of continuity [became] an essential prerequisite to a fully-engaged reading of superhero comics” (Reynolds 1992, 38). In other words, Silver Age superhero comics relied upon a dedicated audience who were committed to following a complex continuity stretching over several titles and often lasting for years. Whilst the Golden Age heroes created a sort of timelessness through the iterative scheme, the Silver Age heroes created their own “endless” continuity by stretching out the complex continuities – however, both can be argued to subscribe to the “oneiric climate” of superhero comics.

The unyielding requirements of iteration, of never-ending serial continuity, also entail problems for comic book writers and artists: the demands of continuity often meant that the characters could not really mature, change or evolve in any way (not counting the complete reboot of the character). Even though the genre has evolved tremendously since the Golden Age and its relationship with continuity has been increasingly challenged, the superhero narrative still has a strong element of being often very predictable, with the only question each week being *how* the hero will this time free himself from the devilish device designed by the villain. As Danny Fingeroth (2004, 36–37) sees it, this element is an essential part of the superhero narrative



because it offers the reader a type of continuity that relies on “a sense of predictability” within the narrative, which gives the reader comfort. Fingeroth clearly recalls Umberto Eco (2004, 160), who has dubbed this feature of popular serial fiction as “hunger for redundance”, characterising the way a highly predictable text provides the reader with a moment of relaxation and escape (which is typical to serialised and popular fiction, such as comic strips or soap operas). By revealing the inherently redundant nature of the iterative scheme in superhero narratives, it could be claimed that *Batman: The Killing Joke* is once more removed further from the very iteration that defines it as it calls attention to its own formulaic nature. The audience’s hunger for escapist entertainment, the redundant scheme, is made obvious by stressing the never-ending continuity of the narrative.

Ultimately, comic book continuity requires a dedicated audience, and the reader’s position to the demands of continuity cannot be ignored. As Matthew Wolf-Meyer (2003, 499) has argued, comic book readership, especially within superhero comics, relies strongly on continuity, on the construction of a language of difference that is particular to the community. This means that the readers identify with a cultural position that has its own names and vocabulary, and which clearly separates them from others. The readers become a part of a distinguished reading community, and the highly complex nature of the comic book continuity with its various and intricate histories and subplots produces a hierarchical structure of knowledge which enables demarcating distinctions between fans (Nikunen 2005, 132; Wolf-Meyer 2003, 500). Superhero comics themselves also participate in creating their readers through fandom, requiring “a savvy and knowledgeable fan” to read their texts (Sandifer 2008, 176). Wolf-Meyer also stresses the relevance of the conservative nature of superhero comic book audiences, and how the relationship between the readers and producers empowers the readers, while at the same time the readers’ conservative strategies may limit the possible superhero narratives (Wolf-Meyer 2003, 512). Comic book readership has been seen as a highly interactive one, echoing Marshall McLuhan’s “participational form of expression” (Shaviro 1997, 4). According to Shaviro, superhero comic books have “fans” more than they have “readers”, and these fans pay fanatical attention to detail, and are quick to point out any inconsistencies or continuity errors and express approval (or disapproval) of character or plot changes (ibid.). It is this fan base that comprises the conservative audience that a new superhero text must satisfy in order to gain approval and acceptance into the superhero canon. The conservative audience of superhero comics puts great emphasis on continuity, and easily disallows narratives that include permanent change or alteration of the status quo.

The 1980s witnessed a strong trend of revisionist superhero comics aimed at revamping older heroes into more postmodern interpretations, often with increased violence and a more cynical and “realist” outlook. In this process, what proves to be crucial is the balance between familiarity



and reinvention, which requires the realisation that popular culture has a history which does not simply disappear as the new text appears, but persists in both the original and diverse forms, and which comprises an essential part of the audience's cultural memory, and consequently, often a large part of the reading pleasure for some audiences (Collins 1991, 171). So while seeking the approval of the readers, texts like *Batman: The Killing Joke* expect their audiences to be familiar with the characters and their vast history so that they may enjoy the adaptation's subtle transformations and transgressions, the dislocations within the characters' history.

Indeed, *Batman: The Killing Joke*, too, appears initially to be a predictable and essentially familiar superhero text, relying strongly on the traditional superhero plot where the Joker takes the active role, and Batman remains reactionary in his attempt to stop him; the Joker acts and Batman reacts, following the traditional plot structure. However, the characters possess an unusual amount of self-awareness when it comes to their formulaic nature; as the Joker has used his final trick (the empty gun), he asks:

Well? What are you waiting for? I shot a defenseless girl. I terrorized an old man. Why don't you kick the hell out of me and get a standing ovation from the public gallery? (TKJ 1988, 43).

The Joker's questions show that he is well aware of the iterative nature of the hero-villain-game, and he knows what the next step will be (and that it will all happen again). This self-awareness of the character exposes a rare level of metatextuality, as the reader, too becomes aware of the forced structure of the superhero narrative, where repeatedly the hero chases the villain, only to have him escape, *ad infinitum*. Similarly, the obligatory battle scene at the end has an air of predetermination to it, as if both characters were acting out an agreed choreography, a dance where both know their moves and cues. Batman, too, reveals his awareness of the never-ending game by replying:

Because I'm doing this by the book... and because I don't want to. Do you understand? I don't want to hurt you. I don't want either of us to end up killing the other... But we're both running out of alternatives... and we both know it. (TKJ 1988, 43-44)

The problems of continuity arise as the narrative formula established by the genre (as well as the financial demands of the industry) requires the stories to continue – if one kills the other or the Joker is rehabilitated, the narrative cannot continue anymore. The Joker recognises this, seeing that they cannot escape the demands of continuity – rehabilitation is not an option.¹⁰ The graphic

¹⁰ This aspect of the Joker has been extrapolated in both Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and Brian Azzarello and Lee Bermejo's *Joker* (2008). Miller's work depicts the Joker as catatonic in a



novel ends with Batman's opening monologue repeated over the battle images, and the last panel echoes the very first panel, zooming in to a puddle of water. Both the textual and the visual narration signals a return to the beginning, the restoration of the status quo in the endless time-space of the superheroic universe (a visual trope recurrent in the works of Moore, cf. *Watchmen*). The juxtaposition of Batman's reconciliatory rehabilitation speech with the images of the two characters fighting is clearly aiming for an ironical effect, as they convey the very opposite messages.

COMING TO TERMS WITH THE "PAST TENSE"

Jim Collins has described *Batman: The Killing Joke* as "both an acknowledgement and an extension" of the Joker's origin story, oblivious to the more open and deliberate denials of the unproblematic nature of this "extension" (Collins 1991, 172). As has been demonstrated in this article, the graphic novel goes far beyond a mere acknowledgement of the Joker's origins, producing a metanarrative that through its very construction comments on the superhero genre and its limitations imposed by serialised continuity. *Batman: The Killing Joke* is not a superhero narrative explaining the Joker's origins, but dissection into the very heart of the genre, offering not just an "extension", but multiple extensions, multiple interpretations, a demonstration of the impossibility of a singular, linear or otherwise coherent narrative within the superhero world. As the Joker himself exclaims, trying to remember and reconcile an unfragmented continuity is a dangerous mission:

Remember? Ohh, I wouldn't do that! Remembering's dangerous. I find the past such a worrying, anxious place. "The past tense", I suppose you'd call it. Ha ha ha. (TKJ 1988, 21)

The Joker finds that "the past tense" is too much for him to remember, and instead chooses not to confine himself into any singular, linear account of his past. The anxiety over the multiple versions of his past is resolved by a deliberate refusal to conform to any linear accounts within the continuity.

In the end, the Joker's response to the idea of rehabilitation ("It's too late for that. Far too late") can be read as a commentary on the very construction of the superhero narrative itself: even though the new "revisionary superhero narrative"¹¹ can reorganise history, make it strange, it

mental institution, while Azzarello and Bermejo (2008, 31–32) depict the Joker released from Arkham Asylum, stating "I'm not crazy anymore... Just mad" and continuing immediately to wield chaos and violence on the streets of Gotham.

¹¹ Clearly borrowing Sabin's earlier term "revisionist superheroes", Klock (2002, 25) writes on the phenomenon of "revisionary superhero narratives", to which he includes superhero narratives that rewrite



cannot completely escape “the anxieties of influence”, as the superhero continuity cannot be escaped, and its suspension is only temporary (Klock 2002, 61). One can suggest changes to the formula, but inevitably the stories must return to form, and succumb to the expectations of the genre rules. Despite seemingly conforming to the iterative scheme, *The Killing Joke* does end with a peculiarly unsettling note, as both Batman and the Joker share the joke told by the Joker and laugh as if the divide between them has momentarily lifted, and the two are just “these two guys in a lunatic asylum”. The panels zoom in to the puddles of water at their feet, while their laughter dominates the top part of the panel and the sound of the police car screams in the lower part of the panel. The laughter ends, but the car siren blares. The last two panels show just raindrops in the puddle, leaving open the question of the suddenly ending laughter – did one of them finally end the game, for good? *Batman: The Killing Joke*, once more conforming to the demands of continuity in its adaptation of the Joker’s origins, leaves the question unanswered and the narrative as open-ended, thus securing the continuity of the narrative.

FINALLY

Arguably, the past can only be understood through the construction of narratives that give the past shape in relation to the current situation in order to make sense of it (Spiegel and Jenkins 1991, 118). The refusal to understand the present in relation to the past denies the possibility of a linear narrative, a chronology; instead of order, *The Killing Joke*’s textual anarchy embraces the liberating chaos of madness:

Faced with the inescapable fact that human existence is mad, random and pointless, one in eight of them crack up and go stark slaving buggo! Who can blame them? In a world as psychotic as this... any other response would be crazy! (*TKJ* 1988, 33)

Madness is for the Joker the only logical solution in the face of the discontinuities of identity he faces. As Shaviro (1997, 66) notes, while the Joker may indeed be a “gleefully sadistic mass murderer”, he also embodies the postmodern subject. Instead of choosing and organising his perceptions of the past and present and maintaining a permanent identity, he simply goes “with the flow”, free of any restraints of society: “he *lives* and *enjoys* the postmodern condition, this mutation of our sensibility into non-linear, non-Euclidean forms” (ibid., 67; emphasis in original). Considering the problems of continuity that plague the superhero genre as a whole, embracing madness instead of the sanity of organisation is often a necessity rather than choice. This is why Barbara Gordon can never “work out a proper filing system, like we used at the library” (*TKJ* 1988,

the genre in a deliberate Bloomian “misreading” of the tradition, such as *Watchmen*, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and *Batman: The Killing Joke*.



12) for Commissioner Gordon's newspaper clippings, as the conflicting histories of the superhero narratives will never allow it (Klock 2002, 59–60). The past is comprised of several alternative options forming alternate histories, and organising it all into a single unified narrative poses too many challenges. Moore and Bolland take this challenge as their premise, and through the use of resonant tropes both textual and visual, create a narrative which on the surface follows the genre expectations, but which soon begins to question its very structure, approaching a form of deliberate, carefully woven textual anarchy.

As Moore himself has stated in a 2007 interview ("Authors on Anarchism" 2007), anarchy is not so much about chaos as it is about "diversity" – diversity as a lack of hierarchy but not without careful thought. It is this anarchic diversity that emerges in *Batman: The Killing Joke*: the diversity of the Batman mythos, its various strands, characters and visualisations that ultimately do not form a unified and coherent whole, but an anarchistic diversity that remains open and changeable. Instead of simply recreating the Joker's origins, Moore and Bolland decidedly expose the impossibility of continuity within superhero mythology. By revealing the cracks in the sanity of organisation, the text instigates textual anarchy and opens up the characters and their multiple pasts. In approaching the narrative past as one of multiple choice, open to new interpretations and new readings of the same character, the text highlights the endlessly open-ended nature of the superhero narrative.



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MARA AND PARACUELLOS – INTERPRETATIONS OF SPANISH POLITICS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE COMICS

By Anne Magnussen

ABSTRACT

After a Civil War and a 40-year long dictatorship, Spain went through a political transition to democracy in the last half of the 1970s. It was a period of unrest and insecurity, and all media participated in the debates about what to do with the authoritarian regime, its institutions and its supporters. Although a relatively new phenomenon in Spain at the time, many comics for an adult audience participated in these debates, representing most often the radical left. Some of these comics criticised what they and many others considered a lack of a real rupture with the dictatorship. The article presents an analysis of two of these comics, *Paracuellos* by Carlos Giménez and *Mara* by Enric Sío. It argues that the comics, through representations of place and institutions such as the family and the Catholic Church, question the political transition, implying that it is a continuation of the dictatorship. The comics, their perspective and their time are further discussed within the framework of present-day memory debates in Spain.

MARA AND PARACUELLOS.
INTERPRETATIONS OF SPANISH POLITICS
FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE COMICS

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Within the last 10–15 years, questions about how to handle the recent past have been very present in public debate in Spain. It is no easy subject, as this past includes a Civil War (1936–39) that divided the population and was followed by an almost 40-year-long dictatorship. After the political transition to democracy at the end of the 1970s, throughout the 1980s and most of the 1990s, the past was hardly present at all as a subject for debate. Then it emerged with a vengeance: today all sectors in Spanish society participate in the debate in different ways, including NGOs, the press, political parties, intellectuals, novels, films – and comics.¹

Spaniards do not agree on how the recent past should be remembered. This is a subject with important consequences on many levels, not only for the way in which Spanish history is presented in school textbooks, but also, for example, for the presence in public space of symbols of Francoist authoritarian power; for the state's implication in the opening of mass graves from the Civil War and the post-war years; and for the securing of historical archives. Among many others, these are the memory related issues that have been raised recently. The debates about – and the opening of – mass graves from the Civil War and the postwar have generated much attention since the end of the 1990s, and in 2007, the Spanish Parliament approved a so-called Memory Law that drew up the legal framework for a series of issues related to memory, including those mentioned above (BOE 2007; González-Ruibal 2009; Sanz 2006; Jerez-Farrán 2010). As one of the most recent issues of debate, a series of cases and testimonies about the forced adoption of children during the Francoist years have started to emerge in the public sphere.²

Before these issues emerged in public debate, one specific memory about the recent past had been dominant. According to this memory, the Spanish Civil War was a tragedy that had divided the population, and that had had serious and long lasting consequences for everybody. Also according to this narrative, when the dictator, Francisco Franco, died in 1975, the collective willingness to compromise and work together for democracy healed the divisions among Spaniards within an admirably short period of time and with hardly any conflict (e.g. Hanley and Loughlin 2006, 11; Martin et al. 1998, 497). This period, the political transition, had a key role in the dominant narrative about the Civil War and the Francoist dictatorship. On the one hand it was considered the happy end after a long period of division, and on the other, it was seen as the beginning of a bright future of democracy and European cooperation. Apart from the people, the

¹ The comics discussed in the article are all comics for an adult audience. It is impossible to create a clear-cut distinction between comics for children and comics for adults, but the comics referred to treat themes that either do not interest children or that children are not supposed to be interested in. This includes political, intellectual and erotic comics, among others.

² As one example, the newspaper *El País*, runs a special issue on “stolen children”, see <http://www.elpais.com/especial/vidas-robadas> (accessed December 8, 2011).



political transition's heroes were Adolfo Suárez, the Prime Minister from 1976 to 1981, and the new Head of State after Franco, King Juan Carlos (Juliá 2006; Aguilar 2002).

As part of the overall memory about the Civil War and the dictatorship, this dominant interpretation of the political transition is also up for debate in Spanish society. Looking closer at the period of political transition itself, it is apparent that the narrative about it glosses over important divisions and conflicts. It is also clear that at the time of the transition it was seriously questioned along the same lines as it is today: it was criticised for the lack of a real rupture with Francoism and its traditionalist and authoritarian characteristics. Some of the comics of the time were part of the questioning, and these comics are the subject of this article. Change, continuity and the significance of the past were recurrent subjects in the comics then as they are now, and as a context for the understanding of today's memory debates, I discuss how some of the comics of the 1970s participated in the construction and questioning of the political development in Spanish society during the political transition.³

Below I present an analysis of two comics, *Paracuellos* by Carlos Giménez and *Mara* by Enric Sío as examples of comics that interpreted Spanish society in the 1970s, having place and continuity as central features (Giménez 1977a; Sío 1980). As a perspective on the analysis, I will discuss today's questioning of the political transition. The 1970s comics constitute the first wave of Spanish comics *de auteur* and are therefore an important point of departure for the understanding not only of the specific period of time, but also of Spanish comics' history generally. I will start with a short introduction to the historical period and its comics.

THE 1970S: POLITICAL PROTESTS, CARICATURE AND THE FEAR OF CONTINUITY

In the 1970s, Spanish comics for an adult audience were a new phenomenon, and they more or less followed the development in countries with a strong comics scene at the time, such as France, Belgium and Italy. Among other things, comics from these countries focused on more complex psychological and intellectual questions; they experimented with comics aesthetics and narrative conventions, and they introduced sex and politics as central themes.

Many Spanish comics prioritised a political focus even more than the comics in other countries, which can be explained by the political turmoil of 1970s' Spain. Especially from the 1960s, protests against the Francoist regime gained force and visibility, leading up to the political transition

³ The theoretical framework of this article is based, among other titles, on the following: Glassberg 2001; Jelin 2002; Gillis 1994; Massey 1995.



described above, and many comics artists were active in the increasing protests against the regime. When Franco died in November 1975, the absolute majority of Spaniards wanted political change, but they did not all agree as to how radical this change should be (Powell 2001, 146–192). After almost 40 years of dictatorship, including censorship and repression of criticism of all kinds, Francoism's traditionalist, authoritarian and Catholic values were dominant in political, administrative, judicial, cultural, and educational institutions. Some wanted a complete rupture with Francoist influence, a rupture that should include an institutional clean-out on all levels (Aguilar 2000). Others wanted change to be gradual and from within the existing system and institutions. The latter represented the conservative forces in society, but they were also illustrative of a more general fear of provoking extremist groups or the armed forces by changing too many things too fast (Aguilar Fernández 2006b, 256).

It was the last group that won, and there were no major personnel changes or anything close to a judicial process regarding crimes committed during the Francoist era (Aguilar Fernández 2006a, 283; Juliá 2006; Moral 2001; Sanz 2006, 5). The lack of a judicial process, or a truth commission to investigate human rights crimes during the dictatorship, was due to an explicit political agreement between left and right (Aguilar Fernández 2006a). The negotiated rupture also meant that Spain continued with the monarchy that Franco had reintroduced in 1947, as well as with the Head of State, Juan Carlos, chosen by Franco in 1969 as his future successor (Phillips and Phillips 2010, 274–275). Because of the lack of a judicial process and the maintenance of the monarchy, at least some continuity was secured in terms of both institutions and practices, even though political parties were legalised in 1976, the first free elections were held in 1977, and the people passed a democratic Constitution in 1978 (Powell 2001, 177). Both this continuity and the conflicts during the political transition were, if not completely ignored, at least glossed over in the construction of what became the dominant memory of the political transition as described above.

Many Spanish comics artists took a stand in the conflicts and debates at the time, and most of them supported the proposition of radical change, which included a republic instead of the monarchy, and an institutional clean-out (interview with Alfons Font in Coma 1981, 46). One of the recurrent features in comics and political caricature of the 1970s was to criticise the new democratic order for being only a facade, and to argue that the Francoist regime continued in power (only without Franco) as politicians, police officials, school teachers, etc. were the same as during the Francoist years. The real power in Spain was, according to the critics, still in the hands of the so-called Francoist families, i.e. the Catholic Church, the Armed Forces, the extreme right movement, La Falange, and the big land- and factory owners (Cazorla 2000, 260). This criticism was present in political caricature, but also in comics albums such as the collective work *Tequila Bang* (Font et al. 1977), and Carlos Giménez' and others' *España una...*, *España grande...*, and



España libre!... from 1978 (Altarriba 2002; Giménez et al. 1978; Giménez and Ivá 1978a; 1978b; Lladó 2001, 18–24). When an extreme right group attacked the Barcelona based publishing house Amaika in September 1977, the absolute majority of publishing houses, comics artists and political caricaturists condemned the attack (Colectiva 1977; *El País* 1977). The artists contributed with comics and caricatures to the album *Los profesionales de la historieta, el humor y la ilustración en solidaridad con el Papus*, which represented a concentrated criticism of not only the attack, but also of the insufficient democratisation efforts generally (Colectiva 1977; Magnussen 2004).

Little by little political violence and fear of military takeovers died down, and after a failed military coup in 1981 and the socialist party PSOE's victory in the national elections in 1982, Spanish society seemed to be on a stable track towards democracy and modernisation on all levels. From the 1980s, the Civil War and the Francoist regime were considered to be part of an embarrassing past, and the absolute majority – politicians and civilians alike – preferred to look forward to a hopefully bright future as part of democratic Europe. After the Francoist repression of regional cultures, especially those of the Basque Country and Catalonia, regional identities became central to the new democratic Spain. In this sense, a European focus on the one hand, and a regional one on the other, almost overshadowed the idea of Spain as a nation, which for many was related to the authoritarian Francoist past (Sanz 2006).

As part of this focus away from the Spanish past and immediate national politics, the emergence of a new generation of comics artists and magazines replaced the politically explicit comics. It was no longer politics, but the parent generation's middle class norms and (post)modern urban life that were under fire, although in different ways and inspired by such different sources as the US underground comics and the Franco-Belgian *ligne claire* (Lladó 2001; Magnussen 2001). These comics were part of the new Spain and hardly any of them referred explicitly to politics or to the past – recent or remote.

The 1980s represented a virtual comics boom in terms of number of magazines, albums and readers, and many very interesting comics and comics artists came out of this decade and the succeeding 1990s (Lara 1996; Lladó 2001; Magnussen 2001). Within Spanish comics history, the 1970s comics do not have the pronounced position, as they are often considered to focus very specifically on the political situation at the time. As with much political caricature and commentary, many of the comics became outdated because of their references to specific political conflicts and actors, or because the efforts to communicate a particular political message meant that aesthetic or narrative reflections were considered secondary at best. However, some comics proved valid also beyond the limited scope of the particular political context. This was due to the comics' originality in aesthetics, argument and/or thematic focus, and *Paracuellos* by Carlos



Giménez and *Mara* by Enric Sío are excellent – but also very different – examples of this category. Below I analyse these two comics as commentaries on Francoist Spain and its involvement in the political transition.

CONTINUITY AND PLACE IN *PARACUELLOS* AND *MARA*

In terms of perspectives and themes, the two comics *Paracuellos* and *Mara* present similar interpretations of Spain in the 1970s. When it comes to publication history, popularity and aesthetics, however, they are very different. For one, *Paracuellos* was first published in Spain, and *Mara* in Italy, although both comics were published in some of the new comics magazines *de auteur*.⁴ This meant that *Paracuellos* and Giménez were more closely connected to Spain in the 1970s than Sío and *Mara*, also because Giménez published other works within the same period of time (e.g. Giménez 1977b; 1979; Giménez et al. 1978; Giménez and Ivá 1978a; 1978b). There is no doubt either that *Paracuellos* became much more popular in Spain in the 1970s and beyond than *Mara* ever did. The *Paracuellos* stories were first printed as an album series from 1977 and reprinted four times between 1979 and 1988, and again in 1997 and in 2007. There are three *Paracuellos* albums of approximately 50 pages each. In Spain, *Mara* only came in one album edition, in 1980, and consists of 14 chapters, 111 pages in total (Cuadrado 1997; Saura 1980). Whereas Giménez is a household name in Spain also beyond the comics world, Sío is probably only recognised as a comics artist among specialists and fans. Part of the explanation of this difference is due to the transparency of *Paracuellos* compared to the opacity and complexity of *Mara* both in terms of narrative argument and aesthetics, which will become apparent below.

Paracuellos consists of two-page stories about life in Catholic boys' orphanages at the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s. The title of the album series is the name of one of the orphanages, and the stories are partially built on Giménez' own childhood, as he was born in 1941 and lived in different orphanages from when he was six years old until he was 14 (Quintana 1977, 8). The stories represent different conflicts or situations within the orphanage, for example when the children are forced to sleep the siesta in the sun, or when family members visit on Sundays (Giménez 1977a, 26–27, 20–21). Nuns run the orphanages, and almost all the stories include examples of their cruelty towards the boys. The boys either stick together, or they “learn” from the nuns and turn on each other. Some boys appear in several stories, but the stories are independent in the sense that there is no narrative development from one story to the next.

⁴ *Paracuellos* was published in *Muchas gracias* from 1976, and *Yes* and *Comix Internacional 1a* from 1980 (Cuadrado 1997, 334). As an album series it was first published from 1977. *Mara* was published from 1971 as a serial in the Italian comics magazine *Linus* (Buono 1983, 667–671; Gaumer and Moliterni 1994, 395), and as an album in 1980.

Aesthetically, the *Paracuellos* stories stand out for the uniform style of equally sized, small panels. The round faces and eyes of the children are conspicuously ‘Giménez-style’, and because of the great popularity of this comic and other comics by the same author, they fast became easily recognisable. The stories and their sad or cruel punch lines should be immediately understandable for most readers. The fact that the stories are short and without continuity in terms of a story line renders the collection repetitive. When reading one story after the other, the reader is left with the impression of a place, of the orphanage, rather than of a coherent narrative argument with a clear beginning and end.



Figure 1. Giménez, Carlos, *Paracuellos I*, Ediciones de la Torre, 1977. © Carlos Giménez.

The orphanage as a place is described in opposition to the outside, and the two worlds seldom interact. When they do, the nuns make an effort to create a respectable front, for example when they give the children a glass of milk only because the national delegate of the orphanages visits



the home, or when they intend to cancel a mother's visit to her son because they have beaten him up and it still shows (Giménez 1977a, 14–15, 28–29).

Although the respectable front is only explicitly present in some of the stories, it is nevertheless implied globally in the activation of societal norms that are violently distorted within the orphanage as a place. It is deeply ironic that the orphanages are referred to as homes (*hogares* in Spanish), while the reality is very far from the safe and loving environment that ought to define the (admittedly ideal) home. The staff has no empathy with the boys and seems to find pleasure in humiliating them. The family as an institution is in this sense represented as one of arbitrary violence and punishment and devoid of any humanity or protection.

