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ABSENCE AS SIGNIFYING FUNCTION IN COMICS

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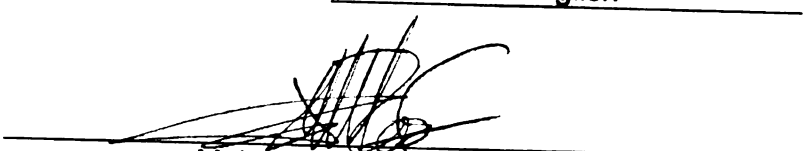

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MIND THE GAP:
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By

Barbara Postema

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ABSTRACT

MIND THE GAP:
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This dissertation argues that the gap, which according to narrative theory is a characteristic of all fictional narrative, in comics works at all levels of signification. Gaps or absences signify in the drawn image, the page layout, the sequence, and image-text combinations, as well as in the narrative.

Comics images rely on the minimizing and absence of information, rather than representation in detail. The notion of the gap as an inherent part of the abstraction that is typical of the comics image is established. The page layout is created by frames and gutters which separate out the individual panels, creating structure and order. The gaps between panels are ultimately the condition for creating sequence and continuity from a series of separate panels. In relation to the layout, gutters are literal gaps, empty spaces on the page, while in relation to the sequence, gutters are gaps in time, gaps in sequences of events that call for interpretation of action rather than of structure.

Another means besides the sequence through which comics offer to close gaps is provided by the insertion of text, the verbal code which as a separate register introduces another way in which to interpret and connect the images in the comics sequence. Text can be another way of bridging gaps between panels, while simultaneously opening a representational gap between words and images. The

concept of gaps is familiar from a narratological point of view, as inherent to and productive of narrative. It provides yet another means in comics by which the reader is invited and engaged as a participant. Through the narrative gap, and the recognition of the various kinds of gaps operative at all levels of their signification, comics create a self-awareness of these absences, these spaces. Often comics will flaunt this self-awareness by creating narratives in which the gap takes on a thematic role, in addition to its signifying functions.

To David for dragging me through this thing
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Fig. 0.1. Daniel Clowes, *Ice Haven*, pg. 4.

As comics have gained in mainstream and academic standing in recent years, there has been a tendency to replace the title *comics* with a label that perhaps provides more gravitas. Publishers and bookstores prefer the term *graphic novels* as an umbrella for all manner of comics genres, while the proposed MLA discussion group and subject area focusing on comics proposes the term *graphic narratives* in its title.[1] Both alternatives, graphic novel or narrative, when used as a blanket term for the comics form, point to an erasure of the specificity of the comics form. The desire to replace the name of the comics form seems to suggest an anxiety about the particular history and social status of the comics, including as it does the often vilified genre comic books such as superhero,

[1] Hillary Chute, the group's organizer, also suggests that label as a replacement for the term comics in her article "Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narratives." The special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* that she co-edited is likewise entitled "Graphic Narrative."

crime and horror comics, and a long tradition of humor comics such as newspaper gag strips. Both these forms are often associated with a young readership, an association that the labels "graphic novel" and "graphic narrative" seem to avoid. However, there is a danger inherent precisely in creating a separation and disassociation between different kinds of comics genres, especially when the labels are ill-defined or haphazardly applied, as with the usage of *graphic novels* in bookstores. The scope of what the comics form can represent or incorporate becomes limited, diminishing the form itself, at least in the eyes of casual observers, and the graphic novel or narrative becomes a genre without precedent or tradition, as if it originated all of a sudden in a vacuum, thereby misrepresenting the genre.[2]

A related but contrary tendency in dealing with comics as their presence in mainstream culture grows has been to increase the scope of comics to incorporate all kinds of visual narrative and sequential art. Publishers and authors have successfully resisted this tendency where it comes to contemporary visual narratives such as children's books.[3] However, perhaps in search of cultural legitimacy, when dealing with historical sequential art comics scholars are often less careful to maintain clear distinctions. Scott McCloud mentions pre-Columbian art, the Bayeux tapestry and Egyptian wall paintings as early forms of comics (10, 12, 14), while art historian David Kunzle discusses the European broadsheet tradition and Hogarth's print series as "early comic strips." In both these cases the application of the "comics" label ignores the material and historical specificities of the comics form. Furthermore, a term such as graphic narrative actually

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[2] See Charles Hatfield's *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*, and Joseph Witek's *Comic Books as History* for two examples of texts that clearly situate graphic novels within and emerging from the tradition of comics.

[3] Although recent works for children, like the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series by Jeff Kinney, and the *Fashion Kitty* books by Charise Harper intentionally blur the boundaries.

invites this kind of opening up of the definitional boundaries of comics, even as the intention behind the term's introduction stems from a desire to limit the field of study to certain more serious, more narratively intricate comics.[4]

It is possible and even useful to point to shared characteristics and antecedents of comics in pictorial narratives, much like M.M. Bakhtin does for the novel in "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse," but retroactively re-labeling such texts "comics" is doing both those works and comics a disservice. Certainly comics did not appear in a vacuum. Long traditions of illustrated texts and narrative visual sequences informed the creation of the comics form, along with the technological advances of the printing press and the mechanical reproduction of images, as David Kunzle's work shows admirably. More importantly, many of these traditions continue alongside comics, so that the possibilities of sequential art and visual narrative have expanded, and are still expanding with the introduction of web-based visual narrative forms.

This dissertation interrogates comics *as comics*, in whichever of its many genres, and with a focus on the formal and material specificities of the form. Comics as an art form and as a narrative form is a system in which a number of disparate elements work together to create a complex whole. The elements of comics are partly pictorial, partly textual and sometimes a hybrid of the two. These elements include the comics images or cartoons; the frames or panels that contain the images—of which the page layout (including the book design) is an important part; the captions, word balloons and the words themselves, whether inserted in balloons and captions or integrated into the image. This dissertation also seeks to answer questions relating to how comics create their narratives: what types of signification are evoked in comics discourse; how does the

[4] Chute defines graphic narrative as "a book-length work in the medium of comics" (453).

material form in which a comic exists—be it a newspaper strip, comic book, or hardcover graphic novel—affect its signification; how do text-image relations alter perceptions of comics as a visual form—in fact, can comics be better conceived of as a visual form or as a textual-pictorial blend; and by what means do comics engage their readers?

Writing about comics, whether the aim is to address their history or to analyze their content from a social, cultural or narrative point of view, inevitably leads to a discussion of their formal qualities. This is illustrated by numerous of the essays published in Heer and Worcester's *Comics Studies Reader*. Only one section, entitled "Craft, Art, Form," addresses formal analysis explicitly, but many of the texts in the three remaining sections ("Historical Considerations," "Culture, Narrative, Identity," and "Scrutiny and Evaluation") also consider formalistic aspects of comics in some detail. The material conditions of the medium naturally invite consideration of the formal elements: the placing of panels and gutters, the size and shape of titles and captions, the icons and the symbols used in the representation. This dissertation takes those formal elements, the signifiers, as its main subject matter, rather than seeking to study comics from a historical, cultural, or sociological perspective. This approach allows a close focus on what comics are, how they work, and the many processes involved in reading them.

Working together as a system, the various elements of comics combine into sequences and into narratives. Thierry Groensteen speaks of a "collection of codes" coming together (6). The collections of codes individually are disparate and even signify in different ways, but in the comics form they start to interact and begin to signify in relation to each other, becoming "one complex sign" as Anne Magnussen puts it.[5] In

[5] Magnussen, Anne, and Hans-Christian Christiansen, eds. *Comics and Culture: Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics*, 196.

order to achieve this synthesis of the individual elements, the comics form relies on the force of absences, of the *gap*. A focus on the gap opens up a new way to conceptualize how comics work. In its abstraction, the individual comics image leaves gaps, lacking as it does in detail and specificity. The practice of surrounding images by frames or another kind of boundary to separate and define the images begins to fill that gap by making it most apparent: it offers the images specificity by anchoring them and relating them to one another by juxtaposing them. The framed panels and the page on which they are laid out create their own gaps, namely the spaces that now separate the panels—the gutters. The gutters are literal gaps on the page, but they also indicate the gaps contained in the next level of the system. As panels are juxtaposed to one another on the page they create sequences of images. Under the influence of the gutters, panels turn into isolated moments with time missing in between.

Precisely the gaps—the lapses of time between the different moments of the sequence—are what produce the continuity of the sequence, as two panels work to imply what happened in between. Gutters can stand in for actions or for narrative functions such as scene changes and the passage of time. Sequences lay out the comics narrative which itself, as is typical of narrative, is riddled with gaps. As Wolfgang Iser points out, narrative is always a matter of leaving openings to draw readers on or create suspense (169). One of the differences between comics and textual literature is that in comics these gaps are visible in a literal way, putting the narrative processes of comics on display. This makes comics a self-conscious form, and also one that involves its readers very directly. This dissertation is a study of what is missing at the heart of comics. To create meaning all the various elements contain and produce gaps, creating a syntax and semiotics (what

Roland Barthes would call a language), in which absence becomes operative throughout as a signifying function, while at the same time these gaps invite readers to fill in the blanks, making the reading of comics an active, productive process.

A Word on Terminology

Fittingly for this visual form, the words used to label, describe and explain comics are often imprecise, misleading or contested. As the opening paragraphs already illustrated, even the most generic of these labels, *comics*, remains under discussion. The term comics itself is also one of the foremost offenders when it comes to (im)precision of vocabulary, since most comics are not actually funny. The term dates back to the early days of the 20th Century when people expected to find the "Funny Pages" inserted in their newspapers. To many casual readers, the word "comics" raises assumptions of simple children's fare, another incarnation of the form that has to a large degree been superseded. Comics exist in many forms and genres, generally sharing the characteristics of containing sequences of pictures, framed or not, combined with text in some way. To be sure, humorous newspaper strips are one of these forms, as are Disney comic books. But genres such as Underground Comix and publication formats such as graphic novels are aimed much more or even exclusively at adult audiences, and genres like comics journalism and autobiography are only occasionally funny. As a final note on the term comics, it is necessary to point out that the word is employed in two different ways. It can be used as the plural of the noun comic, as in "I bought the last comic in the series and now my collection of comics won't fit on the shelf anymore." Or the word can be used as a singular noun: "Comics is one of the most popular and pervasive media forms of our

increasingly visual age"(Varnum and Gibbons ix). Derived from this usage is the application of "comics" as modifier, applied for example in "the comics panel" and "Comics Studies,"[6] which I will be using throughout.

Comics History

In its development, the comics form in North America has gone through a number of phases in which a particular genre has been primary; there has been a Golden Age of newspaper comics, as well as a Golden Age of comic books. Over time, new formats developed out of and in reaction to the earlier ones (as, for example, comic books evolved out of reprints of newspaper strips), and as new formats or genres evolved the older ones did not disappear, so that the comics form now encompasses a range of genres and their "typical" publication formats. In most cases, genre is closely tied to a particular material form, a publication format that is as much part of the genre as art style or subject matter. This overview also touches on two forms of comics that have been introduced in North America from elsewhere, Bande Dessinée from Europe and Manga from Japan. While these two forms have their own rich histories and genres, I mention them here since they are part of the range of comics available in the North American market and their typical forms influenced and still influence the development of North American genres. However, since their traditions are not native to North America they are beyond the scope of the texts that I consider in this dissertation and consequently I only mention them briefly.

Comics first became a popular form of mass entertainment in the United States in the late 19th century. Newspaper strips of the 1890s are generally considered to be the first

[6] See the Appendix for a list explaining of some of the commonly used terms in this dissertation.

American comics, with the Yellow Kid, the central character of Richard Outcault's *Hogan's Alley* leading the way.[7] At the time the "funny pages" were hugely popular, and newspaper strips have probably endured as one of the most widely read publication formats of comics since they reach readers included in their daily newspaper. Newspaper comics appear on a daily or sometimes weekly basis and tend to be humorous and episodic, although there are many exceptions: adventurous continuity strips such as Milton Caniff's *Terry and the Pirates*, which built up longer narratives, used to be very popular but have all but disappeared in the last few decades.[8]

Newspaper strips are often published in black and white on weekdays, with color used as a "special treat" for the weekend strips. On weekends, the strips are also often printed in a larger format and in some cases expanded to two tiers instead of the usual single strip. Some of the most famous newspaper comics, such as *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, *Krazy Kat*, *Dick Tracy* and *Flash Gordon* were printed on a full or half page format, but over the years newspapers have increasingly allotted less space to comic strips rather than more. The current standard is the single strip, filled with between one and four panels. Thus the strip format is basically synonymous with the strip genre.[9]

Comic books began in the 1930s as collections of newspaper strips that were republished for sale as opposed to being included with a newspaper. Publishers embraced these pamphlet-sized books with floppy covers as an advertising venue and soon studios were set up to create original stories to fill comic books. Roger Sabin points out various ways in which comic books were influenced by pulp fiction: comic strips and books took

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[7] See Roger Sabin's *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art* for more on this history.
[8] *Rex Morgan M.D.* and *Judge Parker* are two continuity strips that are still running at the present time.
[9] For more detail specifically on newspaper comics, see R.C. Harvey's *Children of the Yellow Kid* and Bill Blackbeard's *The Comic Strip Century*.

many of their adventure genres from the pulps and in the 1930s many pulp publishers switched to publishing comic books. Their writers and cover artists got to work as comics writers and artists (53-54).

Comic books thrived from the mid-thirties into the fifties, with huge circulation numbers (the period commonly referred to as the Golden Age of comic books). However, the mid-fifties saw a backlash against comic books galvanized by the publication of Dr. Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* in which the psychiatrist argued that there was a link between juvenile delinquency and sensational crime and horror comics.[10] In order to avoid government regulation, the main comics publishers pre-emptively created the Comics Code Authority which would henceforth issue a seal of approval to comics that followed the code, proclaiming them "safe," in effect creating a self-censoring body.[11] While there is no denying that pre-code comics were often lurid, graphically violent and of dubious taste, the public outcry against them shows two things. First it demonstrates an iconophobia in the culture of the day in the way regulators were willing to censor images of crime and violence in ways they would not censor written text.[12][13] This iconophobia is only partly explained by the predominately youthful audience of comics and the resulting worry of guardians, seen for example in Robert Warshow's reluctance to let his son Paul read horror comics. Secondly, the outcry shows a misunderstanding of the comics form. Educators claimed comics created lazy readers,

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[10] In the essay "Paul, the Horror Comics, and Dr. Wertham," Robert Warshow writes about his son's membership to the E.C. Fan-Addict Club, and how as a father he would prefer his son would not read those kinds of comics. The essay gives a personal view of the comics debate of the fifties.

[11] See Amy Kiste Nyberg's *Seal of Approval* for more detail about the comics controversy and the Code.

[12] See W.J.T. Mitchell's *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* for a discussion of iconophobia (and iconophilia) in Western culture (3).

[13] Like comics, the cinema also had to deal with concerns about the visual representation of "objectionable" behavior and perceived immorality. The CCA's self-imposed censorship is actually quite similar to the Motion Picture Production Code or Hays Code that the film industry adopted in the 1930s

children unwilling to bother with text if they were offered pictures. They did not recognize the many other modes of communication and signification at work in comics, which made them require much more than textual reading alone.[14]

After the institution of the CCA, superhero comics survived as the most successful genre in mainstream comics, though some other genres, such as children's comic books and literary adaptations, also continued to do well. Comic books tend to include a number of stories of varying lengths, sometimes broken up into several parts spread out across the book. Issues also often include letters columns and advertisements. Besides the short story arcs within each issue, comic books also create arcs that span long runs of issues, creating continuity.

Underground comics are a phenomenon of the 1960s and 70s, when artists began creating and publishing comic books independently of the mainstream comics publishing sphere, and in direct reaction against this mainstream. The undergrounds were self-published and sold through head shops and later a network of independent comics specialty stores.[15] Comix railed against the Comics Code and dealt explicitly with adult issues such as sex and drugs, which were banned from mainstream comics under the Code. R. Crumb and Justin Green are some of the influential artists from the period, both of them dealing with issues that tended to be avoided in comics, including race and religion. Underground comix were not commercially successful, on the whole, but due to the experimentation they allowed and encouraged in art styles and ways of storytelling,

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[14] See Varnedoe and Gopnik 187 for an interesting reading of Wertham's anxiety: he could accept graphic depiction of violence in "high" art such as works by Goya and Grosz, since as "Art" such work distanced itself from viewers. For Wertham, comics "could only be taken straight." Varnedoe and Gopnik argue that Wertham was taken in by a reality effect of comics, while their young readers most likely always read the material as "stylized fiction" (ibid.).

[15] See Charles Hatfield's *Alternative Comics*, chapter 1 for a discussion of the underground comix economy.

they were instrumental in shaping the sensibilities of many comics artists that have come since, as Hatfield argues in *Alternative Comics* (16). Consequently, underground comix were very influential on more recent formats such as the graphic novel and minicomics.

The term *graphic novel* may have been coined by Will Eisner. He was certainly the first to popularize it, since he applied the term to his 1978 work *A Contract With God*, and he has been an advocate of the form ever since, not in the least in his educational writings such as *Comics and Sequential Art*.[16] Since the 1990s the term graphic novel has been embraced as a marketing tool for comics (bookstores, for example, appear to be more comfortable selling "graphic novels" than comics), and this marketing aspect to the term has tended to make both artists and readers suspicious of the label, if not the format. The panel by Dan Clowes at the beginning of this introduction showed active resistance to the term "graphic novel," and Clowes does not stand alone, as Jessica Abel's dismissive tone in *Drawing Words and Writing Pictures* illustrates (6). Many cartoonists avoid the term by inventing their own labels for their works. Seth goes with "picture-novella" for *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken*, Clowes uses "comic-strip novel" and "narrative picto-assemblage" for *Ice Haven* and Alison Bechdel calls her book *Fun Home* a "family tragicomic."

There is no precise definition of the term graphic novel, apart from using comics as its medium. Unlike novels, graphic novels are not necessarily fictional: comics journalism such as Joe Sacco's work, (auto)biography such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus*,

[16] Will Eisner has had an enormous impact on the comics form. His tongue-in-cheek hardboiled series *The Spirit* brought a comic book sensibility to a weekly newspaper comic, as well as providing an early canvas for Eisner's formal experimentation with sequential art. He ran a successful comics studio and created educational comics for the U.S. government. After he began creating graphic novels in the 70s he also became a teacher of the comics form, a final reason for why the main comics industry awards, the Eisners, which are presented annually at Comic-Con, were named after him.

and historical reconstructions like *Louis Riel* by Chester Brown have all been labeled graphic novels. Even the "original" graphic novel, Eisner's *A Contract With God*, was not actually a novel but a collection of short stories, as its subtitle clearly states: *And Other Tenement Stories*. Furthermore, some of the most celebrated graphic novels bring together pieces of a narrative that first appeared separately as issues of a comic book series. Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth* began as installments in his *ACME Novelty Library* series, and Seth originally published *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken* in issues four through nine of his ongoing comic book series *Palooka-Ville*. Serialization of novels is nothing new of course: works by Dickens appeared in installments in the newspapers before they were published as novel, for example. In fact, the time-consuming process of creating a comic makes it economically expedient to start selling installment before the entire work is completed. However, all this should show that "graphic novel" is not a precise concept.

Notwithstanding the resistance of some cartoonists, and despite its slipperiness, the term graphic novel is useful to distinguish long-form comics narratives from short-form comics such as strips and comic books.[17] A graphic novel is not just a "comic book for which you need a bookmark"—as Art Spiegelman refers to the genre—the term implies a unity across the work, most often discernable in a coherent narrative arc. As such, a graphic novel can be distinguished from other "fat" works of comic art such as collected daily strips, anthologies of short works by various artists, or even collections of a series of comic book issues that do not represent a unifying narrative but rather a commercially attractive volume of comics. One distinctive feature of graphic novels is that they do not have a standard publication format like comic books do. Graphic novels

[17] See Hatfield 4-6 for an explanation of the distinctions between long-form and short-form comics.

are published in a great range of sizes, sometimes with a vertical and sometimes with a horizontal orientation, and often in beautifully designed hardcover editions.

Minicomics became popular with the rise of the photocopy machine in the 1980s. When photocopying became relatively cheap, aspiring cartoonists began to create photocopied booklets of their work, which they would hand out to friends or sell through local comics stores, at comics conventions such as the Small Press Expo, or increasingly over the internet. The term refers to the small physical size of most mini comics: a piece of A4 paper folded twice makes an eight page A6-size mini. However, the term also applies to the small scale in which the work is distributed, and some minicomics do not use the "mini" size. Creators of minicomics often pay a lot of attention to the design of their comics, adding hand-colored or stamped details, as well as other artisanal embellishments. Cartoonists often use minicomics to showcase their work in order to attract the attention of one of the established comics publishers. Adrian Tomine started self-publishing the minicomic *Optic Nerve* in 1991, and the series was picked up by *Drawn & Quarterly* in 1995.[18] Joseph Witek points out the plurality of "visions and voices" that was able to enter comics with the rise of minicomics ("From Genre to Medium" 72), creating a form that was appealing not only to new artists but also to new readers.

Like minicomics, the more recent webcomics often serve as self-promotion for up-and-coming cartoonists as they search for opportunities to get their work published in book form. However, webcomics also provide commercial opportunities in their own right that cartoonists make use of, such as advertising self-published work or selling sketches, prints and t-shirts. And in addition to that, the use of digital media offers

[18] Tomine's introduction to his collection *32 Stories* gives a good overview of the minicomics process.

creative possibilities that paper-and-ink comics do not afford, so that in some cases webcomics develop in directions away from straightforward print comics, incorporating hypertext, sound and even movement.[19] In some cases, webcomics and animated cartoons come so close to each other they are almost indistinguishable.

Genres of comics from outside of North America have also been popular and influential over the years, especially comics from Western Europe and Japan. *Bande dessinée* is the French name for comic books. Since France uses a standard format for comics publication, which is commonly used in many European countries, the term Bande Dessinée or BD is used generically to designate European-style comics including the *Tintin* and *Asterix* series. BD albums tend to be slightly larger than comic books, with hardback or sturdy paper covers and about forty to sixty pages long.[20] BD are also distinguishable from North American comics due to differences in styles of drawing and layout, and the difference in genres. For example, the Western remains much more popular in European comics than it is in North America. In the past the BD format was all but universal in Europe, but under the influence of publishers like L'Association, and perhaps also influenced by the growing variety of publication formats of graphic novels in the US, BD are increasingly letting go of the traditional "album" format.[21]

Manga is the general Japanese term for comics. Manga too has a style that is very distinct from North American comics. Scott McCloud discusses some of these differences in *Understanding Comics* (77-81), especially to do with pacing and different uses of

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[19] In *Reinventing Comics* Scott McCloud discusses the directions of comics under the influence of the internet. D.B. Dowd argues comics and animation are converging back to their common roots with the developments in on-line comics (Dowd and Hignite 8-33)

[20] In the essay "The Publication and Formats of Comics, Graphic Novels, and Tankobon," Chris Couch gives a brief overview of the main differences and similarities between the publication practices in North America, Europe and Japan.

[21] See Beaty's *Unpopular Culture: Transforming the European Comic Book in the 1990s* for details of the publication shifts in European comics.

backgrounds. Manga are usually published in a pocket book format, and due to the reading direction of Japanese, manga are laid out to be read from right to left. Some popular manga genres are shonen manga for boys, and shoujo manga for girls. Especially the latter has opened up new readerships of comics in the United States, consequently inspiring new generations of comics artists, and new genres.

While the range of genres and formats of comics art has expanded hugely over the course of the 20th and into the 21st century, it is difficult to say whether the art form has endured as the mass entertainment form it once was. The popularity of the superhero genre is safe-guarded by the success it is having in the movie industry, and film producers also mine other comics formats for stories and ideas. Besides the instantly recognizable recent *Spider-Man*, *Superman* and *Dark Knight* movies, some less evident comics adaptations are *Ghost World* (2001), *A History of Violence* (2005), and *Surrogates* (2009). Many viewers of these films may not even be aware they are based on comics, and even fans of the superhero movies are not necessarily fans or even readers of the comic books the franchises are based on.

Comics are still seen as a popular or mass medium, however, its actual readership belies this reputation. Graphic novels, currently the *It*-genre in comics, are often published in print runs of only several thousands or even hundreds, a far cry from the hundreds of thousands of issues that were sold of comic books in the 1940s and 50s. Bart Beaty, in *Unpopular Culture*, traces the change in comics marketing in Europe during the 1990s, a period in which comics artists and publishers consciously chose to embrace a more "high-art" based sensibility, with all its cultural credibility, thereby shedding some

of its popular appeal. Comics in North America have taken a similar route, at least in the alternative press sphere.

The majority of the texts I use for discussion and analysis in this dissertation are alternative comics, whether long- or short-form, published by alternative and small press publishers such as Fantagraphics, Drawn and Quarterly and Top Shelf. The choices were driven largely by suitability to the topics under discussion, but unavoidably, they were also influenced by personal taste. As such the comics I have chosen are not meant to imply a judgment on the relative quality of alternative comics in relation to mainstream comics. In order to be more representative of the entire range of comics formats I do also include examples taken from various Marvel and DC comic books as well as several newspaper strips. Generally, the examples were chosen to illustrate the wide range of signifying processes at work in comics, some of which are shared by all genres of comics and other which tend to be applied or explored only in particular genres or forms.

Reading Comics Carefully

Throughout, this dissertation applies an approach that is loosely semiotic in its methodology. It is rooted in the notion of reading as a process of making meaning out of various kinds of signs, and the assumption that signs of many kinds are evoked and utilized in comics. Comics produce numerous different codes to create meaning. Identifying these codes and creating an understanding of how they signify is the basis of my project. The most straightforward of the codes employed in comics is linguistic, and is found in a majority of comics. All comics employ visual codes. In terms of the imagery, a common code is that of iconic representation, where the images represent

something they resemble. Depending on the style of the comic, the images will be more or less mimetic. Somewhat less common in comics are symbolic representations, where an image represents or stands for something else based on an arbitrary and conventional connection. Finally it is not uncommon for comics to show indexical representations, incorporating reproductions of photographs, newspaper clippings, or other scraps.