In Spain during the Francoist years, both the Catholic Church and the Spanish fascist movement, La Falange, were involved in the running of the orphanages, the latter through its women's section (Preston 2000, 111–140). Both institutions are present in *Paracuellos*; the latter through indices such as the Falange symbol at the entrance of the orphanages and the national Falange delegate coming to visit, and the former through recurrent prayer, crucifixes, and of course, the nuns. The nuns consistently use violence against the boys with the overriding objective of maintaining power by any possible means. The homes are "true paramilitary centres, where sadism, psychological and physical torture, repression, and alienation seriously damage the children" (Quintana 1977, 8; my translation). This damage points to the issue of continuity: the values that the nuns pass on to the children, irrational violence as valid behaviour, shape them and in some cases turn them into small monsters themselves (fig.1; Giménez 1977a, 3–4, 46–47). The repetitiveness of the stories described above further underlines this sense of continuity, representing a violent and distorted place that could continue endlessly with the advent of new children, and without being detected because of its respectable institutional front.

Mara also has children as its protagonists, and the 14 chapters narrate the story of an upper-class family consisting of a grandmother and her three grandchildren – Mara, David and Sita – that all live in a mansion. Once a week the family members perform a dark ritual, and the comic both begins and ends with this ritual (fig. 2). Its only purpose seems to be to decide who will be in command of the following week's ritual, and it involves fire, symbols such as the Swastika and wax figurines, old-fashioned clothing, chance and apparently irrational pain and violence (e.g. Sío 1980, 6–10, 72–74). The family has very little contact with the outside world. Once a week, the people from a circus turn up at the mansion to look at the family through the gates, and on two occasions the family goes on trips, once to mass and once to Lourdes (Sío 1980, 16–17; 10; 31). When they go to mass, they act and dress as a conventional family, and in this sense the story establishes two spaces – as does *Paracuellos* – although with the circus people as a strange link.



As opposed to *Paracuellos*, the panel sequence in *Mara* is difficult to follow because of consistently heterogeneous panel sizes and unclear distinctions between them. Aesthetically, Sío uses a wide range of styles, including both near-photographic images and simple line drawings. These features destabilise one of the basic narrative conventions of comics, i.e. that the panel sequence usually indicates the linearity of the narrative argument. Sío further plays with this convention by using the full page and the double page as representations of specific moods, situations or places (Sío 1980, 10; 78–79). Both features draw attention to the environment and place, that of the mansion, and away from the passage of time and sequences of activity. Although constructed with different means, the representation of place rather than a narrative argument is similar to what happens in *Paracuellos*.

The complexity of *Mara*'s aesthetics and the difficulties of establishing clear narrative sequences in the story furthermore draw the reader's attention to the aesthetic and comics conventions themselves by destabilising and continuously undermining them. This refers explicitly to the comics experiments of the time in Italy and France, but it also creates an extra dimension in *Mara*'s interpretation of the family and mansion as an unstable and strange place where nothing is what it seems to be. Again with different means, the same characteristics are present here as in *Paracuellos*: a perverted and dark place, hidden behind a respectable front consisting of family and religious values, which at the same time define the distorted and violent activities.

The relationship between the members of the family in *Mara* is highly complex, and includes changing roles and not least the ritual that involves physical violence between the family members as well as the use of arbitrary power. Statements of love between the family members are continuously undermined or contradicted, and the fact that the grandmother is in a wheelchair is used as a (not exactly politically correct) metaphor of the disabled or crippled relationship between the family members (Sío 1980, 47–48).

When the family leaves for church, they dress up as a traditional family, and in this sense, church related activities come to represent normality and the image of the family that is visible to the rest of the world. Compared to *Paracuellos* that the Catholic Church plays a smaller role in *Mara*, although religious symbols are part of the dark family rituals, in combination with swastikas and other symbols.

The role of the circus people is intriguing. The fact that the family is the spectacle and the conventional performers the spectators, turns another convention on its head, making the circus into representatives of ordinary people, while the family in the mansion becomes the extraordinary act. When seen as a comment on Spanish society in the 1970s, it is tempting to see

the representation of the authoritarian regime and the politicians who orchestrated the political transition as freaks watched by the people.



Figure 2. Sío, Enric. *Mara*, Editorial Nueva Frontera, 1980. © Enric Sío.

There are many repetitions in *Mara*, not only in the ritualistic activities, but also in the representation of individuals through a network of doubles, mirrors, wax figurines, replacement of pets etc. These doubles are closely related to another feature that strengthens the sense of continuity in the story, namely the fact that three generations are present – in terms of age, not blood ties – namely the grandmother, Mara and Sita. There are furthermore references to past family history as far back as the 18th century (Sío 1980, 59–61), and it is clear that Mara is to take over the grandmother's place in the wheelchair, and after her, Sita (Sío 1980, 8; 33; 80; 107; 110–111).



Repetitions are central in *Mara*, as they are in *Paracuellos*, but there is also a clear development. In the last three chapters, the distinction between the hidden life inside the mansion and the outside world is challenged. First the circus people break down the gates and enter the gardens. At one point, doubt arises as to whether the grandmother is actually still alive or if she is played by women whom Mara rents in the village (Sío 1980, 90). Until then, the family has managed to keep the circus people out of the clearly privileged grounds of the mansion garden, but when doubts arise as to the grandmother's true identity, the spectacle turns out to be a fraud, and the circus group reacts (Sío 1980, 92–94). A group of monks who live on the back of the mansion manage to stop them (Sío 1980, 93). However, the circus people's attack seems to have made a first dent in the family's and the place's invulnerability, and it is soon followed by a second. This time, the monks attack by pulling on the mansion's crossbeams with an elaborate system of strings (Sío 1980, 99–100). This attack represents a bigger threat to the family, as the monks are physically much closer to the mansion, as opposed to the circus people who did not come much closer than just through the front gates. The monks furthermore constitute a former ally who protected the family against the circus people.

A third challenge comes from within the family and mansion when Sita protests against her role in the family in the last chapter (Sío 1980, 111). This attack comes from within the family itself, and even though the family repeats the ritual at the end of the comic, the three attacks represent different ways of questioning the family's power, and as they foreground the family's vulnerability, they question its ability to continue in control.

PARACUELLOS AND MARA OF 1970S' SPAIN

Paracuellos and *Mara* share a series of characteristics as they both represent their respective place as distorted and perverse, mainly through their interpretations of traditional values related to the family and the Catholic Church. At the same time, these values function as respectable fronts, hiding a dark and violent world. Both comics also include explicit references to Spanish society. The title, *Paracuellos*, refers to a historical place and orphanage, and in *Mara*, the family has roots in historically recognisable 18th century Spain (Sío 1980, 59–63).

Within the context of the political changes and insecurity of the 1970s, it is not difficult to see the comics as a strong critique of the political and social state of affairs. In the introduction to *Paracuellos*, Manuel G. Quintana (1977, 9; my translation) describes the orphanages as “small totalitarian states within a totalitarian state” and argues that they represent “Spain on a small scale”.



The places – the orphanage and the mansion – function as relatively clear-cut metaphors of Spanish society during the Francoist regime, and the focus on continuity between past, present and future norms and values, can be interpreted as fear of a lack of change after Franco's death. In this sense, *Paracuellos* and *Mara* fit very well into the highly politically charged comics scene of the 1970s. As in *Paracuellos* and *Mara*, it was commonplace also in film at the time to liken the Francoist regime to a –perverted and distorted – family, or in the words of Morgan-Tamosunas and Jordan (1998, 39), as “repressive, dysfunctional and anachronistic”.

Together with the Spanish fascist movement La Falange, the Catholic Church defined Francoist ideology. Especially after the Second World War, the Catholic Church gained the upper hand and functioned as the respectable front of the Francoist regime, making it easier for the rest of Europe and the US to justify the fact of a dictatorship as part of Western Europe. Francoist ideology is often referred to as National Catholicism (Cazorla 2000, 262–263). The two comics' distinction between a perverted, cruel and hidden world behind a seemingly respectable front was therefore easy to grasp in 1970s' Spain at least among critics of Francoism. The family as a core value further emphasises the Francoist idea of patriarchy, with the dictator himself as the head of family and the ultimate authority. The comics' distorted representations of family can in this sense be seen as explicit commentaries on the nature of Francoism and its heritage.

Giménez, Sío and their generation were children in the 1940s and 1950s, during part of the harshest repression, and adults in the 1970s, where their generation became important actors in the transition to democracy. In *Paracuellos* and *Mara*, the passing on of the authoritarian values of Francoism to the children, the new generation, questions the validity of the contemporary democratisation process, implying that there was a risk that the children who were brought up during the Francoist years would reproduce Francoist ideology and relationships of power.

At the same time, both comics also open up the possibility of change through information and knowledge. In *Mara* the family's power is first questioned when others (the circus people) gain knowledge about the true identity of the family. The three attacks on the mansion and the family could rather easily be interpreted as the growing opposition to the Francoist regime, starting with the people (here represented by the circus). The Catholic Church, one of Franco's close allies, first protected the regime, and then at least some representatives of the Church started criticizing it and became part of the growing opposition (Fusi and Palafox 1998, 322). In *Mara*, the monks represent this opposition, when they start pulling the crossbeams. The opposition at some point started turning up among the closest allies and in *Mara*, Sita is an example in point. It could be argued that the fact that Franco's parliament abolished itself in 1976 represented such a letdown from within the regime itself.



Paracuellos does not include a similar development, but the fact that *Paracuellos* is (semi)autobiographical means that it functions as a testimony to past repression, bringing it out into the open for possible scrutiny of the present. *Paracuellos* and *Mara* present in this way the 1970s readers with representations of the past, its possible influence on the present and its potential power also for the future.

The comics offer a perspective on the political transition that questions that which became the dominant narrative; i.e. that what took place was a true transition to democracy. They point to the idea that a respectable front, made up of Church and family values – or of a democratic ideal – might hide a continuation of the traditionalist and authoritarian framework of Francoist times. For many years it seemed that the fears of continuity as expressed in the comics, as well as in other contexts, turned out to be unfounded. However, since the past has become a subject for debate since the end of the 1990s, it could be argued that the existence, for example, of mass graves is a sign that the otherwise modern and democratic Spanish society literally continues to include a dark side. The recent focus on opening the graves and on listening to individual stories about repression and violence can be seen as efforts to lay open the dark side, and as part of the process, rewrite the dominant narrative about the Civil War and Francoism. Such rewriting necessarily has consequences for understanding the political transition as the process that definitively reconciled the divisions among Spaniards and pointed toward a bright, democratic future with no need to look back.

THE POLITICAL TRANSITION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF TODAY

The rewriting of the role of the political transition in Spanish history is far from a conflict free process. According to el Partido Popular, the center-right party in government from 2011, there is no reason to start discussing the significance of the political transition. On the contrary, they assert that it will only rip open already healed wounds (*El País* 2007). The center-left party, the social democratic PSOE, was behind the law about historical memory and supports the opening of mass graves and the development of historical archives, but they do not seem to acknowledge the full consequences of this for the understanding of the political transition. This is apparent in the introduction to the memory law that begins with the following:

The spirit of reconciliation and concord, as well as the respect for pluralism and for the peaceful defense of all ideas [...] guided the Transition, [and] made it possible for us to create a Constitution, that of 1978, which turned the Spaniards' willingness to come together into a judicial framework [...]. (BOE 2007)



According to the text, the new legal initiative does not question the role of the transition; it is rather the natural continuation of a process that was started with the political transition.

While the law does not, at least not in words, question the dominant interpretation of the political transition, other contemporary voices have started doing exactly this. One example is Javier Cercas' chronicle, *Anatomía de un instante* from 2009. Another example is a recent comics anthology published in relation to the protests against how democracy functions in Spain, which took place on Plaza del Sol in May 2011 (Plaza, Pinya and Mejan 2011, 11–22; 29–30). The anthology includes several short comics that compare the movement's demands for "true democracy" (*democracia real*) with the political transition, among them a two-page comic by Pepo Pérez (Plaza, Pinya and Mejan 2011, 11–12). Another contribution explicitly argues that the political situation of 2011 is a direct consequence of the political transition, and not in a positive way (Plaza, Pinya and Mejan 2011, 31–32). Iñigo Sáenz de Urugarte argues that because of the vulnerability and the need for stability during the political transition, the citizens resigned and accepted a political model that did not offer any illusions. When they realised this, it had already been institutionalised (ibid.). Even more interestingly, the anthology also includes two short comics by Giménez, originally published during the political transition as part of the albums *España Una...*, *España Grande...*, and *España libre!...* (Plaza, Pinya and Mejan 2011, 29; 92). The first is about how a science fiction community destroys the idol that they had been worshipping. As a priest reacts with horror, another calmly states that the community will have a new idol when the rains return, indicating that they will not lose control over the community, it will only be in the name of another idol – the need for preachers will be the same (Giménez 2011 reprinted from Giménez et al. 1978, 24–25). The parallel to the fear of continuity of Francoist values during the political transition as described in the analysis of *Mara* and *Paracuellos* is clear. As part of the 2011 anthology, it likens the new protests with those of the political transition and represents a similar fear of political and societal corruption. The other reprinted Giménez comic, "Diccionario básico elemental", narrates how workers are exploited and how apparently democratic politicians are corrupt, sending huge amounts of money out of the country (in Plaza, Pinya and Mejan 2011, 92–93 and in Giménez et al. 1978, 24–25). The short story ends with pictures of a demonstration, police violence and a glass that is about to overflow with a dead man's blood. Although somewhat dramatic in the context of 2011, its reprinting nevertheless creates a parallel between protests during the political transition and those of Plaza del Sol in Madrid. In this way, the comics of the political transition not only questioned the democratic process of the 1970s, but are recycled to criticise present day politics; in questioning the dominant narrative of the political transition, they are thereby part of the general debates about memory as part of Spanish society.



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TOWARDS A PANOPTICAL REPRESENTATION OF TIME AND MEMORY: CHRIS WARE, MARCEL PROUST AND HENRI BERGSON'S "PURE DURATION"

By Roberto Bartual

ABSTRACT

The way we conceive time is conditioned by sequential narrative mediums that generally work in a linear manner. Literature and film force the reader or spectator to grasp single units of meaning one at a time according to our dominant conception of duration; that is, a chain of frozen moments that come and go in a continuous succession.

Henri Bergson challenged that idea, arguing that we can only truly perceive time in those exceptional occasions of self-absorption in which we lose the sense of succession, melting past and present in an organic whole. Bergson called this particular conception of time "pure duration", developing a new theory of memory that inspired some of the most important modernist novelists, especially Marcel Proust, who reconstructed his life remembrances following Bergson's theories in *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

In this article I relate both Bergson's theory and Proust's narrative technique to the work of Chris Ware. By conceiving the page as a network of panels that must be grasped simultaneously, Ware challenges the merely sequential narrative technique most comics use, directly addressing Bergson's notion of "pure duration" as a perception of overlapping moments. Ware has shown, as I will argue here, that comics may be the ideal medium for representing time in a non-linear manner because of its panoptic quality: its power to make the reader see past, present and future simultaneously in the panels of a single page.

TOWARDS A PANOPTICAL REPRESENTATION OF TIME AND MEMORY: CHRIS WARE, MARCEL PROUST AND HENRI BERGSON'S "PURE DURATION"

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INTRODUCTION

Time and memory are two of the most recurrent subjects in Chris Ware's work. They are sometimes invoked through a reflection on public history, as is the case of the segments of *Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth* that deal with the 1893 World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago (Ware 2000), or the strips about the origins of graphic narrative in *The Acme Novelty Library Final Report to Shareholders* (Ware 2005). In other cases, time and memory are directly present in the form of personal recollections: *Acme Novelty Library #19* deals with the memories of youth of Rusty Brown's father (Ware 2008), and *Building Stories Part 2* (*Acme Novelty Library #18*) is narrated by a disabled girl who recalls some of the most traumatic experiences of her life (Ware 2007).

The importance of memory in Chris Ware's comics has been acknowledged by many authors, such as Benoît Peeters (2005), who filmed a documentary about his work titling it "Chris Ware: Un art de la mémoire"; Matthias Wivel (2011), who states that the main concern of Ware's comics "is the suggestive description of inner life, of the feeling of time, of memory, of experiencing the world"; and even by Chris Ware himself, who thinks that comics are not images taken from life, but "from memory. You're trying to distill the memory of an experience, not the experience itself" (Heer 2006, 114), linking the whole medium to the act of remembering.

In the article "Past Imperfect: 'Building Stories' and the Art of Memory", Peter R. Sattler (2010, 207) has done a thorough examination of the role of memory in *Building Stories Part 1*, describing Ware's efforts to reproduce memory as an experience. According to Sattler (2010, 210–212), Ware strives to represent different modalities of the act of remembering: "episodic memory", "narrative memory", "observer memory", "field memory" and "experiential memory". The purpose of my article is not to describe and define these types of recollections or modes of remembering, a task Sattler already performs in his article, but rather to relate Chris Ware's work to a general theory of memory, in particular, the one that Henri Bergson developed during the beginning of the 20th century in an attempt to overcome the traditional idea of sequential memory (memory conceived as a linear chain of remembered events), a theory that influenced the whole of modernist literature, reaching its maximum expression with Marcel Proust's novel *À la recherche du temps perdu*. I will argue that Ware uses a general property of comics, the fact that multiple events are shown in a single page at the same time, with the purpose of transcending all the linear notions of the medium submerging the reader into what Bergson (1910, 100) called "pure duration" (*durée pure*). This is an inner feeling of time and memory that he defined as the "ability to grasp time as a whole" (Bergson 1959, 10 ; my translation), melting "past and present in an organic whole"



(Bergson 1910, 100), and standing opposite to the custom of representing time and memory in a quantitative manner by the fixation of meaningful events along a spatial timeline.

SIMULTANEOUS REPRESENTATION AND PURE DURATION

Page composition is one of the most neglected elements of style in comics, in spite of which there are a number of authors who have experimented in this area to a considerable extent. In *Gasoline Alley*, Frank King showed a particular fondness for *raccords*; some of his Sunday pages are an image of a single space (a house, a street, a beach), fragmented by a matrix of panels. Experiments in page layout were not new or rare in American newspapers: Gustave Verbeek's strips were apparently conventional, but if they were turned upside down, the inverted panels would illustrate the second half of the story. Contemporary authors like J. H. Williams, III, Guido Crepax and Will Eisner have also used their page compositions to put to the test a quality that is inherent to comics: the fact that even though the reader needs to decode the panels one by one, the page is always perceived as a single image.

The name of Chris Ware, however, should stand out among these authors. Although Ware's graphic novels always comprise a linear narrative, they are often interrupted by pages with quite unusual layouts, mostly complex patterns of panels connected by arrows that allow us to switch from one sequence to another (fig. 1). Some scholars have used the term "diagram" to refer to these very characteristic compositions (Cates 2010; Samson and Peeters 2010, 115). These diagrams, or diagrammatic compositions, as I prefer to call them here, play a very important role in the narrations they are inserted into, and what is more: they force the readers to break with standard linear panel-processing habits, which, as I will try to argue in this article, can lead to a departure from the concepts of time and memory we have inherited from pre-modernist literature and classic Hollywood film-making.

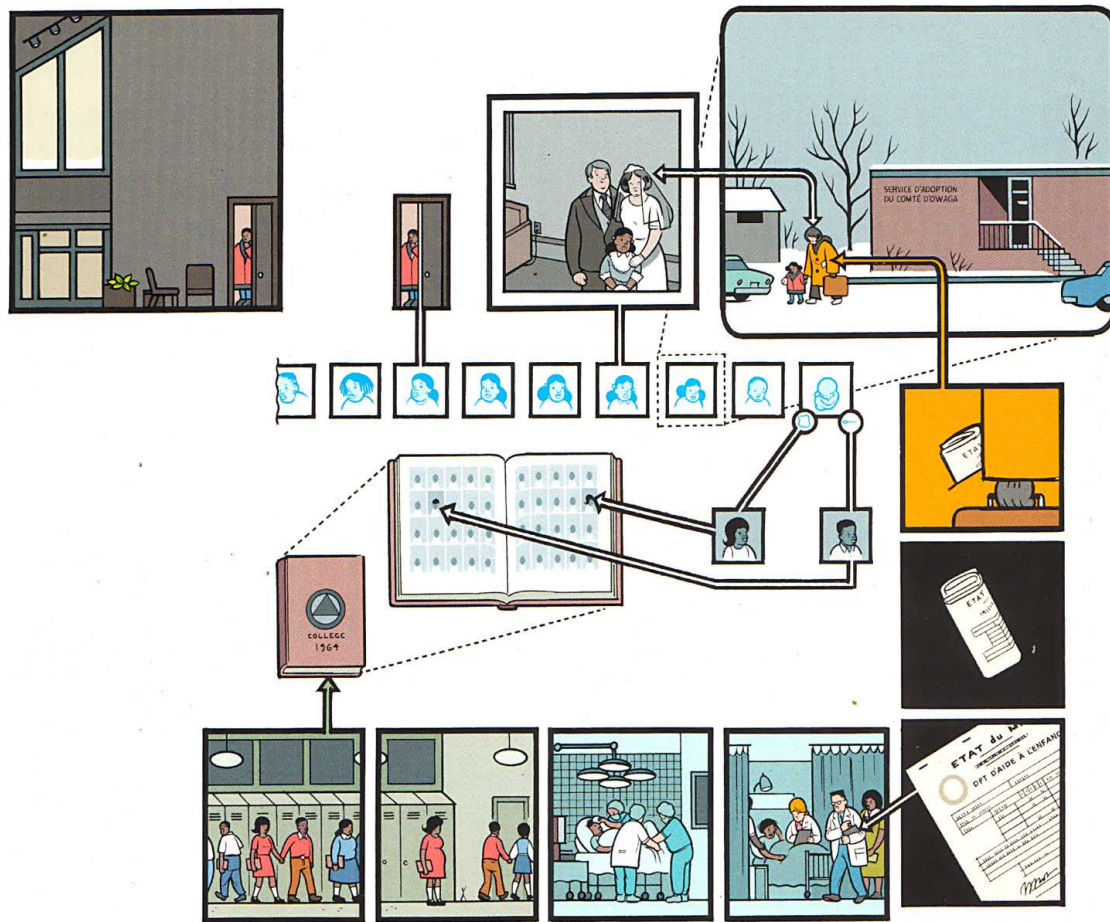


Figure 1. Ware, Chris, *Jimmy Corrigan: the Smartest Kid on Earth*, Pantheon, p. 363. © Chris Ware.

In novels and films, representation of time and memory is constrained by linearity. In a book, words and paragraphs must be read in sequence; in a film, frames are projected in sequence as well. The material characteristics of these media limit the ways events are represented. In a novel, events must be narrated one after another, because it is impossible to read about two of them at the same time. Even in cases like Martin Amis' *Experience*, where we can find two simultaneous narrative lines in the same page, the reader must follow a sequence; in the first place, we must read one of the storylines and then, the other one. Film offers more possibilities in simultaneous representation, because theoretically we are able to watch two images at the same time: unlike literature, cinema is not a strictly sequential medium. There are certainly some experimental films, such as Peter Greenaway's *The Pillow Book* and *The Tulse Luper Suitcases*, or even more conventional ones like Brian De Palma's *The Phantom of Paradise*, where two actions or



sequences of events are shown simultaneously by means of superimposition (Greenaway) or by means of the split-screen technique (De Palma).¹

However, watching a film is not the same experience as viewing a painting or reading the multi-paneled page of a comic. It is very difficult to focus your attention on two scenes at the same time if they are not completely still. Narrative films like *The Pillow Book* or *The Phantom of Paradise* use simultaneous narration only occasionally; a lengthier or more consistent use of this type of narration would eventually make you lose important narrative data, especially if there were dialogue. The data processing problem the audience faces when watching or hearing lengthy audio-visual discourses is well exemplified by Warhol and Morrissey's *Chelsea Girls*. During three and a half hours, this film shows two different scenes projected simultaneously on the screen. The resulting effect is a chaos of voices and actions, although it is still possible to follow the narrative of each scene if you focus your attention on only one of them at the price of discarding the information contained in the other. Of course, *Chelsea Girls* can be enjoyed as a purely cinematic experience, but in order to understand everything that "happens" in the film, it must be watched at least twice. But in spite of occasional experiments with simultaneous projections, according to Henri Bergson, cinema is destined to represent time as a mere succession of fixed frames, "condemned to itemize time image by image, instead of grasping it as a whole" (Bergson 1959, 10; my translation²).

But what is the precise meaning of "grasping the time as whole", the metaphorical expression used by Bergson? In his work *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, he used an example from real life to illustrate how we really perceive time (Bergson 1959, 95). Bergson was working at his desk when he noticed that a clock was striking its bell. He was so absorbed by his work that he was not conscious of the clock when it began to sound. However, he wanted to know what time it was, so he made a retrospective effort to remember and realised that the clock had struck its bell four times before he became totally aware of the sound. He adds this number to the strokes he is hearing now and he reflects:

If, then, I question myself carefully on what has just taken place, I perceive that the first four sounds had struck my ear and even affected my consciousness, but that the sensations produced by each one of them, instead of being set side by side, had melted into one another

¹ The use of the split-screen technique with the purpose of representing simultaneous events was particularly popular during the second half of the sixties and the first of the seventies in movies like Richard Fleischer's *The Boston Strangler* (1968), George Seaton's *Airport* (1970) or Robert Wise's *The Andromeda Strain* (1971). It is, as well, a very common device in newscasts, showing two reporters in a split-screen frame.

² "[...] condamnée à détailler le temps image par image au lieu de le saisir globalement" (Bergson 1959, 10).



in such a way as to give the whole a peculiar quality, to make a kind of musical phrase out of it. (Bergson 1910, 127)

Therefore, time presents itself to the human conscience as an indivisible whole, a fusion of past moments that are intertwined with the present. Bergson's example was directed against the traditional notion that time "presents itself to our conscience as the distinction between a *before* and an *after* in juxtaposition" (Bergson 1959, 92; my translation³) and also against our usual symbolic representations of time in terms of space (the clock sphere, a historic timeline, etc.). He opposes these notions with what he calls "pure duration" or "real duration" (*durée pure* or *durée reel*; Bergson 1959, 92), which relates to the faculty of the human brain to perceive time as a superposition of moments "melting among themselves".

If the human perception of time coincides with Bergson's concept of pure duration, would it not follow that all narrative systems are basically inadequate to represent time and memory? Narrative systems such as literature and cinema (and comics too) are based on the verbal and/or visual discourse, and these discourses are sequential by nature; they are based on the juxtaposition of a *before* and an *after*. As I have already mentioned, Bergson thought that cinema implicitly forced the traditional notion of time upon the discourse because it represents time as a succession of discreet images. However, there are narrative techniques and modes of narration that allow transcendence of that traditional conception of time Bergson criticised, even if they are based on a sequential discourse. In *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Proust used free association of ideas and *achronicity* (the relation of events that cannot be clearly placed in time; Genette 1980, 120) to directly address Bergson's theories about time and memory, as I will argue later.⁴ In *Cinema 2. The time-image*, Gilles Deleuze corrects Bergson's prejudices against cinema referring to film directors and cinematographic movements (Ozu, Godard, Italian neorealism, post-neorealist films like *Viaggio in Italia* or *Blow-Up*) that, by means of "a break in the sensory-motor links" (Deleuze 1989, 167), infuse their images of the present with the past, superposing different moments in a single space. More recent films that Deleuze could not examine in his work, such as Terence Davis' *Distant Voices* or Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*, also refer to achronicity to address Bergson's conception of time and memory.

³ "[...] se présente d'abord à notre conscience comme la distinction d'un 'avant' et d'un 'après' juxtaposés" (Bergson 1959, 92).

⁴ Proust was more than familiar with Bergson's theories. In fact, they were distant relatives: Bergson was married to a cousin of Proust, and Proust acted as his best man at his wedding. They wrote letters to each other with a certain frequency, and one character of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Bergotte, was based on the French philosopher (Leighton 1989).



But what about comics? Although, in principle, they share with cinema the limitation of representing time as a discreet succession of images, they have a quality that, as I will argue next, makes it easier for the comics author to overcome the linear succession of fixed images that visual narratives are usually based in. In comics, the reader can watch a considerable number of events at the same time within the frame of the page. A glance to the page is often enough to relate one image to the others without fear of losing any of the information contained in the discourse. In the words of Art Spiegelman:

A comic strip is made up of units of time placed next to each other so that one sees past and present simultaneously, before decoding the moments that are being depicted in any given box. (Tabachnick 1993, 157)

When we read a comic we are not always aware of the fact that we can perceive different temporal units at the same time, but it has very well argued that when we read a panel, we are being influenced by the contents of the panels that precede and succeed it, and also by the way panels are organised on the page (Peeters 1998, 19–24; Groensteen 2007, 30–31). If we are sometimes unaware of this, it is because the use of the sequence in comics is, more often than not, very conventional. Panels are usually lined in strips, like words in a novel; we fix our gaze in one panel and then jump to the next without paying much attention to the panels we have left behind. However, even in strip form, representation of time in comics is not purely sequential as it is in literature or in non-experimental narrative cinema. This may seem more evident if we compare a quite straightforward film, like Yasujiro Ozu's *Tokyo Story*, with its apparently conventional micro-adaptation to comics by Chris Ware: a three-panel vertical strip for the cover of Ozu's screening programme organised by Cinefamily in the Silent Movie Theatre on Fairfax Avenue, Los Angeles (fig. 2).

Tokyo Story's plot is simple. An elderly couple, who live in a rural area of Japan, visit their children in Tokyo. However, they find themselves neglected by them. The eldest son, a paediatrician, does not have much time for his parents and neither does their daughter, who also has a job and children of her own to take care of. Realising that their offspring have distanced themselves, the couple returns home with a bitter disappointment. A few months later, the wife gets ill and dies. As we see, Chris Ware's adaptation of this plot is extremely minimalistic; he has chosen to represent only three moments of the story: the couple at home, when the wife is still alive; an urban landscape and a railroad, while they are traveling to Tokyo; and a final image of the lonely husband, back at home, after the death of his wife.

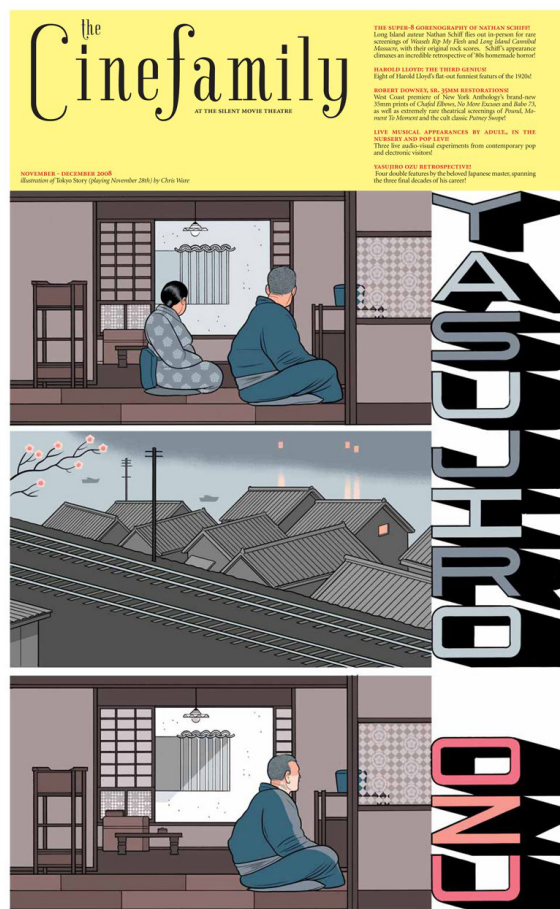


Figure 2. Ware, Chris, cover to the Cinefamily screening program at the Silent Movie Theatre, November–December 2008. © Chris Ware.

Tokyo Story, like many films by Ozu, is a film about time and memory, but in Ware's strip version, the weight of time seems to be greater than in the film for one reason: whereas in movies memory is something virtual, something that can appear or not, in comics, memory is always a factual presence that cannot be avoided. Within a single page, readers are always forced to compare past and present: in this case, the image of the couple and the image of the lonely husband, the good old times and the cheerless present, whereas in the film version, the spectator is not required to confront the past all the time (only when it is directly evoked), leaving him the option of forgetting what he has seen.

The lyricism of this apparently simple page by Chris Ware is based on the fact that when we look at a panel we can also see "the other panels of the page, or even the double page [...]" which inevitably influences the perception of the panel we are looking at" (Peeters 1998, 23; my



translation⁵). This quality of comics, which is as central to the medium as sequentiality, has been given diverse names such “peri-champ” (Peeters 1998, 23), “panopticity” (Samson 2006) or “tabularity” (Fresnault-Deruelle 1976). Ware plays with this quality very often, using the influence of the surrounding panels to show how past times intrude in the present and how that affects human life. We can find a good instance of Ware’s awareness of the panoptical quality of comics in the double page of *ACME Novelty Library*, #18, *Building Stories*, part 2 where its unnamed protagonist gets pregnant (fig. 3). In this ongoing graphic novel, Ware describes the quotidian life of a girl who lost her right leg when she was a teenager, a motive of constant regret and lack of self-confidence for her. But there is another source of anxiety that is very important in the story: she used to date a boyfriend that eventually left her without saying goodbye or giving her an explanation. Of course, she thinks that the reason he left was that he got sick of her physical disability and did not have courage enough to tell her.

The double page that is discussed offers quite an intricate temporal melange. During a visit to her parents’, the protagonist remembers the last time she visited them, a year ago at Christmas. She brought her boyfriend along (fig. 3, upper left corner) to spend the holidays with her. They were both nervous since she never had had a boyfriend before and her parents were very much looking forward to meeting him. They were lying on the bed before dinner and something unexpected happened: he whispered “I love you” in her ear for the first time. The sequence ends with a sad image, a remembrance of the day she arrived home after the amputation of her leg, sitting on the floor with infinite sadness, party balloons floating on the ceiling, only one of them lying on the floor, perhaps a symbol of her missing leg.

Below this panel marked with the number 1, a new sequence begins: in the evening, they all have dinner together and, surprisingly, her boyfriend gets along quite well with her father. She is in heaven, as she states in the captions. Although they have run out of the pill, they make love and she gets pregnant that same night. The moment of conception is marked with # 2 in a panel that is almost a repetition of # 1: same framing, same position of the bed, chest of drawers, etc. The proximity of both panels makes it impossible not to think of her agony as a teen, because whenever we look at panel #2, we can still see panel #1 in the corner of our eye, making the experience of reading similar to the experience of remembering: a superposition of moments. It makes the reader feel that whenever the protagonist tries to remember the night she got

⁵ “Il existe par contre un espace absolument spécifique que l’on pourrait nommer le péri-champ. Constitué par les autres cases de la page et même de la double page, cet espace est à la fois autre et voisin influence inévitablement la perception de la case sur laquelle les yeux se fixent” (Peeters 1998, 23)

pregnant, she always thinks about the day she arrived home after the amputation: for her, the experience of remembering is like looking at these two images together.

But the story goes on. Eleven months later, she repeats the visit without her boyfriend (fig. 3, upper right corner). She arrives in her old room and, when she sees her bed, she cannot find the nerve to sleep on it. Instead of that, she lies on the floor, feeling miserable and lonely. A caption tells us so, but this is not necessary because panel #3 has the same framing as panel #1 and #2, which works as an expressive device; the identical framing makes it obvious that she is thinking about the worst day (#1) and the best day (#2) of her life when she enters the room for the third time. However, there is a fourth visit that takes place some years later. She arrives home again, but she discovers that her mother turned her room into an office. She has to sleep on a couch. The last panel of the page (#4) brings all the past images together within the same space, a superposition of all previous memories.

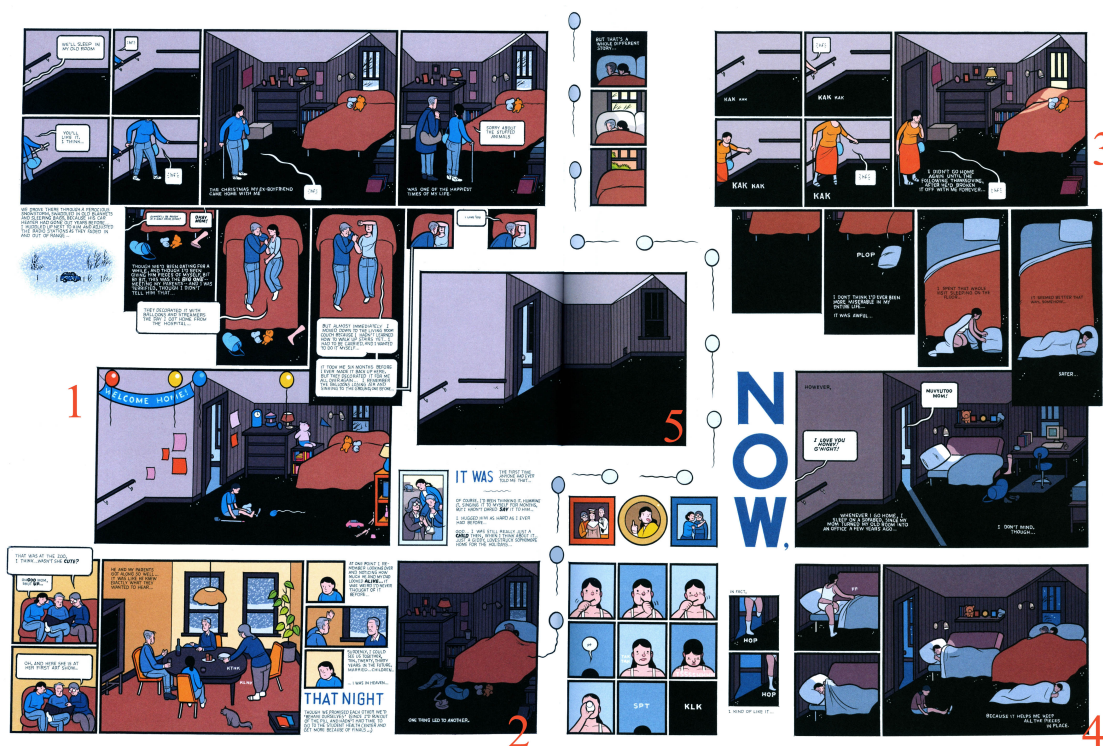


Figure 3. Ware, Chris, *ACME Novelty Library #18*, Drawn & Quarterly, 2007, pp. 33–34. © Chris Ware.

This final superposition of panels #1–3 on #4 constitutes a clever metaphor of memory, that in fact, works as a perfect illustration of Bergson's definition of memory. According to him:

Memory, as we have tried to prove, is not a faculty of putting away recollections in a drawer, or of inscribing them in a register. [...] In reality, the past is preserved by itself, automatically.



fact, the past conserves itself automatically. In its entirety, probably, it follows us at every instant; all that we have felt, thought and willed from our earliest infancy is there, leaning over the present which is about to join it, pressing against the doors of consciousness that would fain leave it [the past] outside. (Bergson 1922, 5)

In Ware's page, the sad memories of its unnamed protagonist "enter" the door of her bedroom, occupying the same space of the present, as it happens in Bergson's definition. Memory is therefore conceptualised as several moments of time in the same space. Even though memory can present events in a sequential manner, when memory is triggered by a geographical space (the house we used to live in, a street we used to walk to go to work, a town we used to spend our holidays in) we see and feel in a simultaneous manner the images we associate to that place, merging all of them together. The conception of memory implicit in figure 3 is very similar to the one Marcel Proust, an author who has been frequently read in the light of Bergson's theories (Jansen 2003, 30), made explicit in his description of Saint Hillaire, Combray's church, in *Du côté de chez Swann*.⁶ Each part of the church dates from a different period: its walls were built in the 11th century, the arcade of the tower-stair is gothic (mid-12th century to 15th century) and the crypt, Merovingian (8th century). Proust reflects upon this:

[The cathedral was] a building which occupied, so to speak, four dimensions of space – the name of the fourth being Time – which had sailed the centuries with that old nave, where bay after bay, chapel after chapel, seemed to stretch across and hold down and conquer not merely a few yards of soil, but each successive epoch from which the whole building had emerged triumphant. (Proust 1957, 74)

Here, Proust is not considering personal memory like Ware, but collective memory and history; the image is, nevertheless, similar: diverse moments of the past, represented by the different areas of the temple, "lean over the present" (to use Bergson's words) coming together in the present space of the church. The experience of the protagonist of *Acme Novelty Library*, #18 when entering her bedroom is not unlike the impressions described by Proust's narrator above, who, by walking into the building, instead of perceiving time as a succession of events, gets a grasp of the past as a whole in a single space, attaining a sudden comprehension of the concept of time Bergson defended. Combray's church, as well as Ware's bedroom, are metaphors of the human mind, which uses the faculty of memory to blend several moments of time in a single space and, in doing so, gives us a sense of continuous and coherent existence.

6 The descriptions of Combray are inspired by the town of Illiers (that changed its name to Illiers-Combray after Proust), and Saint-Hillaire, Combray's church, is also obviously inspired by Saint-Jacques, the church in Illiers.

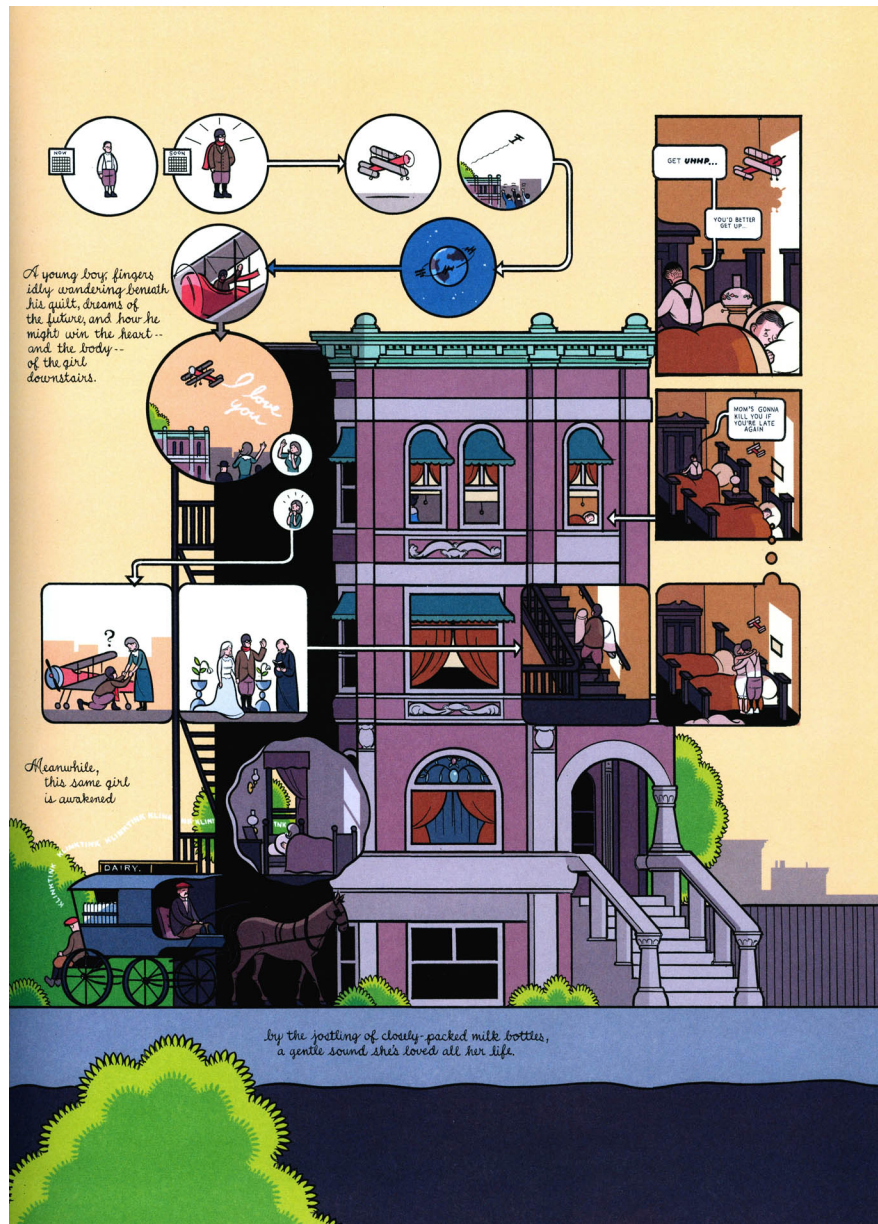


Figure 4. Ware, Chris, *ACME Novelty Library*, #18, Chicago, Drawn & Quarterly, 2007, p. 22. © Chris Ware.

Jacques Samson has pointed out Proust's influence in Chris Ware without detailing which specific points these two authors have in common (Samson 2006). I would say that Proust's main influence is felt when it comes to represent memory as something attached to a geographic and architectural space, especially in some passages of *Building Stories*, part 2 (fig. 4). In the case of the double page analysed above, Ware extends the metaphor of memory to the very essence of the medium: it is the page and not the building that works as the human mind, showing several moments of time simultaneously and organising the images of memory in space. However, if we compare Proust with Ware, we must take notice of an important difference: in spite of Proust's



nostalgic mood, memory always “emerges triumphant” in his work, as his narrator states in the passage above (triumphant in the sense that memory is presented as a conquest of the past, an affluence of rich images of youth triggered by simple, quotidian acts like eating a muffin); whereas Ware’s representations of memory never come across as a conquest of time, since he substitutes detachment for nostalgia, and the operation of remembering always becomes part of a process of emotional decay. When Bergson says that the door of consciousness presses to leave the past outside, he is describing a cerebral mechanism that

[...] is arranged just so as to drive back into the unconscious almost the whole of this past, and to admit beyond the threshold [of consciousness] only that which can cast light on the present situation or further the action now being prepared — in short, only that which can give useful work. (Bergson 1922, 5)

Of course, if that mechanism of repression does indeed exist, most of Ware’s characters suffer from a severe malfunction more often than not. The past images that enter their bedrooms are not an aid for their actions at all, but just the opposite: their sad memories are usually the cause of their vital paralysis, especially in the case of the protagonist of *Acme Novelty Library*, #18, whose mobility impairment is, in fact, both spiritual and physical.

CHRIS WARE’S DIAGRAMMATIC REPRESENTATIONS AND PARALYSIS

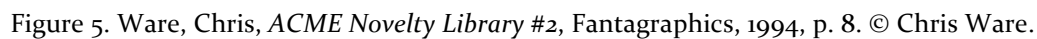
Some of the most remarkable representations of memory in the work of Chris Ware are presented in the form of diagrams, which almost invariably deal with an accumulation of past images that, in some way or another, paralyse the character who remembers. One of Ware’s (1994) most representative memory diagrams can be found in *ACME Novelty Library* # 2 (fig. 5), where a two-headed Quimby the Mouse, remembers his past while his twin Siamese brother is dying in bed. Quimby’s memories are represented in diagrammatic form with arrows that end in five different points: a well near an old house (upper left corner), a wooden hovel far in the horizon, the twin brothers sitting under a tree, a garbage bin (center) and Quimby’s house (upper right corner). We can start reading the diagram from one of these five endpoints going back into the past of the characters. Each object introduces a different memory: the brothers throwing a coin inside the well, killing an ant inside the hovel, taking a picture of themselves near the tree, Quimby hitting his brother in the head with a gas lamp and putting the gas lamp in the garbage bin. There is also a non-narrative sequence: it presents the interior of the house where Quimby spent his youth and some objects contained inside a drawer in his room. Since these five sequences have some intersection points, it is easy to jump from one to another; the well sequence can lead us to the day Quimby threw the coin into the well, or to the drawer where Quimby found that coin. The



drawer, in its turn, leads to a description of its contents, among them a photo, which is the beginning of a new sequence that describes the events that happened the day the photo was taken and the first symptoms of Quimby's brother's illness.

This page constitutes a panoptical representation of memory, like the one in figure 3. Both of them make explicit the common relation the human mind establishes between memories and geographical places, but this page takes into account two properties of memory that are not reflected in figure 3: free association of ideas and chronological ambiguity. Memory does not work in a linear manner, presenting remembrances and places in a chronological order, like the double page of *Acme Novelty Library*, #18 does. When we remember something, one memory leads to the next following a thematic or an emotional link. The diagrammatic form allows Ware to represent these links between memories, landmarks of the spiritual life of his characters, which are more often than not, trivial objects: a coin, a photo, an ant, a broken lamp, a tree, a drawer, etc. A well can become a landmark of memory if you have seen it day after day from your window during a certain period of your life. If after a long time away from home, you return and find the well in the same place, as happens in figure 5, it will suddenly acquire an extraordinary significance because it will become a sign or a reminder of everything that has changed; something permanent, like a lighthouse amidst an ever changing sea guiding you among the memories you associate with that place.

The other essential property of memory Ware takes into account in his diagrams is chronological ambiguity. Memory never works chronologically: since the process of memory is based in free association of ideas, it is frequently difficult to establish if a particular event happened *before* or *after* another. The diagram layout of figure 5 shows evident signs of this chronological ambiguity; many of the sequences are not connected in a linear manner, and consequently their place in the chronological succession of events becomes uncertain. Which memory is older: the killing of the ant or the photographic episode? Some other events, on the other hand, can be dated more easily. The sequence where Quimby's brother coughs in the street must have taken place after the sequence where Quimby takes a photograph of his brother and himself, because Quimby's brother is wearing a white beard in the former and looks younger in the latter. In cases like this, the chronologic order of memory can be reconstructed, but it is always by means of a deductive process. Chronology is not given by the order of the panels or the position of each sequence in the page; chronology is established by the active participation of the reader.



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circular, implying a recursive notion of memory. In other words, memory is not a linear narrative system; it endlessly revises and recycles old materials.

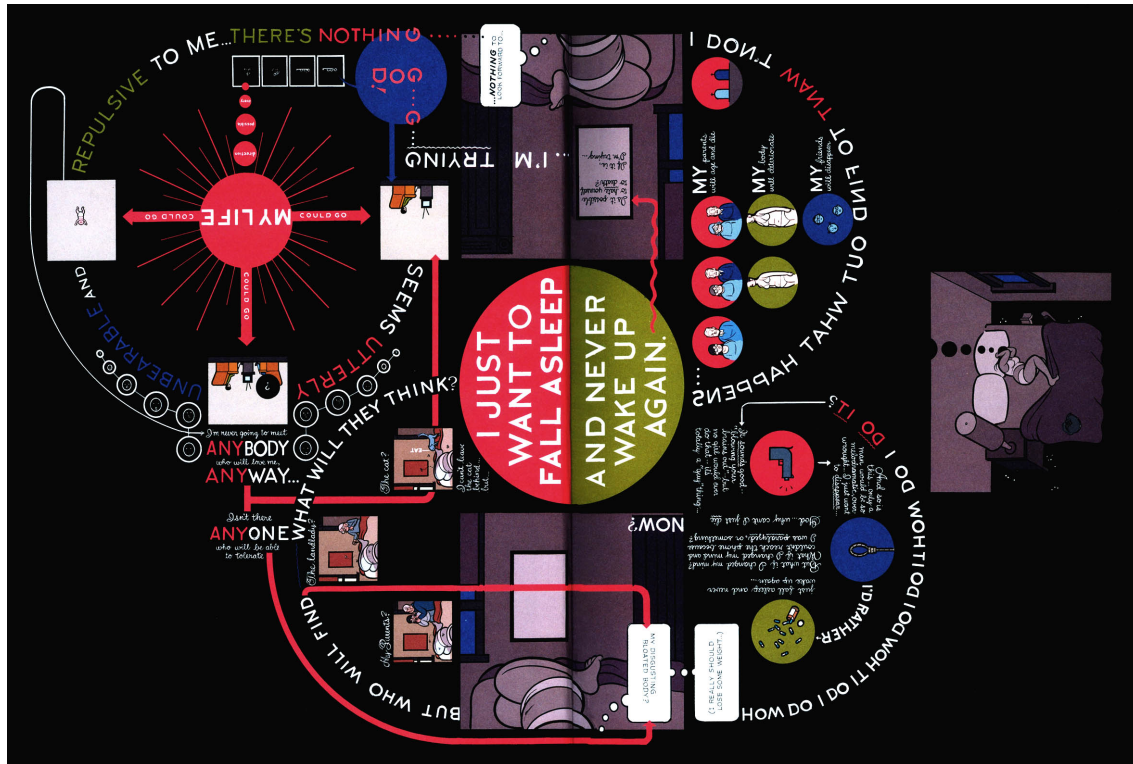


Figure 6. Ware, Chris, *ACME Novelty Library*, #18, *Drawn & Quarterly*, 2007, first end-sheet. © Chris Ware.