Fernande Saint-Martin, in *Semiotics of Visual Language*, argues that in order to create a semiotics of the visual image, one must break the image down into its minimal components, namely lines and dots. However, the individual building blocks of an image, the lines and cross-hatchings making up a human figure for example, have no meaning in themselves until they are seen as *part of* a particular sign. First one recognizes the whole, for example Krazy Kat, both as a cat and as the character. Then one can break that representation down and determine that one line signifies a whisker and another, thicker line her tail. These elements have no meaning separate from the whole, just like individual letters in a word do not signify outside of that word. In considering the difference between *langue* and *parole*, language and speech, Roland Barthes observes that "it is because speech is essentially a combinative activity that it corresponds to an individual act and not a pure creation" (*Elements* 15): the elements used are all part of the system of language (*langue*), even if they can be combined in endlessly different ways.

Barthes' observation applies to literary discourse and artistic texts in general. *Parole* or speech includes the idiolect of the specific style of a writer. However, the idiosyncracies of comics artists' idiolects go further: their main medium is not language that is bound by conventions of meaning and application, semantics and syntax. Instead, images communicate largely without rules: the repetition of language elements that we

see in *parole* (phonemes, morphemes, phrases) do not really exist in comics images: the smallest elements of images have no set meanings, and the way these elements are combined or even repeated are not governed by rules like grammar. Comics, due to a lack of system in the pictorial representation, are an example of that "pure creation" Barthes writes about, and as such resist dissection into smaller signifying units beyond the unit of the panel. This of course does not negate the signification that occurs in these images.

Panels in comics should be seen syntagmatically, as units creating a larger structure. Internally, the unit of the panel supports the all-important visual codes in comics, among them the iconic code, as well as codes of facial expressions, gesture, perspective, and others. Pictures within panels become discrete signifying units which have to be approached and decoded one at a time. These codes are heightened by the panel border or frame, although panels do not need to be surrounded by formal frames in order to have this function. A further code dictates that if in several consecutive panels similar pictorial elements are repeated, whether with small variations or not, these elements do not signify multiples of the same thing, but instead signify one and the same thing over a period of time, establishing a temporal code.[22] According to this code, a series of panels becomes a sequence that represents action in increments of time. Thus, while pictorially a page showing nine panels with a cat and a mouse in each panel may at first glance seems repetitive, the panels signify that each single panel with cat and mouse represent a different moment, so that upon reading the effect of the panels becomes progressive rather than iterative. As the panels are established as syntagms which, following the temporal code convention, create images in time as they are represented on

[22] The code by which repeated appearances of a character or an object signify separate moments in time works by convention, and is often parodied in comics by introducing doubled characters into the storyline. See for example Calvin's use of a Duplicator in *The Indispensable Calvin and Hobbes*, pp. 183-189.

the space of the page, the panels also invoke a narrative code, as the portrayal of events taking place over time evokes narration.

Sequences of panels do not only carry meaning of temporal and narrative codes. The very shape and means of separation of panels also signify. Paratextual markers such as panel borders, the size of the space around and between the panels, the placement of panels on the page (mise-en-page or layout) and the color of the page background are all significant. In some cases their meaning may not be part of an established system of codes; however, by breaking with the conventions of the paratext and drawing attention to themselves, such elements still become signifying units. These are some of the codes that will be explored in the various chapters of this study, broken up to start with the smallest units of signification—the images in panels and the pictorial codes used within them—up to the largest units that apply to comics as narratives. In the process I will make comparisons between how these codes signify similarly in comics and in other arts, or, as the case may be, how the process of signification in comics differs from for example literature, film or pictorial art.

Explaining Comics

When it comes to using other arts as analogies in explaining comics there are two main schools of thought in comics criticism. One says it is useful to use literary studies or film studies as touch stones for studying comics, even if only as a familiar point of reference (Groensteen, 2007; Kunzle, 1990; Lefèvre and Baetens, 1993; Magnussen and Christiansen, 2000; McCloud, 1994; Witek, 1989). Other critics have argued that it is important for comics studies to establish itself on its own terms, without relying on more traditional disciplines, not in the least because such reliance might hamper the discussion

of comics in its own right (Eisner, 1985; Hatfield, 2005; Varnum and Gibbons, 2001). The project of this dissertation relies on bringing in concepts or methodologies from other areas of study where it is helpful, and creating a space for the study of comics *an sich* where possible.

A good place to start is thus to locate an aspect of comics that sets it apart from other forms of communication, and more specifically, from other narrative forms. This study approaches comics as a narrative form based on the cohesion shepherding separate images into a "process of transformation."[23] This process constitutes narrative, however minimal, as a basic function of the form of comics. Even non-narrative comics, in as much as comics can be, gain their effect by hinting at a progression and urge the reader to create a sense of the sequence that approaches narrative.

Comics share characteristics with a number of different art forms. Like written literature, comics tell stories and employ words. Besides text, and unlike (most) literature, comics also use images, most often in the form of panels on pages. Like film, comics tell stories and use images, but in contrast with film, the images in comics all exist simultaneously, separated only by space, whereas the images in film all exist in the same space (the screen) and replace one another over time. Thus the formal aspect of comics that most clearly sets it apart from these two narrative genres is the way in which the form is built up of sequences of images that work together to construct a narrative.[24] The sequence—and its structural twin the page layout—is where the signifying function of absence, of the gap, is most readily visible in comics. In the layout and the sequence the

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[23] Heath, Stephen, *Questions of Cinema* (London: Macmillan Press, 1981) 136.

[24] Comics is not the only form to which this aspect is typical (the photonovella is another one), and there are some socio-historical specificities about comics that are essential to it as a form, but comics are probably the most widely read and well-known form to be made up of images in sequences.

gap is literally present and asks to be read. This dissertation takes the concept of the gap as signifying unit in the sequence and theorizes how its function can be expanded upon, can be understood to operate at all levels of comics signification.

Chapter One, "Draw a Thousand Words," focuses on what appears *within* the panel in comics. It addresses images and the processes of signification at work there, especially as they rely on minimizing and absence of information, rather than representation in detail. The notion of the gap as an inherent part of the abstraction that is typical of the comics image is established. As I explore the semiotics of the panel, I will touch on codes such as the pictorial code, codes of human expression and gesture, spatial codes, as well as on the possibilities of temporal and narrative codes within the single, still image.

In Chapter Two, "Concerning the In-Between," the difference between panel and frame becomes important. I differentiate between the panel and its content—the image—and the layout of the page. The page layout is created by frames and gutters which separate out the individual panels, creating structure and order. The gaps between panels are ultimately the condition for creating sequence and continuity from a series of separate panels. Where Chapter 2 pays attention to the gutters as literal gaps, empty spaces on the page, Chapter Three, "All in a Row," explores the semiotics of the sequence and starts to consider gutters as gaps in time, gaps in sequences of events that call for interpretation of action rather than of structure. Practices in decoding the layout and the sequence both involve active reading, but at different conceptual levels. When considering the gap in relation to the sequence, it is asking to be closed—sequences call for "closure" to use McCloud's term—in the process of reading, in order for the sequence to be interpreted.

This dynamic is different from the gap function in relation to the layout, where its function is often to be observed, to be noted for its separative function, not for its function of connecting panels. Temporal and narrative codes will here be explored in relation to the sequence of panels, instead of within the single panel.

Chapter Four, "Combining Signs," suggests another means besides the sequence through which comics offer to close gaps. This means is provided by the insertion of text, the verbal code, which as a separate register introduces another way in which to interpret and connect the images in the comics sequence. Text can be another way of bridging gaps between panels. To create a sense of the function of the verbal register in comics this chapter explores a range of texts, from ones that contain no linguistic messages at all to comics that rely heavily on the verbal. This chapter also explores the possibility of a notion of a code of textuality as inherently ingrained into the fabric of comics and questions whether on that level comics are indeed a hybrid art: the form may require a certain kind of literacy at the very core of its structure, by the very premise of sequentiality of syntagms.

Chapter Five, "Show and Tell," explores the familiar narratological concept of gaps as inherent to and productive of narration, showing the concept to be yet another way in comics in which the reader is engaged and invited as a participant. Further, this chapter shows how comics create a self-awareness of the narrative gap, and a recognition of the gap operative at all levels of their signification by creating narratives in which the gap itself takes on a thematic role, not just a signifying function. The chapter offers short readings of Daniel Clowes' *Ice Haven* and Charles Burns' *Black Hole* to illustrate this notion. Finally, the chapter addresses some comics texts that do not function according to

the normal conventions of comics. By pushing the form to its limits these texts allow for one more interrogation of the function of the gap as creative presence/absence.

This dissertation offers a way of reading comics carefully and critically. The same principles are applied for looking at the semiotics of the image, the semiotics of the page and of the narrative, because the same processes are involved in creating narration out of a panel, a sequence, a narrative, revolving around asserting the gaps that are present and then offering ways to erase the gaps. In creating a coherent methodology that bridges those features of comics that are unique to the form—the illustrated panel, the sequence—and characteristics that are inherent to all forms of narrative, my work establishes a literary approach to comics that does justice to the all-important visual side of the form as well. In using the gap as the focal point at all levels of signification (image, layout, sequence, and narrative) I demonstrate that comics are multi-layered, complex texts that invite and bear close reading, while also offering a new way to look at other literatures, be they visual or verbal, by interrogating what their gaps and absences signify.

There has been a recent proliferation of discussions of the gap in comics scholarship. A recent issue of the *International Journal of Comic Art* included an article called "Closing the Gap: Examining the Invisible Sign in Graphic Narratives," by Roy Bearden-White, focusing mainly on the most commonly recognized function of the gap: within the sequence. In a discussion at the 2009 Toronto Comic Art Festival, comics artist Anke Feuchtenberger talked about the drive to "cross deep gaps" in creating her work, and forcing her readers to do the same, "between pictures," and between reality and surrealism. The presence of certain conceptions of the gap in comics is well-established but my work seeks to extend its meanings and applications, turning the gap

into a presence that permeates comics at all levels of signification. In this way the gap adds a new way of understanding comics, based on a process that is for the most part unavailable in other media. The concept of the gap thus solidifies our understanding of comics *as comics* and also offers purchase to new consideration of other narrative, visual and narrative/visual media, this time grounding these interrogations in the form of comics rather than vice versa.

CHAPTER 1 Draw a Thousand Words

Signification within Panels

> The zero degree testifies to the power held by any system of signs, of creating meaning "out of nothing" ... *it is a significant absence.*
>
> Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* 77

Looking for Signs

In exploring how images in comics signify, we should think of these images as collections of visual signs. Semiotics or semiology is the science of signs, based on the works of Ferdinand de Saussure[25] and C.S. Peirce.[26] For a discussion of visual rather than verbal signs it is useful to look at the work of Roland Barthes, who laid down a strict semiological framework in *Elements of Semiology* and *S/Z*.[27] From the start he differentiates between codes with strict systems, such as the linguistic code, and codes that have less rigidly defined and definable systems of signification, such as the garment or the food system (*Elements* 25, 27). For most non-verbal types of signification, including the iconic code, the balance between the language (system or conventions) and the speech (usage or style) swings towards speech: visual codes allow an almost limitless range of expression and combination of elements, as opposed to linguistic codes that are made up of a finite number of elements whose combination is governed by the rules of grammar. Nevertheless, certain rules and conventions apply, even in iconic systems.

[25] De Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* laid the foundation for the study of signs that became Semiotics.
[26] Peirce developed a semiotic system that was less rooted in linguistics than de Saussure's.
[27] Umberto Eco is also known for exploring the semiotics of the visual, for example in his essay on Steve Canyon.

Furthermore, Barthes points out the existence of complex systems, possibly "the most interesting systems" (30), which combine different kinds of codes. Barthes mentions the cinema and advertising as examples of complex systems, and comics, of course, qualifies too.

According to Barthes' semiotics, meaning is transferred through signs, using codes. Signs, made up of signifier and signified, form an arbitrary code which users learn to apply and interpret by convention. While this definition applies in a straightforward manner to linguistic codes, it becomes problematic in the discussion of signs and codes of non-linguistic systems (such as drawn images and photographs). The visual representations of, for example, a cat are not arbitrary, as semiotic signs are assumed to be, since it has to show some resemblance to actual cats. Pictures of cats are not arbitrary signs that we recognize as a cat by convention; they are mimetic and iconic, referring to a real shape and form.[28] Furthermore, it is tricky to designate pictorial images as a coded system: there can be as many variations of a representation of a cat as there are artists depicting cats, from Herriman to Crumb, to Varon. In this regard, pictorial images fit more closely the description Barthes gives of photography, than of verbal language, when he claims of the photograph that "it is a message without a code" (*Image-Music-Text* 17). The codes that enter the pictorial image are most often not like the conventional codes of verbal language, as Barthes' three codes in "The Rhetoric of the Image" showed.

In its combination of different kinds of codes, comics form a complex system. In *Comics and Culture*, Anne Magnussen writes: "a comic can be considered as one

[28] In *Semiotics of Visual Language* Fernande Saint-Martin attempts to create a systematic overview of the smallest building blocks of visual signs, the coloremes. While her analysis incorporates many aspects of the visual image that are useful (such as the concept of the basic plane, vectoriality or orientation, and boundary or contour), the breakdown of visual images into minute pieces of lines and curves as such, do not seem to add greatly to the overall understanding the signification of visual images.

complex sign which means that a global coherence is sought in the interpretation of it" (196). She points out that, while the form of comics as a whole can be viewed as a system that utilizes a number of codes that are partially based on convention and that for the reader to learn to understand comics fully, one should keep in mind the bigger picture, or "global coherence," as one does the work of interpreting the various signs in a comic. Thus, although the "complex system" that is comics requires various different strategies to interpret the different codes, one must also keep in mind the "global coherence" of how the code systems relate to one another. In *Visual Thinking*, Rudolph Arnheim touches on this point in reference to the different kinds of meaning that are created within a pictorial image, what he calls *functions* of an image:

> The three terms—picture, symbol, sign—do not stand for kinds of images. They rather describe three functions fulfilled by images. A particular image may be used for each of these functions and will often serve more than one at the same time. As a rule, the image itself does not tell which function is intended. (136)

Comics images often contain pictorial elements that fulfill functions of various different codes at one and the same time. Such elements will signify in multiple ways simultaneously.

Childishly Simple?

Here is an example of a comic:

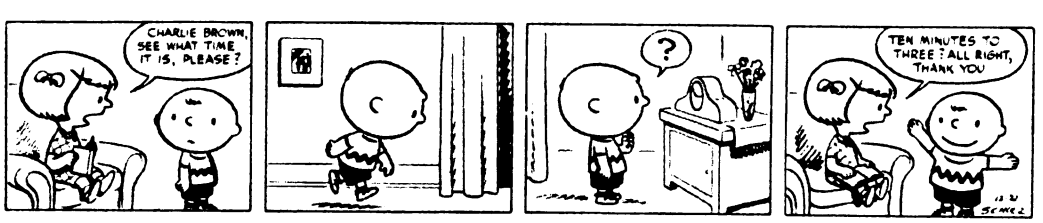

Fig. 1.1. Charles Schulz, *The Collected Peanuts: 1950-1952*, pg. 24.

Figure 1.1 shows an episode of the *Peanuts* newspaper strip that uses the typically simplified cartoon style,[29] and a long-running and popular strip that saw numerous reprints even after Schulz stopped creating new daily installments. Many of the strip's characters are immediately recognizable, as is its particular drawing style. Some aspects of this style are typical of Schulz's own individual workmanship, such as the overly large heads of the children and the stubby fingers—these stylistic aspects remain, even as his drawing style changes and matures from what it was in his earlier strips. Other aspects of the drawing are more typical of comics art in general and can thus serve as an illustration of how this art works.[30]

The strip illustrates a number of the codes at work in comics. Some of these are the conventional codes we are most familiar with in language, consisting of signs that are arbitrary and signify by convention. Examples of such conventional signs in Figure 1.1 are the words in the panels, representing the verbal code, but also the use of frames around the panels,[31] and the word balloons incorporated in panels 1, 3 and 4.[32] A different, much less arbitrary code that is evident in this strip is that of facial expressions, gesture, and body language. Panel 2 shows Charlie Brown walking, signified by the way one leg is aiming forward while the back leg is lifted. Panel 3 shows a combination of coded body language and gesture, as Charlie studies the clock: his body is quite passive, while the hand to his chin indicates puzzlement and thinking. This signification is reinforced by the conventional sign of a question mark in a word balloon. Panel 4 shows

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[29] See the "Cartoon" section in the Appendix for a discussion of cartoon style.
[30] In "Graphic Shorthand" Harry Morgan discusses some qualities of comics art. Its hand-drawn nature (*autotypie*, 24) and the speed with which it is executed (*rapidité d'exécution*), together leading to the typical caricatural style of comics: the "graphic shorthand" of the essay's title (27), which is especially effective in the rendition of characters in comics (28).
[31] A code that will be discussed in detail in Chapter Two.
[32] A subject of further discussion in Chapter Four.

facial expression as a code, in addition to gesture: Charlie Brown smiles, satisfied that he is able to convey the time on the clock in the position of his arms.[33] Figure 1.1 also illustrates the iconic or pictorial code of comics. The panels contain pictorial images that depict their content through a form of resemblance: the images on the page refer to specific matter (objects, persons) that we are familiar with from the real world. In other words, the iconic code is one of signification by representation, not by convention.

However, in Figure 1.1 we must note the economy of drawing in Schulz' work. The artist has left many details out of the pictures: Charlie Brown's eyebrows, Patty's ears, much of the background detail. What is there reinforces the types that are being drawn: the children's large heads, the dresser with a clock. This helps to focus attention for the visual joke at the end, when Charlie physically reproduces the position of the hands of the clock with his own body: he is too young to tell the actual time from that himself. Thus the iconic code in this strip, and in comics generally, does not signify in exactly the same way as any kind of picture. Comics images signify by establishing a code of economy, in which certain details are left out so that other details become all the more important.[34] In this way the gap enter the comics image: In the absence of depictive detail, any pictorial signs that are present, whether codes of gesture, facial expression, furniture, dress, or any other kind of object, draw more attention to themselves and take on heightened signification. The very absence of detail in comics creates the conditions

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[33] Will Eisner examines these codes of body language, facial expression and gesture in some detail in *Comics and Sequential Art*, and also shows that the denotation of various positions (kneeling for example) may signify differently according to context: one position or expression may have various connotations.

[34] Töpffer understood as much when he was creating graphic narratives in the 19th century: "[G]raphic expression, as a direct result of having clear meaning without complete imitation, can have, indeed requires, an enormous amount of ellipsis in terms of additional details, in such a way that, whereas in a finished painting the slightest oversight [discontinuité] in terms of imitation stains the work and leaves it lacking, in the world of graphic expression, on the contrary, the most monstrous of oversights neither stain nor leave the work lacking, even if, as is often the case, they are not clever manipulation of an accepted short-cut resulting from authorial intention" (Quoted in Morgan, "Graphic Shorthand" 32).

for the signification of the many signs that *are* present.

Fig. 1.2. Schulz, pg. 41.

The *Peanuts* strip in Figure 1.2 is even more simplified than the first example. Though its setting is inside (established by the text in panel 1), there is no furniture shown and no indication of a background. This time Charlie does have eyebrows, but their presence is significant: they create his expressions. Like Figure 1.1, this strip, too, makes its point visually, a point that is emphasized through lack of other visual distractions. In the third panel, Charlie shrinks under the talking-to Patty gives him, and the wobbly line around his head underscores his discomfort. The "wobbly line" illustrates another common code in comics, one of expressionistic lines that are often used to indicate emotions in characters. This code works mainly by convention, and includes symbols such as the light bulb for an idea, stars for pain and more indexical signs like floating droplets around the head for anxiety. Besides the wobbly line around Charlie's head in panel 3, Figure 1.2 also includes a sign of this nature in panel 2, where the slightly bent lines behind Charlie's head signify movement. Many of these conventional signs of comics have matured with the form itself and are unique to it.

Messy Pictures

Figure 1.3 illustrates that the economy of the comics image does not necessarily mean they will always display the bareness of the *Peanuts* strips. However, the economic

Fig. 1.3. Julie Doucet, *My New York Diary*. "My New York Diary," pg. 5.

code of the comics image does dictate that all the details that are present are (potentially) significant. This particular panel barely relies on the linguistic code; "Ha!" is the only word present. The panel signifies almost exclusively in iconic codes, and much of the signification occurs in codes of objects of various kinds. At the representational or iconic level, this panel from Julie Doucet's short story "My New York Diary" shows a room with shelves full of books, a short shelf in the middle of the room with records in it and a record player and radio on top, a stove in one corner etc. The floor of the apartment is covered with empty beer cans and boxes with more beer, as well as cockroaches. All the represented objects denote things we are more or less familiar with from the real world. However, these "things" also have connotations, adding meaning beyond the simple fact of being a particular objects. Thus the cockroaches are not only an iconic sign, showing there are cockroaches in the apartment. Cockroaches also carry the connotational meaning of uncleanliness and filth, which changes the general signification of the apartment from possibly cozy to definitely dingy and dirty. The cockroaches are also an

indexical sign that shows causality: they signify that the apartment is dirty and therefore attracts cockroaches. Clearly, this panel is crammed chock-full of visual information.

In Figure 1.3 the denotational meaning of the iconic signs is overtaken by the connotational meanings. Besides the cockroaches, there are many other objects that may seem insignificant in terms of denotational value, and that become highly significant in the context of Doucet's narrative in terms of their connotation. The beer cans are one example: as denotational objects they add to the clutter in the room, but as connotational objects they speak to the character of the room's inhabitant. As such, the beer cans say not only that he is too lazy to clean up after himself, but they connote that he (over)indulges in alcohol consumption, adding to the image of his slothfulness. The room contains more connotational details. Adding to the clutter in the room is a large number of toys, sitting on the shelves and floor, while one may observe that the table is covered with paper, ink, brushes and pens. The connotations of the scene in this panel are that the apartment is small and its inhabitant is a juvenile slob (an assumption based on the toys and mess), who works as an artist (pens etc.). Julie, the woman in the middle of the room, appears happy to be there, though, as the smile on her face indicates, but the relationship trouble ahead may already be read in the missing head of her boyfriend, which is cut off by the edge of the panel. This may connote his ultimate insignificance to Julie, or even an urge to erase him.

Based on the codes and significations laid out above, I create the following reading of Doucet's short story. In "My New York Diary" by Montreal-based comics artist Julie Doucet, from which the panel is taken, the narrator Julie moves in (rather hurriedly) with a new boyfriend in New York. From the pictures it is clear from the start

that the place is a dump, but Julie does not seem to notice this. Waste and squalor fill the pages of this story, making them dark, hard to decipher, and oppressive. This fits with Julie's life at that time, since she is living with a dead-beat boyfriend, and is not doing much of anything except drugs. She is in fact wasting her time in this apartment, with this boyfriend, and she knows it, but does not act. This becomes visible in images that are crammed with litter, rubbish, and her boyfriend's gadgets. The abundance of these objects may go to support the reading that her boyfriend is immature, which becomes apparent to Julie when he becomes annoyingly needy and clingy towards the end of the story.

The almost obsessive-compulsive representation of *stuff* in Figure 1.3 and the pages of "My New York Diary" generally, also points to another reading: the excessive representation of garbage and knick-knacks on the pages becomes a waste of time in itself. Comics images tend towards a minimum of detail, creating focus on those details that are provided, so that they signify all the more strongly in relation to character or narrative. The excessive amount of detail in Doucet's "My New York Diary" almost overwhelms any possible signification. The excess is especially clear in a detail in Figure 1.3 which shows the shadow of a toy, but a shadow that does not actually match its object: the shadow is wearing a hat and waving the wrong arm (in the top left corner, by the window). Such details do not create the more straightforward kinds of pictorial signification but call for another kind of interpretation. The representational excess comes to signify the pointlessness of Julie's situation. The over-determination of representation after the fact, is compensating for the "idleness" at the time, when she is spinning her

wheels. These details suggest a psychological code, the interpretation of which gives depth to the narrative, while not being directly a narrative code themselves.

The final pages of the story encode the opposite effect of that created by the abundance of detail: they look strikingly different from the early pages, in that they are empty and spare. As Julie records in her diary that she is preparing to move out, leaving her boyfriend and generally sorting out her life both privately and as a comics artist, the pages become clearer and brighter, with less clutter. In the last chapter, "Winter," the pages actually become bare, as the apartment has become an empty space. She is preparing to leave New York and start with a blank slate, in Seattle, where she is resolved not to waste her potential and talent.

With the abundance of detail in the panel in Figure 1.3, it seems hard to identify any lack or omission in Doucet's comics representation. The gap is present in several different ways, however. The style she uses it still clearly abstracted, with for example the cockroaches as simple oval dots with six (or fewer) short stripes attached, or the simplified use of perspective. Furthermore, in this case the difficulty of identifying where exactly the gap is in this image is due to the artist's representation of the protagonist's denial of any lack in her relationship and her life in general. The representation compulsively tries to fill in any hint of something missing. At this point in the story Julie cannot acknowledge a gap in her life: the attempt to eliminate gaps in the visual representation masks the disavowal of the gaps in her personal life.

Reading the Cards

The previous section introduced the subject of the connotative code, which needs to be further examined, since connotation broadens the ways in which images signify well beyond a number of codes that can be easily listed. Connotation, according to Roland Barthes, works on a second level or system of signification. If "any system of significations comprises a plane of expression (E) and a plane of content (C)," then "the signification coincides with the relation (R) of the two planes: ERC" (*Elements* 89). The first system of ERC is the denotative level, which as a whole becomes the expression of the second system, the connotative level: (ERC) RC. Barthes calls the meaning of the second system "at once general, global and diffuse" (91). Connotation is much less definite and definable than denotation. Connotative meaning is cultural, based on general knowledge of history, art, and other contextual elements. This means that connotation is also to some extent personal, because not everyone shares the same knowledge or associations, even within the same culture. Furthermore, Barthes points out that the connotative message does not "exhaust" the denotative message it relies on. Whatever the extra meaning(s) the connotative system adds to a given representation, this representation also still "remains 'something denoted'" (91).

In his essay "Rhetoric of the Image," Barthes continues his discussion of denotation and connotation, although he does not do justice to the drawn image: he does not engage the messages at work in a drawn image, and he too quickly posits that the linguistic message is the clearest message connected to the pictorial image, thereby minimizing any meaning the image itself has. This may be true for the type of image he analyzes, an advertisement made up of a photograph and accompanying captions, but it

does not cover at all the various levels of signification at work in a drawn cartoon and certainly not in the sequential images of comics. However, his points about connotation are relevant: "The connotators do not fill the whole of the lexia, reading them does not exhaust it" (*Image* 50). In other words, any connotations that picture elements may have do not cancel out the denotation. Barthes continues: "not all the elements of the lexia can be transformed into connotators; there always remaining in the discourse a certain denotation without which, precisely, the discourse would not be possible" (ibid.). Any function of the image—symbolic, narrative or otherwise—is anchored by the representationality of the image, even in images that have been highly simplified or abstracted.