Ware's characters are lost in their memories, constantly going back to the same obsessive thoughts. The complexity of their circular thought patterns can be excruciating and probably reaches its climax in the diagram printed on the first end sheet of *ACME Novelty Library*, #18 (fig. 6), where the lonely one-legged protagonist of *Building Stories* gives rein to her suicidal thoughts. This inside cover spread goes beyond the act of remembering, because it mixes memories and imagined events, presenting them as alternatives. The starting premise of this thought diagram is a desire: "I just want to fall asleep, and never wake up again", which leads to several possible trains of thought. In the first place, above and to the right of the starting premise, we find one of her arguments for committing suicide: "I don't want to find out what happens [if I go on living]". She does not want to see her parents, her friends and herself grow old: memories of her body and the faces of her parents emerge in her mind along with future projections of their decaying bodies. In the second place, we can find the opposite train of thought, the reason why she is afraid of killing herself, descending from the central premise: "What will they think?", "But who will find [me]?" She goes on living because she is afraid of hurting the people she loves, as well as her cat. So then, if she *must* live, there are two basic options: either she finds a partner, or she



does not (at the upper left corner of figure 6). If she has to stay alone, there is no point in living; "I'm never going to meet anybody who will love me, anyway...", then an arrow leads back again to the panels where she imagines her dead body with flies hovering around her. Of course, there is also the possibility of meeting somebody. But who would that be? Who will accept her? Who will find her attractive enough? The face of her future partner is hidden by a question mark.

We can spend as much time as we want reading this page, going from one thought to another and then back to the central premise of suicide over and over again. No reading path can lead us out of the page and the same applies for the protagonist: every train of thought she follows takes her back to the same obsessive ideas. It is interesting to note that the diagrammatic patterns Ware uses are almost always circular, not only when they represent memory processes, but also when they represent a mixture of memory, thoughts and projections of the future, as in fig. 6. In Ware's diagrams, memory, thought, imagination and every other mental activity become neurotic processes. Certainly, it has to do with the obsessive character of his protagonists, but also with the fact that Ware uses the page as a metaphor of the human mind, just as Proust used Combray's church. The page is a container of images and thoughts, but we must bear in mind that containers are physical objects that are constrained by their physical limits. The space of the page is not boundless: no matter how big the page is, the thoughts, the sequences and the memories it contains are like fish inside a bowl, they can move, twisting and going in circles endlessly, but they cannot trespass the limits of the bowl.

The page, our head, and our body are limits for our desire of remembering and thinking, for our desire of expansion, and nowhere in the work of Ware is this more evident than in *ACME Novelty Library*, #18. Some of its pages are anatomic "maps", where sequences of panels are linked to several parts of the human body (fig. 7). They are not only graphic metaphors for the obstacles and limitations that a disabled girl like the protagonist of *Building Stories* finds in her life, but also a reflection on the medium of comics. Ware is constantly testing the limits of the medium in an attempt to expand his diagrammatic representations of memory. On the one hand, he has used pages of huge dimensions in *ACME Novelty Library*, #2, #4, #7, #15 and, especially, *Jimmy Corrigan's* dust jacket, where we can read, in its obverse and reverse side, a condensed version of the contents of the graphic novel, a whole human life embodied in a single page (fig. 8). On the other hand, Ware has also tried the inverse operation: reducing the size of the panels in order to prolong his diagrams and sequences over the surface of the book; on the edge of the cover of *The Acme Novelty Library Final Report to Shareholders and Rainy Day Saturday Afternoon Fun Book*⁷ (Ware 2005), we can find a minute strip sequence that summarises the origin and evolution of the

⁷ It collects *ACME Novelty Library* #7 and #15 with additional material.

universe using the smallest physical space we can find in a book, an act which gives graphic expression to Hamlet's bluff: "I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space" (Shakespeare 1998, 39.)

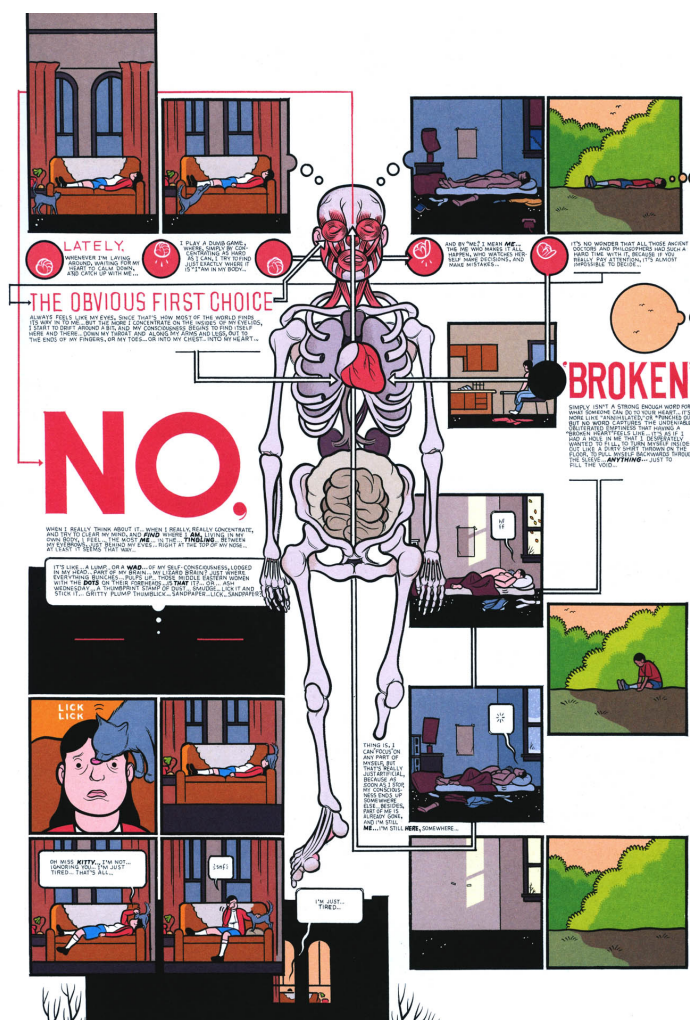


Figure 7. Ware, Chris, *ACME Novelty Library #18*, Drawn & Quarterly, 2007, p. 42. © Chris Ware.

But there is an irony in Ware's attempt of conquering the space of the page. Either by printing books of uncanny dimensions or by inserting diagrams in every available space in the book, Ware's desire for expansion becomes paralysed, like his characters under the weight of memory. No matter how big a page is, the space it offers is never boundless: it limits the expansion of the diagrams forcing them to follow cyclic patterns; the characters often find themselves going back once and again to the same thoughts and past images in a continuous loop that makes them unable to act (fig. 5 and 6). In *Jimmy Corrigan's* dust jacket (fig. 8), for instance, every sequence converges in and starts from the central image of the earth globe; even in an enormous space like this dust jacket, Jimmy's memories are as recursive and obsessive as Quimby's.

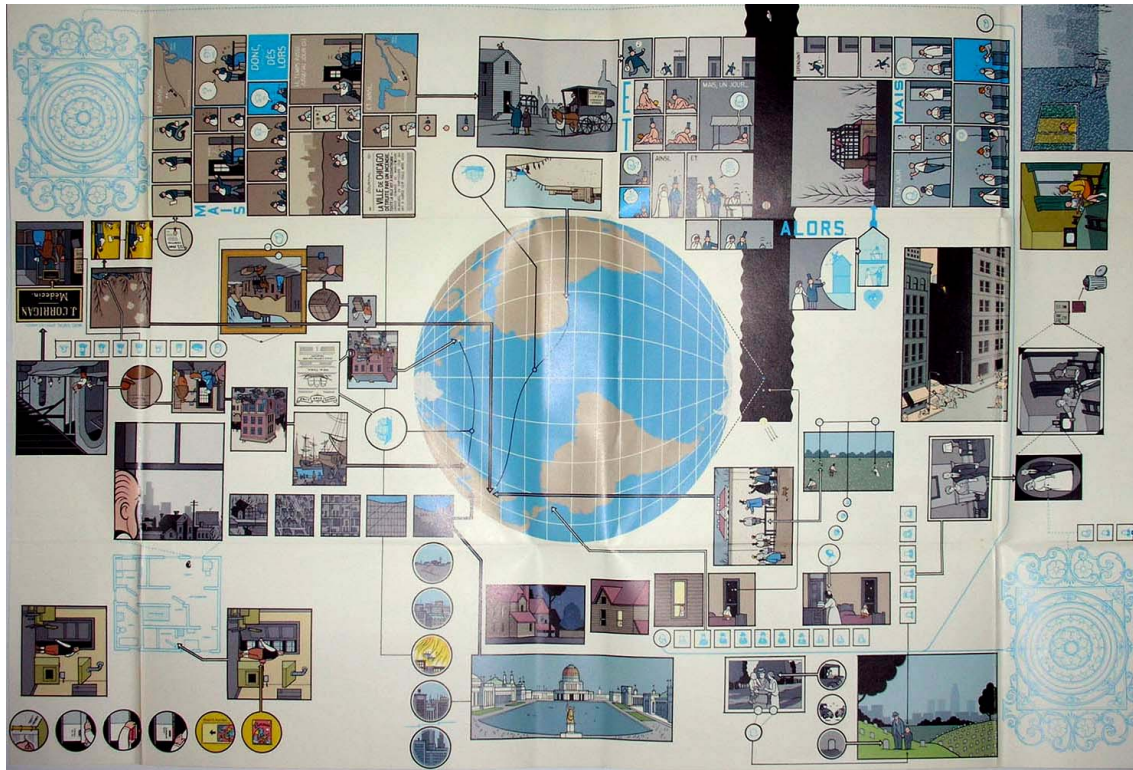


Figure 8. Ware, Chris, *Jimmy Corrigan: the Smartest Kid on Earth*, Pantheon, 2000, dust jacket, reverse. © Chris Ware.

CONCLUSIONS: ADDING A SECOND DIMENSION TO PROUST

Comparing Chris Ware with modernist authors such as James Joyce or William Faulkner has already become commonplace, especially in non-academic comics criticism, without specifying in what particular manner these authors are related (Knut 2010; Thompson 2001; Mautner 2010). This comparison is well grounded, however, if we consider the interest Faulkner and Joyce (and Proust as well) had in the relation between geographical space and memory. In the first chapter of *The Sound and the Fury*, a single space evokes different superposed times in Benji's mind. Like Ware, some modernist writers used free association of ideas as a way to organise narrative materials: whole chapters of Joyce's *Ulysses* are written in a free flowing stream of consciousness, especially the second chapter in which a description of a beach is intertwined with every idea, experience or knowledge, suggested by every object Stephen Dedalus sees on the beach. And, finally, it is common in modernist literature to resort to chronological ambiguity when it comes to connect one memory to another; Gerard Genette, for instance, identified many passages in *À la recherche du temps perdu* where "the order of succession owes nothing to the temporal connection between the events composing it" (Genette 1980, 84). There is a passage at the end of *Sodom et Gomorre* where the itinerary of a train and its sequence of stops gives rise to a narrative



sequence of memories whose order of succession does not correspond with the fact that “the little train goes first to Maineville, then to, Grattevast, and that these stations evoke in the narrator's mind, in that order, anecdotes connected to them” (Genette 1980, 84). With the same disregard towards the actual chronology of the events, Ware arranges Quimby's memories following a free association of ideas, making it very difficult to say which one precedes the other in a time line. This *achronic* mood is completely Proustian, but whereas Proust is forced to present memories in a linear manner, Ware has a second dimension to play with.

Free association of ideas as a sequencing device is characteristic of Proust's narrative voice, as we have already noted. The famous madeleine cake evokes the image of Combray, where the narrator spent his summer holidays. He and his parents used to stay at his aunt's and she gave him a madeleine with his tea whenever he entered her room to visit her (Proust 1957, 63). The image of his ill aunt, who never steps out of her room, makes the narrator remember his aunt's maid, Françoise, who used to entertain her with the latest gossip when the rest of the family went to church (Proust 1957, 66). Françoise makes him think about Combray's church (Proust 1957, 74) and its steeple “inscribing its unforgettable form upon a horizon beneath which Combray had not yet appeared” (Proust 1957, 77), and so on. Although the succession is not chronologic, all these events and anecdotes are presented in a straight line: if we forget what particular image linked one memory to the next, we must go back and re-read that specific passage. Thanks to the panoptical property of comics, Ware is not forced to link the sequences in direct line but does it in a two-dimensional space, making explicit how they are connected and what visual motifs lead from one to another. With a single gaze to the page we can see the muffin, the aunt, the maid, the church, the steeple and every train stop in *Sodome et Gomorre*. Whereas Proust presents the train itinerary from the point of view of the railroad, Ware presents it from a bird's eye view, outlining the routes of the mind on the page, with all their meanders and turns, like on a railroad map.

What Ware proves with this is, that comics seem to have certain advantages when it comes to representing memory and circular thought processes because, as a medium, it can rise above the linear limitations of a purely sequential narration system such as literature. A novel is like Proust's train: it is always going forward and it is difficult for the traveller to perceive anything else but the forward motion. Novels depend exclusively on the verbal discourse, which is forcefully linear: words, sentences and chapters are always apprehended in a straight sequence. Comics, however, add a new dimension: they can give us a broader picture of memory, making explicit its very structure. Comics can represent life very easily as a complex system of possibilities and interconnections.



Memory serves a practical purpose because it is the basis of action, as Bergson stated. Without remembrances of what is good and what is bad, remembrances of how we have reacted to past events or what gives us pleasure and pain, we simply could not be able to act and make decisions. But this function of memory is only one side of the problem. It is true that memory supports our animal survival instinct allowing us to act, but on the other hand (and this is the reason why it is so easy to identify with Ware's characters), memory can also produce a state of paralysis. Nostalgia and neurosis are paralysing mental processes associated to circular "trains of memory". Our faculty of imagination – that is, our desire to relive once and again the same images for the mere pleasure of reliving them, if we are nostalgic, or our desire to relive images because we are afraid of them, if we are neurotic – frequently makes us go against our survival instincts, neutralising our power of action, and becoming dwellers of our own remembrances.

Ware's diagrammatic compositions are one of the most complex and intelligent representations of the pathology of nostalgia and neurosis because they try to represent the structure of these mental processes thanks to a quality unique to comics: panopticity. Many novels and films, like *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Alain Resnais' *Je t'aime, je t'aime*, or more recently, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, by Michel Gondry, have also tried to represent the inner workings of memory and its pathologies. But Chris Ware's diagrams go beyond these titles at least in one aspect: his diagrammatic compositions represent how memory works in the same manner a flux diagram represents how a complex and non-linear social system, such as a factory or a company, works. They give us a complete picture of those pathologies, allowing us to check with just one glance what is the function of every one of its images in relation to the whole, and hopefully help us to understand the complexities of these pathologies better.



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FOCALISATION IN COMICS. FROM THE SPECIFICITIES OF THE MEDIUM TO CONCEPTUAL REFORMULATION

By Kai Mikkonen

ABSTRACT

This article examines the medium-specific means and effects of focalisation in comics. What interests me specifically in this respect is that different internal and external focalisers can appear simultaneously at different points inside and outside the picture frame. The same observation can also be made about other visual narratives like films, but my main emphasis lies in exploring the specific *graphic* means of focalisation and perspectival simultaneity.

In his groundbreaking narratological treatise *Discours du récit*, Gérard Genette undermined the hierarchy of 'showing' and 'telling', prevalent in earlier theories of narration, by claiming that 'showing' in verbal narrative discourse can be only a way of telling. In mixed media visual narratives like comics, however, the processing of narrative information involves paying attention not just to the distinction between *who perceives?* and *who narrates?* but to the interplay between a narrative voice, a verbal focaliser, a centre of visual perception (the visual focaliser), a centre of attention (the visual focalised), and the picture frame. Some recent discussions on perspective and narrative agency in film narrative, as well as developments in focalisation theory in postclassical narratology, provide the theoretical frame for the article.

As my main examples I will use Guibert, Lefevre and Lemercier's nonfictional travel story in Afghanistan, *Le photographie* (2003–2006), Shaun Tan's wordless story about immigration, *The Arrival* (2007), and Jarmo Mäkilä's portrait of the artist in *Taxi van Gogh in korvaan* (2008). All these narratives draw attention to the functions of perspective, and the uses of juxtaposed or simultaneous perspectives. These stories further pose the question of the specificity of their medium for representing perception, by way of incorporating photographs as part of the narrative.

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It goes without saying that all components in mixed media such as comics can suggest a perspective. The processing of narrative information in graphic storytelling involves paying attention not just to the distinction between *who perceives?* and *who narrates?*, which is relevant in much literary narratives, but also to the interplay and changing relations between various elements in different media to propel a common narrative. These include the narrative voice (if there is one, if not, the style is what is called 'mute'), a verbal focaliser (if one exists), a centre of visual perception (or the visual focaliser), a centre of attention (the visual focalised), the picture frame, and other elements such as colour, tone and hue, texture, the style of the graphic line and caricature, or the form of the speech and thought balloons. All these elements can suggest a particular perspective in the story. Furthermore, we also have to take into consideration the multiple ways in which the textual element, by which I mean written language, and visual focalisation interpenetrate each other and thus allow a multiplication of perspectives by way of typography, page and panel setup, and other means.

It is thus highly interesting, but also extremely difficult, to describe how we go about constructing a sense of the prevailing frame of perception in graphic storytelling. By this I mean a kind of global frame of narration that enables us to estimate the meaning and importance of the alternating perspectives at the micro-level of the narrative, be this perspective figural, meaning that it may be tied to a particular character or some unnamed observer, or a non-character bound position. How are we to decide which of the multiple focalisations, visual, verbal, or their combination, need to be seen as more important? Also, how do we attribute expressive signals, both visual and verbal, to a certain agent or refrain from doing so? How do we, for instance, know that some story is told or seen in first person? And, further, when or why do we stop worrying about who sees and perceives, meaning worrying about the identity of the see-er, since the question is not relevant for understanding the story?

Here, I will not try to tackle all these difficult and exciting questions. Instead, my objective is to concentrate on certain medium-specific aspects of focalisation that I think we should consider if we wish to investigate the broader issues of perception, reading and viewing in comics. More precisely, my reflections will concern three important strategies for organising and filtering visual perspectives in graphic storytelling:

1. The nature of the spatially explicit (or determined) point of perception in graphic images
2. The simultaneity of different visual focalisers inside and outside the image frame
3. The complex scale of intermediate (visual) focal points between internal and non-character bound positions



These strategies involve, first and foremost, visual information about observation, involving the point of perception, the simultaneity of visual focalisers, and subjectivity in the field of vision. Due to the limitations of the focus and the space available, I will leave aside some equally important questions about filtering perspectives by verbal means, such as the problem of split verbal focalisation, that is, instances when the same person speaks and narrates simultaneously outside and inside the image.

I intend to discuss these aspects in relation to storytelling in a holistic sense, as part of the interplay between different visual and verbal semiotic resources contributing to the narrative. However, I must make one further note: In what follows, I will be operating with a consciously limited notion of focalisation, restricted to questions of access to perception in strict sensory bounds. What I mean by ‘focalisation’, therefore, is the information the narrative conveys about the spatial and physical point of observation, and the sensory range of that position, including information of the spatiotemporal position of the focalised, that thing which is perceived. I will thus neglect the temporal, cognitive, emotional, ideological or other aspects of focalisation often discussed in relation to this notion in literary and film studies. This is simply to avoid making the term too broad to be useful. I admit, wholeheartedly, that it may not be possible to ever make an absolute distinction between an analysis of the spatial point of observation and, for instance, assumptions about the potential meanings indicated in what is seen. Judgments about internality, externality or omniscience in narrative perspective seem to be always accompanied by presuppositions that concern the limits of knowledge and experience, or the cognitive and epistemic motivation in perception.¹

¹ Silke Horstkotte and Nancy Pedri (2011, 331) argue that “optical perspectivation” in comics is only one dimension within a broader category of focalisation that “includes aspects of cognition, ideological orientation, and judgment”. I agree with them that perceptual focus (or what they call optical perspectivation) is only one aspect of focalisation and that concentration on the perspectival construction of the visual viewpoint is potentially misleading in the multimodal context of comics. Horstkotte and Pedri’s readings of *Persepolis*, *Maus* and *Watchmen* illustrate perfectly the latter point, for instance with regard to the framing devices and symbols that cannot be reduced to optical viewpoints. However, I do not accept their idea of the “futility” of the optical perspectivation approach to focalisation in graphic narrative (Horstkotte and Pedri 2011, 351). On the contrary, my article aims to show that the analysis of perceptual focus and spatially determined viewpoints in graphic images, especially in images (which are the majority in narrative comics) that give an impression of three-dimensional space, can contribute towards a more rigorous visual narratology. The concentration on the specificities of visual focalisation in graphic narratives does not require an absolute, and thus problematic, distinction between perceptual and cognitive dimensions of focalisation. An important choice to make in this respect is how we define the focalisation concept in relation to other concepts such as narration or optical perspectivation/perceptual focus (or François Jost’s [2004] ocularisation). I have discussed some of the difficulties confronted if we try to translate effects of subjective vision and perspectival simultaneity in graphic narratives in terms of verbal narration elsewhere (Mikkonen 2012) and I



THE SPATIALLY DETERMINED POINT OF PERCEPTION IN GRAPHIC IMAGES

In his groundbreaking narratological treatise *Discours du récit*, Gérard Genette undermined the hierarchy of 'showing' and 'telling', prevalent in earlier narrative theories, by claiming that 'showing' in verbal narrative discourse can be only a way of telling, while he also made the influential distinction between 'who speaks?' (the narrator) and 'who sees?' (the focaliser). From this distinction, Genette (1980, 187–189) further derived the well-known triadic typology of the focal possibilities of internal, external, and zero level focalisation, based on the degrees of access to characters' minds in a given narrative. The model is roughly equivalent to Jean Pouillon's (1946, 72–114) earlier division into 'vision with', 'vision from without' and 'vision from behind'. Internal focalisation, whether fixed, variable or multiple in kind, involves a perspective that is limited to some character's mind. External focalisation, in contrast, is spatially limited to the role of the witness, without direct access to characters' psychology. Finally, zero focalisation, which Genette sometimes also calls omniscient focalisation or non-focalised narrative, gives the illusion that the narrative perspective is spatially unlimited.

The concept of 'focalisation' has changed a great deal since these formulations and Genette's basic premises have been brought into question numerous times. For one thing, Genette (1988, 64) himself later redefined the question of 'who sees?' as 'where is the focus of perception?' thus moving the focus on focalisation from some character as a see-er to the problem of the affective, perceptive or conceptual centre orienting the narrative. Such a centre of perception need not be embodied by any character. Mieke Bal's early critical comments on this theory were also highly influential in that she threw out Genette's category of external focalisation altogether, because, as she convincingly showed, it rested on a confusion between 'who sees?' and 'what is seen?'. The category is really based on clues about how something is seen from the outside without mention of inside views – if, that is, focalisation is consistent throughout the story (Bal 1991, 83–84). Focalisation was thus redefined as the relation between the vision (of the agent who sees) and what is 'seen' or perceived (Bal 1997, 142; 146).²

tackle the distinction between perceptual and cognitive focalisation in a forthcoming article (Mikkonen 2013 [forthcoming]).

² My limited notion of focalisation corresponds to a large extent with François Jost's concept of ocularisation that Jost has defined as the representation of the visual viewpoint in films as different from the character's mental point of view, which Jost calls focalisation. Ocularisation describes, more precisely, the relationship between how the camera shows the hero and how the hero supposedly sees things (internal ocularisation that comes in primary and secondary forms) or how the hero is seen from the outside, for instance by other characters (external ocularisation) or by no one in particular (zero ocularisation) (see Jost 2004, 74–75).



Recently, there has been a strong trend in so-called postclassical narratology to emphasise perception as a fundamental cognitive frame in understanding any narrative, while these new theories have again challenged earlier definitions and uses of the focalisation concept. Monika Fludernik has called our attention to the fact that focalisation is to an important extent an interpretive move, a postulation that is determined by the processing of certain textual clues, which in literature are verbal clues, such as deictic and expressive markers. The person who ‘sees’, as she claims, “is the reader, but *à travers* the linguistic medium, and not in terms of *visual perception*” (Fludernik 1996, 345; emphasis in original). For this reason, Fludernik argues that narratology has assigned false rigor to the distinction between ‘who speaks’ and ‘who sees’. Furthermore, Fludernik’s subordination of perceptual parameters in a narrative – or the perceptual metaphor – to the question of the presentation of consciousness may help us to see how it does not always matter who speaks or sees in the narrative (Fludernik 1996, 345–346). What may be much more important is how the reader, or the viewer of visual narratives, gets optimal information about a character’s consciousness, his or her motivations, thoughts and perceptions.

What interests me in graphic storytelling in light of the latest reformulations of the focalisation theory is the emphasis on the cognitive importance of the spatial (and optic) point of perception – even if deemed metaphorical in literary discourse – as well as developments in the analysis of the markers for the point of perception. In the case of graphic storytelling, such markers are necessarily both verbal (metaphorical) and visual (literal) clues. Given the multimodal nature of the medium, recent theoretical discussion of point of view in studies of film narratives can complement these narratological findings, which are mainly based on literary examples. When film theorists compare techniques of focalisation in film and literature they often point out a crucial difference between these media in regard to the epistemic access available into the world that is seen. Katherine Thomson-Jones (2007, 88) has argued that the “placement of the camera in filmmaking makes it impossible not to have an explicit point of view in cinematic narration, whereas literary events need not be described from anywhere in particular”. Other film theorists, similarly, contrast the ‘explicit focalisation’ of films to the metaphorical viewpoints in novel focalisation (see e.g. Deleyto 1996, 222; Gaut 2004, 247–248, on what he calls the intrinsic perspective of the film image).

The basic idea put forward in these approaches is that cinematic images give us a view into a space from some determined perspective. In graphic storytelling, as in film, the one who sees can always remain temporarily ambiguous, and sometimes even permanently so, but the image necessarily reveals a spatial point from which something (the focalised) is perceived. This constraint has various potential consequences for the understanding of the text-image

interaction. One result is that it may not really matter that much to the reader of graphic stories who is seeing, or if 'anyone' is seeing at all, since we know (culturally and intuitively) that images always show things rather than tell them.

There are some possible exceptions to the general rule of the determined, explicit perspective, such as non-perspectival or multi-perspectival images. The so-called non-perspectival images might include pure surface images that refuse the window-effect of a built-in perspective. These would be, for instance, pictures that are mere ornamentation, blank panels or frames that only include writing or speech and thought balloons (as in the "La bande pas dessinée" series), conceptual images, or scientific and technical ('objective') pictures that neutralise the viewer's spatial perspective, such as maps, diagrams, charts, and geometric shapes, even if they may carry important conceptual, ideological or other information (as the maps in Corto Maltese's adventures; fig. 1). However, while such conceptual, symbolic or technical images may be easily incorporated into graphic storytelling, they tend to play limited stylistic and thematic roles. Moreover, in as far as such images are graphic images and part of the graphic composition, their visual form and frame may carry information about a particular (experiential, conceptual, stylistic or other) viewpoint related to other images around them. A conceptual image without any particular spatially identifiable perspective also in no way challenges the need to view the printed page from a particular distance, meaning the convention of reading not too near and not too far from the page. Multi-perspective images, moreover, typically acquire meaning as perspectival distortions in relation to the expectation of a fixed viewpoint.

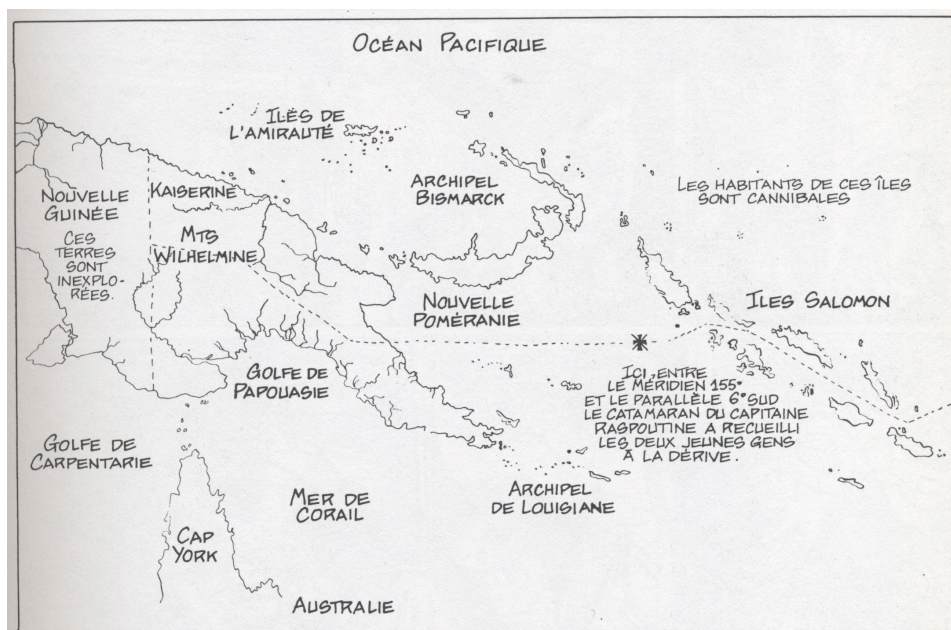


Figure 1. Pratt, Hugo, *Corto Maltese. La ballade de la mer salée*, Casterman, 2000, p.9. © Casterman.



THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FOCALISED AND THE FOLLOWING

Further, if we think of ‘focalisation’ as the relation between the vision and what is perceived, it is almost as important for a graphic story to have someone or something in the image that is focalised from one panel to another. What seems to matter from the point of view of narrativity in comics, in first-person and third-person narratives alike, is that the main character or the narrator, and sometimes other things like a landscape or a building, is shown regularly in the images, i.e. included in the space of the image as the focalised. The showing of some person and his field of vision from one moment to another, being embedded in a setting and engaged in action, is a strong cohesion device that increases narrativity in any sequence of images. Likewise, indicators of the direction, object or field of a person’s gaze can give us a strong sense of perspective into the space of the image. Such indicators may be derived, for example, from a graphic version of the shot/reverse shot technique or by locating a character by the picture frame. Another important category of looking and gazing in comics, and one that carries potential meaning in any visual representation that depicts people, is the direct gaze, meaning participants in pictures who look directly at the viewer. We could recall here the theoretical division into ‘demand’ and ‘offer’ images, as defined by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (1996, 126–127). Realising a visual ‘you’ in this way, the ‘demand’ picture suggests a particular, often genre-specific type of interaction between the picture and the viewer. The technique can also increase narrativity by suggesting a heightened level of involvement for the reader.

One way to explain the importance of the focalised character in graphic storytelling is the *following* function in narration. Rick Altman has argued, in his recent ambitious cross-media narrative theory, that following a character or a group of characters is more essential to the category of narrative than the notion of a point of view or focalisation, which he sees as only applicable to a small portion of texts (Altman 2008, 21–22). By the latter he means narratives mainly in so-called third-person narration, when some character clearly functions as a secondary filter of perceptual information. While Altman’s theory goes far in reducing the question of point of view to instances of internal focalisation, the notion that there is always some following-unit, from single-focus to dual-focus to multiple-focus, that “covers the entire narrative portion of every text treated as narrative” (Altman 2008, 22), is highly suggestive. The suggestion seems particularly compelling in regard to visual narratives or theatre where the narrator’s role is much more restricted than in literary fiction.

I already mentioned that the focalised in graphic storytelling need not be limited to characters, but can be a landscape or a building. Things, places and events are often part of the focalised and may constitute the focus of the story. However, we can safely say that graphic narratives without



characters are more marginal than, for instance, the so-called mute stories that do not use any written words. The permanence of an identifiable character, or a continuing consciousness frame, is a strong cohesion device for most genres of graphic narrative. This becomes evident also when Thierry Groensteen, in his *Système de la bande dessinée*, lists ways to get around the presence of an identifiable character in comics and still tell a story (Groensteen 1999, 19–20). Groensteen includes in these techniques six different cases, even if actually only the first technique involves a radical exclusion of all human figures from the visual level of the story. The other five strategies concern examples where the characters' visual and physical aspects are not clearly seen or are not stable, for instance when the characters keep changing from panel to panel. As is obvious in most of these examples, such fragmented and instable figures are dependent on the viewer's expectation of being able to follow a particular person from one panel to the next. As to his first category, Groensteen includes three examples: "Intérieurs" by Régis Franc (1979), "The Short History of America" by Robert Crumb (1979), and *The Cage* by Martin Vaughn-James (1975), where the only 'engine' of the story seems to be the changing décor and the world of objects and things held in the field of vision. The space that is seen thus functions as both the focalised and the only actor in the scenes. The material world, therefore, appears to control the narrative.

We must make two immediate reservations to the supposed characterlessness of these stories, however. In the case of Franc, the verbal narration creates a strong sense of a continuing consciousness frame for the story as a whole. I mean by this that the interiors that are depicted become meaningful as a narrative since they are part of a presentation of a human mind, the first-person narrator's contemplation, memory and experience. Similarly, in Woodrow Phoenix's *Rumble Strip* (2008), where the only human-like characters are figures from traffic lights and signs, the narrating consciousness creates a sense of continuing narrative. Also, Crumb's short story is not, strictly speaking, without human figures, since small figures are part of the décor in about half of the twelve images. Furthermore, what is important in this case, as is also the case with Martin Vaughn-James's complex graphic work, is that the spaces that are seen are strongly marked by human experientiality, by signs of human embodiment, experience, and society. Therefore, the (near) absence of human figures in these images is again indicative of the expectation of seeing people who inhabit and experience the spaces shown to the reader. The verbal elements in Vaughn-James's *The Cage*, even if they do not directly refer to any speaking or narrating subject, further suggest that some human consciousness is filtering the images (fig. 2). Yet, the case is clearly different from Crumb's and Franc's non-character narratives, or from Phoenix's statements and anecdotes about traffic accidents for that matter, in that we can ask if in reading *The Cage* we are reading a narrative at all. *The Cage*, after all, could be better categorised

as a visual poem, or perhaps a series of tableaux that involve various spatiotemporal conditions only loosely or partially connected with each other as a narrative.

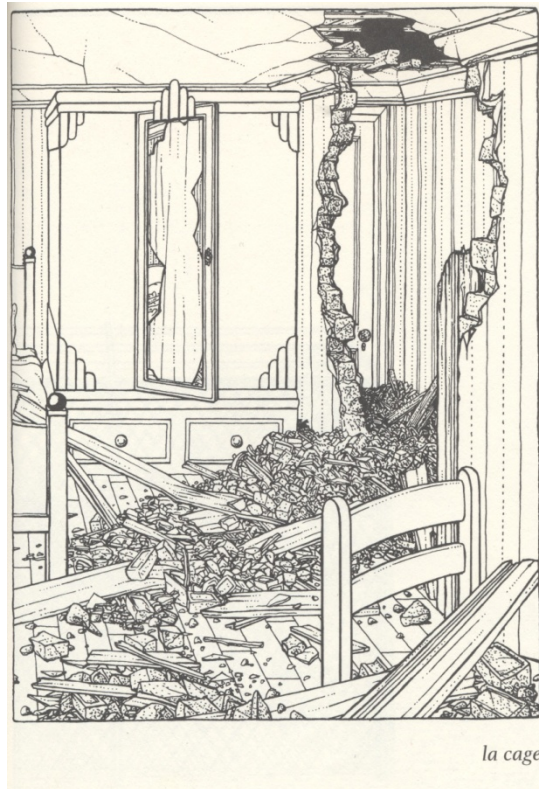


Figure 2. Vaughn-James, Martin, *La Cage (The Cage)*, *Les impressions nouvelles*, 1986. © Martin Vaughn-James.

THE SIMULTANEITY OF DIFFERENT FOCALISERS INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE PICTURE FRAME

As can be easily shown in relation to film narratives, several internal and external focalisers can appear simultaneously at different points inside and outside the image frame. In his analysis of classical films, Celestino Deleyto (1996) has, for instance, analysed the tendency to use external perspective to make the internal gazes understandable. Similar practices and effects are known to us from picture books where, for example, it is almost automatic to combine first-person verbal narrative with uninvolved third-person visual perspective (e.g. Nodelman 1991, 4; Yannicopoulou 2010, 66–67; 73–75).

What interests me specifically in this respect is that while different internal and external focalisers can appear simultaneously at different points inside and outside the picture frame, this capacity can also set up tensions between visual and verbal narration on a global scale (Thomson-



Jones 2007, 88). As to the medium of comics, furthermore, the principle for organising visual perspective makes use of specific *graphic* means and techniques for multiplying focal points and suggesting perspectival simultaneity. The play with the divergence and convergence between visual and verbal perspectives is a common practice also in autobiographical and other kinds of nonfiction graphic narratives (Baetens 2008, 83–84). This is different from literary narratives where the possibility to present characters at the same time from the outside and from within is usually another indicator of the fictionality of the world (see Patron 2009, 169).

To illustrate these points about multiple visual perspectives in graphic storytelling, I will briefly discuss one specific device for multiplying perspective, which is the use of embedded photographs. In the following three examples, the photograph, whether a real photograph incorporated in the story or a graphic rendition of an imaginary photograph, draws attention to the choice of perspective, and the use of juxtaposed perspectives, by multiplying points-of-view. In thus remediating photographs, the stories further pose the question of the specificity of their medium for representing visual experience. Here comics, so to say, think with their own medium by way of the other medium.

The Australian artist Shaun Tan's graphic novel about immigration, the prize-winning *The Arrival* (2006) is a story with wordless images. What I would like to highlight in this wonderful book are some of the functions of the drawn family photo portrait that we see at various moments of the story. The portrait is pictured at the beginning of the narrative and at its end, in addition to when the father of the family is shown looking at it after being separated from his wife and daughter in a strange new land. First of all, it is significant that this image draws our attention to the characters, who gaze directly at us and, further, that this exchange of gazes is seen through the father's eyes. The subjective aspect of the viewpoint is revealed by the father's hand, which we see taking the picture from the shelf and packing it in his luggage (fig. 3). Besides the subjectivity of the gaze, the introduction of the portrait reveals the emotional intensity that accompanies all the later viewings of the image. Another important aspect of the viewing is that it emphasises the impression of a photographic frame, that is, the sense in which all the panel images in Tan's book more or less resemble old black-and-white photographs in sepia tone. The effect is even more prominent in the father's passport photo and the worn-out panel frames in some of the embedded stories, which recall an old photo album.

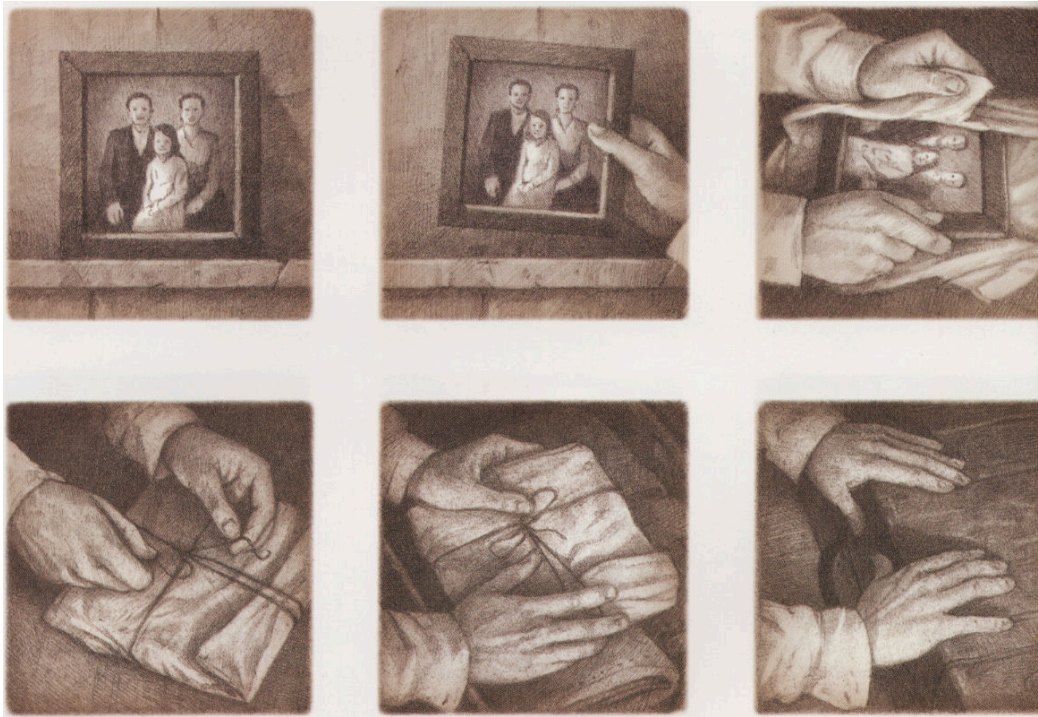


Figure 3. Tan, Shaun, *Là où vont nos pères* (*The Arrival*), Dargaud, 2007. © Shaun Tan.

Jarmo Mäkilä's fictional portrait of an artist, *Taxi van Gogh in korvaan* (A Taxi into Van Gogh's Ear, 2008), the second part in a trilogy by this Finnish painter³, is a complex mixture of childhood memories, hallucinations and a Dantesque journey into the world of the dead. The main character is split into different personalities: a lonely boy, a clown, and an adult man, the artist called Itikka (meaning 'bug' or 'mosquito'), who seem to live in two different realities at the same time, the world of the living and the world of the dead. At one moment in the narrative, the artist is lost somewhere in the forest where he finds a photograph in his pocket depicting himself as a young boy with his parents and a girl he loved (fig. 4). The incorporation of a graphic version of this photograph again multiplies perspectives by introducing subjectivity into the sequence, and underlines the interpenetration of different levels of reality and memory. The effect continues in the next panel, spread over a whole page. Here we are suddenly taken, as if through the main character's gaze which we momentarily share, into another world where we meet the artist drifting in space amidst toys on a plastic rowing boat (fig. 5). The multiplication of perspectives leads us to other levels of experience, contrasted with the verbal focalisation of the story that gradually moves from first- to third-person narration.

³ The first part of the series was the album *Daydreamer* (2002). The third part is still to be published.



Figure 4. Mäkilä, Jarmo, *Taxi van Goghin korvaan*, Itikka, 2008. © Jarmo Mäkilä. [Caption: “It is a photograph of Itikka on the way to celebrate May Day with his mother and father. At the back you can see Satu who chased Itikka throughout his childhood...a love”, my translation]



Figure 5. Mäkilä, Jarmo, *Taxi van Goghin korvaan*, Itikka, 2008. © Jarmo Mäkilä. [Caption: “Here everything is taken by the current. This world has so many secrets passageways that you cannot find in maps.”, my translation]

Finally, Emmanuel Guibert and Frédéric Lemerrier's travel book trilogy *Le photographe* (2003–2006) raises quite explicit questions about media hybridity and the realism of the photograph. It is based on a true story by the French photographer Didier Lefèvre involving a Doctors Without Borders mission in Afghanistan in the late 1980s. Almost every page and spread of this story includes Lefèvre's actual photographs from the dangerous journey, and sometimes a whole page or a double spread is composed just from them. The graphic image and the photograph have pretty much equal weight throughout the book (fig. 6).



Figure 6. Guibert, Emmanuel, Frédéric Lemerrier & Didier Lefèvre, *Le photographe*, tome 1, Dupuis, 2003. © Emmanuel Guibert, Frédéric Lemerrier & Didier Lefèvre.

What interests me here is not so much the remediation of the photograph as part of graphic storytelling – a process by which comics, as in the two previous examples, refashion photographs, break them into a story and thus try to improve upon them – but a more balanced dialogue between the media, where photographs have an impact on the graphic images, and vice versa. On the one hand, the various instant moments that are captured by the camera and included in *Le photographe* are given narrative shape and meaning by the graphic images and the first-person verbal narration that accompany and surround them. The photographer, his medium, and his equipment are literally made part of the graphic narrative. On the other hand, the integration of photographs has an obvious, many-sided impact on the graphic images and their sense of veracity. This is not so much that the photographs give an air of authenticity to the graphic



panels, even if this might happen as well, but that they make the graphic images look more like photographs, like an instant shot.

The effect of this intermedial composition may perhaps appear awkward to eyes not accustomed to it, but once one gets used to the hybrid form, the alternation between the media itself becomes interesting. Neither medium serves as the other's relay or amplifier, but both move the story forward. Sometimes one of them dominates a single page, double spread or an episode. The photographic images are interwoven in the sequential order of the narrative with the graphic panels while the photographs also preserve something of their status as individual images illuminating an instant. We can note that the photos enjoy a certain distance from the verbal 'voice-over' in the narrative boxes. The same is not afforded to the drawn images. While verbal narration often accompanies the photographs, the photographic images never include dialogue, and the verbal narration next to them remains carefully separated, not part of the frame.

The question of veracity is further complicated by the very *graphic* nature of the images involving real objects and people. The reality of the point of observation and the field of vision in graphic storytelling, even if it is nonfiction, is necessarily make-believe. No one ever saw the world as drawn, or as caricature, no matter how detailed or instantaneous the graphic line may be. Naturally, no one sees the world as photographs either. Yet in graphic images and caricatures there is a specific graphic distance, or opacity, between the image and the world that it represents.⁴ As happens here, the tension between the photographs and the drawn images, and their respective perspectives, provides graphic nonfiction with a particular self-critical potential, pointing out that the reality in pictures is always mediated. In *Le photographe*, the hybridity of the visual form and the multiplication of visual points-of-view thus highlight the meaning of the perspective both for narrative organisation and for the sense of reality.

THE SCALE OF (VISUAL) FOCAL POINTS BETWEEN INTERNAL AND NON-CHARACTER BOUND POSITIONS

Drawing on these observations, I would like to underline the fact that graphic storytelling, when it comes to the visual perspective of the narrative, uses an extremely rich and complex scale of potential intermediate positions between the subjective or internal focalisation on the one hand, and clearly non-character bound perspective or external focalisation on the other hand. This

⁴ Philippe Marion (1993, 36) argues that the graphic material in comics is always at least to some extent turned towards itself, that is, towards the graphic trace, thus creating an impression of opacity and resistance to transparency.



scale, however, is not organised in a strict external/internal, or reflector/narrator binary as may be the case in literary narratives. Rather, it reflects varying degrees of congruence and divergence between a character's point-of-view and the reference world of the narrative, as well as the fact that graphic storytelling can use internal and external viewpoints at the same time.

To better describe this multitude of positions classifiable as 'vision with' or 'vision from behind', we can first point out that graphic storytelling has at its disposal most of the cinematic techniques for getting close to a specific subjective point of view, from suggesting a subjective perspective to adopting and wholly assuming it. We can use as our starting point Manfred Jahn's (2003) list of the five most important subjectifying filmic devices.

Firstly, the point of view shot (POV) is the most internal and subjective perspective in film narratives. It assumes the viewer's position; the image frame functions as the representation of someone's gaze and a field of vision. Edward Branigan has defined POV more precisely as "a shot in which the camera assumes the position of a subject in order to show us what the subject sees" (Branigan 1975, 55). Yet, we must also add that the presumed subjectivity of a POV shot always involves an interpretive move and potential ambiguity: How do we know that a certain perspective belongs to someone? And do we understand the object that we see in the same sense as the viewer whose vision we share? The subjective implications of a given subjective viewpoint may remain indeterminate (see Gaut 2004, 244). The technique also cannot be used extensively for obvious reasons, as studies of 'subjective camera' in film or in the picture book medium have shown (Verstraten 2009, 96–97). The main difficulty of a POV image is that the character whose perception we share could never appear in any picture except in a mirror or a reflection.

Secondly, the gaze shot depicts a character looking at something. More precisely, this is an image with external perspective that shows a character looking at something that cannot be seen, thus drawing our attention to perception. Generally speaking, in viewing any visual narrative we keep making inferences from people's looks, gazes, glances, and facial expressions so as to have access to their subjective states, even if these states may remain fairly indeterminate.

Thirdly, the eyeline shot/match cut is a combination of a gaze shot that is followed by a POV shot (the gaze shot cues the audience into interpreting the preceding or the following shot as a POV shot). The use of shot/reverse shot technique is common, for instance, in dialogue scenes.

Fourthly, the over-the-shoulder shot is less direct and less internal (fig. 7). In a film, this means that the camera gets close to, but not fully into the viewing position, or that a camera follows closely the movements of some character. In graphic storytelling, the image is shown from behind a character's back or it can mean a sequence of images closely following a character's movement

(as if the point of viewing were tied to this movement). What matters is the composition of the frame that implies and includes the character's angle and field of vision, wholly or partially.



Figure 7. Ellis, Warren and John Cassaday, *Planetary* #4, WildStorm Productions/DC Comics, 2010. © WildStorm Productions/DC Comics.

Finally, the fifth device is the reaction shot (fig. 8), which shows a character reacting to what s/he has just seen. Similarly to the gaze shot, the reaction shot draws our attention to perception, but does so retrospectively, after the act of viewing or perception. In comics, to know that a panel shows a reaction image requires that the reader makes inferences of a sequence of panels that draw his or her attention to someone's act of perception.



Figure 8. Ellis, Warren and John Cassaday, *Planetary* #4, WildStorm Productions/DC Comics, 2010. WildStorm Productions/DC Comics.

To these techniques we can add some other possible subjectifying techniques or subcategories of the devices just described, amongst them a few that are available to a number of visual media, but

also some that are more or less typical to graphic storytelling. One such device is the placement of the character in the image in such a way that his or her position can subjectify the perspective, for instance when the character's back or side profile is placed by the image frame as to heighten our association with his or her perspective (fig. 9). This is related to the over-the-shoulder image, and may also be accompanied by the eyeline match, but is also different from the over-the-shoulder in that that the reader does not pretend to look over the character's shoulder even if what he or she sees in the image coincides to some extent with what the character sees. In other words, the character's position subjectifies the perspective even if the angle and the position in the image do not pretend to correspond with the character's field of vision. Similarly, when a character looks straight at the reader, as in the above-mentioned 'demand' picture, this can engage us in a make-believe exchange of looks and create an effect of shared subjective perspective. Likewise, the depiction of a character's hands or lower body by the image frame, or his or her image in a mirror, also points out that we share his or her perspective. The drawing of a character's fingers by the panel frame, as in the example above from *The Arrival*, is still another graphic convention that reveals the subjective perspective of the image.



Figure 9. Ellis, Warren and John Cassaday, *Planetary* #4, WildStorm Productions/DC Comics, 2010. WildStorm Productions/DC Comics.

What film studies calls the perception shot is also always possible in comics (Branigan 1984, 81). This is a specific type of POV shot that, as Branigan defines it, reveals the mental condition of someone looking at something. A perception image most often shows difficulty in looking or the viewer's heightened attention, typically a blurred scene that presents the vision of a drunkard or someone who is fatigued. Moreover, the way something like a landscape is visually rendered, by using conventional implications of colours, varying intensities of lines and shading, or patterns of shapes, etc. can suggest to the viewer how one should respond, emotionally or otherwise, to the things that are seen. In this respect, but mainly technically speaking, there may be great differences between different visual media. The tone of a film narrative, for instance, is the result of a wide variety of stylistic choices concerning for instance lighting, cinematography, *mise en*



scène, and the editing of both the image and sound tracks, while graphic storytelling can use means specific to the medium like the panel setup, *mise en page*, the expressive use of the frame shape and size, and the graphic line. Another question is whether films and comics use the above-mentioned subjectifying devices in the same frequency. I believe not but, without the support of extensive corpus analysis, it is impossible to verify whether, for instance, comics on average employ over-the-shoulder images less than films.

All these techniques and devices amount to an extremely complex scale of intermediate positions between clearly subjective and clearly non-character bound perspectives. The fact has some important implications for the processing of information in graphic narratives. One conclusion I draw from this is the central role of ambiguous or doubled focalisation in the medium. This could also be characterised as the predominance of ‘free indirect discourse’ and ‘free indirect perception’. The first category, derived from a linguistic distinction among types of discourse that present thought and speech, entails a reference to both a narrator/author and some character who thinks or speaks in a way that blurs the boundary between the two. In literary narratives, such ambiguity is achieved by grammatical and/or idiomatic means, as well as through intonation, immediate context, and content (see McHale 1978; Mildorf 2008). As this regards written language, however, we have to remember that free indirect discourse is most typically not ‘vision with’ a character, but thinking or speaking with someone in third-person narration (Cohn 1978, 111), and that the possible coincidence of perspectives between a particular character and the narrator/author is based on our analysis of various kinds of verbal clues. The visual perspective is only metaphorical. The category of ‘free indirect perception’, in turn, comes originally from literary narratology where it refers to a kind of ‘narrated perception’, which occurs when the narrative describes or clearly implies the perception of a character. A character’s mind is thus implied as the perceptual angle of some textual passage, but his perceptions are never directly introduced by perception verbs or other linguistic means (Chatman 1978, 204; Mikkonen 2008, 309–312).