Visual representation has always made use of the "staggered systems" of signification, where one system builds on top of another, even if these systems have not always been called denotation and connotation. Erwin Panofsky's iconographical approach to Renaissance art also involves reading images at several levels. Panofsky's representational meaning parallels the denotative system of Barthes' semiotics, while the level of iconographic symbolism is similar to the connotative system. However, in iconography the symbolism is foregrounded, and often specialized knowledge is necessary to read these symbols.

While connotation as a second level of meaning is often only implied, the Renaissance symbols on which Panofsky bases his iconographic readings can be portrayed as *open symbols*, drawing attention to themselves *as* symbols, or can be *disguised symbols* that could initially be taken at face value (van Leeuwen 109). A contemporary example of an open symbol may be the network of roads shaped like a

Swastika that Anya and Vladek face in Spiegelman's *Maus I* (125): Any road they choose is dangerous because of the growing Nazi presence. Disguised symbols are harder to pinpoint, partly because it is often easy to deny that they are in fact meant to be symbolic. In the case of Panofsky's source materials, specific knowledge is often required in order to understand the iconographic symbology displayed in the paintings, since meanings have changed over the centuries. In dealing with contemporary texts, it is not as straightforward to make a distinction between an iconographical reading and a semiotic understanding of the connotations of signs based on experience with the conventions of a particular culture. However, one difference may be that the iconographic meaning tends to be more set, while connotations are more likely to change based on specific context (and individual reader).

Figure 1.4 shows how the comic book *Jack's Luck Runs Out*, by Jason Little, uses symbolic meaning, as well as the connotations of a particular style to add depth to the narrative. The panel shows three people in a car, a young man and woman and an older man. Their hair is flying in the wind and they have little circles around their heads (bubbles) that denote the trio is drunk. The bubbles, an example of the code of comics conventions, help to make this clear because one cannot tell from the facial expressions of the three people, which are blank. In fact, the facial expressions,

Fig. 1.4. Jason Little, *Jack's Luck Runs Out*, pg. 6.

even the angle at which their faces appear don't change throughout the story. This comic draws attention to itself with its formal qualities, especially due to the iconographical symbolism of the representation. Rather than recognizing characters as representing Salome or St Bartholomew, as in Panofsky's Renaissance examples, in "Jack's Luck Runs Out" one will recognize the resemblance of the characters to the royal face cards in a common design of playing cards (Figure 1.5). Iconographically, the representation of the comic refers to the playing cards, and once this link is established, the narrative draws on the connotations of the playing cards and card games.

Fig. 1.5. Bicycle Playing Cards, Jack and King face cards.

The formal qualities of this comic show a strict restraint in the representation of its world, most notably the characters. All the characters have the faces of the face cards in a deck of cards. The character Jack has the face of the jack of diamonds; his girlfriend Gina is represented by the queen of diamonds, and nightclub owner and shady character Rex is the king of spades. Thus the names of these characters symbolically come into play as well. Jack is obviously a jack, Gina is short for Regina, meaning queen, and Rex means king. The representation of the characters as playing cards is formalized in the visuals, in that their faces are always shown in three-quarter view (never full frontal or from the side). The one exception is when they are shown squarely from the back, in

which case the face is not visible at all, only the hair. In this case the symbolic code of the playing cards supersedes other representational codes such as facial expression: the characters do not show any expressions at all. The formal qualities of the playing cards are carried through in the representation of the setting, where they once again interfere with codes that establish representational realism. The setting is represented in a flat way, without shadows and with only minimal indication of perspective. In addition, the use of color in the comic is restricted to red, yellow, blue and black, again the same colors as used in the playing cards. While these elements of the image do not affect the denotation or representational meaning, they do affect interpretation at the iconographic level. Jack, Gina and Rex come to represent roles, values in a deck of cards. In the deck, and in the playing of card games, the use of face cards is regulated by conventions, rules which cannot be broken. This meaning of the cards is underlined by the strict way the representation in the comic adheres to the color scheme and the point of view from which the faces of characters are shown. This text-world is governed by the rules of the card game.

The way the symbolic code in this comic dominates other possible pictorial codes, limiting the vocabulary in the visual register, creates a gap with regards to the pictorial representation: the faces in the comic are unable to express emotion or even identity. Instead, the connotational meaning of the cards fills in what is lacking in terms of representational meaning. With the symbolic reading on the iconographic level, in which the connotations of card decks and card games come into play, the representation in this comic introduces a kind of fatalism into the narrative: Jack took a gamble, and his fate was sealed when he entered the game. While at the end of the comic there is no visual

representation of the shot being fired, and the images do not represent Jack's dead body, the world of the comic is determined by the rules of the card game, where the king always beats the jack. The text unequivocally calls for the reading that Jack is killed by Rex. When king and jack cancel each other out, the queen wins, as Gina gets away with the money.

Source Materials

The graphic novel *Night Fisher* by R Kikuo Johnson draws on a rich variety of sources in the imagery it uses. In doing so, the representation in this comic uses not only the pictorial codes discussed above, but adds an intertextual code, by making the sources of various visual registers significant in relation to the narrative. The panels in this comic quote imagery from geology and math textbooks, criminal records, do-it-yourself guides, photographs, maps and so on, creating an intertextuality that evokes the many disparate discourses in which images are used. In this example (Figure 1.6), two panels are set side

Fig. 1.6. R. Kikuo Johnson, *Night Fisher*, pg. 126.

by side that come from very different representational backgrounds, and share little in common apart from the vegetable that is incorporated in both. The image on the right

appeared once before, earlier in the book (82), when Loren, the book's main character, was in class learning about some of the staple crops of Hawaii. He was distracted then, but the botanical illustrations on slides from his biology or geography class come back to him as he visits a local market some days later. The image on the left shows the same crop being sold at the market, where local (presumably mostly native) Hawaiians shop for food.

The pairing of images, one in the visual register that this comic uses throughout, the other in a scientific register, comes to signify Loren's mental state as he wanders around the market. Loren is not a native of Hawaii and it seems that many of the plants he sees at the market are unfamiliar to him: he recognizes them from the class, not from the personal experience of having eaten them or seen them growing. This mixing of pictorial registers—the objective, scientific depiction of the Kalo plant with more informal observations from Loren's point of view at the market in the panel on the left—work together to give a sense of Loren's feelings of alienation on the island, as well as of the pressure he feels as a high school senior who is expected to do well in school. Even a ramble to clear his head becomes a learning experience in which knowledge is reviewed and stored. Like the connotative code, the intertextual code is a second level code that builds on the denotational level but does not destroy the denotation. An awareness of the various iconographical traditions and intertextual sources evoked in this graphic novel, and a knowledge of how they are used in society, help create a deeper understanding of the main character Loren.

The connection between the two panels in Figure 1.6 is never made explicit. The pairing creates a gap of meaning that creates a tension in the text. The text offers a way to

connect the images and resolve the tension, because the second panel is a direct repetition from page 82. However, this connection is not made explicitly by the images, making this an example of a writerly text.[35] The key to the way the two images signify together is available but not explicitly so; they are laid out together on the page to indicate their connection. The juxtaposition of the two visual registers (one comics narrative, the other scientific illustration), warrants reading the two panels as a single signifying unit where the lack of meaning in each individual panel is filled in by what is represented in the other one.

Story Code

The examples above have attempted to show that single panels from a graphic novel are deceptively simple in terms of what and how they signify. These images contain numerous codes, from codes to do with the drawing itself, such as line work, perspective, and color, to codes linked to the represented world, such as material objects, body language and gestural codes. These codes create with what is directly denoted in the panels, such as "a woman standing in a room," or "three people driving in a car." Symbolic codes and intertextual codes add another layer of signification, building connotations on top of the purely denotational signification, and bringing in meanings that are not made visible in a straightforward way. To this we must add two more forms of signification that cannot be represented directly in single static images, but that are at work nonetheless. These are the narrative and the temporal codes.

Usually, each individual panel shows a moment in time. The particularity of the moment portrayed in individual panels encodes narrativity: the moment that is shown is

[35] See *S/Z* by Roland Barthes for a discussion of writerly and readerly texts.

unfinished. It asserts itself as a fragment of a larger whole. This whole is a continuing narrative, no matter how simple. As a result, one panel inevitably creates a pull to surrounding images in order to fulfill the narrative potential of the single comics image. The first panel of figure 1.1, for example, sets up a question that needs answering. The specificity of the moment in the comics panel represents a gap: it shows that what came before and what came after are omitted and makes the lack of those moments felt. In *Visual Thinking* Rudolf Arnheim writes: "A pictorial image presents itself whole, in simultaneity" (249). He contrasts the pictorial with the literary image:

> A successful literary image grows through what one might call accretion by amendment. Each word, each statement, is amended by the next into something closer to the intended total meaning. This build-up through the stepwise change of the image animates the literary medium. (249-250)

The "stepwise change" that Arnheim mentions enters comics in the use of sequences of panels.[36] However, even the single pictorial image, simultaneous as it may lay before a reader's eyes, allows for some of the stepwise animation that Arnheim describes. The "wholeness" that Arnheim ascribes to the pictorial image is in fact problematic at two levels. When he says the image presents itself in "simultaneity," this implies it can be taken in all at once, which is not the case. Pictorial images are scanned and require reading, just as literary images do. Furthermore, the image often implies other, unrepresented, moments. Thus again, the image is not whole, at least not in the sense of being complete.

This section addresses the incompleteness of the pictorial image, because it is through that very incompleteness or lack, that narrative and temporality are inscribed into the image. The means by which narrative and time have been inserted into pictures have

[36] See Chapter 3.

often been established long ago, and are not always intuitive. They are conventional codes that we have learned to read, and that are now being applied in the comics image. The encoding of time and narrative within the visual image is not unique to the comics image, but an inherent quality of pictorial representation. As such, some of this discussion of temporal and narrative codes deals with other forms of pictorial art.

In his discussion of sequential art, Will Eisner makes a distinction between illustrations and visuals. He says that "visuals," the most developed form of sequential art, create narrative by themselves, because they "replace a descriptive passage told only in words" (127-8). The "illustration" only "reinforces (or decorates) a descriptive passage" (128). This implies that an illustration, or even an image that is not part of a sequence, cannot convey a narrative or even the passage of time. However, I argue that even single images, and what Eisner calls illustration, contain codes that allow them to imply narrative and the passage of time, even if the image does not create a complete narrative, because it cannot actually show change over time.[37]

The Illusion of Time

There is a long history of adding illustrations to established texts, and in this tradition the illustrated bible may be the most constant form. In his book *Words, Script and Pictures* Meyer Schapiro discusses the conventions of illustrated texts, and some of the complications of combining text, especially sacred text, with images. He points out first of all that the images will inevitably remind us of the story to be read even before we read the words. The picture brings the story to mind, supports it, *illustrates* it. But the pictures do more than that, and here Schapiro appears to contradict himself. He writes:

[37] See Chapter 5 for a definition and fuller discussion of narrative.

> The text is often so much fuller than the illustration that the latter seems a mere token, like a pictorial title: one or two figures and some attribute or accessory object, seen together, will evoke for the instructed viewer the whole chain of actions linked in that text with the few pictured elements. (12)

Schapiro points out that the text in medieval bibles is much more detailed, much "fuller" than the images. However, he also acknowledges that from the single image the whole narrative may be brought to mind, which shows that the potential of narrativity, even in a single image, is immense. Schapiro writes: "But the meaning of such reductive imagery may be rich in connotations and symbolized values not evident from the basic text itself"(12). Is the picture reductive or rich? Schapiro seems to want to privilege the written word in these bibles, making the illustrations only secondary, much like Barthes did with his advertising image.

Schapiro's subsequent argument and my previous examples show that the imagery of pictures has ways of adding to the narrative of the text (whether this is a verbal or pictorial text). Schapiro gives the example of the story of Cain and Abel. The biblical text omits any mention the weapon with which Cain killed his brother, but medieval illustrations often showed a weapon (a stone, branch or club) giving specificity where the biblical text was open (14). In such cases one could say the illustrations only add in a descriptive, not in a narrative way, but Schapiro also notes the symbolic meaning the pictures often had. Especially if one was sensible to these symbolic meanings, "an artist could add a detail or two suggesting ideas that were not part of traditional exegesis and even at times in flagrant deviation from the text"(22), for example, by making stories in the Old Testament foreshadow those in the New. In this way mere illustrations were able to add meanings to the narrative (which become clear especially in an iconographical reading).

The images discussed by Schapiro thus far imply narratives and add detail, but do not necessarily create narrative themselves. To find narration within images in Shapiro's work, we must turn to his discussion of images that themselves incorporate text. He mentions the practice of representing figures holding scrolls, as in a depiction of the last temptation of Christ. Both Christ and the devil hold and cross scrolls in a series of images (160). Narrativity enters here not only in the seriality, but also in the scrolls themselves. The scrolls encode the act of speaking. These rolls are inscribed with the words Christ and the devil exchange in the debate; the words of both speakers are visible simultaneously, but since the two figures presumably are not talking over each other, the rolls give the image a certain duration. Schapiro notes that these scrolls are "a purely artistic device to express an ongoing dialogue of opposed wills without defining a more particular content"(159, 163). He points out that these words are not legible from the point of view of the figures within the images; they are oriented towards the reader and thus "[i]t is the sign for *speech* recognized as such rather than the internal viewer's reading of the written word that matters. *Word* and figure are juxtaposed here"(163). As Schapiro points out, the scrolls are *signs*, signifying something beyond mere pieces of vellum. The scrolls and banners that Schapiro discusses are a very early form of what in comics evolved into the word balloon. [38] As a result of the encoded speech, these images also portray action over time. Time is signified in the length of the rolls which, in the words they bear, iconically represent a speaking over time.

The coded nature of these temporal and narrative signifiers is even clearer in the examples Schapiro gives of images with rolls that are blank: in one case the scroll is a long strip held by a king, a bishop and an abbot, then continuing in the hands of a monk

[38] See Chapter 4 for a discussion of word balloons and the incorporation of text in comics more broadly.

below them(167). This time the actual words of the conversation are not represented, but the length of the roll signifies the duration of this conversation that connects the three prominent figures and is witnessed by the monk. Schapiro observes that the monk "seems to see and hear what is going on above"(165). The use of the progressive form "is going on," indicating the duration, illustrates how narrativity has entered this image. In his investigation of visual language, Schapiro mostly restricts himself to images from the Middle Ages. Narrativity is not his concern and he does not refer to it, but clearly, the potential to *tell* stories and not just to illustrate them is already present. However, the Middle Ages is a time when according to E.H. Gombrich, art was expressly *not* narrative.

In *Art and Illusion*, Gombrich tracks how Western art has become increasingly realistic until into the 19th century. However, he complicates the idea of realism by explaining how Renaissance perspectivalism is really as much a convention as the earlier, more schematic, styles in art. In fact, perspective is a code we have come to see as natural. If we see Renaissance and later art as "realistic," this is mainly because these styles have been able to convey an *illusion* of realism that we have learned to accept. Gombrich traces the rise of the realist style to what he calls the Greek revolution (during the sixth century B.C), when representation went from stiff and mask-like to what we consider life-like. He writes: "In the whole history of Western art we have this constant interaction between narrative intent and pictorial realism"(131). The two go together, he says, although Gombrich points out that it is impossible to tell which came first: did art become realistic to tell stories, or did it begin to tell stories once it became realistic. In any case the change of the Greek Revolution was not permanent. In the early Byzantine

period "the achievements of Greek illusionism were gradually discarded" (144) and did not resurface until the Italian Renaissance.

According to Gombrich, the "illusionistic" style of painting, whether Ancient Greek or Renaissance, succeeded in adding time and space to the image. Before the Greek Revolution and during the Middle Ages, the "image was [not] asked the questions of how and when: it was reduced to the what of impersonal recital"(ibid.). Gombrich points out that older Greek paintings and sculptures, and Medieval icons and illuminations, have a timeless quality and a flatness to them. Byzantine art "somehow partakes of the nature of a Platonic truth;"(145) it cannot be "conceived as free 'fiction'"(ibid.) as Renaissance art can. With that, the notion of narrative enters the scene once more. The functioning of pictorial realism in art gives the image a specificity in time and space, so that we can "see it as a sign referring to an outer, imagined reality"(139), which cuts the spectator off from the timelessness and universality of earlier art.[39]

Gombrich refers to Renaissance and post-Renaissance art as narrative art: it sets a scene which implies a narrative, with a pre-history and some kind of continuation, but one could argue that such paintings are actually more an illustration (in Eisner's terms) than a narration of a story. This is supported by the fact that so much (post)Renaissance art depicts scenes from stories, be they biblical or mythical. Like Schapiro's biblical icons, these paintings bring the complete story to mind with a single scene, but besides visual detail they do not add to or develop the narrative. In many cases, since they represent such a specific moment in a story, they even lack duration, so that arguably, although these paintings possess narrativity, it is no stronger or weaker than the

[39] The close relation between realism and narrative intent in art may also explain why narrative and temporal codes in pictorial images are often one and the same: the two stem from the same impulse.

narrativity of Medieval art. Time is implied, in that the scene clearly has a "before and after," which also implies the narrative of the scene. Such images do not display a sign system that signifies time or narrative, unlike the scrolls Schapiro discusses or the images in the following paragraphs.

In an essay called "Narrative and Narrativity: A Narratological Reconceptualization and its Applicability to the Visual Arts," Werner Wolf evaluates the various degrees to which images may be narrative. He posits:

> What most scholars have in mind when using the terms 'narrative' or 'narrativity' in discussions of pictures is still either the reference by means of a visual representation to some literary narrative, or the representation of any kind of action in a picture, as opposed to static, descriptive images, but hardly ever the *representation of a story proper*. (180)

Wolf recognizes a signifying system by which time and narrative are encoded within images, though he does not discuss them in semiotic terms. He distinguishes three different ways in which images may be narrative and in which time enters the picture. He claims that in order for a painting to be narrative or to induce the viewer to "narrative activity," "the representation of some experiential agent and at least the suggestion of, or reference to, a temporal dimension in the represented world are minimal requirements"(192).

Wolf assigns the lowest level of narrativity to pictures that have a "narrative reference" (193). Most of what Gombrich calls "narrative art" falls into this category, since this is art representing an agent in the form of "anthropomorphic beings" and a reference to a script (an existing narrative), but which lacks duration or "temporal experience." They therefore fit Eisner's definition of illustration, and these images do not contain any temporal or narrative code.

The second level is comprised of "monophase" pictures (190). These are paintings which show a single, "frozen" moment, but because the action that is represented in the picture is paused at a crucial moment in the narrative that is implied in the picture itself, it evokes a "tendential or quasi-narrative" (193). Wolf argues that in such a case it is left to the viewer to form the narrative that frames the moment shown in the picture. He uses Jan Steen's *Het Sint Nicolaasfeest* (the Festival of St. Nicholas) as an illustration of a monophase narrative painting, since this work does not depict an existing story but it contains enough varied elements (a crying boy, a laughing child and a man waving to something outside of the picture frame) that it implies a story.

The type of image that Wolf calls "monophase," incorporates narrative and temporal codes in several ways, building on other pictorial signs. Like connotation, temporal and narrative codes tend to be second level signifiers, building on other signs. In Wolf's example *Het Sint Nicolaasfeest*, signs of time and narrativity are inserted through the use of pregnant moments. Actions are represented at a moment of tension, such as the crying boy and the waving man. The body language shows actions captured in mid-moment. Besides representing the action (the first level of signification), the body language also signifies time (the second level), by implying the moments before and after the represented pose. In creating a sense of time and action, the body language of these figures also signifies simple narrative: something happened to make the boy cry, someone left after whom the man is waving. In this case the specifics of this narrative are left unrepresented, but the signs encoding the possibility of narrative are there, and those same signs are utilized in comics.

Wolf's third level of narrative imagery includes the "multiphase picture," (190) in which a single painting includes several distinct scenes from a single story, thus showing more than one moment in time within its space. This practice, common in the middle ages, results in a "strong" narrative (as opposed to the "weak" narrative of monophase painting) even if it necessarily loses pictorial realism. The type of image that Wolf labels "multiphase" contains a clear narrative code. The repetition of a particular figure signifies that the image shows several moments in the protagonists life, several episodes from a narrative. Repetition as a signifier for ongoing action or narrative is also commonly used in comics.

Double Time

The comics image applies the narrativity of the single image in different ways. Upcoming chapters will discuss the narrativity that results from combining numerous panels into sequences. The present examples, from Craig Thompson's *Good-bye, Chunky Rice*, show how time and narrative are present as signs in single comics images.

Fig. 1.7. Craig Thompson. *Goodbye, Chunky Rice*, n.p.

Figure 1.7 literally shows the figure of Solomon, the man with the cap, repeated three times, and through narrative coding this signifies not that there are triplets coming out of the house carrying boxes, but that the panel shows three moments in time. Solomon is represented 1-coming through the door; 2-walking down the steps; and 3-putting the cardboard box on the ground. The pillars of the porch more or less separate each point in the action, giving the illusion of separate frames, which heightens the illusion of time passing in this panel.

This narrative code based on repetition signifies by convention, not resemblance, since we never actually see several moments at the same time. Another conventional code, for time rather than narrative, was briefly introduced in the discussion of figure 1.2. Panel 2 of the *Peanuts* strip contains motion lines behind Charlie Brown's head. These lines are a common feature in comics panels (see for example figures 3.1 and 4.9). The motion lines signify movement and thus are another way of encoding time into the single static panel.

Fig. 1.8. Thompson, n.p.

The next illustration (Figure 1.8) shows an even greater expanse of time represented within a single panel, and more importantly, a larger stretch of narrative. This panel shows adult Solomon as he is talking to Chunky Rice, but he is holding the dog he had as a child,

and he is surrounded by the setting of the past where his father is just walking into the garage to tell young Solomon they'll have to drown the dog's puppies. Solomon still suffers from the memory of that event, and the fusing of the present and the past into the one panel shows the immediacy of the memory to him. The visible presence of the dog and the father, figures from his childhood, signify that though Solomon is represented in his present-day appearance, the rest of the panel shows a scene from the distant past. In this case the narrativity of the image is reinforced by the word balloons, but the image still calls for that connection to be made, for the visual signs of time in this single image to be recognised.

Werner Wolf reserves the strongest form of narrativity for the series of representations, "provided they depict at least two temporally and causally connected phases of a specific, non-iterative action and contain some uncertain, suspenseful telos centred on anthropomorphic beings" (192). This introduces the sequential image, or what Eisner calls the "visual." The series of representations is the strongest form of narrative, according to Wolf, because of the presence of time, space and juxtaposition that the "meaningful *series* of representations" allows (ibid.). The series or sequence of representations is precisely what creates the narrative impact in comics, where panels are juxtaposed across the space of the pages. Like the temporal code of repetition in what Wolf calls the multiphase picture, the panels on the comics page also create a repetition that signifies time passing and action commencing. This will be discussed in Chapter 3.

In his philosophical analysis of the comics form David Carrier too is concerned with how images create a sense of time, how they narrate. He says that in order to make sense of a pictorial narrative, the reader or viewer must be able to

"move" the images. Carrier introduces this term in his essay "Comics and the Art of Moving Pictures: Piero della Francesca, Hergé and George Herriman." He writes: "To understand a picture, we must *move* the depicted scene. My idiosyncratic use of the verb 'move' alludes elliptically to the way that we must know what has just happened or what will happen next" (327). It is possible to *move* a single picture like *Het Sint Nicolaasfeest*, or like the Thompson panel in figure 1.7, due to the codes for time and narrative present in these images. Applying the practice of *moving* to images in comics illustrates that "[i]t is natural to relate comics to the history of narrative pictures, for their image sequences permit moving scenes which otherwise would be as indecipherable as modernist masterpieces" (ibid). Carrier points out that even without the use of text, comics imagery "develops a lucid visual narrative. Two images already constitute a narrative for their meaning is inscribed in the succession" (ibid), once again introducing sequentiality as the basis for the strongest form of narrative, though not denying that the single image contains a certain amount of narrativity as well.

The narrative potential of the single comics image is amplified by the lack of distraction from unnecessary, or rather insignificant, details. There is a concentration of signification in comics panels, such as for example the *Peanuts* strip in figure 1.1: the image is spare, but any visible sign is to be taken as significant. The combination of lack and concentration, abstraction that calls for focus on what is there, help to increase the momentum to move from one panel to the next, to fill the gap in time and narrative left by the single image and to begin reading meaning in the sequence.

Picture Theory

Comics invite the reader to approach the process of signification in these sequences from the point of view of the text: the visual and verbal information that is given on the page. In looking for signification one deals partly with information that is based on resemblance, on mimesis, and can be interpreted on that basis. Other images are coded and conventional, but what makes comics interesting is that their signification is often based on codes that establish their signification within the comic itself, signifying by conventional according to the terms of that particular text. Richard Watts, in his essay "Comic Strips and Theories of Communication," argues that a certain amount of signification in comics does not fit the "narrow semiotic model of information transference" (173). Reading and interpreting comics, according to Watts, is to a large degree based on semiotic codes, but since comics generally contain more visual information than verbal, readers will resort to non-demonstrable inferences when necessary to make sense of non-coded visual information. Readers make these inferences on the basis of relevance (176), combined with the assumption that the visual information is ostensive (intentionally meaning something), finally supported by the linearity convention (177). Watts suggests readers must infer what the author's intentions were for particular iconic representations (179). Rather, since intentions can never be known, and since, in fact, the text may not actually perform the way the author intended, I would revise that statement to suggest one rely on what is in evidence on the page. Due to the mixed nature of comics communication—some of it coded, some of it mimetic (iconic) and some of it a blend of the two—it seems to make most sense to decode where possible

and beyond that to approach implication and elision themselves as part of the signifying process of comics.

The process of reading comics in order to glean the narrative from them is often taken for granted or considered to be transparent. This can be observed in Eco's essay "A Reading of Steve Canyon,"[40] where Eco analyzes how the character of the series' protagonist is established in the very first installment of the strip, based on his looks and his actions: suspense is raised by keeping Canyon's face hidden until panel 6, and Eco pays close attention to details of dress and body language. But in order to determine the actions that take place in this strip, he relies heavily on the dialogue that the page provides, and spares hardly a word for the other dimensions that establish what Canyon is doing on this page: the images and the sequence. The sequence (20) shows Canyon leaving his apartment building and walking to his office, where his secretary has a call waiting for him that will result in his next assignment and thus his first recorded adventure. While this sequence does indeed display a lot of explanatory dialogue, Eco's approach to semiotics makes him privilege the linguistic code in this strip, and also causes him to rely on other recognized semiological codes like dress. For him the other aspects of the visual representation seem to be transparent because they are representational. However, as Chapter One demonstrated, the fact that objects and characters in comics images are to some degree representational does not stop them from signifying in other ways as well. Mimetic images can and do also hold coded meanings in relation to the narrative. As Barthes points out in reference to Literature in "Myth Today," comics are a metalanguage which take the sign of the first chain, the image, as the signifier in the second chain of signification. He states: "I defined writing as the

[40] In Wagstaff, Sheena, ed. *Comic Iconoclasm*. London: ICA, 1988. 20-25.

signifier of the literary myth, that is as a form which is already filled with meaning and which receives from the concept of Literature [or in this case, Comics] a new signification" (*Mythologies* 134).

The spatial juxtaposition of two images portraying different moments in time is enough to make comics tell a story. This impulse that even individual images create, the impulse to be *moved*, is one final way in which single comics panels signify. It may thus also explain the difficulty of extracting panels out of their narrative context to discuss them: the impulse to move them and leave their connections to the narrative they are a part of intact is very strong. As Christian Metz writes in *Film Language*:

> If the shot is not the smallest unit of filmic *signification* (for a single shot may convey several informational elements), it is at least the smallest unit of the filmic chain... One cannot conclude, however, that every minimum filmic segment is a shot. Besides shots, there are other minimum segments, *optical devices*—various dissolves, wipes, and so on—that can be defined as visual but not photographic elements. (106)

The same principle applies to comics: the panel is smallest unit in the chain, or rather the sequence, but the single panel contains a whole range of "informational elements." Many of these elements are pictorial and denotational, with added signification through connotation, symbolic meaning, intertextuality or narrativity. Some of the informational elements however are purely formal and rather than relating to the pictorial content of the panel they create the signification of the function of the panel. These informational elements will be the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2 Concerning the In-Between

Layout in Frames and Gutters

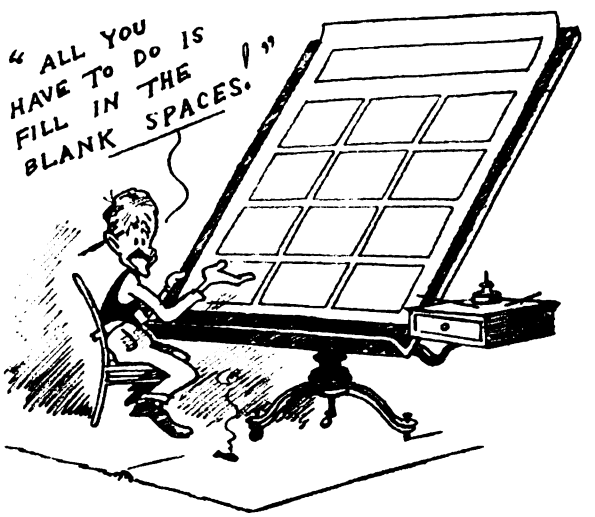

Fig. 2.1. Fontaine Fox in Brian Walker, p. 69.

This chapter is a bridge between two levels of reading: the images in comics that were discussed in Chapter 1, and the comics sequences that will follow in Chapter 3. The subject of the present chapter is the formal, structuring elements that tie images into sequences and create the conditions under which the comics images signify beyond the contents of each individual picture, while the image sequence still allows for panels to exist as individual entities, not merely ciphers in a more important string. This chapter fills the gap between image and sequence, just as the subject matter of this chapter—panels, frames, layout—creates a gap while at the same time establishing the means to close it.

The cartoonist in the self-caricature in Figure 2.1 points out the importance of panels, panel borders and layout in comics: once the layout is there, all that is left for the cartoonist to do is to fill in the blanks. This is humorous exaggeration of course, but it does introduce the importance of the formal elements of the page, informational elements that have little to do with pictorial representation—the stuff that will go inside of the empty boxes. Furthermore, Fox's caption also highlights the double meaning that the term "blank spaces" has in comics: the cartoonist is talking about filling in the empty panels neatly laid out on his page, but the work of reading a comic strip also involves mentally filling in the blank spaces *between* the panels. That is the work of reading the sequence, which I will discuss in the next chapter. The present chapter deals with the functions of the frames, borders and spaces that create the structural layout of the page and how they set up the conditions that create the sequence out of the individual images that were discussed in the previous chapter.

Panel Discussion

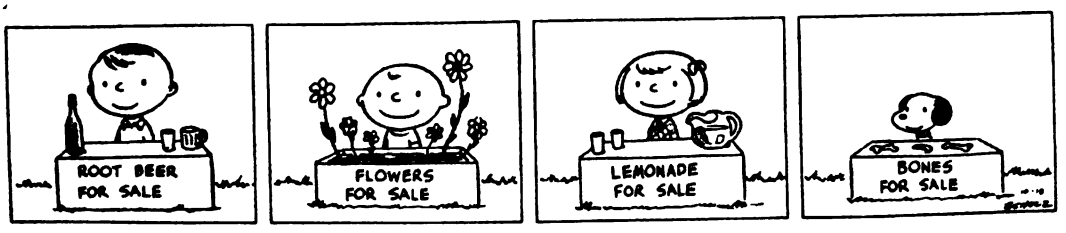

Fig. 2.2. Schulz, pg. 5.

This *Peanuts* strip shows the basic elements this chapter deals with: panels, frames and gutters. This strip is made up of four panels. The panels can contain images, as is the case here, text, a combination of the two, or they can even be empty. Basically, the panel is the space surrounded by the frame. Figure 2.2 has four frames, in this case

each a simple, single-line rectangle. Finally there is the space outside of the panels, which is also delineated by the frames. Between the panels, the frames create gutters, essentially empty space or gaps on the page. The function of the gutters is to separate the panels and articulate them: the panels are set up as individual entities or syntagms, which are at the same time connected to the surrounding panels due to the power of the intervening gaps.

Panels, by means of frames and gutters, combine together on the comics page to create a synergy that goes beyond the content of the single panel and makes something new. That is the most general function of panels, frames and gutters. Through this function, the contents of individual panels—images which signify by resemblance or a code such as gesture, or temporality, or color—become significant in relation to the other panels and their content. Together, panels, frames and gutters signify that panels need to be considered not just by themselves but in relation to the other panels. How exactly those connections are to be made is dictated by the way the panels are spread across the page, by the shape of the panels and the frames, and by the look of the gutters. Those elements together make up the layout of the comics page, so that, in other words, the layout establishes the conditions for the reading.

Figure 2.2 shows a very simple four-panel layout.[41] Due to the accompanying four frames and three gutters, Schulz's four panels establish separation and contrast, allowing focus on each individual child and his or her table. In this case, the panels' contents—the repetition of the composition of the images with the children and their

[41] Eric Berlatsky, in his essay "Lost in the Gutter," rather idiosyncratically uses "breakdown" as "a term used to refer to the arrangement of panels without their accompanying content" (180). However, the term is more often used to refer to the distribution of the action across a series of panels, as in Eisner (*Comics* 128). To avoid confusion between the two forms of "breakdown," I will use the term "layout" when concentrating on the placement of panels on the page rather than their content. Charles Hatfield also refers to the layout as "surface," pointing to the tension that exists in comics between narrative sequence and page surface (48).

booths—works in tandem with the simple repetition of frame and gutter shape. As each frame is articulated by itself, the four panels take on significance in relation to each other. They may or may not all represent the same time frame (a summer day?), and they may or may not all represent the same setting (one street or a neighbourhood?). The four separate frames relate these panels to one another, creating the statement that this is what children do on a nice day. But the frames also make each panel unique. It says that the booth that each child runs is particularly suited to that child. The repetition in the layout and change over the course of the first three panels sets up the "punch line" in the final panel: Of course Snoopy would sell bones, he is a dog; but hang on, dogs don't run booths! Snoopy's doglike/un-doglike behavior, which becomes a source for so many jokes in the *Peanuts* series, is carefully set up in this strip, through the three previous panels and their separation and juxtaposition by frames and gutters.

Layout and contents affect one another profoundly on comics pages: the layout can change how the contents of the panel signify, and the panel contents can alter the signification of the layout. For example, Figure 2.2 has the same layout as most *Peanuts* strips from that period: in all the weekday strips compiling the first three years of his series *Peanuts*, Charles Schulz does not vary the layout of his strip once.[42] But although these 705 strips use a grid identical to the one in Figure 2.2, a strict four-panel breakdown in which each panel is the same size, in Figure 2.2 the repetitive panel layout draws attention to itself more than other strips, due to the repetition within the panels. This is one example of how, within this rigid layout Schulz can create endless variations in the content of the panels, to come up with a new episode for each day of the working week.

[42] All *Peanuts* examples used in this dissertation share the same layout.

Conversely, variations in the layout will alter the signification of the images within the panels. Panel size, as well as the number of panels on the page, can affect what the panel contents mean. Similarly the kind of panel border or frame used, and the shape, size and frequency of the gutter will potentially change the meanings of the images. Although these basic elements can be combined in innumerable ways with countless variations, many artists choose to use fairly stable layouts (though Schulz's extreme regularity is an exception). For full-page comics, layouts with nine to twelve panels spread across three or four tiers are the most common. Of the elements that make up the page, the panel is the most prevalent: layouts can be made with panels that lack frames or identifiable boundary lines; and layouts can be created in which there is no room left for gutters or spaces between panels. Within these variations the illustrated panel is a constant—without it there is no comics page. However, in terms of the function of the layout of the comics page, as it relates to the processes of signification in the comic, the gutter is the most important element.

A Taxonomy of Layouts

Layout, in its malleability, is the difference between comics on the one hand, and film and animation on the other. As Groensteen points out, comics can change the size and shape of the frames it uses at any moment, whereas cinema, or at least in individual films, are always tied to a set aspect ratio (94). The placing and spacing of gutters and frames is a matter of choice in comics, which shows how integral the layout is to the signification, the construction of meaning, of comics. The signifying function in comics are not just based on the signs present in the content of the panels, but very much about

how the panels are arranged on the page and how (and whether) they are framed. The layout, and the gaps that are an integral part of it, are an essential part of comics signification. Gutters and frames give structure to the layout and thus are related to other formal elements of the page such as margins. These are paratextual elements which break the page into a signifying structure and which signal the existence of sequence by creating a progression from panel to panel.

In order to understand the impact of layout, it is useful to look closely at some different layout possibilities. Cartoonists tend to stick to a particular type of layout, a basic page structure for a particular work. Such a basic structure involves the number of panels presented on each page and the informational devices used to separate panels: the presence of frames and gutters, the number of panels and the amount of space around panels. Throughout this discussion it is important to keep in mind the appearance of the page as a whole. The more panels a page has, the more gutters and frames there tend to be to create separation between the panels. The presence of so many gutters signals that there are relations to be made between the panels, even before one starts looking at the content of the panels specifically. Besides the first, most common layout, I have generally broken down the page layouts by the number of panels on the page, to highlight how the signification of the panel contents changes based on page layout.

1. Panels framed by frames, separated by blank space:

This is the most prevalent and probably the most traditional form of laying out a page, perhaps because this layout demonstrates most explicit gutter function. The regular structuring of the page into panels that are separated by gutters to form strips or tiers, and

tiers that are separated by gutters and stacked to fill the page, create a strong sense of sequentiality that draws the page together. The large number of gutters in this type of page layout signal the numerous connections between panels that will be present on the page, pulling the signification within the panel across to other panels, especially when the panels utilize temporal or narrative codes. Although panel size and number are not absolute, pages tend to be divided up into regular units, such as three or four panels per strip, and three strips per page. When Groensteen discusses what panel separation should look like, this is the layout he is talking about and indeed it is the best example of images existing *in praesentia* but separated (by the gutters), the two conditions for iconic solidarity which create sequence and thus narrative (18). Examples of this layout can be found throughout works by Daniel Clowes, Chris Ware, Jason Lutes, Jessica Abel, Sara Varon, Jaime and Gilbert Hernandez, and Scott McCloud. Most of the comics used for analysis in the later chapters employ this layout.

Despite its regularity, variations are possible within this layout. These tend to be made within the parameters of the basic layout, so that for example the size of the strip doesn't change when panel sizes within the strip are changed. In *System of Comics*, Thierry Groensteen discusses some of the effects of variations to the traditional comics layout. He evaluates fellow BD theorist Benoît Peeters' breakdown of layouts into four conceptions: conventional, decorative, rhetorical and productive (93) and finds these too limiting.[43] Instead, Groensteen suggests using a combination of four possibilities: regular and discrete, regular and ostentatious, irregular and discrete, and irregular and ostentatious (98). He says Peeters places too much emphasis on opposition between story

[43] The relevant passages from Benoît Peeters' book *Case, planche, récit: lire la bande dessinée* are available in translation in *ImageText* as "Four Conceptions of the Page: From Case, planche, récit: lire la bande dessinée." Translator Jesse Cohn also contributes a useful critique of Peeters' typology.

and picture (99), which he wants to replace with considerations of artistic project, so that one can see that an ostentatious layout may in fact be rhetorical or productive, rather than decorative, as Peeters' typology would immediately classify it. However, Groensteen's categories say very little about the actual function of the various layouts, using them instead mostly as a starting point for interpretation. After that process of interpretation, Peeters' categories may still be usefully applied to describe the function of a layout. However, a more important problem in their writing is that both their taxonomies work with variations on the conventional layout of numerous panels and frames. As recent North American comics have illustrated, there are many possible page layouts that do not apply that kind of breakdown at all, and the following sections consider the effects of gutters and frames in the signifying processes of some layouts that do not fit the traditional BD framework.

2. One panel per page (with or without frame):

From a formal and structural point of view, the comic with only a single panel on a page is significantly different from those with several panels per page, because the single-panel comic involves a page-turn with every second panel. This layout creates conditions for only minimal gutter function: without gutters to create a draw from one panel to the next, this layout allows for little momentum towards the next image, the next page. This layout demonstrates that, while it is necessary for images to be separated in order to create sequence, this separation should not be too great. The division between panels in this layout is doubly enforced: by the blank page but also by the physical gesture of turning the page. In addition, the chain that links panels is weakened because

only two panels at a time are visible. The panels in this layout seem to stand on their own more, calling for attention as individual works of art, rather than parts of a sequence. Thus the connections between panels, based on composition or repetition, or a pictorial code, are hampered. This layout creates obstacles to the signification of the sequence, if not to that of the individual panel , and reading the sequence for meaning has to become a much more conscious process because it literally involves leafing backwards and forwards through the book. Through its greater presence in the space around the image and the turn of the page, the gutter becomes overdetermined and ceases to work effectively *as* gutter. Examples of this mode of spacing can be found in the work of Jordan Crane (*The Clouds Above*) and Anders Nilsen (*Monologues for the Coming Plague*).

An early example of the one-panel-per-page layout is seen in early twentieth-century silent novels, like those by Frans Masereel and Lynd Ward.[44] These graphic works, which are sometimes seen as important precursors to graphic novels (see Berona), create narratives out of sequences of wordless prints (usually woodcuts, wood engravings or lino cuts). They combined an artist's sensibility of the composition of the image, such as strong light and dark contrasts, with a sense of dramatic storytelling (see Figure 2.3). Giacomo Patri's narrative *White Collar*, from the 1930s, is an example of the silent woodcut novel. The artist called his work a "novel in linocuts" (167). The novel tells the story of a white collar family slowly slipping towards poverty during the depression, as the husband's work as an advertising illustrator brings in less and less income.

[44] Stories by Masereel, Ward, and Patri are collected in George Walker's *Graphic Witness: Four Wordless Graphic Novels*.

Fig. 2.3. Giacomo Patri, *White Collar*, In George Walker pg. 230.

Patri's story follows one particular family in images that portray a sequence of key moments in their life. Among these are buying a home, the closing down of the company the man worked for, looking for work, increasing money problems, the discovery of the wife's pregnancy, getting loans, the decision to give the infant up for adoption, and eviction from their home. All these episodes are particular to this one family. However, the composition of the pages with its single panel gives each panel a weight that makes it signify beyond the particular. The social commentary in this novel, as in Ward's and Masereel's work, comes from the emphasis each image gets in its isolation on the page, as well as their stark black and white contrast. Works such as this one may not be subtle, but they lift the experience of the particular to illustrate more widespread social problems, or even to show universal truths. The experience of the depression that the family in Patri's text undergoes is not an aberration, the page layout states—it is a common occurrence that has effects far beyond their personal lives. This message becomes explicit at the end of the novel when after their eviction the family meets many other people similarly affected by the depression. The last panel shows a mass of people, not just white collar laborers but from many strata, striding towards the viewer with resolve in their faces (289): their individual sufferings have become the seed

for a mass movement, because the individual stories were always shown to be a shared experience.

Besides the arrangement of the panels, layout involves the size of panels and their frames. Like Parti, Eric Drooker also often uses only a single image per page, or even per two-page spread. He follows in the tradition of the wordless novel and explicitly evokes its history in his graphic work, both in terms of the social commentary in its content and the formal qualities of his art. Drooker draws panels using scratchboard, a technique that creates an effect very similar to the woodcuts and engravings familiar from Ward's and Patri's work. His story "Flood" employs a variety of panel sizes, but some of the most striking images cover two whole pages, sometimes with hardly any margins. Here, the size of the panel in relation to the page creates a great expanse of image, giving the panel a sense of movement. This movement is wholly suitable in the context of the narrative, as Drooker's main character is swept into the air by wind gusts, holding on to his umbrella. The movement is supported by the indication of driving rain in these panels, diagonally crossing the page from top left to bottom right. The raindrops emphasize the direction of the eye sweeping across the page, which in turn seems to trace the path of the man hanging on his umbrella. The size of these panels makes the physical involvement of eye movement into the evocation of flight possible. While the panels themselves incorporate a high degree of movement and the illusion of time passing within their monophase imagery, the layout Drooker applies reduces the forward momentum of the text. Due to their size, each panel stands alone, like an individual work of art, minimizing the gutter function and the resulting connection to the subsequent (and previous) panels.

In Renée French's work *Micrographica*, the use of a small size becomes a tactic to engage between the panels and the empty space on the page. This comic shows a single panel in the middle each page. The tiny creatures in each panel are shown in extreme close-up, as if we see them through a microscope. The drawings were originally done in a very small size (about one centimeter square)[45] and then enlarged for the book.

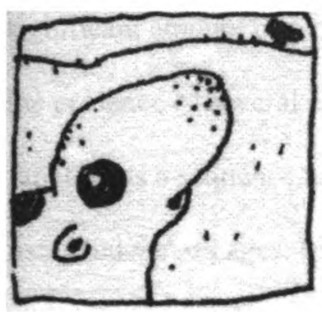

Fig. 2.4. Renee French, *Micrographica*, n.p.

This is opposite to the usual process of cartooning, which is to create pictures on a larger scale and then shrink them in reproduction. The magnification that took place in French's text shows off the pen marks in the drawings. It creates a grain to the images and an unevenness to the lines that give the sense of seeing the world through a microscope: surfaces look rougher than they do at their normal size. This effect is enhanced by the grain of the paper underneath. The paper the book is printed on is fairly smooth itself but has a "grain" printed on in a light grey suggestion of a rough surface. Although the pages are completely covered with this effect, the grain is much more noticeable in the areas around the panels (gutters and margins) than within the panels. The grain in this text highlights the space that surrounds the panels on the page, and creates the sense that the panel seems to have a separate existence from the page. The grain separates page and panel, so the panel can be read as a window to elsewhere—the text world—surrounded by gutters or margins that are not part of the text world but are part of our world, where we feel them in our hands as part of the paper object of the book. This impression is especially strong in texts with only one panel

[45] One of the final pages of the book (there is no pagination) shows a panel from the book next to a US postage stamp on a sheet of [hashed] paper to give the scale of the original drawings: the panel is about half the size of the stamp, or about a centimeter square.

per page, since such texts often employ wider margins and because the materiality of the text is emphasized by the frequent turning of pages necessary to read the book.

3. Several panels per page:

Like the previous one, this layout too has panels that are surrounded by a significant amount of empty page on all sides and the panels do not form strips. However, the presence of several panels on a single page is different because the panels can function as a sequence within the single page. Sequence is now no longer dictated by recto and verso pages. In the Patri novel, panels automatically got the emphasis as a work of art of being shown in isolation, elevating the image to art with universal importance; in French's work the page created a concentration on the panel into an almost scientific observation under a loupe. By contrast, with several panels present on each page, gutters appear explicitly: they are present as actual spaces between panels, no longer margins that function as gutters. The interplay between panels begins to function, and the material page, whether as the move across the crease or the page turn, becomes less important. One example of this layout can be seen in Renee French's *The Ticking*, which varies its page layouts between one panel in the middle of the page and two panels arranged horizontally above one another. Recto and verso pages facing each other thus contain between two and four panels.

A strict page layout of this type can be used to signify routine, to amplify the narrative created within the panels. Jordan Crane in *The Last Lonely Saturday* uses a fixed layout with two panels arranged vertically on each page. The panels form a regular pattern on the pages that never varies once in the entire text. As with the panel isolated on

the page, these two panels per page becomes a rigid structure as the story progresses. The inescapable structure of the page comes to echo the strict routine of the old man in the story as he goes through his daily chores, writing letters to his dead wife and visiting her grave one Saturday a month. The plodding movement from panel to panel that the layout provides becomes emphasized because this comic barely uses speech balloons, which tend to break the rhythm of the page as well as establish a different sense of time in a comic. The almost complete absence of speech balloons draws attention to the regularity of the page layout, while it also foregrounds the old man's loneliness. In fact, three out of the six speech balloons present in the text occur in a flashback: the old man's memory of giving his wife to be flowers for the first time. The silence, combined with the sense of plodding through life evoked by the standardized panel distribution on the page makes it a relief when the old man's dead wife comes for him, ensuring that this Saturday's visit to the cemetery is his last one. The eight pages after the final panel that reads "Fin" show leaves and pages of letters fluttering across the pages, which are now clear of panels. The layout has allowed the images to break free from the regular panels, just as the old man's spirit has broken free from his routine existence.

The graphic novel *The Playboy*, by Chester Brown, uses a layout with very few panels per page to foreground the narrative's personal and memoiristic nature. Brown's panels are set in a black background, varying between one, two and three panels per page (Figure 2.5) The panels are bordered by strong frames—a thick white line surrounding a thick black line—and the effect of the loose distribution of the panels across the page, sometimes with overlapping corners, is that of an album of photographs.

Fig. 2.5. Chester Brown, *The Playboy*, pg. 166.

The layout's allusion to photo albums enhances the memoiristic nature of the narrative (recalling the author's teenage years in the 1970s), and at the same time creates the sense of being a voyeur into Brown's very personal narrative, as he discovers and explores his sexual urges. If these are photographs, the layout implies, they show moments their subjects would surely want to keep very private indeed. But this uncomfortable candidness is one of the typical qualities of Brown's very confessional work, which is compelling and repulsive at the same time.

The only things that escape the frames in this text are speech balloons, which habitually cut across panel borders, and a little demon figure who is identified on page two as "Chester Brown, world famous cartoonist." This "demon," a representation of Brown with reptilian wings, acts as narrator throughout the text, providing a kind of voice-over. His commentary as he watches young Chester masturbate over Playboy magazine eradicates the need to provide thought balloons for Chester, so that the teenager remains inscrutable throughout: his thoughts are never communicated directly, only through the narrating Brown. The demon appears within panels, but also often floats on the page around the panels. As the narrator, he is extraneous to the panels and their photo album qualities, as is the representation of words spoken in these panels, which so

frequently move outwards into the marginal space around the panels. In this text, the seemingly nonchalant layout of panels arranged irregularly on the pages enact the different ways in which we have access to the past: on the one hand through artifacts and memorabilia like photographs (and old *Playboy* magazines) and on the other hand through recollection, which the narrating demon figure and the billowing speech balloons represent in their contrast to the photograph-like panels.

4. Frameless panels:

This layout often employs relatively few panels per page, which ensures they are surrounded by a lot of blank space and keeps the separative function of the gutter intact despite the absence of the formal frame (Groensteen 43). The space works as the gutter, even though the gutter is not explicitly articulated by bordering lines. One particularly clear example of the frameless panel layout can be found in Tom Gauld's "Move to the City" (Bell and Sinclair 79). This one-page comic shows two little black figures on top of a mountain (recognizable because in the first panel one figure says to the other: "It's amazing up here"). The page shows the mountain top six times, with minimal variation in the positions of the two men. The peak of the mountain is blurred into white around the spot where one would expect the frame of the panel to be. Due to this blurring and the lack of any formal frames, the frameless panels in a white field in this text signify a mountain surrounded by clouds which the two men have climbed through on their way to the top. Here the margins and the gutters of the layout do not limit the panels; the white space of the page becomes incorporated as part of the image, as the cloudscape surrounding the mountain top, giving the page an understated humor.

Will Eisner's *Contract with God* uses a layout of unframed panels intermingled with framed throughout, which is quite common with this category of layout. It is rare to see a comic rely entirely on frameless panels alone. With the four stories in *Contract with God* Eisner is embarking in a new direction in comics, and it is significant that frameless panels should be so ubiquitous in this work. With these stories Eisner was breaking free from established comics traditions, most notably the mainstream comic book tradition that he had himself been a major part of with his series *The Spirit*. Traditional comics tended to be clearly structured, often as formulaic in layout as in plot, and institutionalized as an industry. The prevalence of frameless panels in *Contract with God* shows Eisner ridding himself of boundaries, not only in relation to the comics industry but also formally on the page. The frameless panels in the text have the effect of opening up the page as spaces bleed into each other. With the absence of formal frames and gutters the draw from panel to panel is reduced. The weakened gutter function slows down narrative pacing and makes the look of the page more organic.