In films and graphic storytelling alike, similar effects are commonplace. Charles Forceville, for instance, has suggested – even if he does not make a distinction between free indirect perception and free indirect discourse, or between *vision avec* and *pensée avec* – that studying techniques like character-bound camera movement in terms of free indirect discourse, specifically when such techniques create ambiguity between the external “narrator” and the character, could contribute to a transmedial narratology (Forceville 2002, 133).⁵ Such free indirect instances in films, which take place when audiovisual information is shared between the character and the overall narrative

⁵ I have analysed some of the limitations and creative reformulations of free indirect discourse in graphic storytelling in Mikkonen 2010; 2011.



frame, involve also passages when certain things are distilled through a character's perception by means of colour filters, visual distortions, and other such techniques. In comics, as we have already seen above, there are a number of ways by which the narrative can focus on the character and his or her field of vision and make us systematically look either with him or her or look from behind him or her. These techniques may allow the reader to look deeply into the character's field of vision, even limiting the view to the range of perceptions available to some character, while at the same time retaining the sense of a hypothetical viewing position that does not belong to any character (or narrator). In comics we often watch along with a character, from the character's back or side, or gain insight into his or her point of view through what we see in other ways, but focalisation is not entirely left to the person, or any person.

A second conclusion that I would like to draw from the importance of the vast midway between a supposed non-restriction and an internal restriction of the visual focalisation is the way the intermediate positions may heighten the play of divergence and convergence between words and images. These techniques for instance enable graphic storytelling to fully exploit the distance between a self who speaks, a self who sees, and a self who is seen, or the split between a narrating and an experiencing self. Think of Mäkilä's portrait of the artist where the gradual move from the verbal I-narrator to a He-narrator complicates our understanding of the constant perspectival transformations and embeddings between personal and impersonal viewpoints in this narrative. The shift in narrative voice accompanies the changes in verbal and visual focalisation and thus prompts the reader to adjust his or her understanding of these viewpoints and their relation to the storyworld.

At the very end, I would like to briefly return to Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* where a great quantity of the images imply a strong subjective angle, even if there are relatively few clear cases of a subjective POV image. Consider the end of the episode where the main character, the father of the family in the main story, who at this point is still living alone in the foreign country, is invited to have dinner at the home of another immigrant family. In one large image that spreads over a page we see a scene around the dinner table (fig. 10). The following twelve close-up images consist of a series of eyeline matches, leading us from one subjectified field of vision to another, motivated by the direction of the character's gaze in the previous panel, and at the same time restricted to what these characters may see from their respective positions. This creates the effect of intertwined looks around the table that reveal to the viewer things happening from different angles as if we could alternate between each person's perspectives (fig. 11 and 12). However, while the lonely father's subjective vision is at times strongly implied, especially at the end of the scene when the couple looks directly at him and us, we also see him from the outside. We also observe

the other people from angles that could belong to any of the characters present or to no one in particular.



Figure 10. Tan, Shaun, *Là où vont nos pères (The Arrival)*, Dargaud, 2007. © Shaun Tan.

I do not deem it necessary, therefore, for the understanding of this scene, to postulate one particular subjective viewpoint. Instead, what matters, and what to some extent subjectifies all the views at the dinner, is the restriction of visual information to the immediate views of people around the table. This limitation of the perspective, combining a possible gaze image with a potential POV image, emphasises the joyful atmosphere and the feeling of sympathy among the members of the party. In a sense it does not matter whose perspective we share since, roughly speaking, we share them all.



Figure 11 & 12. Tan, Shaun, *Là où vont nos pères (The Arrival)*, Dargaud, 2007. © Shaun Tan.

We could conceive this situation as a case of what Manfred Jahn (1999, 98) has called *ambient focalisation*. In this technique of perspective-taking, something is perceived from more than one side, or possibly from all sides, while the condition of specific time-place anchoring is relaxed, thus creating an impression of a mobile, summary, and communal point of view. Instead of any one subjective, fully personalised vision, we have access to many potential subjective or communal views. The host couple of the scene also looks out of the space of the picture at someone as if they were inviting the reader, or someone who is supposedly close to them and at the same time close to the reader's viewing position, to participate in the event. Another way of formulating the complex source of focalisation in this scene is what literary narratology sometimes calls the *empty deictic centre*: a position that is clearly on the scene with the characters, but without the possibility or even the need to identify with any of them (Banfield 1987, 272–273; Fludernik 1996, 192–198). Both the techniques of ambient focalisation and the empty deictic centre enable an impression of relativ alternation, and ambiguity, between subjective and communal viewpoints and the impersonal but space-bound perspective.



CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, having focused on three principles for organising and filtering visual or perceptual information in comics (explicit viewpoint, simultaneous perspective, and subjective ambiguity), I would like to make one more meta-theoretical remark about studying focalisation, and the framing of perception, in graphic storytelling.

All focalisation, be it in a literary or visual narrative or somewhere else, is always variable. While proposing his original typologies and distinctions, Genette was fully aware that it is difficult to find pure examples of his three categories: external or zero focalisation, and internally focalised narratives. Yet, such categorisation may be even more challenging when it comes to mixed media narratives like comics since here focalisation, at least on the narrative micro-level, by which I mean the transitions from one episode or scene to the next, is much more varied and combinable. We need, thus, not only a revision of the old narratological concepts, or the invention of new and sharper ones, but the creation of more flexible ones.

The panel frame, the gutter, the *mise en page*, and the graphic line modify the structures and devices of focalisation used in this medium in ways that I have not been able to discuss here. We may also pose the question of the reader's disposition to appreciate the medium-specific play in graphic storytelling with a kind of anthropogenic distance between a narrating and an experiencing self, between a self who speaks, a self who sees, and a self who is seen. This said, many of the devices of focalisation common in graphic stories exceed the boundaries of the medium. The devices and strategies of focalisation in comics are in many ways structurally similar to techniques in other visual narratives like film and picture books, or theatre, where the pictures and the language (or the sound) together suggest a perspective and help to create the story.

I should finally clarify that the aim of my inquiry has not been to identify devices of focalisation in comics with the help of narratological concepts or to simply apply postclassical narratology to principles of graphic storytelling. Rather, it has been to evaluate some of the key functions of these devices and in this way reflect critically back on the system of narratological concepts that I am using. This intervention will hopefully also point to new ways for understanding the construction of global frames of perception in graphic storytelling. My further premise is that the complexities of the point-of-view technique in this medium can suggest possible new methodological insights for narrative theory, originally (mainly) developed for the study of literary narratives.



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BEYOND THE VISUAL: THE ROLES OF THE SENSES IN CONTEMPORARY COMICS

By Ian Hague

ABSTRACT

We tend to think of comics as a visual medium, a means by which stories are told using a sequential arrangement of images and (sometimes) words. In recent years, however, it has become increasingly apparent that this conception of the medium is not as valid as it arguably once was. Comic artists are moving to take advantage of new technologies such as the internet to produce comics that are not only visual in nature, but incorporate elements that stimulate the other senses as well.

Over the course of this article, I discuss examples of such works, and think about the ways in which creators are working with a diverse array of materials and technologies to develop comics that are still primarily visual, but not exclusively so. Additionally, I outline some of the possibilities and implications of the use of the non-visual senses in comics.

I consider each of the non-visual senses in turn, and look at a range of examples of the ways in which creators have taken up the challenge of incorporating sounds, textures, smells and even tastes into their comics to create what are truly multisensory reading experiences. My article does not focus on a particular comic, but rather it takes in a selection of works from various areas, including Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*, Ben Katchor's *Julius Knipl: Real Estate Photographer* radio cartoons and the recently launched UK small press anthology *Solipsistic Pop*.

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INTRODUCTION

“Comics,” writes Scott McCloud in his seminal work *Understanding Comics*, “is a mono-sensory medium. It relies on only *one* of the senses to convey a *world* of experience” (McCloud 1993, 89; emphasis in original). In making this statement, McCloud concisely enunciates an assumption that underpins much of our understanding of the medium of comics, and conditions not only the ways in which we do think about our object, but also the ways in which we are able to think about it. We tend to conceptualise comics as a visual medium or a visual art form, a means by which stories are told using pictures and (sometimes) words. Rather than understanding comics as fully realised physical objects, we view them as very limited, exclusively visual entities. As Roger Sabin points out in an essay on the differences between printed comics and electronic ones: “It’s easy to forget that we read – or rather ‘use’ – comics in a very physical way (we tend to think of them as being two-dimensional, but in fact they exist in three dimensions)” (Sabin 2000, 52). He goes on to discuss some of the properties of printed comics that are overlooked by such a conceptualisation:

They can be bent, rolled-up, roughly opened or whatever. They can be held in different ways: cradled in your hand or gripped at the edges. We know how far into a comic we’ve read because we can feel how many pages are left. There are also smells: of dust, glue and paper. (Sabin 2000, 52)

What Sabin’s comments here emphasise is that the purely visual conception of comics exemplified by McCloud’s remarks is not a wholly valid one. Comics are not images without material substance, they are physical objects that we interact with in physical ways. Whether they involve the manipulation of paper in a printed comic, or the use of a mouse to effect changes in images on a computer screen, we are still required to connect with comics in ways that go beyond the visual.

Indeed, it is often the case that the non-visual elements of a comic’s composition have the greatest effects upon the reader. In 2002, Mel Gibson conducted a series of interviews with comic readers. She noted:

Patterns emerged in interview [sic] regarding memories of comics [...] readers often wanted to check details, testing memory against outside sources. Further discussion included titles and narratives *alongside physical aspects of the texts, including paper quality, feel, scent and size.* (Gibson 2008, 151–152; my emphasis)



While it is true that the narrative elements of the comics as expressed by visual components attained a position of primacy here, what Gibson's research makes obvious are the roles played by the other senses in receiving and formulating the identity of the comic in the reader's mind. Though it would clearly be somewhat foolish to suggest that comics are *not* visual in nature, it is fair to assert that they are not *only* visual in nature. The senses other than sight can have powerful effects upon the reader, communicating information and contributing to the formation of memories and emotions around comics in ways that sight cannot. In recent years, it has become clear that comic creators and publishers are growing increasingly aware of these effects, and are working to incorporate or emphasise them where possible. In this article, I would like to consider some of the ways in which this has been taking place by discussing a selection of examples that I will relate to each of the four non-visual senses in turn, beginning with touch. Although this selection is not intended to be comprehensive, it should give an idea of some of the ways in which the various senses have been taken up by comics creators.

TOUCH

After sight, touch is perhaps the most obvious of the senses to play a role in our conscious understandings of comics. As I mentioned earlier, we almost always interact with comics in some tactile way, whether this is through the turning of a page or the clicking of a mouse. Indeed, so embedded in the comics reading experience is touch that it can seem strange when it is absent or different; reading comics in a gallery or even on a website can at times be unsatisfactory because they seem to lack the "reality" of the tangible object. As Jonathan Rée has remarked, "[. . .] eyesight on its own does not always enable you to distinguish appearances from realities, and when in doubt it is wise to call on the sense of touch to settle the matter" (Rée 1999, 20). At the most basic level, the feel of a comic book in our hands can assure us of its existence, its reality, and perhaps if we are collectors the authenticity of the object in our possession, but there are more complex ways of integrating the sense of touch into our understanding of comics.

In Art Spiegelman and Chip Kidd's *Jack Cole and Plastic Man: Forms Stretched to Their Limits!*, which combines numerous full-page reproductions of Cole's work on Plastic Man with a long biographical essay by Spiegelman that first appeared in *The New Yorker*, designer Kidd masterfully manipulates materiality (Spiegelman and Kidd 2001). "The design approach to me was obvious", he remarks in Gary Spencer Millidge's *Comic Book Design*, "what if Plastic Man had turned himself into a book?" (Millidge 2009, 128). Accordingly, the book features a plastic cover, a huge variety of paper stocks and textures, and rounded corners. The effect of this is to make the reading experience very changeable and inconsistent; the reader is regularly reminded that they are reading a book because their sense of touch is actively drawn into the reading process, and



through this the ‘realities’ upon which Jonathan Rée remarked are continuously brought back to the reader’s attention. We cannot simply look at the comics on the book’s pages and see them as visual narratives because we are also repeatedly told by our sense of touch that this is a book, even that this is a page that is very different from those that came before it or will come after it. This changeability is ideally suited to the character of Plastic Man, whose superpower is an inhuman malleability – he is able to stretch and transform himself into outlandish shapes and sizes – a power that is replicated within the book itself and accessed by the reader through their sense of touch just as much, if not more than, through their sense of sight. This emphatic physicality is further strengthened by the selection of materials employed in the book’s design. While the interior pages are made of paper (albeit with varying levels of thickness, smoothness and glossiness), the book’s covers are plastic; precisely the same material that the protagonist is supposed to resemble. It does not simply represent plastic, it is plastic, and touch here serves to negate the abstraction required of the looking individual by evoking a direct link between the reader and the work that cannot be replicated by any other sense. Plasticity as a concept, and plastic as a material, permeate the entire work and serve to strengthen the expressions of narrative therein without simply restating them. We are presented with a tactile experience that exceeds the visual one without overwhelming it, and in this sense the ostensibly conventional book format transcends the role of a ‘support’ to the visual images; the visual components support the tangible just as much as the material elements support the visual (Groensteen 1998, 108¹).

Where *Jack Cole and Plastic Man* represents a very specific use of material to indicate a particular concept, touch can also serve more generic, though that is not to say less effective, functions as well. As Mel Gibson (2008) has pointed out, the feel of a comic’s pages can be important in establishing its identity in the reader’s mind, and publishers have taken full advantage of this fact, often issuing multiple editions of works, which have varying levels of cultural and economic cache. One need only look to the rise of the term ‘graphic novel’ and the presence of comics in bookshops to see the various ways in which physical format can effect changes in how the medium is treated. The process of modifying a comic’s physical formatting to achieve particular effects has perhaps reached its zenith in the huge, heavy, slipcased hardcover editions of DC Comics’ “Absolute” line, which are printed on a very high quality paper stock, and feature additional paratextual elements that would not be found in less expensive versions of the same title. In producing such items, DC Comics is able to assign to the tactile properties of hardness, heaviness and smoothness a level of economic and cultural prestige that is not afforded to softer,

¹ Groensteen (1998, 108) uses the term “support” in his definition of a comic strip, writing: “I would define a comic strip as a visual narrative, a story conveyed by sequences of graphic, fixed images, together on a single support”.



lighter, rougher works such as individual comics. Furthermore, it indicates that those works which possess the former set of qualities are deserving of preservation and respect, something that the latter qualities do not necessarily imply. Tactile properties of this kind are therefore able to play a part in reflecting and contributing to the canonisation of the works in the format as “classics” of the medium. Without wishing to appear too cynical, I suspect few would argue that *Superman: For Tomorrow*, *Green Lantern: Rebirth* or the first seven issues of *Danger Girl* are of historical or narrative significance equal to *Watchmen* or *Sandman*, but their inclusion in the same (very limited) publishing format does afford them a cultural cache through physical substantiality.

Properties such as hardness can serve other functions as well, and if we turn to another work by Art Spiegelman, *In the Shadow of No Towers*, we can see some of these in use (Spiegelman 2004). *In the Shadow of No Towers* is Spiegelman’s response to the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York on the 11th of September 2001. It comprises a series of ten double page comic spreads that were originally published in the German newspaper *Die Zeit*, and an appendix providing a brief history of American newspaper comics along with a plethora of example pages and strips. What is particularly interesting about the work is its publication format: it is a large board book printed on fairly hard cardboard pages rather than soft paper. Producing the work in this fashion makes a powerful statement because the hardness here serves to suggest permanence and significance. Spiegelman presents the events of 9/11 as physical memories that are literally too hard to efface, just as the black on black silhouette of the World Trade Centre that serves as the book’s cover suggests the ever-present absence of the twin towers themselves. In making the book physically hard, he gives the memories a permanence, which reflects the permanent changes wrought upon American society, and the American psyche, by the relatively brief but significant events of that day. Laura Marks has pointed out that: “To appreciate the materiality of our media pulls us away from a symbolic understanding and toward a shared physical existence” (Marks 2002, xii), and this is particularly evident in *In the Shadow of No Towers*. By making the work unusually inflexible, and indeed unusually large, Spiegelman forces the reader to remain aware of its (often uncomfortable) presence in their hands or upon the table in front of them at all times. There is no escaping this “black box” of encrusted memories and histories; it is something that must be dealt with and thought about, despite the fact that this will not always be a comfortable process. He makes history literally too hard to crumple up and dispose of as we might otherwise do with the seemingly ephemeral newspaper comic strip, which is usually “[. . .] consumed, then discarded [with the newspaper]” (Carrier 2000, 63). At the same time, a sense of fragility does inhere in the format due to the subject matter; just as the twin towers themselves appeared to be



solid, stable constructions that were unlikely to disappear, the book itself is far from indestructible.

SMELL

Touch is not the only means that creators have at their disposal to generate strong memories of and connections to comics. As we saw in Roger Sabin's very vivid description of the comic reading experience, which emphasised the presence of the scents of "dust, glue and paper", smell can also have a particularly potent effect upon the reader. 10,000 times more sensitive than the sense of taste, smell is a powerful means of linking comic and reader, and has a number of possibilities open to it, many of which stem from the strong connections between it and the memory centres of the brain (BBC, n.d.). As Walter Benjamin (2003, 335) succinctly put it: "A scent may drown entire years in the remembered odor it evokes". We have already seen evidence for the importance of smell to those readers interviewed by Mel Gibson, who, when given a comic from their past, smelled it to see if their memories of its aroma were accurate. Smell here serves as a connective thread; rarely obvious but constantly present, and it takes only the merest renewal of a particular scent to induce in the reader (or smeller?) a flood of memories, emotions and experiences drawn together by the two instances of a particular smell.

Yet despite the power that smell could have in comics, it has rarely been used with the conscious intention of conveying meaning and/or narrative, and the reasons for this likely stem from the difficulties inherent in its properties. Essentially, when deciding to employ smell, creators are faced with a choice between two things: control and longevity. On the one hand, the creator may wish to develop a sort of semiotics of smell, a codified system by which smells are deployed in the narrative. For example, they might like to have a particular part of a page smell of roses, or use a scratch and sniff card that the reader would use at particular points in the narrative to give them a sense of the aroma of a particular scene. This type of device has been used in other media in the past. John Waters' 1981 film *Polyester* was produced in 'Odorama', which meant it came with a scratch and sniff card that viewers were told to use at certain points in the film. A similar device was used in the 1986 video game *Leather Goddesses of Phobos*. Scratch and sniff technology has also been employed, albeit in a relatively limited fashion, in comics as well. Early printings of the manga series *Antique Bakery* by Digital Manga Publishing (2005–2006), for example, featured scratch and sniff covers. As comic shop owner Christopher Butcher remarked in an article on the series:



Each volume would have a new scratch-and-sniff, strawberries, chocolate, all meant to entice you into the baking world within. No manga publisher had done something that clever, to that point. It was pretty cool, and got people talking. (Butcher 2010)

As Butcher's comments here mark up, however, scratch and sniff technology in comics is still something of a novelty, and is not featured in many. Furthermore, although controlled, manufactured smells of the types employed in scratch and sniff offer a means by which creators can communicate specific ideas to the readership, they do not last a particularly long time. A scratch and sniff card of the type used in *Polyester* does not long retain the odours with which it has been impregnated, and this can be something of a problem if the smell is made a critical aspect of the work. If the reader must smell something to understand its meaning within the narrative, then this meaning will be lost as soon as the smell fades.

An alternative to the codified system of smell is that of a "natural" smell, i.e. a smell that is naturally emitted by the material of which a particular work is composed. It seems probable that these are the types of smells that were appreciated by the individuals in Mel Gibson's study, and they are largely understood to be incidental. In some instances, relevant smells may be present, as is the case in *Jack Cole and Plastic Man*, and even more so in the later work *Plastic Man: On the Lam!* (Baker 2004), both of whose covers emit rich plastic aromas, but it is probable that this is more by coincidence than design. It seems somewhat unlikely that DC Comics began with the smells and worked from there. Nevertheless, there is evidence to suggest that creators do in some instances seek to select materials for their works that will have the right odour. The recently launched UK small press anthology *Solipsistic Pop* provides an excellent example of such attention to detail. Writing on the publication's website in November 2009, the book's editor and publisher Tom Humberstone remarked:

On the day *Solipsistic Pop* launched [...] people were walking up to offer their support and feedback for the book. The most popular phrase being:

"You got the smell right!"

This was heartening to hear. Believe it or not, I'd gone to a lot of trouble to make sure the book had that just printed aroma. It was part of the reason the anthology existed.

(Humberstone 2009)

For Humberstone, it is not enough to simply produce a comic as a physical object without thinking about why he is doing so. There must be a reason for creating a printed comic rather than, for example, a digital one. In thinking so carefully about the physical characteristics of comics as objects, it is natural that Humberstone came to consider the smell of the printed page



to be a critical element of the work because the smells of “dust, glue and paper” that were noted by Roger Sabin are not currently accessible in the digital environment.

Indeed, it is proving somewhat difficult to develop smell-based technologies that are feasible for the digital era. Haptic technology such as force feedback, touch screens and vibration systems are already in existence and have been used to enable digital comics to have an effect upon the readers’ sense of touch. Perhaps the highest profile example of this type of interaction to date can be found in Robot Comics’ adaptations of Bryan Lee O’Malley’s *Scott Pilgrim* graphic novels for certain mobile phones under the banner of *Scott Pilgrim’s Precious Little App* (O’Malley 2010). The app employs phones’ vibration capabilities, for example when a phone is ringing in the story or when an impact occurs. This provides very different tactile experiences to those I discussed earlier, but it nonetheless represents a conscious and effective means by which digital comics can communicate via touch. Smell, however, has had no such success in the digital arena. Perhaps the most promising piece of technology to have been developed so far is a device called, somewhat dubiously, the iSmell, developed by the company DigiScents at the beginning of the 21st century. The idea was that the iSmell would take digital recipe codes from websites and then use chemicals inside the device to synthesise aromas that would be emitted from a grill on its front. Though an interesting concept, it was ultimately unsuccessful, and in 2006 it was listed by *PC World* magazine as one of the 25 worst tech products of all time (Tynan 2006). Until technology develops further, it seems that smell will remain an aspect of printed comics that cannot be replicated in digital ones.

The importance of this should not be underestimated. The development of the internet as a means of distribution, both legal and illegal, has affected the ways in which creators think about their field. As the internet provides access to a vast quantity of material at a very low cost to the consumer (or even at no cost at all), creators who depend upon the sales of their comics for their livelihoods are being forced to find ways to compete. This means thinking more carefully about the unique and untranslatable elements of the physical form, and striving to produce objects that are desirable as objects, rather than functional as containers for visual components but of only limited aesthetic merit in and of themselves. Where images can be scanned in and distributed as digital files online, the texture of a book’s cover and the smell of its pages cannot be replicated; these elements are therefore becoming increasingly important for creators, and are no longer relegated to secondary positions behind their artwork and writing.²

² I am indebted here to Bryan Talbot, who marked up the significance of this aspect of the internet’s influence at Comica in 2009.



HEARING

If there is one area in which digital comics do perhaps have the upper hand, it is in dealing with the sense of hearing. To return briefly to *Scott Pilgrim's Precious Little App*, in addition to the vibration functions already discussed, the app features music and sound effects on the books' title screens and at relevant points within the stories. Conversely, in printed comics the use of sound as a consciously deployed device for expressing meaning is rare. Although the opening and closing of a book and the turning of pages do generate noises, these tend not to be associated with any narrative elements per se, though it is not inconceivable that a sufficiently inventive creator could develop some means by which the physicality of the object itself could produce meaningful sound. More common is the production of sound through some kind of associated object, whether this is an integral component of the comic or not.

1968–2008... *N'effacez pas nos traces !* by Dominique Grange and Tardi is an album in two senses of the word: firstly it is a *bande dessinée* album, and secondly it is an album on CD (Grange and Tardi 2008). The CD presents a selection of anti-establishment songs composed by Grange in May 1968. Although the words of the songs are in some cases reproduced more or less directly in the book, the music and the voice are not, and there is thus a fairly significant difference between the two elements. Yet they are physically packaged together and it is not difficult to see that the book is somewhat incomplete without the CD. The publisher's website asserts: "A double reading of this book is essential for the reader who has the task of listening to Dominique Grange's songs with their eyes focused on Tardi's pictures"³ (Casterman, n.d.). Such an analysis calls to mind Charles Hatfield's (2005, 32) description of comics as an "art of tensions". He asserts that one of the tensions involved in the reading experience is between the sequence and the surface. "The page", he argues, "functions both as sequence and object, to be seen and read in both linear and nonlinear, holistic fashion" (Hatfield 2005, 32). The sequence is comprised of the individual panels understood as single images apprehended in their reading order. The surface is the page in its entirety; it is not what we read, but what we see. Compare this with the following extract from Ferdinand de Saussure's *A Course in General Linguistics*:

Unlike visual signals [. . .] which can exploit more than one dimension simultaneously, auditory signals have available to them only the linearity of time. The elements of such signals are presented one after another: they form a chain. (de Saussure 1983, 70)

³ Translation by Hayleigh Nash (2010) from original text: "Une double lecture de cet ouvrage s'impose donc au lecteur qui aura la tâche d'écouter les chansons du CD de Dominique Grange le regard rivé sur les dessins de Tardi !"



In 1968–2008...*N'effacez pas nos traces !*, Tardi and Grange manipulate a similar tension to the one described by Hatfield, but this time it is between the printed work as the object or surface, which is solid, permanent and stable, and the music as the sequence, which is fleeting and ephemeral. Aurality here expresses in a temporally deployed fashion that which visuality expresses spatially. As was the case with *Jack Cole and Plastic Man* (see above), the audible experience exceeds the visual one without overwhelming it, and the two elements are able to work in concert to generate a piece that is greater than the sum of its parts.