In *Black Orchid*, artist Dave McKean often uses a layout with frameless panels larger than the remaining, framed, panels on the page. The frameless panels often "continue" on behind the framed panels, making them in a sense the backdrop to the rest of the page, as on page 110. Here, the first panel becomes the background for the entire page. The frameless panel that runs off the page is both framed and frameless, since it is bordered by the edges of the page, by the hyperpanel itself. However, in relation to the other panels on the page this panel is unframed and takes on a new kind of connection with those panels: since the panel is still there around, almost "under" the other panels, the moment represented in the panel endures as one reads the other panels, like the sound

of a bell, the ring of which hangs in the air after it has been struck. In *Black Orchid* the frameless panels that double as background resonate with the other images, modulating those separated panels as they come through in the gutters surrounding these remaining panels.

Black Orchid has no page numbers on the pages where a frameless panel spreads across the whole page. In the same way a panel is not quite of or on the material page, but can seem to be a window *through* the page, so the background shaped by the frameless panel does not function like the material page and doesn't hold pagination, refusing to take on that paratextual function. On page 68, the bottom left-hand quarter of the page is taken up by a close-up on a man's face. His face is distorted in shock as he shouts out "Aaah!" in alarm. The borderless panel in which this close-up appears spreads on behind the other panels as in the previous example. In this case, however, the panel does not resonate with the surrounding framed panels in the same way. Instead, the shock infects the other panels, imbuing the whole page with a sense of tension and fear, even before the moment this panel takes in the sequence. Frameless panels tend to be less anchored in time than framed panels. While they have a specific place in the sequence, their lack of boundaries allows for a shifting and, especially in cases such as these where frameless panels connect to the whole rest of the page in the background, the unmoored moments that these frameless panels represent spread out, either stretching the moment represented or stretching the emotions and atmosphere that are represented in the panel. Such panels do not signify straightforwardly within the sequence, disrupting the narrative flow and creating emotional tension instead.

5. Grids:

These panels are separated by lines only, not by gutter space between the lines: the lines dividing up the page form a grid. Sometimes, as in Rebecca Dart's *Rabbit Head*, gutters separate tiers, but panels within tiers are only bounded by framing lines. The gutterless grid signifies in different ways, depending on the text it is applied in. Jason Kieffer, in the minicomic *Downtown Toronto*, experiments with various kinds of layout, also including diagrams and insets, but the main form of layout he employs in the short text is a grid of small, almost square panels, sometimes bordering on a single larger panel (8 and 12). The lines shaping the grid are thick and black and run seamlessly into the thicker black border surrounding the layout, separating it from the surrounding margins. Kieffer uses this border throughout the entire work, including the front and back covers, which also include grid lines, although the grids here frame nothing but a parallel line pattern that is used frequently throughout the comic for shading. *Downtown Toronto* deals with city life, much of it with homeless people living in the streets. All of the text is set outside on city streets, where the shading with parallel lines represents the brick walls in the background. The ubiquity of this shading in combination with the stark grid give the layout of the pages themselves the feel of the brick and cement structure of masonry, so that the comic takes on shades of the environment it portrays, the prevalent texture of urban surroundings.

Where in Kieffer's work the grid layout takes on an architectural structure, in Brian Biggs' *Dear Julia,* the grid used for the layout works in quite a different manner (Figure 2.6). In Biggs' text, each page shows a grid of four panels surrounded by white margins. In other words, each page has a large rectangle drawn on it, with a cross inside it

Fig. 2.6. Brian Biggs, *Dear Julia*,, pg. 56.

that divides the rectangle into four equal smaller rectangles. The blank margins draw attention to the lack of white space—gutters proper—between the panels, so that the panels look squashed together. This effect is heightened by the composition of the panels, which often show objects and faces in extreme close-up (67).

In this story, the main character Boyd is obsessed with flying. He feels watched and persecuted (not without reason) and wants to escape using a huge pair of wings. The combination of the grid layout and the cramped compositions of the panels give the pages a close, oppressive atmosphere that seems to reflect Boyd's state of mind. Thus the layout in this comic enhances the main character's mental status, helping to explain his desperate actions at the end of the story.

The grids in Dave McKean's artwork for *Arkham Asylum* also capitalize on this psychological effect of the grid layout. Here too, the grid squeezes out the gutter, making the pages dense and claustrophobic, in accordance with the atmosphere of the insane asylum. In one section of the text the lines creating the grids in *Arkham Asylum* are irregular, even interrupted and redrawn, as if they were scratched in by an unsteady hand (n.p.). The panel borders become subjective, similar to the way an unsteady or oddly framed shot in film shows itself to be subjective. The sequence with the irregular frames shows Batman losing grip on himself and reality. When in the next scene he has regained his composure, the grid is made up of straight, even lines again, signifying his sanity.

6. Inserts / Insets:

This layout consists of framed panels that exist within or overlapping with larger panels, so that, at least around the inset panel, no explicit "gutters" exist at all, since the smaller panels exist within, or on top of, larger images that fill up the space usually left blank as the gutter. In such instances the placement of the panels becomes instrumental in establishing the sequence of the panels. While the larger or "host" panel may have primacy from a visual point of view, it may not come first in terms of the sequencing of the panels and thus in the formation of action and narration. Examples of this format occur frequently in work by Joe Sacco and Ho Che Anderson.

Insets often derive their effect from their contrast with a text's standard panel layout. Gaiman and McKean's *Black Orchid* often uses large frameless panels, so that in some cases, framed panels seem insets within the larger surface of the frameless hyperpanel. However, page 14 in *Black Orchid* has one of the few examples in the book of a true inset. Here, a small square panel is set into a larger frameless panel that takes up the bottom left quarter of the page. The inset panel is in the top left-hand area of the larger panel, ensuring that the eye catches this panel first, due to Western reading patterns. The inset shows a close-up of a thumb cocking a handgun. Next, the underlying image explodes around the inset, representing the gun being fired, and the edges of the frameless panel spread out under the neighboring regular panels. The inset in this context, with its stark frame and crisp extreme close-up, is a matter-of-fact insertion, performing the "click" sound effect of the gun being cocked, which the comic does not provide textually. The entire graphic novel contains no sound effects, instead suggesting sounds through signification in the image or in this case in the layout.

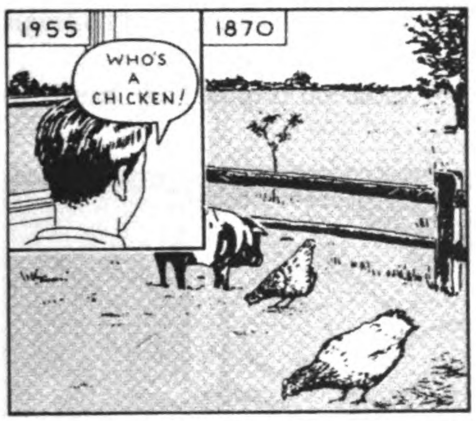

Fig. 2.7. Richard McGuire, "Here" pg. 71.

In his comic "Here," Richard McGuire uses a layout with numerous insets in an ingenious way to fragment time (Figure 2.7). The six pages of this comic show a traditional layout of six panels per page, two in each tier, separated by gutters. Apart from the first panel, each panel has a caption in the top left corner with a year. In the fifth panel of the comic insets start appearing within each panel, also each identified with a year in the top left corner. Some panels contain as many as three insets, almost crowding out the original panel. This comic sequence does not tell a story; instead it shows a single location, "Here," in many different points in time. The location is identified in the first, undated panel, as a generic room with a window. This room is always shown in the same way, or rather, the point of view in the panels never changes, even as the room changes, or when, in years before the house was built, the room did not exist yet. The panels are not shown chronologically, but jump between 500,957,406,073 B.C. and 2033, though most panels and their insets cluster in the period when the house existed—it was built in 1901 and burnt down in 2029. Much of the comic deals with one man who lived in the house almost his whole life, but it would be reductive to say the story is about him. The insets in this comic give glimpses into multiple times, sometimes giving a sense of synchronicity, as for example when in the main panel (1870) shows chickens pecking in the field that was in the location the house was later built on, while in the inset (1955) a man calls out "Who's a chicken!" (Figure 2.7). Rather than a story, "Here" gives a history, but this is a history that is fragmented and disjointed, as is

signified by the insets in various sizes and locations that populate the panels. In the case of "Here" the layout *is* the story.[46]

Fig. 2.8. Craig Thompson, *Goodbye, Chunky Rice*, n.p.

Inset panels can also be used to establish an atmosphere, to create a sense of time passing in its relation to the main panel, or both. Craig Thompson's *Goodbye, Chunky Rice* has a scene where the eponymous hero of the book, the turtle Chunky Rice, is spending one last night with his friend, the mouse Dandle (Figure 2.8). They are sleeping in a tent on a beach and as the mouse sleeps Chunky explains to her why he must leave. The bottom two-thirds of this page are covered by a large panel showing the two snuggled under a quilt. This larger panel contains two smaller insets which illustrate the importance of location to insets. The first inset is located in the top left corner, "before" the main panel. This panel shows rain streaming down. Due to reading direction one encounters this panel before the main panel, first getting the impression of pouring rain, and then the contrast with the cosiness of the bed inside the tent. Sound effects within the main panel link to the rain that was shown in the inset, giving the "tat" of rain drops hitting the canvas as well as the background "hshhhh" of rain on the sand or on the water. The inset panel and the two sound effects visually encroach on the lovers from three sides, making their sanctuary all the more precarious. The larger panel hosts a

[46] Spiros Tsaousis does a reading of "Here" concentrating on page structure and spatiality, concluding that comics are an exemplary site for postmodern spatial abstraction.

second inset, in the bottom right corner. This inset shows a moment "after" the main panel, but its application as an inset rather than as a separate panel allows the host panel to linger almost indefinitely: the host panel takes place before the inset, but also allows a return to it after the inset, creating a sense that Chunky lies awake looking at Dandle for a long time.

Insets are very effective in signifying various effects of time, as Groensteen also observed (89-91). The relation of insets and larger panel in terms of time is not stable. The time that passes within and between the panels that are involved is indicated by location on the page, and it is due to the absence of gutters that the time suggested in such panels can be so indefinite. It is also important to keep in mind that the inset is always, as the term suggests, set in or over another panel. A page layout may be irregular and contain smaller and larger panels, but the smaller panels will only function as insets if they are actually surrounded by a larger panel of which they effectively obscure a part, and which eliminates the gutter. The application of inset panels rather than regular panels in a layout signifies largely on a connotative level rather than signifying anything specifically. Inset panels are more likely to suggest simultaneity or parallelism of certain moments, as well as focusing more attention on both the inserted and the host panel, compared to a layout that does not involve insets. Thus the panel showing rain in the Thompson example first creates an impression going into the larger panel, but it remains present in the periphery throughout the reading of that panel, signifying the continued presence of the rain outside the tent.

Mix and Match: Layout Variations

Despite the last five examples of layout, most comics do indeed rely mainly on the first category that was covered, a page filled with tiers of framed panels. Within that framework, there is room for variation however. Comics will usually establish one format for panel layout as their default. Groensteen has discussed how very often the panel format becomes almost invisible, since as a reader adjusts to a particular format, he or she fails to notice it any more (95), just as one usually does not take notice of the font of a novel one is reading. In its layout, the comics text establishes the basic panel format that will act as the basis for most of the text. This does not mean that the text will not employ any of the other formats, however. For example, the use of insets into larger panels is rarely used on all, or even most, pages in a text, McGuire's "Here" being an exception. This format is one that is usually limited in its application to moments of particular significance or tension. Because most comics texts do have a default format, a variation in the format becomes a source of signification in itself.

In *Ghost World* by Daniel Clowes, as well as in Seth's *It's a Good Life If You Don't Weaken*, variations on the basic layout are employed to signal shifts in the narrative. Generally, the two texts employs the basic format of framed panels with gutters in between (format 1). However, each of the texts include short sequences where the panel format changes and they switch to panels without frames. In *Ghost World*, the sequence of frameless panels (format 4) represents a first-person narrative by Enid, prompted by a friend's request: "Don't leave out a single detail"(35). The sequence breaks with the more or less omniscient point of view present elsewhere (36-38). In *It's a Good Life If You Don't Weaken*, there are two frameless sequences. The first is a dream

(66-68), and the second represents a flashback by the main character, in which he reflects on a past relationship (99). As with the *Ghost World* passage, the shift in panel format here also signals a shift in narrational point of view.

Panel variations can also be used to create special focus on the panel contents. Single panels without borders seem to be randomly interspersed into the main format of framed panels of Seth's text. These single, frameless panels give some variety to the look of the page and seem to be added mostly for aesthetic reasons. However, the panels do stand out from the flow of the other panels in the sequence, allowing for the possibility that the intermittent panels without frames create emphasis on the content of those particular panels, thus foregrounding that particular moment or changing the pacing of the sequence. While generally panels play only a passive role in the sequence, as carriers rather than as signifiers, sometimes, through manipulation of the frame and the gutter, they actively contribute to the signification of the sequence.

Gutter and Gap

Groensteen argues that iconic solidarity, the co-presence of images, is a key ingredient to the comics form, and one important part of iconic solidarity is that images are separated from one another (18). The other part is that the images, although separate from one another, also exist together on the page, or *in praesentia*. As Rocco Versaci puts it, comics panels thus do not only create a temporal unfolding, they also exist "all at once" (16). In the six formats above, images are indeed always separated, either by frames or by space. But as the layout with a single panel showed, there is quite a range in what can be understood as *in praesentia*: when pages contain only two panels, or even

just one, there is far less visual repetition and far less redundancy than when a page is filled with nine or more panels. This is what makes the page layout of only one panel per page so different from other layouts.

The other extreme in terms of layout also needs to be considered: Is it possible to have a comic without separation? Some examples that seem pretty close are Sammy Harkham's "Alexander the Greatest," in which no formal panels can be identified (Bell and Sinclair 90). *Ninja*, by Brian Chippendale, with its pages of thickly packed grids alternated with pages filled with doodles is another example. Do these exceptions in the comics form disprove Groensteen's notion of separation? Or do these examples also contain separating frames, perhaps by implication? Comics drawings conventionally use strong outlines surrounding and defining figures. In comics without formal panels, the defining lines take on the role of panel frames: the trees, shoulder, and the edges of a violet all become panel boundaries in "Alexander the Greatest," parsing out moments and points of view. In a case like this, almost anything can be a panel and the gutters are only implied.

The gutter, more than the frame and the panel, is directly connected to the material existence of the comics page, while at the same time it is an element that structures the images *on* the page. While I put much of the function of separation and structure of the comics page on the gutter, others point to the frame as the primary function. Angela Miller writes:

> They [comics] are about frames: frames as ways of narrating and composing time, ways of isolating moments in a temporal continuum, but also as a means of calling attention to how we know things. We know them because they refer to other things, as frames within frames—an endless *mise en abyme* that contains a good part of the history of visual communication. (Dowd and Hignite 6)

Thierry Groensteen also ascribes primacy to the frame (39-57).

Frame Works

Groensteen argues that "hard" panel divisions, lines framing panels and thus really separating them from the spaces between them (gutters) are essential to create meaning in a sequence of panels (44-45). He argues that the lines around panels function in a way similar to punctuation in text, to separate signifying units from one another and create structure (43). While this may sound logical I want to question the unequivocal statement of panel-surrounding lines as a rule, because there are many obvious examples of comics without clear markers for panel divisions, in which meaning is generated without problems regardless, some of which Groensteen points out himself. Often images will exist in distinct areas on a page, surrounded by the white of the "underlying" page, separated only by this blank ("inter-iconic") space. Anders Nilsen's work is a recent example of this, but I should also mention the 19th century French example of the *Chat Noir* stories.[47] One might say that the absence of frames works because the reader implicitly inserts the frames into their proper slots anyway, out of habit based on convention, but as Kunzle's example shows, the technique of leaving out panel borders was already being applied before the conventions were set. While the presence of the frame may add certain signification (or alternatively, the absence of the frame may imply a way of reading), it is not the lines surrounding the panel that are important, it is the multiplicity of images, and the fact that they are ordered. Groensteen points out a triple separation between panels: the (closing) frame of one panel, the blank space in between, and the (opening) frame of the next panel. His argument implies that the more clearly panels are delineated, the more clearly they will signify. However, panels can't get much more separated from each other than each having a page to themselves, as is the case in

[47] See David Kunzle's chapter in Varnum and Gibbons' *The Language of Comics: Word and Image.*

Gross's *He Done Her Wrong* and Crane's *The Clouds Above* (Type 2). While these books certainly signify as comics, the continual turning from page to page actually works to alienate the reader from the reading process: the separation of panels has become overdetermined. The point to be taken from this is that with comics images in sequence, a delicate balance needs to be maintained between their separation and their interconnectivity. How panels are separated is not relevant per se, as long as it is possible to identify individual moments on the page.

Groensteen and I agree on the principles involved in the interplay between gutter and frame and their roles in signification. However, I prefer to use the gutter (and its application of the gap) as the operative principle in the creation of meaning out of sequences of panels, since frames are employed in all manner of images, not just in comics and their sequential images, while the gutter as an entity is unique to the comics form. Groensteen notes: "the gutter in and of itself [...] does not merit fetishization" (112); after all, he claims, there does not have to be a gutter between panels in order for them to make sense as a sequence. Furthermore, "an intermediate state between the two panels does not exist" (113). However, the elision that is denoted by the blank space of the gutter is so instrumental to the functioning of the sequence that even panels separated by nothing but a line will require the mental blank signifying that every panel is part of an enunciation which needs to be reevaluated in relation to each new panel on the page.

The gutter may not always appear as an empty space, but there is always a gap. In decoding the sequence, the moment of potential that the blank gutter signals has to be present, to be filled immediately by the following panel and new signifying processes. Rather, the space between panels, whether signaled by a gutter or a line, is never empty,

because the gutter as such only exists if it is followed by another panel, which immediately erases the nothingness of the gutter. The space is there to signal the sequentiality of the image. The signifying function of the gutter in comics has become ingrained in the reader's consciousness to such an extent that it works even when the gutter is absent. Whereas in the reading process the gutter is often invisible, scanned over without notice, the final examples have shown that even when the gutter is literally invisible, when it is absent, its function operates on the sequence. The gutter is a formalization—a crystallization into a function—of a potential of images that is always there, namely the inherent potential of the image to narrate as it shows. The potential of images to show and tell as once, becomes foregrounded when images are put in relation to one another (as Werner Wolf argued) and this relation is made formal with the introduction of gutters. The gutter function is necessary to signify sequentiality: it creates the continuous movement towards the next panel and the conditions to renegotiate meaning based on new information compared to what was established so far. In short, the gutter facilitates the processing of the sequence.

Gutters are the empty spaces between panels, but in the layout of the comics page, gutters, frames, and panels are bound together. It is hard to decide which creates which. Does the panel exist by virtue of its surrounding frame or the empty space of the gutter that surrounds it? Or is the gutter only there because it is space left blank after the panels have been placed? As for the frame, there too one can ask if it is a part of the gutter, separating it off from the panel, or whether the frame is a part of the panel, defining it against the negative space of the gutter? Gutters, frames and panels are formal signs on the comics page, providing structure and order on the page in the form of the layout.

Consequently, the gutters are closely related to the margins, with which they share an emptiness. Both gutters and margins are paratextual elements of comics, creating the material conditions for the comics text, but at the same time also signifying in their own right. As the formats discussed earlier showed, the elements of layout signify in different ways, depending on how they are combined and how they structure the page.

Drawing the Line

With the gutter, the gap becomes literally visible in the comics page. The gutters isolate and juxtapose the panels, requesting attention for each one. The spaces between panels in comics are sites of elision and erasure. They are gaps that stand in for moments and events that go unrepresented in the comics sequence, moments that are not pictured but that are nevertheless evoked by the empty space. Gutters are easily overlooked and meant to be so, like the spaces between words.

Gutters and frames in comics separate panels which, marked off as they are by the structuring devices, become meaningful units or syntagms. The syntagms in comics signify by convention to some extent: the way a standard layout turns isolated images into an action sequence is largely based on conventions. But as the examples in the typology showed, the conventions are also often broken to create meaning in other ways. There is no set grammar to the pictorial and spatial signification of comics. By separating and defining individual units (the comics panels), gutters allow these panels to articulate meaning in contrast and in response to one another, creating the conditions for inter-referentiality between panels. This is the "juxtaposition" of images that is rightly brought up in so many discussions and definitions of comics (McCloud 8; Groensteen 19;

Tsaousis 208). Comics panels exist together on the page *in praesentia* but differentiated from each other by empty space that becomes meaningful in its relation to the panels. Unlike the spaces between words, the space between panels does not always signify the same thing. We are faced with the necessity to read the spaces, as the space itself generates meaning.

Although the gutter creates meaning, this does not mean it calls for an explicit "filling in blanks." Gutters do not "stand for" or represent anything beyond elision. They only create the conditions for the process of signification (e.g. narrative) to occur and invite a focus on what is given: each panel, as a signifier, gives a certain amount of information, which is re-evaluated with each new panel, if necessary by revisiting earlier panels. As in language, comics call for a process of retroactive resignification. Different constructions of gutters and frames produce a different look and feel to the page, but, more importantly, they make the page signify differently, as the typology of layouts illustrated.

Whatever the layout, the gutter function is necessary for the sequence to produce meaning such as narrative. The gutter function produces the conditions by which discontinuous images become a continuous stream of signification. In his chapter "Blood in the Gutter," McCloud also pinpoints the gutter as essential in creating the sequence in the comics form: those moments that are not shown give meaning to the moments that are, which is one of the reasons why he calls comics the "invisible art."[48] The gutter function does not even always involve a literal existence of gutters as blank space between the panels or frames. In some cases the gutter function is evoked in comics

[48] Another reason is that comics have long been overlooked in discourses on art and literature, falling outside of their scope and thus invisible.

without any kind of the gutter as we classically understand it—that narrow strip of empty space between to lines separating two pictures. Layouts like the grid and the inset demonstrated this. In those cases, the gutter is only present as a rhetorical function to evoke sequence. The gap that is signified by the gutter still functions when the material gutter is not there: the comics form has internalized the gutter function to the degree that it applies it even when there is no empty space between panels, expanding the possibilities of the comics page. The gap function is ingrained in the comics page, signifying even when the literal gutter is lacking. In the transition from looking at the layout to understanding a sequence as narrative in comics, the gap is necessary.

CHAPTER 3 All in a Row:

Creating Action Through Sequences

Because the sequence is the means by which comics create action and ultimately narrative, the sequence is central to the comics form. Sequences can be long or short, and narratives can be made up of one single sequence or a series of sequences. Some shorter sequences are clearly signaled by the text itself, often with (para)textual markers such as chapter headings or in-panel captions introducing a new setting in time or space. In his essay "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," Barthes introduces a discussion of sequence in narrative. He states: "A sequence is a logical succession of nuclei bound by solidarity," in which solidarity means "two terms presuppose one another" (101). This notion of narrative is similar to Aristotle's definition of the unified plot, where each action in the plot is logically linked to the one before and after it. In relation to comics, this means that the panels on a comics page, when they form a sequence, are bound together because each panel presupposes the one before and after it. This is the meaning of Groensteen's term "iconic solidarity." The sequence as a whole can be recognized because all panels have a connection with the ones before and after it, except the very first and last ones: The first panel in a sequence has no connection to the one before it (if there is one) and the last panel in a sequence bears no relation to the one (if any) after it. In comics then, we don't just have the narrative that is built up of nuclei (cardinal functions) that necessarily hang together logically. In order to create narrative

out of an accumulation of images, comics must employ iconic solidarity, by which once again "two terms presuppose one another," but this time these terms are visual units: panels that are separate from each other but coexist on the page (Groensteen 18). Due to these circumstances comics panels become sequences with solidarity in the Barthesian sense, and take on narrative functions.

The sequences that create action in comics are made out of still images[1]. The images in panels exist all together on the page, at the same time, but each is separated from the others. Gutters and the frames that circumscribe and define panels create the sign that says "these images speak to one another," so that the panels become a sequence that propels an action or the development of another kind of meaning in comics. The driving force can be explained by the process of closure, following McCloud. He explains closure as "observing the parts but perceiving the whole" (63), a process which involves "mentally completing that which is incomplete based on past experience" (ibid.). In the case of sequences of comics panels, this process involves "tak[ing] two separate images and transforming them into a single idea" (67), so that several separate images become one action or scene based on the gaps left between the images. This chapter explores some of the ways in which sequences function to create "a single idea," and the role that gaps play in this process.

Moving Pictures

The four panels in Figure 3.1 show a single action by creating a sequence out of four separate images. The first three images signify movement through the position of

[1] This is in contrast to sentences in literature, or moving pictures in film.

Snoopy's body (his ears flying behind him, his legs), by the addition of motion lines, and through the space between Snoopy's feet and his shadow. These three images signify as

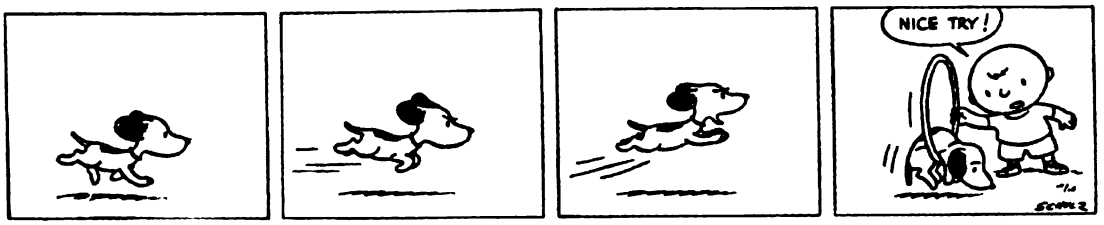

Fig. 3.1. Schulz, pg. 5.

moments in time due to their existence as panels: the frames and the gutters function to separate and connect the images at the same time, so that the panels become connected as a sequence. In order to understand the connections as a sequence, each panel—each moment—is contrasted with the ones before and after it, so that based on the changes shown in the scene, from one panel to the next, an action unfolds. In the fourth panel, the momentum that had been built up, Snoopy's surge forward, has come to an abrupt halt: Snoopy is now slumped over the hoop Charlie Brown is holding. His body language and the motion lines contrast with those in the previous panels. Snoopy is still suspended in the air, but now this is not due to his own velocity, but because he is hung up on the hoop he was trying to jump through. The completed sequence creates the joke in this strip: the anticipation built up in the first three panels contrasts sharply with the anti-climax in this fourth panel.

The four panels in Figure 3.1, which combine together to signify an action, function as syntagms, like words and syllables in verbal language. Images in comics are defined as syntagms by means of frames and gutters, which break the page into identifyable units. As signifying units in the comics discourse however, panels are syntagms of a different kind than words or syllables. Greimas and Courtés state:

> The term syntagm is used to refer to a combination of elements co-present in an utterance (sentence or discourse)... The syntagms are recognized by the segmenting of the syntagmatic string, since the establishment of relations between the parts and the segmentable totalities results in the transformation of this string into a syntagmatic hierarchy. (327)

The order of words in sentences and syllables in words is governed by various kinds of grammar, which allow for certain combinations but not others. Panels in sequences can be combined in infinite ways, because they are not governed by such grammar. In that regard, panels are more similar to the "narrative syntagms" that Greimas also discusses (327). Furthermore, the contents of panels as syntagms are not bound by limits or rules. The numbers of words and syllables that can be used in a language are finite, leading to a finite number of combinations (although indeed this number is very large). Yet these syntagms are at least theoretically limited. The contents of comics panels, in terms of depicted material, composition and drawing style, have not such limits.[2]

In forming sequences in comics, panels as syntagms work to signify some kind of action, usually in the service of a narrative.[3] In *Questions of Cinema* Stephen Heath defines narrative action as "a series of elements held in a relation of transformation such that their consecution—the movement of the transformation from the ones to the others—determines a state *S'* different to an initial state *S*" (136). Comics panels are especially suited to showing these transformations, since panels on a page show the various states together, simultaneously and *in praesentia*. The connections between actions or events, which narrative depends upon, are continuously visible, as all panels are laid out on the

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[2] This makes the fact that comics artists do repeat panels quite significant: there seems to be a desire to create convention and tradition, even where none is necessary. The "quoting" of panels from classic comics seems to be a pleasure to comics creators and readers alike (see for example the first panel on page 5 of *Jar of Fools*, Part 2, which recreates a panel from the Tintin album *Red Rackham's Treasure* by Hergé.

[3] Sequences are not necessarily narrative, as indeed several panels on a page do not necessarily imply sequentiality or story, as Harry Morgan points out ("Index" #11), but for simplicity's sake we will deal with the most common function of the sequence.

pages. Thus in comics the page structure is always implicitly related to the narrative structure.

Though panels create narrative, they need a point of reference to create the cohesion between the separate images. This cohesion tends to be provided by a character who appears across various panels: "It is the character that provides the reference point and who allows the reader to understand the sequential logic, both in temporal and spatial terms," Harry Morgan explains ("Graphic Shorthand" 36). So in Figure 3.1 we see the character of Snoopy recurring in each of the four panels. It is through the contrast of each appearance of Snoopy with the others—a process of repetition and difference—that the sequence makes sense as an action and a narrative. Snoopy's state goes through several transformations, to use Heath's terms, which we make sense of by turning them into a narrative. Narrative is the way we tend to make sense of the world around us, whether we are dealing with real or fictional actions and events. As Roland Barthes points out, "the narratives of the world are numberless... [Narrative] is simply there, like life itself" (*Image-Music-Text* 79).

Narrative enters comics as a code: snippets of action and events are represented, and based on relations between these snippets such as causality, progression, or another form of organization, the separate moments in panels come to imply a flow of events, a course of action. This process is of course supported by the temporality that can itself already be implied in the still image, as was discussed in Chapter One.

Action Comics

Due to the superhero genre, the comics form is often associated with action, or

shall I say, "action-packed adventure." Indeed, Superman, the first real superhero, was introduced in *Action Comics* No.1. But the term "action comics" is almost an oxymoron: in order to create action, comics freeze it and break it down. The comics form does not create movement or action, it only implies it. But there is something about the dissection of action in comics which turns its weaknesses—breakdown and stillness—into strengths where the notion of action is concerned. The challenge of capturing movement in still images has led to a number of strategies in the use of sequences, all of which revolve around leaving out moments, creating gaps. As Figure 3.1 illustrated, these strategies are based in repetition and difference: establishing situations and then introducing changes, creating relations of opposition or complementarity between the panels. The relations between panels lead to the suggestion of events because, as Pascal Lefèvre puts it, comics represent "essential phases" of action, to show that action with the least possible information (2000, 4 of 7). Like the abstraction of comics images, that signify by simplification, so comics panels signify through an abstraction of actions.

The action in comics is created not in a single panel but in the combination of panels. How the situation in panel A ends up as the situation in panel B, C etc. is all based on connections between the panels that are not visualized. Readers take the information that the panels offer and create the action from these givens. McCloud calls this closure (64), and one of his symbols for closure is two panels—an open and a closed eye—which represents the work readers do to fill in the action between one panel and the next (85). McCloud's symbolic representation does not do justice to the intricacy of this process of evoking action in comics. His example really leaves nothing to be filled in, except perhaps intervening moments between the absolute positions of the open and

closed eye. But these intervening moments would do nothing to create a clearer sense of the action. The minute details of an action are usually not the point in comics. McCloud's symbol of *two* open eyes is even less enlightening (92): these two panels give absolutely no clue as to what happened in the intervening space. This space may represent only a moment, so that the panels represent a pause in which nothing happens. Or the space may represent a distance of minutes or even days in which everything has changed. The two panels in McCloud's example mean nothing outside of the context of a longer sequence. The interest of sequences of panels comes from the flexibility and expanse of action that can be left out between panels, not from capturing the minutest details of these actions. The most effective ways in which comics evoke action have less to do with literally showing movements and actions in full detail, and have more to do with implying it through the gaps that are allowed to fall.

In his discussion of the comics form, Scott McCloud draws heavily on Will Eisner, who called comics "sequential art" in his 1985 introduction to the creation of comics. Eisner does not spend much time explaining why he chooses to call comics sequential art. He mentions that actions need to be broken up to create comics:

> In visual narrative the task of the author/artist is to record a continued flow of experience and show it as it may be seen from the reader's eyes. This is done by arbitrarily breaking up the flow of uninterrupted experience into segments of 'frozen' scenes and enclosing them by a frame or panel. (39)

Eisner does not interrogate the term sequential, and appears to use it because "sequential" means "forming a sequence," while "sequence" means "a set of things belonging next to one another on some principle of order; a series without gaps" (*Oxford Concise English Dictionary*). This definition is striking since in the theoretical usage of the term "sequence" in comics studies, the gaps are in fact an inherent part of that sequence.

Eisner does not seem to give much thought to what a sequence of images is or does, considering he writes of "arbitrarily" breaking up a flow of events in order to picture it, where, in fact, the "moments" pictured in comics panels are anything but arbitrary. Furthermore, Eisner speaks of a "flow of uninterrupted experiences" as if there were a completed and autonomous reality underlying the action captured in a comic. On the contrary, by carefully representing certain moments, the panels in a comic create a sequence, a continuing action, where there was none before. This may be the main difference between Eisner's discussion of sequential art and the concept of the sequence in Groensteen's work and perhaps French comics theory more generally: Eisner conceptualizes the creation of a comic as the composition of a story or complete course of action, which then gets "broken down" in order to turn it into a comic (128). In Groensteen's conception, the comic starts with the available space on the page and is built up from there, through the process he calls "gridding" (or *quadrillage* in French) (144).

Child's Play

Figure 3.2, another *Peanuts* strip, shows a course of events developed over four panels. It will illustrate some of the basic processes at work in reading comics, some of the functions of panels in a sequence.

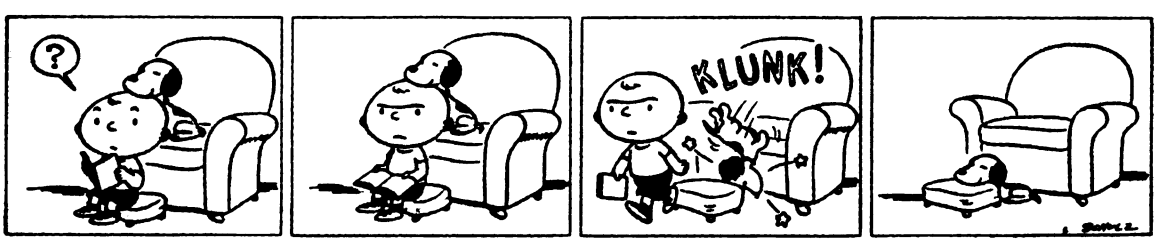

Fig. 3.2. Schulz, pg. 3.

The first panel sets up the situation, establishes the scene: Charlie Brown notices that Snoopy is using him as a rest for his head. It should be noted that even this one panel already implies a number of moments in time: Charlie Brown is holding a book, so he had been reading. He is looking straight ahead here, not at his book, so he has just lifted his head. Snoopy has his eyes closed and a smile on his face: he looks like he's been sleeping comfortably for a while, but as Charlie Brown's raised eyebrows and his balloon with a question mark indicate, Charlie has only just become aware that something is going on. All this is indicated in only this first panel of four. The second panel covers less time. It repeats much of the first panel, but through the differences expresses its main function: to show Charlie's reaction. While Snoopy is still sleeping, Charlie's book is now open on his knees and he is frowning. In this case the gap between the panels elided only minor changes: the book and Charlie's eyebrows came down. But these changes indicate the mental processes happening in Charlie Brown's head.

The shift to the third panel in Figure 3.2 is much greater: This panel represents Charlie Brown walking away and Snoopy upside down, hitting his head on the stool Charlie had been sitting on. Again the panel itself covers some duration of time, as motion lines show Snoopy falling, the sound effect "klunk!" indicates the moment of impact, and three little stars emanating from Snoopy's head show the puppy has hurt itself falling down. The moments just before this have been elided in the space of the gutter, and clearly some actions are not shown, such as Charlie closing his book and getting up and Snoopy sliding off his head and beginning to fall. The function of the third panel is based on causality: on the one hand annoyance has caused Charlie to leave; on the other hand his disappearance is causing Snoopy to fall. Charlie's getting up is a

crucial part of the action, but it is present as an implication only, based on the information that is provided in panels two and three. Peace has returned in panel four: Snoopy is sleeping in much the same position as in panels one and two, but Charlie is now gone so Snoopy's head is resting on the stool. What happened in the space between panels three and four? Certainly Snoopy lay down again and has fallen asleep. Whatever else he "could have done" there, growl at Charlie, howl in pain, lick himself or turn three circles before lying down again, none of this is pictured, and so the final panel gives a Snoopy unperturbed by the tumble he took in panel three. The function of this transition is a narrative one: in this case the transition gives the strip its wry humor due to the unexpected twist. Leaving out Snoopy's reaction to his fall and change in circumstances, and showing Snoopy already asleep again gives the strip a mildly ironic or dryly comic ending, so typical of the Charlie Brown comics: Snoopy was not sleeping on Charlie's head out of affection for his little master; it was a convenient spot, and he will sleep just as comfortably now that this resting place has gone.

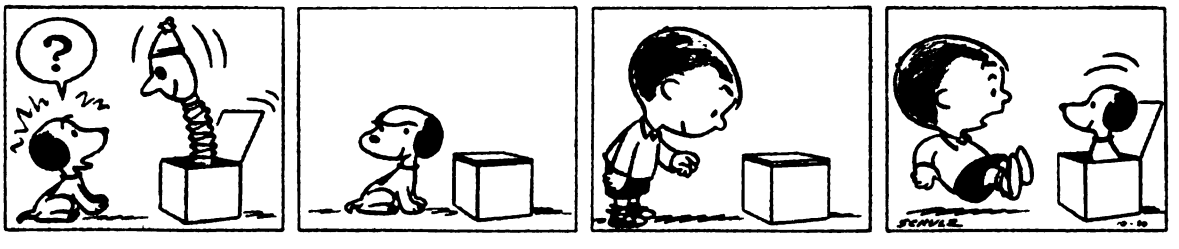

Fig. 3.3. Schulz, pg. 6.

Figure 3.3 is another example of a *Peanuts* strip. The first panel shows Snoopy looking at a wobbling jack-in-the-box in surprise. Taken by itself this panel may strike one as rather odd. As the first panel in a strip it has no introduction itself and the question mark over Snoopy's head may represent our own questions as well: what is going on here, what have I missed? The contrast with the second panel is great, and though this

panel seems very simple (a puppy next to a closed box), the differences between this panel and the first generate a lot of signification. The transition here is all about contrast. The first panel is quite full, especially in the top half, while the second panel is emptier, the top section in particular. Moreover, the first panel contains movement and strong emotion and the second one does not. A final contrast to mention is the open jack-in-the-box in the first panel, compared with the closed one in the second. By comparison to the second panel, the questions raised by the first panel are answered. This panel is caught already in the middle of the action, with Snoopy startled by the jack-in-the-box that just opened in his face. The strip does not show a set-up "shot" for this situation (the economy of the four-panel strip does not allow it), but this situation is provided, mirrored in a way, after the fact, so the reader can extrapolate that this is what happened *before* panel one.

Figure 3.3, panel two, shows Snoopy fully recovered from the shock and, to judge by the roguish expression on his face, making plans of his own. The transition based on contrasts leads to an understanding of Snoopy's reaction, and to an involvement in the plot. In the progression and the composition of this strip it is important that the box is now closed. Presumably one should not ask oneself how Snoopy was able to get the Jack back into the box: the transition between panels one and two here not only represents an elided action, but perhaps also a certain suspension of disbelief in the part of the reader.

The change between panels two and three seems to be only a small one: Snoopy is replaced by a little boy reaching out for the box. I will come back to this is a transition in a moment. The boy's outstretched hand in panel three sets up the transition to the concluding panel, where he has evidently opened the box: Snoopy appears in the opened

box and the boy falls over backwards in surprise. The contrast between the panels is again one of tranquility versus movement and emotion, and here the position of Snoopy's head, facing left, mirrors nicely with his appearance facing right in the first panel. The two Snoopies bookend this strip and thereby draw the attention to the middle of the strip, between panels two and three, which becomes the fold between the first and the last panels. The space between this panel and the next is no bigger than the others, since all the gutters are the same size. But here this space represents an elision, or an omission even, that is greater than between any of the other panels, and which sets up the joke at the end of the strip. What is not shown here is that Snoopy takes the place of the puppet in the box so that in panel four we get twice the surprise: the surprise of the box opening as well as the surprise of not finding a Jack but a puppy instead. Thus the final panel refers back to and explains Snoopy's wicked look in panel two, and it fills in actions that were left unrepresented before, in that central space between panels two and three. For this reason it is so important that the sequential panels in comics are simultaneous, always present: the form requires one to go back and forth between panels. This is true for neighboring panels, as was the case between panels one and two, but often also between panels that are much farther apart, such as between panels four and two in Figure 3.3, but often far more than that.

Much of what I broke down above happens unnoticed, almost automatically when one is reading this strip. And in most cases it will take a reader only moments to read a strip like this. This is what makes Schulz' work, and perhaps comics in general seem so simple: the underlying processes going on are erased, invisible, as the gutters disappear. Notable in both the *Peanuts* strips above is that the point of view from which the panels

are shown barely changes. To echo terms used by McCloud and Douglas Wolk, the panels in Figure 3.2 show changes in time, not in space. In Figure 3.3, the extreme stylistic simplicity, in this case a completely blank background, make it impossible to ascertain whether the Jack-in-the-box changes location or not, or perhaps that possibility just is not relevant. The simplicity and economy, but also the expressivity, of Schulz' strips are clearly visible in these examples, but it should also be evident that these qualities are not limited to Schulz' work alone. With very frugal means comics are able to evoke actions and events vividly.

Implications for longer sequences

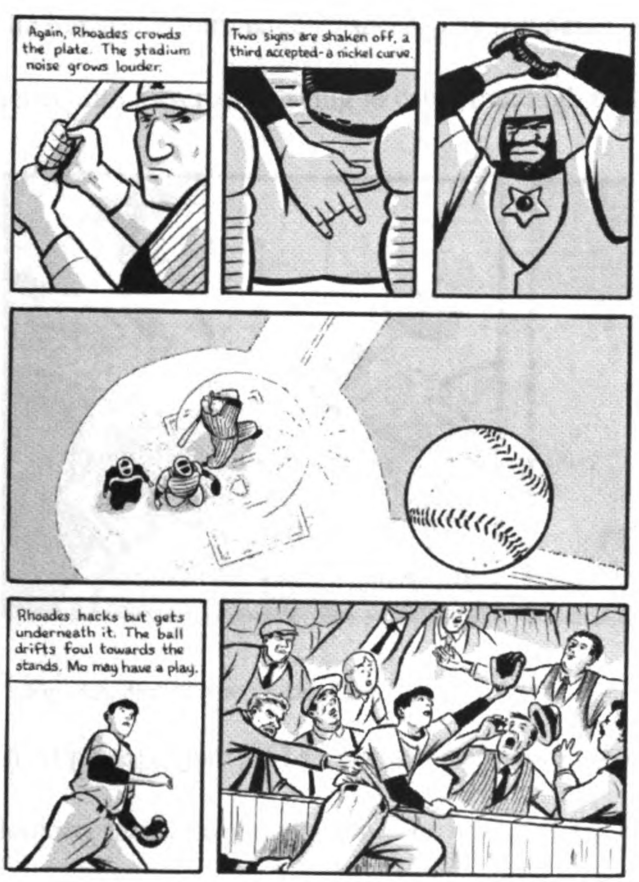

Fig. 3.4. James Sturm, *The Golem's Mighty Swing* pg. 77.

As was illustrated in reading the *Peanuts* strips, it is fundamental that the comics form implies that a panel that follows another is somehow related to the previous one; it is connected to furthering the action or story by showing the next moment. Sometimes the next moment is delayed and leads to ambiguity that can create or increase suspense. Here is an example from James Sturm's graphic novel *The Golem's Mighty Swing*, from 2002.

This graphic novel, about a Jewish minor league baseball team in the 1930s has extended sequences of the games the team plays. Figure 3.4 picks up the sequence on page 77. The sequence that the first four panels create, shows how batter and then pitcher prepare themselves and then show the hit, which goes steeply into the air. Again, some of the crucial moments are not shown, like the pitcher's throw and the actual impact of the bat on the ball. The complete course of events can only be interpolated; it not given in its entirety, but can be completed by comparing the moments on either side of each gutter, surmising what has been left out and filling in the gaps. This process involves reading panels more than once, often returning to them after having read forward several panels.

The process of weaving back and forth between panels draws attention to itself in the transition from page 77 to 78. The last panel on page 77 shows Mo leaning across the fence into the crowd, trying to catch that high ball from panel 4. The first panel on the

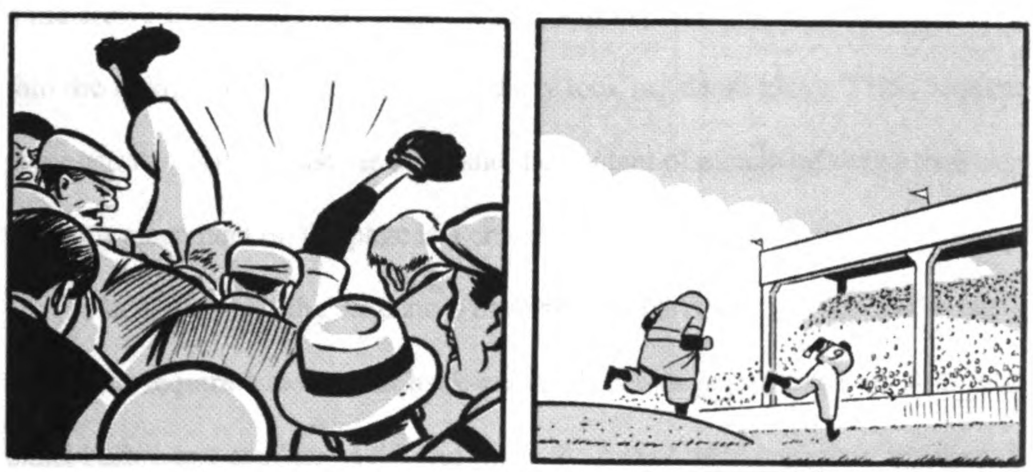

Fig. 3.5. James Sturm, pg. 78.

next page (Figure 3.5) shows Mo's arm and leg waving about as a group of angry-looking men crowds into him. The next panel shows the pitcher and another player running towards the bleachers, presumably to the place where Mo is struggling. The transition from the last panel of page 77 to the first panel here is ambiguous: did Mo fall

over the fence as he was trying to catch the ball, or is something more going on. The alarm of his team mates in panel 2 suggests that Mo is in serious trouble and that the onlookers are more a mob than a crowd. Turning back to the previous page, the last panel gives information that may well have been overlooked on first reading. The focal point in this panel is on Mo's arm reaching far across the crowd. But at his back some of the onlookers are leaning in towards him, and one of them is even grabbing his shirt. Weaving back and forth between the panels makes it clear that Mo was assaulted by the angry crowd. The placement of the moment of the assault in the gutter across the page turn breaks up the sequence and creates suspense and ambiguity. The panel that follows the one of Mo trying to make the catch is not visible, the transition is delayed with the page-turn. Careful reading between the panels makes it possible to infer the course of events, and later panels on page 78 dissolve any possible remaining uncertainty. In panel 4 the crowd is shouting "Go home, Jews!" and in panel 5 Mo, having been thrown back into the field, can speak for himself: "They took my damn glove." This sequence demonstrates that not just the form and the content of panels influence their signification, but their placement on the page is a crucial part of that process too.

In general, all the sequences discussed so far draw attention to the fact that comics sequences require a movement back-and-forth across panels. One needs to read the next panel before one can "go back" and fill in the gap of what happened between the previous panel and the next. There is a certain amount of anticipation involved in reading comics, but foremost, it is a continual weaving back and forth, as the reader first "skips over" the gutter to look at the next panel, and then mentally goes into the gutter to fill in the actions, events, or transitions that took place in the gap between the panels. Sequences in

comics signify in a process of reading back and forth. As one reads forwards, details in previous panels become important (again) or come to signify in different ways. Retroactive resignification may take place based on the reading of more recent panels; but on the other hand, reconsidering previous panels may also then lead to a re-evaluation of action in the present panel. Consequently, the creation of action in a comic is an intricate and continuous negotiation and (re)consideration of various panels at the same time, based on visual information that panels, as signifying syntagms, provide.

Small Changes

Narrative does not always progress through action. In his *Principes des littératures dessinées*, Harry Morgan discusses the importance of distinguishing between action and narration in comics: "One should not confuse the notion of the story ("récit") with the idea of an action envisioned in its duration" (*Principes* 151).[4] Morgan points out that action and time in comics are not mimetic; things do not occur in "real time" as they do in film or on stage. Even when comics panels represent action, as in the examples discussed so far, this action is only implied. The action is narrated, not shown unmediated.

Comics narrative also includes sequences where the depicted action has functions beyond just showing things happening. The actions or events portrayed in the syntagms of comics narrative, can signify in more ways than one. This is a common feature of narrative, as Paul Ricoeur's discussion of plot and actions in *Time and Narrative* demonstrated:

[4] Translations of the "Summary of the Principal Points" for the three parts of Morgan's *Principes des littératures dessinées* were provided by Randall Scott.

> We may sum up this twofold relation between narrative understanding and practical understanding as follows. In passing from the paradigmatic order of action to the syntagmatic order of narrative, the terms of the semantics of action acquire integration and actuality. Actuality, because of the terms, which had only a virtual signification in the paradigmatic order, that is, a pure capacity to be used, receive an actual [*effective*] signification thanks to the sequential interconnections the plot confers on the agents, their deeds, and their sufferings. Integration, because terms as heterogeneous as agents, motives, and circumstances are rendered compatible and work together in actual temporal wholes. It is in this sense that the twofold relation between rules of emplotment and action-terms constitutes both a relation of presupposition and one of transformation. To understand a story is to understand both the language of 'doing something' and the cultural tradition from which proceeds the typology of plots. (Ricoeur 56-7)

Thus the actions of the agent, Ernie, in the following sequence (Figure 3.6) function to signify a frame of mind, which here is more than actual events or actions. The sequence here is utilized for a fleshing out of the character, which adds to the narrative in a different way.

Fig. 3.6. Jason Lutes, *Jar of Fools* pg 28.

Figure 3.6 shows two tiers from *Jar of Fools Part One*, by Jason Lutes: The three panels of the last tier of the page show Ernie, the book's protagonist, sitting in a chair with a letter. Each of the three panels shows Ernie facing the same way, with a slightly

bent head, holding the letter. Due to the gutters dividing these panels, each moment is separated out, given definition. The first panel shows Ernie smelling the envelope; in the second he is looking at it, and in the third panel he is tearing the envelope open with his finger. The repetition in the images and resulting visual redundancy in the panels, may create the urge to read through this tier quickly. This effect is stronger still because this is the bottom tier of the verso page which creates a pull across the crease to the top of the next page, the recto.

This sequence rewards a slower reading, however. In the second panel, the space occupied by Ernie's hands in panel one is again filled with two hands. However, Ernie's fingers can be seen in the bottom right-hand corner of the panel, still holding the envelope. Clearly, the hands by his face are no longer his own, though they echo the image in the first panel of the tier. Instead, these hands resting on Ernie's shoulders and chest belong to a person standing behind him, of whom only the hands, cuffed sleeves and chest are visible. The swell in the shirt behind Ernie's head suggest this figure is a woman. In the third panel the figure has disappeared again. This sequence may raise the impression that a woman approached Ernie in his room and then left again, but the surrounding panels show that Ernie is alone in the room and that he is in fact sitting with his chair up against a wall, with no room for anyone to stand there.

The action that is depicted in this sequence, of a woman appearing and disappearing, should not be taken literally then. When Ernie first saw the envelope in the previous page he recognized the handwriting: thus he already knows the letter is from Esther, his ex-girlfriend. Ernie smells the envelope in the first panel of Figure 3.6, an intimate, perhaps sentimental gesture. The implication of the dynamic between the first

two panels is that the letter indeed still holds some of Esther's scent, and this sensory perception evokes her presence for Ernie. This impression is supported by Ernie's closed eyes, which perhaps allows the heightening of other senses. Like the smell, her presence is only a fleeting impression, because in panel three it is gone again and Ernie has begun to tear open the envelope. This short sequence works according to two opposite functions. One creates a momentum through the panels to the next page, based on the repetition of the images and the drive to find out what is in the envelope. In this dynamic, one may be inclined to scan over the second panel quickly, partly because it seems so similar to the two on either side. The second function of the sequence is more introspective, and works with a dynamic that slows down the reading. The presence of the disembodied body in the second panel makes one linger on this panel indefinitely, just as Ernie lingers over the closed envelope. There is no indication of the duration of the second panel, but in a reading that focuses on the second panel this image becomes the most important of the three and weighted with the most time, allowing Ernie some extra time with his memories of Esther. Of course, he is inevitably overtaken by reality, and the third panel shows him dealing with it by opening the letter.