When the solidity of the surface is entirely absent, however, it becomes questionable whether we are really dealing with comics at all and one comic artist, Ben Katchor, has produced a particularly challenging case. He has created a series, *Julius Knipl: Real Estate Photographer* 'radio cartoons', audio files distributed via the internet in RealPlayer format (Katchor, n.d.). They have no visual content whatsoever, and accordingly would meet resistance from most definitions of comics, but Katchor himself is a renowned creator of comics and the character of Julius Knipl has appeared in numerous comics and collections. This, of course, makes them no more definitely comics than a lunchbox featuring a picture of Superman is. But more significantly, the fact that he has called these works cartoons gives an indication that Katchor considers them to stand alongside his other Julius Knipl productions, and is an implicit indication that they should be included among that canon. Accepting that implication is not an easy task for most comics readers, who remain wedded to the concept of visuality as a defining characteristic of comics, and Bart Beaty has provided some anecdotal evidence to suggest that most of his students are unwilling to make the leap in this case (Beaty 2009). But whether we accept Katchor's audio output as comics or not, they nevertheless represent an exciting development for the field because they challenge us, in a very explicit way, to acknowledge both the presence and the potential of the other senses in the medium.

TASTE

Of all the senses, taste is probably the one that has been least heavily involved in the production of meaning in comics. The most common means by which tastes are incorporated into comics is as part of the paratext; confectionary items, for example, are regularly featured as free gifts in children's comics. Yet these tastes tend to be fairly generic, and although they may be packaged in such a way as to make them relatively congruent with the narratives of the comic, the level of meaning we are capable of gleaning from them is unlikely to be much greater than that which the film-goer derives from the popcorn they eat at the cinema. Nevertheless, if a comic were to be regularly packaged with the same type of food, it is probable that a more specific type of association would develop, and readers may well come to treat the taste of that food in a similar



fashion to the scent or feel of the paper; something that would help to form the comic's identity in their minds and affect their memories of it in later life.

Attempting to incorporate tastes more concertedly into comics is not necessarily a futile act, but doing so would replicate the problem of longevity that came with smells (though it is unlikely that the problem of control would also be present). One simple way to overcome this problem would be to provide recipes, perhaps for the dishes and foodstuffs the characters consume in the comic, which the reader could then prepare and consume themselves. This is the route taken in Julian Hanshaw's *The Art of Pho*, in which the narrative revolves around a Vietnamese noodle soup called pho (Hanshaw 2010). The book includes numerous recipes in comics form, which demonstrate how pho and other dishes should be prepared and served, and in this way the work provides a means by which the reader is able to go beyond the printed images upon the page and access the smells, textures and tastes that are represented by those images. The reader is thereby immersed far more comprehensively within the narrative environment; they are able to engage with it in a multisensory fashion, and the comic thus gives the reader far more than a purely visual understanding might indicate.

CONCLUSIONS

In closing, it is worth drawing attention to that seemingly innocuous word 'more'. What I have attempted to demonstrate over the course of this article is that comics are far more than just a visual medium, and that creators of comics are continually striving to do more with the works they produce. These works are not simply sequences of images; they are physical objects that affect us in ways that far exceed the limitations of the visual field. The feel of a book in our hands and the physical motions involved in turning a page on a computer affect how we perceive the images with which we are interacting and can lend a comforting (or even disconcerting) solidity to what we are reading. The scent of paper can generate memories that persist long after individual words and images have faded from our recollections, and the sounds and tastes that artists are able to incorporate into their works can serve to generate narratives that immerse us comprehensively in fictional (or not so fictional) worlds. As technologies continue to develop, it seems probable that artistic innovation and experimentation will keep pace. It remains to be seen whether any of the works I have discussed here will become classics of the medium, but what they all demonstrate is an increasing awareness of the importance that physical forms play in the reading experience. Rather than simply seeking to find new ways to present their images to the eye, contemporary comic artists are working to create objects that appeal to a number of the senses, if not all of them. In this way, they are pushing the boundaries of the medium and I would



expect that as digitisation continues and physical forms naturally become more diverse, we will see a continuation, and perhaps an amplification, of this trend.

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THE CURRENT STATE OF FRENCH COMICS THEORY

By Thierry Groensteen





Comics theory started to develop in France in the early 1970s, which was the Golden Age of Structuralism. The pioneer scholar was Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle, and his approach was inspired by semiotics. It was commonly believed at the time that concepts forged by linguistics to describe the mechanisms of verbal language could be adapted to other kinds of languages, including visual ones.

The three main ideas discussed by Fresnault-Deruelle in his first works were, firstly, text-image relations, which were supposed to define the very syntax of comics, and secondly, the discontinuity between images. Long before Scott McCloud, Fresnault-Deruelle tried to distinguish different categories of closure. Thirdly, Fresneault-Deruelle pushed forward the idea that the global composition of the page, as modern artists like Philippe Druillet or Guido Crepax were conceiving of it, was fighting against the linearity of the narrative and thus deconstructing comics as a narrative medium.

Twenty years later, in the early 1990s, Fresnault-Deruelle wrote that he had noticed the recent emergence of a new trend in comics scholarship. Referring to the works of Benoît Peeters and myself, he called this new approach “neo-semiotic critic”, noting that we were especially stressing the “poïetic” dimension of comics. What he meant was that we, the new generation of French comics scholars, were putting more emphasis on the creative process and the concrete choices that a comics artist has to make while working.

I will try to briefly summarise the developments of comics theory in France these last fifteen or twenty years, and I will consider successively five ranges of questions:

- the inherent problem in defining comics
- the importance given to the page and the physical dimension of comics
- the poïetic dimension, already mentioned
- the cognitive dimension, which refers to the construction of meaning by the reader
- and finally, the ‘mythopoetic dimension’, which refers to the importance given by comics to certain content

PROBLEMS OF DEFINITION

During the 1970s and 1980s, the usual definitions of comics were challenged by the emergence of new work that broke away from tradition. These ‘avant-garde’ or experimental comics did away with the need for animate characters, the need for a narrative, the need for drawing, even! More



recently, the rediscovery of comics from the 19th century, whose formats and formulas differ from modern comics, and the flood of comics imported from Asia, which follow different cultural codes, have made defining comics all the more complicated. Finally, recent years have seen the rise of a new standard in western production, the *graphic novel*. All these factors have contributed to making the 'definition' of comics more problematic than ever.

In this context, comics scholars have been inclined to reevaluate certain categories of works that had previously been considered marginal. Pantomime strips (wordless, or silent strips) have been particularly easy to rehabilitate and restore within the comics art domain, and many young artists have regenerated this specific form. Some pantomime artists whose work is popular in the French market include Nicolas de Crécy, Lewis Trondheim, Frédéric Coché, Micol, Winchluss, Thomas Ott, Shaun Tan and Blanquet.

In the recent anthology of critical essays edited by Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester, *A Comics Studies Reader* (2008), there is an essay by Robert C. Harvey in which he strongly disagrees with McCloud's definition of comics. For McCloud, comics are made out of "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequences" and they do not have to contain words to be comics, whereas, for Harvey (2008, 25), the "essential characteristic of comics is the incorporation of verbal content".

This controversy about the importance of text is just one example of how difficult it is to come up with a definition of comics that everybody agrees with. Personally, I do not consider the question of a definition of utmost importance, and I have always been cautious while dealing with the subject. But my position is very similar to McCloud's, since the basic criterion, for me, is what I call "iconic solidarity". I believe that comics are made of images that are both separated from each other and over-determined by their coexistence *in praesentia*. The reader can see several images sharing the same space (the page or the double-spread); plastic and semantic relations between these images are displayed, and it is these relations that make comics into a *text*.

My friends Thierry Smolderen and Harry Morgan refuse the idea of an immanent and over-rigid definition that would confine the specificity of comics. They both hold, with some nuances, a theoretical position grounded in the idea of relativity. It can be summarised as follows: *throughout history and civilisations, there have been historic states of comics art, which are equivalent from the theoretical point of view. The current form of the medium is just the most recent one, and one should not give it a greater importance or make it into an autonomous form of art.*

According to Smolderen, comics is a complex object, at once real and imaginary, technical and artistic, and it is an object that has continuously undergone transformations. Every "actor"



implied in the field (historian, scholar, artist, writer, publisher, censor, adult reader or child) has its own definition of what comics are, even if this definition is not explicit and can only be inferred by the relation this person has built with comics, the way he uses and handles them.¹ Each of these definitions is equally valuable – it is interesting to analyse them all and to establish a cartography of definitions.

Morgan denounces the:

evolutionist error, of describing the history of the medium as a series of conquests and improvements, and the teleological error, frequently associated with the first one, of describing the evolution of the medium in a retrospective way, as a continuous progress towards a current form assumed to be perfect. Ancient or exotic forms of sequential art were perfect and fully accomplished from the point of view of their authors and users. (Morgan 2003, 151)

In 1845, Rodolphe Töpffer was already positioning his picture stories (*histoires en estampes*) as another form of literature. Harry Morgan makes this approach his own motto and speaks of “*les littératures dessinées*”, drawn literatures, in the plural (see Morgan 2003; 2008). Comics are only a subset of this vast domain, together with satirical etchings, popular imagery and cartoons. The very notion of literature refers, of course, to the idea of the book and the print – or its modern substitutes, the computer screen or the e-book.

THE PAGE LAYOUT

French theory is characterised by the attention given to the page as a physical, graphic and narrative unit. For all of us French scholars, the page is the reference unit of the comics language. This is an important difference with Scott McCloud’s approach, for instance. In *Understanding Comics*, McCloud examines very carefully and pertinently panel-to-panel relations, but without ever having consideration for the complete page.

All of us have adopted the term and concept introduced by Henri Vanlier at the Cerisy Conference in 1987 for the comics page: ‘*multicadre*’, a multiframe. The relations that the artist displays between the panels are of utmost importance, from the geometric as well as from the semantic point of view. We pay specific attention to his choices, regarding the shapes, surfaces and positions of the respective frames.

¹ I quote from my correspondence with Smolderen.



I suppose that even for an American scholar, it is quite clear that Winsor McCay, Jack Kirby and Chris Ware, to name just these three major artists, have very different conceptions of the page, and therefore it is strange that the question of page layout has not been raised as a major issue in comics theory.

As most of you probably know already, Benoît Peeters has proposed a typology, a model opposing four different conceptions of the page, which he called *conventional*, *decorative*, *rhetorical* and *productive*. I discuss these categories in my *The System of Comics* (Groensteen 2007, 93–95), because it appears to me that, in practice, the identification of these four categories encounters some difficulties, since quite a lot of pages fall into several categories at once. In his latest book, *Ecrire l'image*, Peeters (2009) agrees with my criticism, but nevertheless believes that his model, because of its simplicity, keeps a certain pedagogical value – which is absolutely true.

My own opinion is that, to describe the layout of a comics page, one has to start by answering some simple questions: firstly, is the layout regular (with frames of a strictly constant format) or irregular, and secondly, is it discrete or ostentatious, spectacular in some way or another? For a more precise description, you have to examine more specific phenomenon, which do not necessarily affect the globality of the page. This could include the suppression of a frame, thickness and regularity of inter-iconic space, the recourse to an insert, location of speech balloons, the number of strips and the regularity of their height, the number of panels, which define the denseness of the page, etc. None of these criteria is neutral in respect to our appreciation of the layout. They are all part of what I have named the ‘spatio-topical system’. *Spatio-* refers to the space, *topical* comes from the greek *topos*, which means place. (I realise that this terminology can be confusing for English readers because *topical* has another meaning in English, whereas the word ‘topique’ doesn’t exist in French and has been created by me for the purpose of my demonstration.) In my view, space and place must be considered separately, although they are connected. A panel has a certain shape and surface, but it is also located at a given place on the page and in the book, and these placements matter. Spatio-topical parameters open a choice of possibilities for the artist, but also set certain rules or constraints.

In his most recent works, Thierry Smolderen has studied the history of speech balloons (Smolderen 2006) and the various and competing conceptions of the page layout in comics from the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries (Smolderen 2007). With these in-depth studies of a technical or an aesthetical problematic, he was able to untangle the mixture of cultural, ideological and symbolic determinations at given periods. Therefore the solutions that we usually see as belonging to a certain artist’s credit appear like responses to new problems or like ‘leading metaphors’ of a medium that is in constant regeneration.



THE POÏETIC DIMENSION

As I said earlier, most of us French scholars try to take into consideration the creative process, the very action of conceiving a comic, the intellectual, technical and artistic aspects of the craft.

Benoît Peeters has emphasised the difference between the work of a single creator who both writes and draws his own comic (what we call “un auteur complet”), and the collaboration between a scriptwriter and an artist, each of them a professional in their own domain. For Peeters, the complete author has the privilege and the “irreplaceable chance” of inventing his narrative while working on the page, because from the very beginning this narrative can take the form of a comic. “Text and image are not two separate moments of the elaboration process, they are born simultaneously, the hand of the creator moving from one to the other without even clearly noticing it”.

Peeters illustrates this by a few examples borrowed from Rodolphe Töpffer and Hergé. Töpffer conceived the story of *Mr Crépin* while looking at a profile he had been sketching without any specific purpose; the doodle inspired him to create an entire graphic novel. In the unfinished *Tintin et l’Alph-Art*, Tintin visits an art gallery and knocks at the door of the office where the book-keeper is working. In three panels, we can see how this “Monsieur Sauterne” transforms into a woman, “Madame Laijot”, and the scene takes an unexpected turn: because of her sour-tempered and acrimonious personality, Hergé imagines that this woman can do nothing but complain about her job: “I have been working like a slave for 25 years...”, etc.

For Peeters (1988; see also 1998, fifth chapter), these instantaneous exchanges between text and image constitute, for the creators who work in collaboration, something like a lost Paradise. They can only be nostalgic for this privilege of the complete author. Being himself a scriptwriter who has worked with François Schuiten for almost 30 years, Peeters credits his friend and colleague as co-inventor of the story, since they had long discussions about the themes, the characters, and the situations. The specific role of Peeters is to give the narrative its final form and structure, and to write dialogues. He insists that the scriptwriter has to be in the service of the artist. For him, the definition of a good script is that it proposes a strong “drawing machine”.

I make a digression to point out the fact that this opposition between complete authors and professional writers or artists structures the profession in France in a very remarkable way. If you look at catalogs of independent or alternative publishers, you will find that 95% of the books are made by single authors, whereas big publishers, on the contrary, encourage collaborations and have writers attached to their company who work simultaneously with a vast number of artists.



Smolderen's opinion is very much like Peeters' in his development of his own theory of what he terms 'stereo-réalism' (Smolderen 1988). *Stereo-réalism* is the name given to a certain number of techniques in story-inventing and scriptwriting inspired by the ambition of creating fiction that would be "turned towards image" ("*fiction orientée image*"). Such fiction does not address the linguistic capacities of the reader but tries to activate mental faculties that trigger visual imagery. The techniques Smolderen discusses are concerned with actions, objects, places, movements and characters.

His theory is based on scientific works about cognition, such as Harry Jerison's essay *Evolution of the Brain and Intelligence* (1973) and Howard Gardner's *Frames of Mind* (1983). What makes his approach so original is that he applies this scientific knowledge to the specific process of artistic creativity. So far, the theory of "stereo-realism" has only been outlined in a few not-too-recent articles, but it should be fully developed in Smolderen's forthcoming essay to be published by Les Impressions Nouvelles.

Another theory I'd like to refer to is the one Philippe Marion introduced in his Ph. D. thesis at the Belgian University of Louvain-la-Neuve in 1991 (a work that was published two years later under the title *Traces en cases*; see Marion 1993). Marion discusses the problem of graphic style as the individual expression of an artist. He is interested in the *trace* left in the drawings by the artist (or, in Marion's own terminology, the "enunciator"), a phenomenon for which he invents a neologism, namely the concept of *graphiation*. He tries to demonstrate that the emotional and empathic response of a reader towards a comic is founded on this graphic trace expressing the subjectivity of the artist. He believes that in a drawing, we have to distinguish between two different dimensions: the monstration (the act of showing, representing something – which is the transitive dimension) and the graphiation, turned towards the graphic trace (the reflexive dimension).

For Marion, our passion for comics is explained by the memory of our own experiences as a child. The reader is a 'graphiateur' who ignores himself. When we read a comic and we perceive the graphic trace of a specific artist, we are sent back to the traces we produced ourselves in our childhood and to a given psychic context. Through the reactivation of these memories – even if it is a subconscious phenomenon – we identify with the artist. Marion's theory – summarised, defended and much praised by Jan Baetens (2001) in the collection *The Language of Comics* – is clearly psychoanalytical.



THE COGNITIVE DIMENSION

By ‘cognitive dimension’, I refer to the decoding of a comic by the reader, the process of production – or reconstruction – of meaning in the reader’s mind. With your permission, I will deal here only with my own work.

Science tells us little about how the human brain reads a sequence of images. Several scholars working in the fields of linguistics or classical semiotics claim that, in order to understand an image, our brain has to translate its message into words. The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze agreed with this idea of the necessary ‘mediation’ by verbal language. However, this has never been proven, and in my opinion it is only a matter of faith. My own intuition, reflection and experience as a reader have led me to other conclusions.

In my book *The System of Comics*, I write that an image is not necessarily polysemic. This is especially the case when it is a drawing, an artefact where every line is the product of the artist’s will, whose purpose is to express something; and more so when the image does not stand alone but is part of a sequence. The semantic relations between an image and its neighbors anchor the sequence in but one specific meaning. Moreover, I underline the fact that, in most cases, comics artists are not using just any kind of drawing, but what I call a *narrative drawing*. One of the characteristics of narrative drawing is that it “obeys an imperative of optimal legibility. It uses different parameters of the image (framing, composition dynamics, color placement, etc.) in a manner that mutually and concurrently reinforces them to the production of a unique effect” (Groensteen 2007, 162).

So, most of the time, drawings in a comic have a way of communicating their message directly and do not need the mediation of the language (I do not speak here of the additional functions of speech balloons, but of the way the intrinsic message of the drawing is decoded). Nevertheless, it is true that an image can be considered an *utterable* which means that it can be translated, paraphrased in the language of words. Apart from being an utterable, it is also a *descriptable* and an *interpretable* (Groensteen 2007, 107). The description of the image, though, is never fully accomplished by the reader, because he attaches priority to the chain of events, the dynamic of the story. A full description would suppose that the reader is more attentive and establishes an inventory of information contained in the panel, not to mention the fact that the specific style of the artist must also be considered (Groensteen 2007, 121–126).

I am weak enough to believe that I have been able to somewhat clarify how the meaning of a comic is constructed by the reader by bringing to light the phenomenon of *retroactive determination*. Sometimes, the meaning of the panel is determined by the panel that follows,



because it allows the reader to verify if his first interpretation was correct, or even it gives the key *a posteriori* of a complete sequence.

This is why I was led to the conclusion that the construction of meaning is staged, especially when we take into consideration a sophisticated comic. There are different *planes of meaning*: my understanding of a panel at first glance is always to be verified and adjusted on the basis of the information given by the preceding and following panels, which constitute a frame of interpretation, but also on the basis of the complete sequence that allows new inferences and leads to the production of a global meaning.

THE MYTHOPOETIC DIMENSION

Mythopoeia is the name given to the creation of myths in literary works. In a broader sense, when I speak here of the ‘mythopoetic dimension’ of comics, I refer to the fact that comics, as an art form, tends to generate specific kinds of content. For instance, superheroes and funny animals are two categories of characters that are especially favored – although none is the exclusive preserve of comics: superheroes have become very popular in the movies in recent years, and funny animals have always been a favorite in animated cartoons.

Philippe Marion and Harry Morgan have both worked on the problem of this specific correlation between the art form and the narrative content: in how far can we say that the art form determines or generates the themes and structures of the stories being told.

Marion introduced in 1991 the concept of mediageny (*médiagenie*). When you say that someone is photogenic, it means that their face is treated kindly by the photographic images taken of them. Similarly, a specific theme, topic or character, will be mediagenic in relation to a given medium if the medium reserves it a preferential treatment. Later, Marion developed a symmetric concept, namely that of mediativity (*médiativité*). He defines it as “the intrinsic and ontological capacity of representation proved by a given medium”, its “specific potential” (Marion 1997).

I have criticised these two notions in an article published by the electronic journal *Belphegor*, devoted to the study of popular literature and mediatic culture (Groensteen 2005). In my opinion, mediageny and mediativity are properties that are almost impossible to measure; moreover, in the best case they can be described as relative, which means that they admit various degrees but no absolute form.

One could think that there is something such as a ‘degree zero’ of mediativity, which would refer to what the medium is unable to express, what it excludes. But I believe that there is no such



exclusion. I agree with Christian Metz, the famous researcher in the theory of cinema: from an aesthetical and even an ethical point of view, one must recognise that every medium is capable of expressing anything (Metz 1984, 52), but uses different means to achieve its narrative ambition, and sometimes waits for the right artists to enlarge the scope of its achievements.

You certainly know the famous conclusion of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractacus logico-philosophicus* (1921): "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence". Now, the French writer Valère Novarina has turned Wittgenstein's proposition upside-down: "What we cannot speak about is precisely what has to be said". And this sentence applies perfectly to the matter we are dealing with here. For an artist, it is always a challenge to deal with a subject or theme that is supposed to be a little mediagenic, in relation to the medium he works in.

Innovative comic artists like Chris Ware, for example, tell us the kind of stories that have never been told in the comics form before. So, I would say that what a given medium is not supposed to be able to express is precisely what ambitious artists will tend to make it say. And that is the reason why modern graphic novels are not confined to superheroes and funny animals.

In his Ph.D. thesis about *Mythopoeia*, Harry Morgan approves of my criticism of the concepts of mediageny and mediativity, but wonders in his turn about the "optimal use" of the medium. He tries to demonstrate that the 'very genius' of comic art leads to the creation of imaginary worlds and myths. (The corpus he investigates is made out of the work of two French artists, Alain Saint-Ogan and Jean-Claude Forest, and of two American works: one newspaper strip, *Little Orphan Annie* by Harold Gray, and one famous superhero series, namely *The Fantastic Four* by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby.)

In my view, Morgan's answer to the question of interaction between the medium and its content is accurate but not complete. I believe that one important aspect of the question has been left in the dark. If one of the natural tendencies of comics is to give birth to original worlds in fiction, and lend its content the form of mythic narrative, then another tendency of comics is to use derision, caricature, parody – for mockery is also a component of its 'genius'.

The lack of realism in drawn literature favors both fantasy and lampooning. This is why the *topoi* comics deal with, whether borrowed from our cultural heritage or more specifically created, are so often treated with an ironical or satirical distance. I develop this idea further in my essay *Parodies: la bande dessinée au second degré* (Groensteen 2010).



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GRAVEN IMAGES – A COMMANDING READ

By Martin Lund

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Lewis, A. David, and Christine Hoff Kraemer, eds. *Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels*. Continuum, New York, 2010. ISBN: 978-0-8264-3026-7. 384 pages.

Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels is the end-result of a creative and intellectual process that all in all has to have taken somewhere around three years' time from conception to print. In 2008 at Boston University, academics, comics creators, and fans met up to discuss a topic that is near and dear to my own personal and professional tastes – comics and religion. Some of the papers presented there were subsequently fleshed out for publication and additional texts by writers who did not attend were added. They were then divided into three sections: *New Interpretations*, *Response and Rebellion*, and *Postmodern Religiosity*.

The first section contains readings of comics that are characterised by the editors as aiming to examine “traditional religious themes ... to reveal those religions’ hopes, fears, prejudices, and values” (p. 5). Chapters include Alan Ricker Parks’ critical discussion on how a violence-tinged reading of the Book of Revelation has affected, and continues to affect, superhero comics; Emily Taylor Merriman’s survey of Alan Moore’s sacred psychogeography of London in *From Hell*; and Laurence Roth’s analyses of J.T. Waldman and Johann Sfar, via Will Eisner, as expressing a renegotiation of the “troubling category” of the heroic in Jewish tradition. Anne Blankenship contributes a discussion of the *Treasure Chest of Fun and Fact*, a series of Catholic comics published between 1946–63, in which American Catholic youths could learn how to become perfect American citizens. Starting out with *The Golden Plates*, a graphic retelling of the Book of Mormon, G. St. John Stott uses constructs and argument that graphic adaptations of sacred texts should not be seen as “lesser” products but rather as intersemiotic translations on equal standing with printed Bibles or Books of Mormon.

In “Comics and Religion: Theoretical Connections,” Darby Orcutt traces the interplay between the two constituent parts of his chapter’s title to argue that there is something more than “*just* comics that happen to be about the religious, nor religious expressions that *just* happen to be in comics format” (p. 104), hoping to inspire both readers and scholars to look at comics and religion from new angles. Next, Andrew Tripp engages in a theological discussion on images of the divine in graphic narratives, arguing that they do not constitute idolatry, but rather contextual and ineffectual representations that – in the end – show God’s ineffability. Continuing on the theological track, Saurav Mohapatra interprets – although acknowledging that he might see a pattern where none exists (“When all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail!” being the epigraph to his chapter’s last section) – superhero comics as embodying vedic conceptions of reincarnation. The final chapter of the section deals with the “Christianizing of Animism” in



translations of both the manga and anime versions of Hayao Miyazaki's *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*. According to Eriko Ogihara-Schuck, the English-language versions downplay the animism in the work by applying a dualism endemic to Christendom but alien to its creator, changing the text and in doing so muddling its message.

The section labeled *Response and Rebellion*, in which "contributors highlight how comics provide unique opportunities to either subvert traditional religious iconography or to extend it in controversial new directions" (p. 7) starts with Mike Grimshaw's "On *Preacher* (Or, the Death of God in Pictures)", a chapter that argues that "*Preacher* represents Gen X in search of itself, a generational reading of a loss (the death of God) heard in their parents' generation..." and that the series "reflects the sensibility of a generation willing to suspend disbelief in anything as long as it is *not* traditional, orthodox Christianity..." (pp. 161–162). Following this, A. David Lewis argues against the common interpretation of Superman as a Christ figure, seeing him instead as a different kind of savior who preserves, through his nature as an endless story, other narratives. Next, Julia Round reads Mark Millar and Peter Gross' *Chosen* as a *bildungsroman*, arguing that it both satirises Christian millennial expectations and undermines audience expectations by playing with conventions and misdirection.