Sequence vs. Series

Comics sequences may use action for narrative effects that have little to do with a progressive course of events, as the last example demonstrated. In fact, sequences may present situations that have very little to do with action at all. The function of comics sequences in relation to the narrative is dictated by the content of the panels and their distribution on the page. In some cases a group of sequential panels signify not as a

sequence, but rather as a series, in Groensteen's terms. A series within the context of comics can be less self-evident than a sequence, since the individual panels that make up a series do not necessarily occur next to each other in the comics text or even on the same page. Readers may not even pick up on the ways in which certain panels relate to each other as a series across the text. Groensteen calls the coherence that connects various panels in a work as a series, *tressage* or braiding, since these panels create a network within a comics text through a paradigmatic or "associative logic"—as opposed to the "syntagmatic logic" at work in the sequence (158).

In Jason Little's *Shutterbug Follies*, a graphic novel that is not subtle about its use of the motif of photography, it is fairly easy to identify the panels showing photographs as a series throughout the text, a series which may be expanded to include panels of negatives, and perhaps even panels that show photographs being developed or taken (although this would perhaps become too inclusive since it would incorporate almost the entire comic into the series). However, it is pertinent to expand the series intertextually, to include certain panels from Little's short story "The Abduction Announcement," which like *Shutterbug Follies*, shows photographs being used as clues, evidence and art.[5] The series of panels establish photography as a motif in *Shutterbug Follies*, where it plays a part both in terms of setting and of plot, while the comic's narrative also explores photography as a medium, questioning its reliability and its place in people's lives. By relying on the braiding of images concerning photography as a series within the text, and by foregrounding some of the characteristics of photography in the narration, Little's graphic novel brings into the open some of the functions of the sequence in relation to narrative.

[5] See pages 22 and 24 of "The Abduction Announcement" in *Jack's Luck Runs Out*.

A Scene at Mulberry Photo

Pages 87-89 show an example of a fairly standard sequence in comics, but also incorporates six panels—a sequence within a sequence—that is quite different and exemplifies something more about how sequences in comics work. In order to get a sense of the function of the panels, it is useful to look at this scene in quite a bit of detail, focusing largely on the gaps, both between the panels and in the narrative. Strictly speaking the scene starts on page 86, panel 3, which is captioned "The next day…" and shows the narrative's protagonist Bee at work. For brevity's sake I will pick up on page 87, on the top tier.

Fig. 3.7. Jason Little, *Shutterbug Follies* pg. 87.

Panel 1: Close-up. Bee is speaking (to Huey, who asked for a moment with her on the previous page.). Her response sets up the conditions for the scene that is to follow: "I'll take my break. Follow me." There is a gap between this first panel and the next, as panel 2 shows a different location. The transition and interplay between the two panels signifies that Bee and Huey have gone into the office at the back of Mulberry Photo

where Bee works. Bee's hand on the door knob and the crack of the door in panel 2 could signify the she is opening the door rather than closing it. However, through the door the green color of the walls in the main shop space is visible, which was the background in panel 1. This indicates they are now in a different space from panel 1 which they entered in a stretch time elided between panel 1 and panel 2, and it follows logically that Bee is closing the door behind them, not opening it.

Panel 2: In the office, Bee closes the door while Huey is rummaging through his bag for something. The transition to next panel is much less abrupt here than in the previous case, since the location and the characters stay the same. The implication, based on the next panel, is that Huey finds what he was looking for in his bag and takes it out, while the point of view for panel 3 changes from panel 2 to close in on the object that he takes from the bag.

Panel 3: Huey hands the object from his bag, a cigar box, to Bee. The cigar box is the center of focus in the panel, which also shows Huey's body, arms and his hands as he holds the box out to Bee. Only her hands are shown, stretched out to receive the box. Context from the surrounding panels is necessary to make the logical assumption that the disembodied hands shown here are indeed Bee's. The transition to the next panel again elides only a small amount of time, and implies that Bee takes the box and opens it.

Bottom tier, panel 4: Bee's eyes are shown focusing beyond the top of the cigar box, presumably on Huey, who is not shown in the panel. Her hand is on the lid, which is halfway up, indicating she is in the process of opening the box. Again there is only a small gap between this and the next panel, reinforced by the minimal change in point of view to panel 5. It is implied that Bee looks in the box and takes out the top photograph.

Panel 5: Bee has the box in one hand and a photograph in the other, which she holds up to her face as she looks at it. The next panel represents at once only a small transition from one panel to the next as well as the greatest shift we have seen so far. It is the implied "reverse shot" of panel 5, which follows very logically from the direction of Bee's gaze in that panel, but in its representation of a black and white photograph it also is a radical break with the representational style connecting the previous panels, and in fact begins a new representational regime, not of narrative panels but photographs. Even as the "reverse shot" this panel does not function typically, since it is represented in complete isolation. The panel does not show Bee's fingers obscuring part of the photo as if she is holding it; it stands alone, both part of and outside of the narrative, representing Bee's point of view but not perfectly. Only due to iconic solidarity and its implication that all panels must in some way presuppose one another can the reader connect this image to the ones surrounding it. By implication it is clear that the next panel shows the photograph Bee has taken from the box.

Panel 6: The photograph Bee sees—a sepia shot of a mother proudly holding up her new baby. This representation of the photograph comes at the end of the page, and the subsequent panels aren't visible until the page is turned from recto to verso. The photo becomes a mystery: what is the purpose this decades-old snap shot?

Page 88, top tier, panel 1 (Figure 3.8): On the next page the scene shown in the panel shifts back to the context of Bee and Huey in the office. Bee is still holding the cigar box and the picture, asking Huey about it. Dialogue provides direction for the next panels: "There's more," says Huey. Based on the assumption of solidarity, a relevance of the different syntagms to one another, panels 2-6 show what he means. Altogether there

are six photographs in the box, which would have fit on a single page in a six-panel layout, which Little employs quite regularly throughout the book. By breaking up the series of black and white photographs, so that one of them appears by itself on page 87,

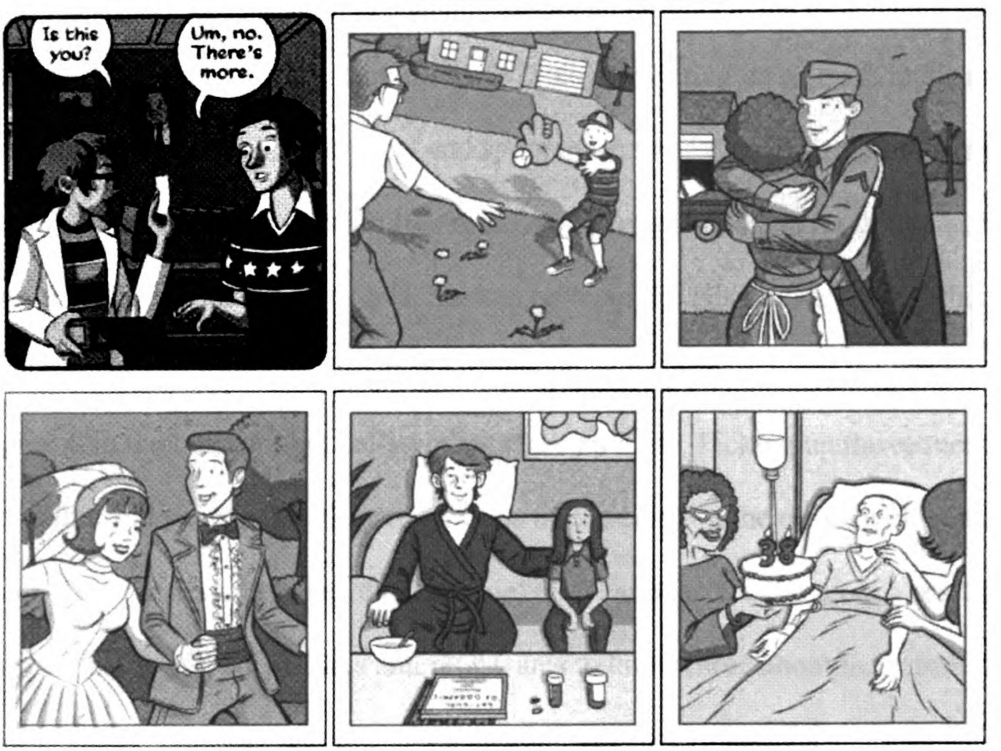

Fig. 3.8. Little, pg 88.

and one narrative panel breaks up the series on page 88, this sequence acquires the added tension of suspense on page 87, and at the same time stays rooted within the main narrative, since panel 1, page 88, with Bee holding up a photograph to Huey, provides context for the five photographs represented on page 88. The combination of the narrative panel with the five photographs illustrates the *in praesentia* requirement of Groensteen's iconic solidarity. The single panel showing Bee and Huey anchors the five subsequent photographs to the context of the two characters in the photo lab's office.

Page 88, panel 1 sets up the implication that consequently Bee takes five more black and white photographs out of the cigar box, each showing a stage in one man's life.

The location of panel 1 in the layout of the page introduces and frames these five photographs, which I will summarize only schematically: Panel 2 - childhood (a boy playing ball with his father). Panel 3 - youth (a young man in army uniform hugging his mother goodbye). Bottom tier, panel 4 - Wedding (grains of rice falling on a bride and groom). Panel 5 - Fatherhood and ill health (the man sitting on a couch in his robe, medicine bottles on the table, bowl and spoon in front of him, a worried looking girl next to him). Panel 6 - Close to death (the man has deteriorated: he has a thin face, hollow eyes, and is lying in a hospital bed, hooked up to an IV. His mother holding his birthday cake, the candles showing 38, while his wife holds his arm). This is the last image on the page and in the box, symbolically ending the man's life. Picking up the sequence at the top of the next page, page 89, panel 1 takes up the scene in the office with Bee and Huey again. The transition between the last panel on 88 and the first on 89 implies that Bee has finished looking at the pictures and now wants to know more about them from Huey.

Fig. 3.9. Little, pg. 89.

Page 89, top tier, panel 1 (Figure 3.9): The panel shows a close-up of the camera that Huey found the film in, with an explanation in dialogue. From outside of the panel, a word balloon from Bee states: "Where did you get these?" The answer is inserted in another out-of-panel word balloon from Huey: "They were in here. I found this in a dumpster in Jersey City." The transition to the next panel establishes that Bee takes camera: she is holding it in panel 2, while in panel 1 the camera was in Huey's hands, indicated by the position of his word balloon, which covered his hands. The camera creates a causal link between the six photographs and the setting, a symbolic pulling back from the photographs and the man who once was the object of the camera's focus, to the camera that took the photograph, to the man who developed the photographs and the woman looking at them. This panel consequently creates the transition from the series of photographs on the previous page back to the "here and now" of Bee's narrative.

Panel 2: Bee now holds the camera and she and Huey talk, the dialogue providing more explanation of the film in the camera and thus the photograph panels. After this Bee and Huey are interrupted and the scenes revolving around the photographs is over.

This particular sequence stands out due to the contrast between the regular narrative panels and the panels representing photographs, a contrast that highlight the functioning of comics panels in the construction of story. The photographs that formed the center of this sequence are distinguished from the panels in the comic by their (lack of) color, and, as throughout this comic, by the square corners, as opposed to the rounded corners of the narrative panels. More importantly, the transitions between the photographic sequence is very different from the transitions between the regular panels. The jumps in time between the photographs on the single roll of film are larger than those

between narrative panels, but their continuity is established with the constant presence of the main subject and the recognizable other participants such as his mother and his wife, who can both mainly be identified by their hair. In this sense the photographs work similarly to comics panels, using recurring characters to create the sequential logic, as Morgan discussed ("Graphic Shorthand" 36). This logic is related to Groensteen's iconic solidarity, and functions to establish a coherent line of narrative from a string of panels. Certain parts of the panel (most notably the main actors, but often also parts of the setting and key props) will be repeated from panel to panel. Consequently, these photographs establish themselves as a sequence based on the principles that work in comics sequences. But because in this sequence this process works through photographs, these six images become a self-referential commentary on the functioning of comics and the work panels perform to create narrative.

This function is also foregrounded in the spreads of photographs Bee repeatedly studies trying to figure out what happened with the trampled woman, Khatchatourian's wife (73). From the various photographs she has collected as evidence she can recreate the course of events and even hypothesize on the existence of a missing picture that would show the actual crime. The photographs that are there, if put in the correct order, give her enough information to fill in that blank. When she finds the negative in Khatchatourian's files she has proof that he had his wife murdered (107-109). Similarly, the panels in a comic give enough information for readers to make the necessary inferences between panels, so that the full narrative takes form. Narration in comics comes from a careful process of leaving out. There is however a big difference between

the series of photographs around which the sequence above revolves and more general sequences of comics panels that create narration.

Much more time elapses between the individual images in the series of photographs than commonly does between comics panels. The process of reading these photographs is also radically different from how one reads a comics sequence. These photographs build on one another in a logical way as they show an individual aging from boy to man and then slipping into ill health and death. The narrative of the photographs evolves through a progressive adding of information, but one only needs to read this sequence in one direction, forward, to gather this information. The photographs represent stages, indeed rather clichéd stages in the life of human beings. Narrative panels are not so inflexible. In looking at narrative panels in comics it is necessary to read back and forth in gathering the signification of comics panels. They do not represent stages or moments, but rather a continuum of possibility that remains fluid even after one has read the panel. In reading panels there is a continuous weaving back and forth, as the meaning of one panel retroactively resignifies what was seen in the previous panel.

These pictures from Huey's camera, and photographs in general, show isolated moments, which makes them only superficially similar to the panels in comics. The two are parallel but ontologically very different. One important difference is that with photographs, whether they evoke a story or not is incidental; their main purpose is to show. For comics images, on the other hand, narration is their *raison d'etre*. The photographs from Huey's camera do not create the sense of temporality that the comics panels do. There is no sense of what may happen immediately after the moment captured, or what went before. The photographs, unlike comics panels, do not expand the moment.

Comics panels allow for a flexibility of temporality that was first discussed in Chapter 1, and that comes into play again here. In contrast to the photographs, the narrative panels from the *Shutterbug Follies* scene seem incomplete by themselves, trivial even, because they rely on their surrounding panels for completion, for closure. Morgan argues that the comics image is subordinate to the needs of the narrative (*Principes* 251), though that is probably too strong a claim. The main concern of an individual panel is not its composition or any of the other qualities that we use to judge fine art. This may be a weakness in terms of individual imagery, which often leaves single panels unmemorable or even awkward. However, it becomes a strength in relation to the sequence, where single panels are completed by their surrounding partners. Based on the process of filling in gaps, comics sequences encode narrative, sometimes, but by no means always, with the support of text.

CHAPTER 4 Combining Signs: Image-Text Relations

Comics share a medium with literature—ink on paper—and are therefore sometimes erroneously regarded as a "branch or subproduct of literature" as Groensteen points out (128). While the material media are the same, the artistic forms of literature and comics are very different. Both forms share paper as a carrier, both are predominately, though not exclusively, narrative, but where in literature text or the verbal is the main (or even only) force with which to create a representation, in comics it is the pictorial that propels and creates the story and the work. The textual or verbal is only an optional, if convenient and commonly used, supporting tool in this process. Text appears in comics in word balloons and in captions. One of the main ways in which text operates in comics is to smooth over interstices, to create connections that the visual representation alone does not make clear. The function of text in comics is to fill in the gaps left by the images, the layout and the sequences. Simultaneously the insertion of text introduces another gap: the opening between verbal and visual representation.

Groensteen writes about the two "registers" of comics, the visual and the verbal, or "the iconic and the linguistic" (128). The importance of the combination of these registers in comics as a philosophical concept is evidenced by the titles of numerous publications about comics, including the titles of the journals *ImageText* and *Word & Image*, as well as the book *The Language of Comics: Word and Image*, edited by Varnum

and Gibbons. The essays in this collection begin to show the deep disagreement that exists between scholars of comics, about whether the "hybridity" of comics—the mixture of the verbal and pictorial registers—is foundational to the art form or only a fairly common characteristic, however central it may be in the comics in which it appears. Admittedly, it is hard to imagine the intricacy of *Watchmen* without the text it incorporates in word balloons, diary excerpts, newspaper articles and so forth. But similarly in Magritte's "The Treachery of Images" the image is made more provocative by the inclusion of the words "Ceci n'est pas une pipe," so that text and image together create a meaning and an irony that was not present in either separately. This inclusion does not make text an inherent part of all painting, and neither should text be seen as such in comics. It is symptomatic of our culture's regard for the linguistic that the verbal register in comics is so often elevated to equal standing in comics, on a par with the visual register. Instead, it would be more accurate to think of comics as a form that is mainly driven by the visual, to which the verbal often adds interest or depth.

The verbal dimension in comics is similar to soundtrack and dialogue in film. Sound in film adds specificity, perhaps helps provide details within the narrative, but it is not always essential to telling the story, and certainly not to the film medium itself. The visual language of film was already highly developed before sound was introduced. Certainly, the cinema adapted in various ways after sound technology was introduced, but the basics of its visual language were not changed (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 298). Having always been a print medium, comics did not need to develop new technologies for the representation of the verbal in addition to the visual, sound as well as sight. All these are represented as marks on paper in the comics; hence the two

"registers" within the single medium.[6] As a result, both auditory and visual representation are more mediated in comics than they are in the cinema, more reliant on codes. In that regard comics can never be as immersive as film. On the other hand comics as a form displays more unity: sensory phenomena—be they visual, auditory, olfactory or tactile—are all indicated by marks on paper. The medium that text and image share in comics adds fuel to the debate over whether the two registers are united and interdependent, or separate and, in the case of text, even optional.

Scott McCloud denies the existence of a conceptual gap between the two registers in comics, between representation by resemblance and representation by convention. His map of the "Universe of Comics" (*Understanding* 52-3) implies a continuous line from the most realistic images, through increasingly abstract images, to text. McCloud calls words, pictures and icons the "vocabulary of the language of comics" (47) and claims that if comics are recognized as a unified language, it "deserves a single, unified vocabulary" (ibid.). This leads him to see as continuous the range from realistic visual images to simple words to increasingly complicated text (49). McCloud is invested in seeing comics as one complete language or signifying system, saying that without that recognition "comics will continue to limp along as the 'bastard child' of words and pictures" (47).

Various other comics scholars agree with McCloud's conceptualization of comics as a single, unified language. In his reading of the comics form, Robert C. Harvey calls comics a "verbal-visual blend," and claims this characteristic is an essential feature of the form:

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[6] Sometimes even sounds are represented pictorially rather than verbally, such as image of a saw cutting a log to represent the sound of snoring.

> [T]he essential characteristic of *comics*—the thing that distinguishes it from other kinds of pictorial narratives—is the incorporation of verbal content... [I]n the best examples of the art form, words and pictures blend to achieve a meaning that neither conveys alone without the other. ("Describing" 19)

The problem with this statement is that, as I will demonstrate later, comics can work perfectly well without verbal content, and the verbal-pictorial blend is not unique to comics. It also operates very effectively in single panel cartoons such as those in the *New Yorker*, as well as in children's picture books and in photographs and their captions. In all these cases the blend of word and image is working to create meaning that neither convey by themselves.

David Carrier takes a similar stance to R.C. Harvey, foregrounding the philosophical implications of creating a signifying system that combines text and image to the point where one is incomprehensible without the other. For him the speech balloon exemplifies the conceptual link between image and text in comics—it is "a defining element of the comic because it establishes the word/image unity that distinguishes comics from pictures illustrating a text" (*Aesthetics* 4).

However, notwithstanding talk of image-text "blending" or "unity," text inevitably signifies in a completely different way from even the most abstracted of images and the most conventionalized of icons. Words and their textual representations do not in any way represent the visual appearance of the objects or concepts they signify, the only exception being onomatopoeic words, which resemble their source aurally, not visually. Granted, both text and images are signifying systems, or language, as Jurij Lotman explains, when he defines language as "an ordered communicative (serving to transmit information) sign system" (1). Unlike McCloud and Carrier, Lotman draws attention to the deep difference between the verbal and the pictorial, these "two

independent and equal cultural signs: the word and the image" (5). Clearly, verbal and pictorial communication are two opposing systems of signs, which come together productively in certain arts, comics and film among them.

Rather than attempting to force a continuity between the verbal and the visual, then, what makes comics conceptually interesting is the way the form allows images to adopt linguistic patterns of encoding and decoding into their signification, while conversely text in comics often takes on visual signification.[7] Images by themselves (as panels) signify as images simultaneously in space, but in addition to that, comics panels are structured to be *read* sequentially, like text. Like words, panels are ordered on the page to be read from left to right and from top to bottom (in Western comics). This follows Barthes' statement in "Myth Today": "Pictures become a kind of writing as soon as they are meaningful: like writing, they call for a *lexis*" (*Mythologies* 110), with the panel being the lexis in comics. In comics, the meanings of panels are modulated by subsequent panels, as the meanings of words are in a sentence.

Conversely, text in comics takes on visual qualities; the visual appearance of the words, such as size and font, create a graphic representation, usually of how the texts sound (e.g. loud or soft, harsh or sweet). These visual aspects of the representation of the words do not alter the meaning of the words themselves.

Despite the difference in textual and pictorial systems or languages, the notion of the gap that I have been discussing at various levels of signification in comics—from image to narrative—is perhaps least evident in the connection between image and text. However, this is only logical considering the relationship between these two registers.

[7] Sheila Nayar, in the article "*Écriture* Aesthetics: Mapping the Literate Episteme of Visual Narrative," discusses a notion of literacy that goes beyond a mere ability to read words to other ways of understanding structures of meaning, including gaps (149). This type of literacy may well be visible in comics.

Generally in comics, text and image work to complement each other, one register supplying details or information that the other register does not or cannot provide. As such, the two together tend to work to smooth over gaps, not to create them. Does this negate my assertions so far, that elision lies at the heart of comics? Certainly not. The gap at work at this level is the gap between the verbal and the visual as signifying systems, a gap which is never quite bridged, no matter how visually expressive text in comics sometimes becomes, and no matter how abstracted and cryptic some images become. While the insertion of text anchors the signification of the image, helping to bridge gaps, the resulting co-presence of text and image creates a new gap between these two forms of communication. Comics try to bridge that gap too, blending the limits of text and image, but never quite succeeding, much as McCloud would wish it so.

Representing the Verbal

Text appears in comics in a number of ways: as captions, external or internal to the panels; as words that are part of the represented world (i.e. a newspaper headline, graffiti on a wall, or writing on a T-shirt). Most emblematically to comics, text can appear in the word balloon, which may be a speech balloon or a thought balloon. Groensteen pays attention to the word balloon as a part of the layout of the page, seeing it work in complicity with the illustrated panels and the gutters to guide the flow of the page, even before considering the text that actually appears within these balloons (67). Word balloons are still part of the image, but what makes them so interesting for some critics such as David Carrier, is that word balloons do not exist as visual entities in the world of the comic: they are conventional shortcuts into characters' minds, showing what

characters in the comic are saying or thinking. He calls word balloons "a great philosophical discovery, a method of representing thoughts and words" (*Aesthetics* 4). Two examples of the ways text can be incorporated in comics can be seen in Figure 4.1, a *Peanuts* strip.

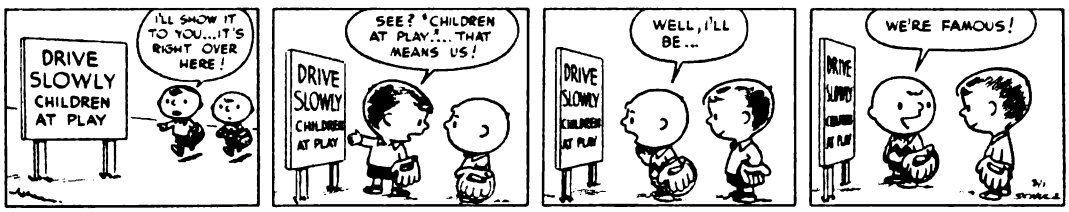

Fig. 4.1. Schulz, pg. 44.

Here, Charlie Brown and a friend discuss a sign that they have discovered in their neighborhood. The sign and the word balloons contrast with each other. The representation of the text on the sign changes as the point of view changes the perspective from which it is shown; by contrast, the word balloons are always clearly visible, facing the reader frontally. They display no materiality.

Despite their association with text, it is possible for word balloons to contain only pictures. One example is McGuire's "The Thinkers," which uses thought balloons to show the thoughts of people on the street in New York, from the local policeman thinking about a vacation to the man revisiting a painful childhood memory, while the thoughts of the dog he is walking jump between scattered impressions of food, poodle backsides and fire hydrants. The only text present on this page is the word "slave" on a gravestone a depressed woman imagines, and the words "Hot Dog" and "Soda" on a vendor's cart (190). However, despite being virtually non-verbal, the page is a rich stream-of-consciousness rendition of daily life. Another example of the flexibility of the signs incorporated in word balloons is Figure 4.2, another *Peanuts* strip. This strip first shows

Snoopy barking as he chases a bird. The two balloons represent the sound he produces as onomatopoeia: "Arf! Rarf!". In the final panel, after Snoopy has slipped on the ice and lost the bird, his grumbling to himself is represented only visually but quite eloquently: as a black smudge in the word balloon. While word balloons are a common vehicle for words, they are equally suited to carrying pictures, or any combination of the two.

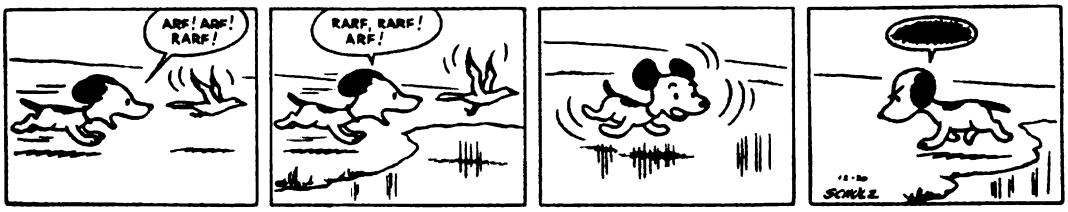

Fig. 4.2. Schulz, pg. 23.