Clay Kinchen Smith argues that Jack Jackson, an early profile in underground comics, wrote theological underpinnings similar to those characterising contemporary liberal Christian theology into his critique of American culture. In her chapter, Kate Netzler discusses evangelicals' use of comics, how they brand their products to differentiate them from other comics, and how their ambitions sometimes clash with established conventions of mainstream comics. Kerr Houton argues that Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* evolves, through the application of both Zoroastrian and Marxist perspectives, from an initial set of dichotomies to a more complex world-view which rejects Muslim fundamentalism as much as it rejects amoral secularism; openness and education are central to the mature Satrapi who has told the story of her path to this conclusion with religion playing an important part.

Finally, *Postmodern Religiosity* explores "fresh and innovative ways of being religious in comics" (p. 8). In its first chapter, G. Willow Wilson tackles the possibility of a primordial intellectual tradition cropping up in comics. Following this is two chapters on uses of magic by comics creators Grant Morrison and Alan Moore in *Invisibles* and *Promethea*, respectively. Comics creator Mark Smylie then reflects and expounds on the creation and use of religion in his own series *Artesia*. Ending the book is Emily Ronald's "Present Gods, Absent Believers in *Sandman*" which argues that while the supernatural is alive and thriving with the diegesis of Neil Gaiman's classic series, belief in it is underrepresented.



Being an advocate of the study of the relationship between religions and comics, I was overjoyed when I found out that *Graven Images* was in press. Since this is a topic that interests me – a lot – I became cautiously... giddy, I guess... when I got the news; on the one hand, I thought this could be a book that marked a significant step along the road to the establishment of a sound basis for the study comics and religion, but on the other hand, I supposed it could turn out to be just another superficial collection of articles that one, at best, had the energy to trudge through, from cover to cover. It turned out, largely, to be of the former variety.

But it is not without flaws. My biggest issue with the book is that some chapters treat religious ideas *as religious* (the perspective so vehemently critiqued in Russell McCutcheon's *The Discipline of Religion*) and, consequently, fail to regard the texts studied with sufficiently critical perspectives on their ideology or effect, opting instead to use comics to promote certain views on religious practice. This goes hand in hand with another concern I have with the book: entertaining reading though they may be, the speculations of comics creators on issues of religion and comics are perhaps not the most fitting contributions to an academic volume, and certainly not in the abstract form some of them take.

Despite this, and while some chapters only scratch the surface of their subjects – thanks also in large part, I think, to the limitations inherent in the format of the edited volume –, *Graven Images* is a book well worth picking up. In my estimation it is a significant step toward the establishment of religions and comics as a topic of academic study in its own right. However you view comics or those human phenomena we commonly label “religion,” this book is required reading for anyone who wants to study the ways in which the two interact.

A NEW ACADEMIC APPROACH TO WOMEN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL COMICS

By Olga Michael





Chute, Hillary L. *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*. Columbia University Press, New York, 2010. ISBN 978-0-231-15062-0. 297 pages.

Graphic Women is a much-needed book in studies on comics and women's self-writing as it initiates a new beginning in these areas. It argues that the graphic memoir provides space for radical feminist constructions of female subjectivities and re-creation of issues around sexuality and trauma that are otherwise silenced and suppressed. With the aid of rich theoretical background in trauma and autobiography and substantial close readings, Chute examines the work of Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Phoebe Gloeckner, Lynda Barry, Marjane Satrapi and Alison Bechdel. While Bechdel and Satrapi's works have enjoyed a large amount of literary criticism, academic attention on the remaining artists' work remains relatively limited and *Graphic Women* initiates a beginning for their further exploration and study. Despite being focused on women artist's work, Chute does not fail to mention in her introduction works by male artists like Art Spiegelman, Robert Crumb and Justin Green, who have been initiators of the genre and a great influence on women cartoonists, showing an interconnection between them and constructing a more rounded image of graphic memoir.

In the first chapter, Chute gives a lucid analysis of Kominsky-Crumb's autobiographical comics like *Love that Bunch* and *The Complete Dirty Laundry Comics*. Kominsky-Crumb is one of the first women to use this form and her work is both radical and controversial. It has been rejected as pornographic by male publishers, critics, and feminist underground cartoonists alike because of its failure to idealise women and for constructing abject behaviour as a subject matter (p. 37). By seeing this work from a different angle however, Chute argues that both the excessive and harsh style, as well as the obscene content of Kominsky-Crumb's narratives brings forth a darker side of female sexuality.

In the second chapter, Gloeckner's *A Child's Life* and *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* are discussed and female sexuality is presented as being composed both of pleasure and degradation (p. 61). With her provocative analysis of the narratives of the protagonist's sexual abuse by her stepfather, Chute demonstrates how pain, trauma and pleasure are intertwined and how child sexual abuse is seen from the perspective of the victim. Additionally, she succeeds in underlining the significance of the visual in the transmission of these issues by comparing these narratives with a prose text of similar content, the *Bastard out of Carolina*, and noting that "there's a resistance to something that is drawn that wouldn't exist if it were written" (p. 61). It is suggested that it is only through the visual element of comics that what Chute calls "embodiment" of female desire and experience are mediated and this mediation is more disturbing when visually constructed. Additionally, she



notes that despite their value, these graphic narratives have been heavily criticised as pornographic, banned and denied entry at the French and British borders. By entwining legal and ethical issues with the discussion of the text, Chute succeeds in showing the complexities around publication and circulation of radical female graphic narratives like *A Child's Life* and *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*. Simultaneously however, she gives an opposite view to that which characterises Gloeckner's work as pornographic, and she substantially argues for a radical form of feminism emerging in these graphic memoirs.

Chute also discusses Lynda Barry's work and focuses again on trauma and child sexual abuse as they are constructed in *The Red Comb*, *One Hundred Demons* and *What It Is*. Barry constructs child sexual abuse as an absent presence, which according to Chute is never explicitly named as such but implied through the combination of image and text. By placing Barry's imaginative treatment of this challenging problematic next to Gloeckner's, which is significantly realistic one, Chute successfully demonstrates the multiplicity of ways that comics offer to recreate this experience. Also, she introduces Cathy Caruth's theory on trauma and explains that the visual element is essential in traumatic memory, hence, pointing to the ability of comics as a medium to substantially mediate trauma.

Furthermore, Chute explains how the female body is both constructed through and constructs these memoirs, and she argues for the significance of materiality in the construction of the female self as it is shown in *One Hundred Demons*. She suggests that decorativeness and the dependence on materiality result in a different form of female experience and links Barry's construction of *One Hundred Demons* to the pattern and decorative movement of the 1970s. However, the idea of decorativeness and ornamentation in art goes further back to late nineteenth century artistic movements like art nouveau and the arts and crafts movement. By placing too much emphasis on contemporary contexts, Chute fails to consider that certain aspects of Barry's work are explicitly tied to the long history of literary and artistic representation, as she only briefly mentions similarities to the avant-garde without elaborating on them.

Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* expands Chute's analysis beyond the scope of the U.S. Here, readers face public and collective trauma of war, as opposed to come across sexual ones, which were previously discussed. In terms of style, Chute notes that Satrapi's work mediates the horror and the complexities of war and death in minimal drawings, underlining in this way the perspective of the girl child and the collectivity of trauma. She also describes the censorship of *Persepolis* in Iran as opposed to its inclusion on approximately two hundred and fifty university syllabi in the U.S. alone (p. 137), reflecting the different perceptions on what is and what is not speakable in Eastern and Western contexts. While to ignore *Persepolis* in *Graphic Women* would have been an



oversight, it is important to note that its inclusion in is somewhat problematic in that Satrapi is the only non-American artist Chute discussed. Instead of focusing on her work only, Chute could have discussed graphic memoirs by other American or non-American artists who are not as well known as Satrapi in order to offer a more diverse perspective on the genre.

The final chapter discusses another work, which has received a lot of scholarly attention, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*. In her analysis, Chute shows how the past is expored in graphic language and how it re-emerges in Bechdel's narrative. In this case, childhood trauma stems from the closeted homosexuality of the protagonist's father and the everyday presence of death in Alison's life due to the funeral home maintained by him. She introduces trauma and death in relation to artistic creativity. She interestingly poses drawing as a form of touch and paper as a kind of skin (p. 199), supporting once more her idea of embodiment and the significance of the body in the construction of graphic narratives.

Furthermore, she discusses the heavy literary allusions the book is filled with and she explains how Alison's father's literary preferences and opinions re-emerge in the daughter's graphic life narrative both through text and image. Therefore, *Fun Home* is seen as demonstrating how the past is brought back to life through Bechdel's artistic creativity. Chute dismisses again the re-emergence of late nineteenth century Decadent decorativeness both in terms of content and drawing style, which is detailed and excessively ornamented. By paying more attention on this aspect of the narrative, the creation of *Fun Home* is shown to be in many ways similar to the restoration of the Victorian house by Alison's father. The excessive dependence on materiality and ornamentation demonstrates a re-appropriation of Decadent literary and artistic ideas both by the father's obsession with the house and with the daughter's construction of the graphic memoir as an inheritor of this tradition.

To conclude, Chute's close textual analysis and the comparisons between these artists are lucid and support her argument for new feminist constructions of female subjectivities and the embodiment of female experience and trauma in graphic memoirs. Throughout the book, Chute only provides black and white illustrations, giving their coloured reproductions at the end. In some cases though, it would aid readers more if she included more examples of the panels or pages she analyses in her text as it would give them a more substantial view of the matters she discussed. On another level, each of the five artists included in *Graphic Women* demonstrates a different use of comics and a different approach to the construction of trauma and female experience through the manipulation of visual and textual elements. However, as already mentioned before, the inclusion of less well-known women artists and/or non-Americans would enrich the scope of her investigation in women's graphic memoirs. A last missing element from



the book is a concluding chapter, which would round up Chute's arguments; instead, the book ends with the chapter on Alison Bechdel. Nevertheless, *Graphic Women* is an essential book for those who are interested in autobiography, visual studies and comics in general as it initiates a beginning in the study of women's graphic memoirs.

“A THING OF MANY LEVELS, AND COMPLEXITIES.”

By Mervi Miettinen





Di Liddo, Annalisa. *Alan Moore: Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel*. University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 2009. ISBN 978-1-6047-3213-9. 211 pages.

GULL: Take this city, in itself a great work, you'll agree: a thing of many levels, and complexities. How well do you know London, Netley?

NETLEY: Like the back o' my hand, sir.

GULL: Ha ha! As grubby, certainly, but London's more besides: it too is a symbol, history and myth... Do you begin to grasp how truly great a work is London? A veritable textbook we may draw upon in formulating great works of our own! We'll penetrate its metaphors, lay bare its structure and thus come at last upon its meaning. As befits a great work, we'll read it carefully and with respect (*From Hell*, pp. 4; 6-9).

University Press of Mississippi's Great Comics Artists Series has so far featured very different comics artists from Donald Duck-drawing Carl Barks to the 19th century caricature artist and often-quoted "father of comics", Rodolphe Töpffer. Other featured artists include Chris Ware, Garry Trudeau and Osamu Tezuka. The first featured "comics artist" who doesn't actually draw comics, British comics writer Alan Moore (b. 1953) is undoubtedly an awaited addition to this group, and the expectations regarding a comprehensive analysis of his work are high. In her book *Alan Moore: Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel*, Italian scholar Annalisa Di Liddo takes on the daunting task of dissecting Moore's extremely vast *oeuvre* in order to create a "consistent argument" about what she regards as "core aspects of his production" (p. 14). These core aspects include such essential themes as intertextuality and form, the relationship of space and time (what she refers to as "chronotopes") and the issue of identity. While her work (like Moore's) has its faults, her overall examination here remains focused, well-argued and lucid throughout the book. Di Liddo takes on some of Moore's essential comics works from the criminally under-analysed *The Ballad of Halo Jones* to the fairly over-analysed *Watchmen*, opening the formal and intertextual structures and cultural connections of the texts. Also Moore's very recent work (in collaboration with partner Melinda Gebbie), the pornographic *Lost Girls*, receives a whole chapter devoted to its analysis at the end of the book. However, due to the understandably limited scope of the book and considering the productiveness of Moore, a substantial amount of especially his earlier (and rare) underground comics have been left out in favour of more commercially successful and widely published works.

Di Liddo's approach is, as it should be with regards to a hybrid form such as comics, a multidisciplinary one, and her methods include both literary and cultural studies with modern and postmodern approaches, not forgetting the recent school of specialised comics studies. Her



primary method is an attentive and carefully balanced close reading of the texts, through which she produces insightful and precise observations. Di Liddo devotes several pages of her introduction to the contextualisation of the term (and literary phenomenon) “graphic novel,” successfully illustrating the polemics of the word and its problematic status within comics studies. Her own approach stresses the importance of “thematic unity” in defining graphic novels, which is achieved through the deployment of “one or more adequately developed motifs that build up the core of the narrative” (p. 20). While spending a subsequent section devoted to defining this term, she leaves other essential terms, such as the overly vague “postmodern storytelling,” completely without definition.

The title of the book and its relations to the content puzzles the reader from the start. The word “performance” immediately arouses expectations of analysis on Moore’s later performance work and his relatively new role as a self-proclaimed magician. However, Di Liddo discards most of this aspect of Moore’s career, only briefly mentioning it in her conclusion. Her assertion of Moore’s comics “as performance” is not fully explored, and the concept remains fairly vague throughout the study. While quoting Alan Moore as “a performing writer,” (p. 22) and mentioning his later passions for theatrical performances realised in *The Birth Caul* (1995) and *Snakes and Ladders* (1999), she then completely ignores the subject until she reaches her conclusion, where she quickly draws parallels between Moore’s performance work and the themes of stages and masks in *V for Vendetta* and the multiple superhero narratives of masked avengers as “performance” (p. 168). She also makes no distinction between the terms “performance” and “performativity”, despite their very clear differences. She asserts the “scalpel” metaphor (itself a quote from Moore) more successfully as a way to analyse the “distinctive deconstructive quality” of Moore’s comics work, and with this one she fares considerably better. Indeed, Di Liddo approaches Moore’s repertoire as a comics writer much in the same way that *From Hell*’s Dr. Gull approaches London, viewing it as “a thing of many levels, and complexities” (pp. 4; 6-9). Her reading is done “carefully and with respect” as she uncovers the core structures of the graphic novels and penetrates the textual and visual metaphors that comprise them. The reader becomes the Netley to Di Liddo’s Gull, thinking he knows Moore’s work, but will soon discover the true magnitude of it as Di Liddo proceeds to lead him through its structures and complexities work by work.

However, despite the merits of Di Liddo’s research, her work has some inconsistencies that need to be addressed. Her treatment of illustrators is, despite mentioning the collaborative nature of comics creation, overly dismissive. She systematically credits Moore for the works throughout the book until she gets to *Lost Girls*, where she suddenly credits Moore’s partner Melinda Gebbie for the artwork and gives equal creative status to her (unlike the other illustrators Moore has worked with). Instead of fully resolving the matter at the beginning of her study, she chooses to leave the



matter of collaborative authorship mostly unresolved. This is especially disappointing as the book, to the reader's immense pleasure, contains not only detailed attention to page and panel construction but several reproduced images from the original works. While the images are all in black and white, their number and quality make up for the lack of colour, as they function well with Di Liddo's concise visual analysis, which she systematically carries out throughout the book.

The phenomenon of stressing Moore's role as the author can be located within a larger problem within the study. Di Liddo herself criticises previous comics scholarship for its "all-too-celebratory" nature in discussing Moore's work, and calls for a "more systematically critical study" of his work (p. 14). Yet, she herself proceeds to produce a study which, while initially claiming objectivity, ultimately ends up celebrating Moore in fan-like adoration. Despite Moore's generally recognised uneven quality, Di Liddo finds little flaw in his work, citing even his poorer work as "absolutely intentional" (p. 147) in its mediocrity, and then cites this as further proof of his genius. While she does occasionally mention that a particular work may not be up to par, she nevertheless systematically proceeds to discuss the merits of the work extensively rather than the faults. Especially lacking from her analysis is Moore's highly problematic portrayal of female characters, who are often subjected to brutal violence and suffering for the sake of the plot. Similarly, the complete absence of *Captain Britannia* in a work discussing Moore's work on English identity seems a strange oversight.

Her celebratory reading of Moore's work is even more problematic, in my view, when one considers the fact that she relies extensively on Moore's own opinions and views about his work, derived from various interviews and pamphlets. As one of Di Liddo's main arguments about Moore's work focuses on intertextuality and its highly significant role in the textual, visual and structural nature of his comics, relying on the author's intentions instead of her own discoveries as a comics scholar does not compliment her analysis. By relying so much on Moore's own opinions, she tends to mythicise him as a genius author (she even refers to his writing as an "almost alchemical act", p. 34). While authorial motivation behind such phenomena as intertextuality can have limited interest, relying too heavily on Moore's own motivations threatens to further weigh the book into the very swamp of idolatrous scholarship that Di Liddo previously criticised.

In conclusion, *Alan Moore: Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel* still fares reasonably well. The text flows fluidly, and a reader familiar with Moore's works will undoubtedly enjoy the observations made by Di Liddo. Her close readings provide an overall structure of Moore's "key strategies" (p. 27) as a writer, and it is only towards the end that Di Liddo falls fully into the fan girl mode as she fails to critically assert her analysis of these strategies in *Lost Girls*. Thus, a



scholar looking for a “more systematically critical” study of Alan Moore’s comics may be partially disappointed with Di Liddo’s book, as her writing becomes increasingly embedded with the celebratory approach she claims to avoid in her introduction. A fan of Moore, on the other hand, will undoubtedly enjoy the observations and connections pointed out by the book. Di Liddo’s own voice and focus can be heard throughout, and her research is admirably thorough. Like picking raisins from a (huge) bun, Di Liddo analyses Moore’s works with her own scope in mind, and successfully avoids the temptation of overanalysing the works.

TELLING A STORY BEYOND STORYTELLING

By Netta Nakari





Kukkonen, Karin. *Storytelling Beyond Postmodernism: Fables and the Fairy Tale*. Tampere University Press, Tampere, 2010. ISBN 978-951-44-7992-2. 263 pages.

For some time now an effort has been made to find suitable routes to address under-analysed ways of storytelling, such as comics, and to incorporate these ways into literary research. Karin Kukkonen's PhD dissertation, *Storytelling Beyond Postmodernism: Fables and the Fairy Tale*, acquires a position in between post-classical narratology and cognitive linguistics, and the more particular fields of fairy tale and comics studies. Her study aims to show how Bill Willingham's comic series, *Fables*, moves beyond postmodernism, and especially subversion and self-reflexivity, which are features often associated with postmodern writing, by juxtaposing these features with tradition and mimesis. The series consists of various story arcs, each originating from fairy tales but blending them with genres such as crime fiction, heroic fantasy, war narratives, horror stories, and political fable. In other words, traditional fairy tale characters such as Snow White and the Big Bad Wolf are brought to the contemporary scene of New York and turned into ecoterrorists and detectives, for example. Kukkonen suggests that despite this blending of features and the diversity it produces, the end result is a coherent story world that at once maintains tradition and is more than a postmodern retelling of fairy tales. Kukkonen has limited her analysis to the first eleven trade paperback collections of *Fables* issues, dating from 2002 to 2008.

The study draws much of its theoretical apparatus from narratology, but relies especially on cognitive linguistics and on the assumption that it is through the reading process that the meaning of *Fables* is constructed. In Kukkonen's own words: "[t]his approach not only takes a step back behind the different semiotic channels of words, images and sequence, which comics employ, but also ties in with the poststructuralist notion of reading as structuration, i.e. readers dynamically constructing meaning" (p. 24). More particularly, the study is about "how comic texts engage the human through clues, the cognitive processes and textual effects they elicit" (p. 7). It regards the reading process as a special kind of communication in which not only coherence and causality influence the interpretation but also the experientiality, the emotions, and the cultural schemata available to the readers. Taking into account the reading process allows Kukkonen to include aspects such as cultural memory, generic frames, and intermediality in the analysis of *Fables*. This kind of multidimensional approach compliments a multimodal medium such as a fairy tale narrative dressed as a graphic novel.

The wide-ranging theoretical discussion shows the writer's learnedness in literary criticism; arguments for the application of each concept from narratology, semiotics, and cognitive linguistics as well as cultural studies are for the most part convincing. On the other hand, this



learnedness sometimes transforms into a desire to present her knowledge of Western literary criticism, thus resulting in the disintegration of the clarity of her argumentation. In the opening chapter, for example, the fairy tale itself as a genre is covered quite swiftly whereas the research on the fairy tale acquires a thorough treatment. For the sake of contextualisation, a more thorough discussion on fairy tales in general would be welcome. Regardless, the study by no means consists only of theoretical discussion. In chapter 5 on the intermediality of *Fables*, for example, the extensive presentation on Marie-Laure Ryan's transmedial narratology is a relevant addition to the discussion, but simultaneously overwhelms the reader hoping for a break from the conceptual overflow. However, the reader's hopes are fulfilled at the end of the chapter which provides an in-depth analysis of crime fiction as a mediated tradition in *Fables*. Not only does this kind of analysis prove that the writer has tremendous abilities in textual interpretation, but it also clarifies the argumentation through interpretation, in other words, by claiming that the frame of crime fiction, at first sight subversive of the fairy tale narrative frame, actually holds together the coherence and traditionality of the narrative as a whole. Mostly the close reading of *Fables* and the theoretical argumentation do juxtapose nicely both implicitly and explicitly. The study also shows promises of an even more refined way of academic writing: for example, the anecdote of the "emperor's new clothes" and his nakedness as a metaphor for the dominant but dead culture of modernism, as opposed to the postmodernist child pointing at the naked emperor, connects literary research with the Western literary tradition by being intellectually stimulating and at the same time hilariously entertaining.

One must, however, question the advantageousness of the application of concepts conventionally used in other areas of research, such as narratology, to this extent in the analysis of *Fables*.

Narratology and cognitive linguistics can naturally bring further dimensions to the analysis, but one of the aims of comics research is also to address this unique medium of storytelling. The aim is not necessarily to bring it into the realm of high culture and academia, which is perhaps a somewhat old-fashioned way to regard comics research, but to recognise all the aspects of the particular potential of comics for complex storytelling. Kukkonen's study as well as *Fables* itself could benefit from a more comics-oriented perspective. For example: The study covers the issue of genres from various perspectives: genres as developing historically, genres as frames for readers, genres as constructed media, and genres in relation to one another, for example. In the flux of genres such as the fairy tale, heroic fantasy, political fable, and crime fiction, *comics* either as an umbrella term for these various genres or as a form of expression in general, as compared to movies, for example, seems unfortunately to gain less attention. Also, the visual aspects of *Fables*, such as paneling and its resemblance to the traditional layout of the fairy tale books, for example, are mentioned on numerous occasions but how much are they actually taken advantage of when



it comes to discussing comics per se? Another example is the concept of multimodality which, despite some discussion on the relation between form and content in comics, is somewhat bypassed. The discussion concentrates on comics as communication between different media in general. Kukkonen interestingly hints that there is, in fact, surprisingly little research on comics as a multimodal medium – if this is so, it would have been complementary to her study if she had taken further steps in that direction herself.

Kukkonen states that intermediality is an essential factor in today's media culture and that it is partly through globalisation that the variety of media has become so essential in communication. Taking into account the wider social and cultural context results in the most intriguing and wide-ranging discussion in the study. The main characters of *Fables* are, in the end, public domain figures such as Snow White and Prince Charming. Because they are taken from folklore, mythology, and literature, it is not only suitable but also crucial that contextual associations be taken into consideration in addition to discussing the significance of the reading process. It is precisely chapter 4, "*Fables'* Traditions: Popular Cultural Memory and Genre", although the gratifying tendency is detectable throughout the study, that relates the narratological and cognitive approaches to culture at large and not only to literature and literary research. This is done by discussing the difference between high and low culture, or cultural memory and communicative memory in Kukkonen's words, in connection to fairy tale and comics traditions. The chapter also offers a subtle analytical reading of *Fables* by juxtaposing comics with the heroic fantasy quest and the war and horror genres.

In the final chapter of the dissertation Kukkonen discusses ideology, cognition, and general metaphors. She notes that the postmodern thinking of the 20th century saw the so-called "master narratives" as totalising structures imposed on the complexity of the world and suggests that the both traditional and metareferencing *Fables* is an attempt to recreate the master narrative after postmodernism. *Postmodernism* is the central concern of the study (even on the level of the title) but *tradition* is emphasised throughout the study, probably to highlight the move *beyond* postmodernism. At first sight the study seems to function on polarisations such as the centre and the margin, high and low culture, and tradition and postmodernism. Such polarisation would be paradoxical since the study also promotes the actual instances of storytelling and criticises the arbitrary binary relations of the semiotic approach. The overall aim is not to polarise but to juxtapose. For example, Kukkonen analyses the representation of gender and race in *Fables* not by concentrating on the conventional polarisation of the centre and the margin but through a careful reading of the actual instances of storytelling. Also, the differences between modernism and postmodernism are attached in Kukkonen's discussion to questions of otherness and totality, but instead of concentrating on division, the discussion is used to shed light on *Fables'* way of



representing relativism, infinite possibilities of interpretation, and the bridging between low and high culture. Similarly, the co-operation of postmodern and traditional features is what Kukkonen's analysis of *Fables* is all about, and the move *beyond* postmodernism is clarified laudably in this context. One could, nonetheless, pose some questions concerning her treatment of postmodernism, such as why she regards the two features of subversion and self-reflexivity as *the* central features of postmodernism. Is it because the two features are so crucial in the narration of *Fables*? Of course, Kukkonen may intend subversion and self-reflexivity as textual manifestations which entail other postmodern characteristics such as relativism and questioning of the canon. Also, when it comes to the contextualisation of the fairy tale and comics, again, one would perhaps have hoped for a more extensive linking of intermediality and multimodality in contemporary culture with postmodern or post-postmodern thinking.

Despite the at times overly packed theoretical discussion and some possible stances which could be clarified, Kukkonen manages to tell a convincing, balanced academic story about *Fables* beyond the theoretical, mostly narratological and semiotic boundaries of storytelling, and even beyond the conceptual boundaries she herself has set for the study, i.e. those of the fairy tale, tradition and subversion, and mimesis and self-reflexivity. The variety of linkages that Kukkonen draws between her study and literature and culture in general is admirable. The discussion introduces intriguing possibilities of applying analytical tools and concepts such as the simultaneously subversive and coherent story world and the importance of the reading process to comics as a whole but also to so-called popular genres such as science fiction or fantasy, and to various forms of self-reflexive (postmodern or post-postmodern) literature.