Another problem with privileging word balloons as an essential feature in comics is the evidence of alternatives to the use of word balloons to represent speech in comics: In *Micrographica* by Renee French, each panel is accompanied by some short lines in quotation marks underneath the panel, representing what one of the characters in the panel is saying (see Figure 2.4). Unlike with word balloons, where the balloon is usually clearly "tied" to the speaker, through the tail of the balloon, in *Micrographica* the panel and the dialogue lines are separated, making the speech slightly disembodied. Although this example illustrates the relative effectiveness and elegance of the word balloon, it also demonstrates that word balloons are only optional in comics, not an exclusive means of representing speech or incorporating text.

How to do Things with Words

The appearance of words and letters in comics are often manipulated to add to the purely linguistic meaning of the words, making the visual dimension of text a source of

signification. *Arkham Asylum*, for example, uses different fonts for different characters, signifying the sound of their voice as one reads their words. Many comics use font size and thickness to indicate sound levels: the larger the letters, the louder the sound they represent.[8] Sometimes the visual qualities of the verbal register become part of the narrative's theme. In her article "Manuscript in Print: The Materiality of Alternative Comics", Emma Tinker discusses Craig Thompson's *Blankets* and the importance of handwriting, the personal mark, in that book. Tinker argues that for the protagonist "drawing and handwriting are essentially parts of the same activity" (1176), an activity which is both material, as in "She must have been pressing her pen hard"), as well as intimate: "An alluring line looped her 'l's" (Thompson 146; quoted in Tinker 1178). Tinker points out that comics are not only (hand)drawn, they are also often handwritten, blending the distinction between word and image, creating a form in which "the relationship between words and images is substantially closer than one might expect in other forms of illustrated text" (1176).[9]

While physically the production of text in comics may be closely linked to the production of the images, relying on the same tools in most cases, as registers the two operate quite differently. Lynda Barry makes a similar connection to Tinker's in her comments about brush strokes and writing: "I decided to try to write my book with a brush, mostly because I wanted to get as far from the computer as I could. I was surprised by the instant change in my experience of writing. Without a delete button, I could allow

[8] See Catherine Khordoc's chapter "The Comic Book's Soundtrack: Visual Sound Effects in *Asterix*" (156-73) in *The Language of Comics: Word and Image*, by Varnum and Gibbons.
[9] The hand-drawn and hand-written nature of comics is what Morgan calls "autotypie," and is essential to modern comics ("Graphic Shorthand" 24). See also Gene Kannenberg Jr.'s chapter "Graphic Text, Graphic Context: Interpreting Custom Fonts and Hands in Contemporary Comics," for a discussion of the importance of lettering in comics, and how this can signify.

the unexpected to grow. I finished my novel" (no pagination). There is slippage between Barry's use of the words writing and painting in this passage, as if these activities are not at all two very different things. When she also says: "These monkey paintings are fossils of experience, the remnants of a hand in motion, of breath and being," it may be clear that, as with Thompson, making marks on paper, whether verbal or pictorial, is a blended activity, and very importantly tied to the body.

In comics the textual register often provides contextual specificity, but is not essential to gauge the action. Certainly, text often helps one understand the meaning of otherwise floating signifiers in the image, or it foregrounds specific aspects of the image among the numerous visible details. At the same time, the verbal message also needs pictorial information to ensure its interpretation. Pronouns like "that" or "he" need the support of a deictic image in which the speaker is pointing at something or someone to identify what is being said. In McCloud, the combinations of image and text can take on the following relations: word specific, picture specific, duo-specific, additive, parallel, montage, and interdependent (153-155). In his listing, McCloud concentrates in the immediate relation between the words and images on the page. If one needs the image to clear up who the "he" or "she" in the text is, then the relation is picture specific, although it may also be additive or interdependent. Rather than looking at the *relations* between picture and text, Groensteen discusses the insertion of text into comics in terms of the *functions* of the verbal register in comics (132), showing that for him the word in comics is always subordinate to the image.

A Word About Text

Words and pictures do not always collaborate seamlessly in comics. In some cases, in comics and in other graphic and literary forms, images dominate, but more often the text takes center stage, making pictures play only a supportive role at best, as is the case in illustrated narratives. We are accustomed to verbal narratives, from bedtime stories to the novels of Hemingway. From children's books to detective novels to literature, events and action are evoked by strings of words. In the case especially of children's books, these events are often accompanied by pictures, illustrations to the text.[10] In comics the evocation of action, the generation of events, comes predominately from the images. Text is a convenient way to create specificity: captions solidify a time or a place of the setting, dialogue shown in balloons anchors the action to motives, but at the level of action, the images of comics do not need words. In this regard comics differ from film. Early cinema was silent (and some argued that adding sound would diminish of the film form[11]). The short films of early cinema (actualities mostly) were perfectly able to convey events without the intervention of spoken words and sound effects. Even inter-titles were not a part of the very early film experience. Inter-titles did not emerge in film until the cinema developed more intricate modes of story telling, basically when film went from showing events to creating narratives (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 183). And this may be the crux in comics too. The form is perfectly well suited to show simple actions and events, but text becomes a virtual necessity in comics if they want to create more intricate forms of narrative.

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[10] See chapter 2 for a discussion of the difference between pictures that illustrate and pictures that narrate, or illustrations and visuals.

[11] Vachel Lindsay is one of them, in *The Art of the Moving Picture.*

Comics also have their silent versions, but these are not linked to a particular period in the evolution of comics. Unlike with film, for comics the use of words has not been dictated by technological limitations or advancements. From the start the technology required to print comics has left artists free to decide for themselves whether they wanted to include text or not. There is a longstanding and continuing tradition of comics without text—"silent strips,"[12]—from the *Chat Noir* pages in French magazines in the 1800s to Milt Gross's 1930 *He Done Her Wrong*, to Eric Drooker's work from the early 1990s. Clearly, many comics artists have chosen not to include text, although often this choice has been restricted to omitting dialogue. Gross's story explicitly evokes the silent film of the period in his cast of characters, the melodramatic story and a "pantomime" scene that is repeated several times by different characters. He is drawing attention to the lack of dialogue, but has no qualms about using text in general, especially in support of a joke: at a crucial moment in the story the hero and the heroine fail to meet each other in the street because they are separated by a huge movie billboard advertising the new film *Fate*. Thus Gross's subtitle, *The Great American Novel and Not a Word In It--No Music Too*, is not strictly true, but it does shed light on Gross's apparent project of creating a truly American story (virtually) without using text.

Artists sometimes make the choice to forego dialogue in comics to achieve particular aesthetic effects. The stories in Drooker's book *Flood!* lack represented dialogue, and thus have no speech balloons (Gross used speech balloons with pictures in them). On the other hand, these stories do contain textual cues at some important moments. At the beginning of the first story, "Home," the main character is shocked to

[12] I take the term "silent strip" from David Kunzle's essay in *The Language of Comics: Word and Image*, in which he discusses the *Chat Noir* comics among others.

find the notice "Plant Closed" nailed to the front door when he arrives at work; later he is faced with the words "Eviction Notice" tacked to his own door. In the narrative of the first story, where a man falls slowly from joblessness to hopelessness to homelessness, these textual interventions are minimal, but they do help clarify and speed along the progress of the narrative. The pacing of this short story also speeds up because towards the end the panels get smaller and smaller. Towards the end of the story the pages go from having four panels each to sixteen, to sixty-four and finally 256 tiny panels. In these last few pages the actions represented in these sequences get muddled. It is hard to say

Fig. 4.3. Erik Drooker, *Flood!* n.p.

whether this is due to the shrinking panels with increasingly abstracted figures or due to the lack of text, but over the last pages the events facing the protagonist (who is present in each panel) disintegrate, which perhaps is the point of the story. In panel 137 on the final page, the protagonist, already reduced to a tiny stick figure, disappears, and the final 119 panels are empty and black. The other two stories in the collection *Flood!* have a

dreamlike, or rather, nightmarish quality to them, quite fitting since they are about dreams and visions. These narratives create their visions all the more strongly by their wordlessness. The lack of text helps these comics evoke the preverbal or subverbal state of experience that is the dream.

It is almost impossible to make comics completely without text. In his use of titles, Drooker is strikingly spare; the stories in his collection are simply called "Home," "L," and "Flood!" But short as they may be, these titles once again show the difficulty of getting away from text completely. Even silent comics (just like silent films) need titles for identification, and giving a work a title always involves a textual intervention that changes the work itself.[13] In her collection of short stories *Sweaterweather*, Sara Varon makes an attempt at completely circumventing the textual title.

Fig. 4.4. Sara Varon, *Sweater Weather* pg. 3.

In the table of contents she lists nine pictures with page numbers, and each story begins with a page that is blank except for the story's image from the table of contents. Only one of the stories collected in *Sweaterweather* comes with an official, or rather, textual title. Story number two has the title "The Dinner Guest" in a banner at the top of the first page, and this is exactly what the pictorial title also shows: The panel shows a cat sitting at a table, fork in one hand, chewing on a

[13] This is especially noticeable in the world of visual art where titles, from *Fountain* to *Untitled Film Still # 21* to just plain *Untitled*, have a huge influence on the interpretation of a piece.

mouthful of food. The difference with a textual title is that in the case of the picture one needs to have read the whole story to know this panel depicts the guest who came to dinner—that the cat *is* "The Dinner Guest." While this example illustrates the lack of specificity that accompanies (or may accompany) wordless comics, from a more positive point of view this indeterminism of silent comics may be regarded as an invitation to fill in what is left unsaid. Varon's use of pictorial titles is a whimsical way of drawing attention to the titular practices in comics and the arts in general. Even works of art that involve no textual or verbal register within themselves, like a painting or a piece of instrumental music, are still identified by verbal means in giving them a title.

Titles are often a site of play in comics. They are foregrounded in Eisner's *The Spirit*, when he draws buildings or peeling posters that in their shapes spell out the title (*Sequential Art* 31). An example of a similar use of text in a comic, where words are both part of the image and extraneous to it as "information for the reader," can be seen in Dan Clowes' *Ghost World*. The words "Ghost World" are graffitied on the walls and windows in the neighborhood (79) but at certain instances in the book the graffiti doubles as the titles of individual chapters (9, 47, 63). In those cases the graffiti becomes a case of iconotext: it is text within the image that can be read there literally, but can also be read on a metaphorical level (Burke 39). The nature of the textual register comics is such that it can foreground and defamiliarize the practice of giving titles and indeed generally play with the visual dimensions of text.

Although wordless comics create a challenge, depriving readers of the sense of certainty that text in comics often provides in the anchorage function (Groensteen 129), combining text and image does not necessarily lead to clarity and certainty. There can be

an ironic and destabilizing clash between text and image, for example in Spiegelman's *Maus*, where the image attempts to create a historical certainty that clashes with the eyewitness report represented in Vladek's narrational captions (II 54); or in Chris Ware's short story "Thrilling Adventure Stories" which contrasts the images of a more or less conventional superhero story with the awkward memories of a pre-adolescent child. The texts starts "When I was really young," and this recollection continues in all the possible locations for text in a comic: in captions, word and thought balloons, iconotexts such as letters, newspapers, banners and even lighted letters on buildings. The most striking discrepancy between text and image in this story is the penultimate panel, where the sound effect for an explosion in suitably big and bold letters reads "WHEN" (81), a climactic clash of text and pictorial context. This comic is an example of how text and image can run on two completely disparate tracks and still oddly make sense.[14] By contrasting its two registers, this short story becomes a touching performance of how superhero comics can provide an escape from painful everyday reality for young readers, making this perceived weakness—escapism—on the part of comics, into an underlying theme for its narrative. Precisely the disconnect that exists between text and image in this story creates the drive to find an interpretation that accounts for the gap.

A Wordy Alternative

There are many ways in which comics can balance image and text, with varying degrees of success. A short sequence from the work of Fletcher Hanks illustrates the sometimes paradoxical relationship between image and text in comics: On the one hand

[14] See Gene Kannenberg Jr.'s essay "The Comics of Chris Ware: Text, Image and Visual Narrative Strategies" and Charles Hatfield, pages 37-40 for two useful discussions of Ware's short story.

silent comics can lead to vagueness and ultimately confusion, but Hanks' work illustrates that an excess of text, verbal overdetermination, also affects signification in comics: it can hamper the normal flow of the sequence, interrupting the functioning of the gap between panels.

The book *I shall Destroy All Civilized Planets!* collects a number of Hanks' "The Super Wizard Stardust" stories from the 1930s, each of which is introduced in more or less the same fashion: "Stardust, whose vast knowledge of interplanetary science has made him the most remarkable man that ever lived, devotes his abilities to crime-busting..."(14). The story "Skullface Takes Over New York" from *Fantastic* #11, shows Stardust on the second page, listening in on the villain Skullface and his crew.

Fig. 4.5. Fletcher Hanks, *I shall Destroy All Civilized Planets!* pg. 15.

The first panel is captioned: "Stardust uses his panoramic concentration unit..."(15) and shows the Super Wizard peering into a kind of huge telescope. The second panel shows Skullface speaking to two of his men: "First, we'll terrorize the city," so that this panel represents what Stardust is seeing and hearing from his laboratory. The following panel, on tier 2, still shows Skullface giving instructions to his men, followed by a narrow panel

of one of his men saying "Let's get going, "Skullface"! What are your orders?" A close-up of Stardust follows in the next panel: "They're getting the bombing planes ready, and New York has no anti-aircraft guns!" This panel has a smaller panel in the right-hand corner, showing Stardust turning away saying: "I haven't much time!" These panels create the simple course of events of Stardust spying while Skullface is making plans. The panels are text-heavy due to large speech balloons laying out the proposed course of action of the "organization of gangsters"(14), but captions are not used to make the transitions from panel to panel, and indeed they are not necessary.

The next pages show Skullface's plans set into action, and action it is. Here, every panel is provided with a caption: "As the subway transportation is stopped, the bombing planes swoop down"/ "The bombs explode in the streets"/ "And on the bridges"/ "The bombs leave dead and dying victims in the shattered districts"/ "People become terror-stricken." Each caption goes along with a panel image that is much larger than the caption, but since the captions are placed in the top left-hand corners of the panels, they appear first, in terms of reading direction, setting up the image to follow subsequently, and relegating it to the rank of illustration: the caption has already accounted what is happening, the image no longer establishes the action—it can only provide a visual support for the captions. This effect is amplified by the completeness of the captions. The captions touch on every aspect of the action that is visible on the pages. The caption: "A terrific battle follows between the surprised police and the well equipped army of hidden gangsters," accompanies a picture of numerous policemen firing handguns into an empty background (17). In some cases the image shows even less than what the caption says. The text "'Skullface' contacts his bombers" is set into a panel that merely shows parts of

three airplanes in close-up. Thus the action in this comic is driven by the captions, and in fact the captions get longer as the action gets more intense, as on the next page when Stardust joins the fray (Figure 4.6). The first captions on this page read "But when the planes are ready to discharge their deadly load, a star-shaped flash appears above them"/ "From out of the flash, swoops Stardust, releasing powerful fusing rays"(18). The text in these captions is gushing with excitement, brought across partly by the use of adjectives—"*deadly* load," "*star-shaped* flash," "*powerful fusing* rays" (my italics). The detail in the text clashes with the bold-lined simplicity of the images. The caption said "star-shaped flash," so when the image beneath shows a flash in the shape of a star, this does not provide any new information. In this case the verbal overdetermination makes the images all but superfluous, showing that ideally a balance needs to be struck between text and image in comics.

Fig. 4.6. Hanks, pg. 16.

There is a naiveté about Hanks' work that comes partly from the style of the drawings: simple or non-existent backgrounds; exaggerated perspective; bright, mainly primary colors (with some green and orange). In addition, Stardust is always shown from the same two angles: either from the side and back or from an almost Egyptian three-

quarter angle from the front. The stolid effect of the images is reinforced by the use of captions. In this comic the sequential breakdown of the images is dictated not by the action but by the captions, which are what McCloud would label "word specific." The flow of the captions across the page is structured like a series of sentences, or even a series of phrases forming a single sentence. Each phrase is accompanied by a picture, so that every panel illustrates a part of the sentence. The action is broken up according to sentence structure rather than according to the rhythm of the action or arc of events, with the results that the panels do not achieve flow as a visual sequence: The sentence that is formed by the textual captions in the sequence pre-empts any closure that might occur between the images within the panels.

In the captioned comics Lynda Barry's *One Hundred Demons*, rather than foreclosing gaps, the combination of caption and panel often creates a tension, a new gap that needs to be closed. The stories in this comic deal more or less with Barry's own youth: the captions are narrated in first person, and the girl in the stories is addressed as Lynda. The stories are all structured with two large panels per page, so that in effect, when the book lies open, the two pages together form a four-panel strip. The panels are split in two, the top part filled with text and the bottom showing a picture. Most panels are divided up about equally between words and image, but in many cases more than half the panel consists of caption, and sometimes the picture takes up more space. Besides the captions, words also occur in the images, in speech balloons, so that all together this comic contains a lot of text.

Sequence does not work in the "typical" comics manner in these stories, because actions are rarely built up over the course of several panels. Almost every individual

panel is a scene unto itself, with here and there two panels combining together in a scene. The flow of the action is mainly created by the captions in Barry's comics. These comics have a strong narrative voice, and yet the accompanying images do more than merely illustrate. In a story like "Dancing," the captions provide a general narrative and the images supply specific details of characters, actions and events. While Barry's panels do not create action through montage, as we saw in earlier examples, in the interplay between caption and image, Barry's pictures bring life to captions which by themselves provide mainly introspection.

The heartbreaking story "Resilience" foregrounds the interplay between captions and pictures. In this story, after the first few panels raise the question of when Lynda became a teenager, and positing it was not when she first kissed a boy, the captions and the images move apart on separate tracks: the images in panels three and four show Lynda coming home the afternoon after that first kiss and being interrogated about where she was by her mother who knows something is up (Figure 4.7). These two panels show

Fig. 4.7. Lynda Barry, "Resilience," *One Hundred Demons* pg. 65.

caption and image moving apart. The first (panel 3) shows both image and caption still dealing with the aftermath of the kiss. In panel 4, the image stays with that context, while the caption goes off in a different direction, reminiscing based on associations with the kiss. Panels five and six show her in bed that night, worried about what might happen if she were to meet the boy again as he suggested, somewhere "more 'comfortable'"(66).

Meanwhile the captions accompanying these images start at the same point as the images—that first kiss in the ravine—but then hint at unspeakable experiences Lynda had in the past: "I'd been scared about that kiss and I was glad it didn't last long. The ravine was dark and creepy. I already knew too much about sex, found out about it in harsh ways"(65). The next caption elaborates: "When I was still little, bad things had gone on, things too awful to remember," and the next: "I wasn't alone in my knowledge. Nearly every kid in my neighborhood knew too much too soon"(66). In the next panel, number six, caption and image meet up again. The caption reads "I cringe when people talk about the resiliency of children. It's a hope adults have about a child's inner life, that it's simple, that what can be forgotten can no longer affect us. But what is forgetting?" This caption is paired with the image of Lynda in bed, having fallen asleep after her worries about the boy she kissed. This image shows Lynda in the act of forgetting: for the moment she's been able to forget the pressure to have sex that the boy represents, and it shows how she's been "forgetting" for years about the bad things that were done to her sexually in her childhood. The lines of the captions and images in this story create narrative loops by separating and coming together several times in its 18-panel span.

Throughout this story the images create a more or less chronological progression of events: after kissing the paper boy Lynda accidentally/on purpose gets a class mate

interested in him, letting herself off the hook of having sex. She tries but fails to get into a new group of friends; at 13 she starts drinking and staying out late (and having sex, presumably), and keeps denying it to her mother. While this line steadily moves forward, the captions loop around, referring to the past, touching on the present in the images, but also imbued with the awareness of the "present" of the time of writing. The link to that present is implied throughout with the use of past tense, but comes out especially strongly in panel 16, which reads: "I caught up with the home-ec girl's way of being, doing things that scared me but made me feel exhilaratingly whole. I know this may be hard to understand, this compulsion to repeat the situations that harmed you"(71). This caption shows an understanding of her actions that Lynda did not possess as a teenager, as is clear from the thought balloon in the accompanying image: "Why do you keep doing this? You are so stupid. You are so, so stupid." The captions catch up with the time of the images in the final panel (Figure 4.8). In the course of the images Lynda has turned into a

Fig. 4.8. Barry, pg. 72.

teenager, and the final caption acknowledges this, answering the question raised in the

very first caption: "I became a teenager when I discovered how to give myself that feeling of wholeness, even if it lasted only for a moment, even if it got me into huge trouble, it was the closest I could come to... to... I don't remember"(72). At this point it is the image that veers away radically from the course of events it had been presenting. Instead of the surly teenage Lynda one might expect, this final image shows a much younger Lynda playing with a doll. A man who is only visible from the belt down says to her: "Hey there, sweetheart. Do you and your dolly want to go for a ride?"

While not showing the traumatic experience of childhood sexual abuse that followed, this panel illuminates the unwanted knowledge that earlier captions in the story referred to: this image is the preamble to the "bad things [that] had gone on"(65). The story never actually represents any of the crucial moments that shaped the development of the child in this story. The first kiss, and the sex as a 13-year-old are not pictured, only told in words, and the central event, the sexual abuse as a child, goes unrepresented in either register. That event remains unrepresentable, just as the first trauma remains unspeakable. But in the evasive looping of captions around the images, no doubt is left about what Lynda wants to forget but cannot forget. Pictures and text each separately tell only part of the story, giving fragments. Together they explain why the term "resilience" makes Lynda cringe, and together they perhaps attain the wholeness that the child in the story is trying to achieve. None of McCloud's image-text relations quite capture the relation Barry creates between text and image in this story: a gap opens up between image and text here that itself signifies the gap created by Lynda's loss of wholeness.

In the work of both Barry and Hanks the sequential action of the images is disrupted by text. The use of long narrative captions eliminates the need to move back

and forth across interstices between panels to study changes and follow the action. The result is that while narratively a lot may be happening, visually these comics are quite static, lacking movement. The role of text can be supportive, allowing the action to be mostly transmitted through the images, or the text can take on the main narrative role, relegating images to illustration. Often comics use a combination of the two. The difference between text-dependent comics and more image-focused comics has sometimes been summarized as a "literary style" and a "cinematic" style (*Two-Fisted Tales* 144)[15]. Comics script writer Al Feldstein claimed (his own) text-heavy stories allowed for "a complicated, more nuanced plot...to flesh out the characters" due to his use of "heavy, descriptive captions"(144). According to him, comics with less text emphasized the art work, while comics with more text emphasized story. This reflects a traditional bias or perhaps misconception that still clings to the comics form: that narrative is mainly a textual phenomenon. However, if the previous chapters have done anything, I hope they have dispelled that notion and shown that narration in comics is very much an image-based process.

Suiting the Word to the Action

Text-heavy comics can strike a balance between image and text; they are not necessarily as static as the examples from Hanks' and Barry's work may imply. In the following example from a traditional superhero comic book, the action is rapid, as one

[15] Commentator Russ Cochran compares the styles of two of EC's best-know creators, the text-heavy comics by Feldstein which he calls "literary," and the "cinematic" comics by Kurtzman (144). Feldman responds, with reference to Harvey Kurtzman's comics scripts: his "stroboscopic, pantomime depictions of a single action would occupy, often, an entire page...leaving hardly any room to develop a long, complicated story line when limited to, say, a six-pager"(144). Kurtzman's sequences, often with minimal dialogue or other textual intervention, contrast sharply with Feldstein's narratives, where practically every panel has a caption box inserted. The assumption here is that a complicated story is better than a simple one, but also that a complicated story cannot be told in pictures alone.

expects of the genre, and the abundance of text may come as a surprise. Here, the action is image-dominated, making the text secondary—"image specific" in McCloud's terms. The reason for including the large amount of text in comics of this period is likely tied to the history of the genre, rather than to a purely creative choice on the part of the artists.

Figure 4.9 shows an early Spider-Man comic book, from March 1963. This story, "Spider-Man vs. the Chameleon!" was created by Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, and is a conventional superhero comic from that period. While this comic is action-packed, it is certainly not wordless. Typical of the Spider-Man series is Spidey's running commentary about what he is doing, presented as an internal monologue in thought balloons, or even sometimes vocalized in speech balloons. The commentary seems to be so integral to the character that it was reproduced in the animated series based on the comic book, where Spider-Man's internal monologue was presented to viewers in voice-over. Due to the commentary that Spidey provides in this comic, these pages are relatively text-heavy. But the dynamic between text and image in the pages of *The Amazing Spider-Man* comic books is very different from the dynamic in Hanks or Barry. The passage on page 36 shows Spider-Man in action as he is chasing down a villain who just took off in a helicopter. The first three panels, on the top tier, show

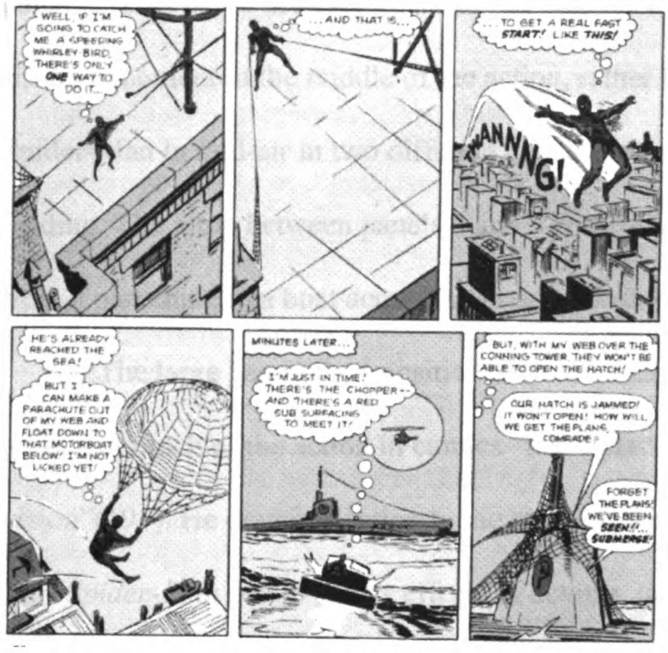


Fig. 4.9. Lee and Ditko, *The Amazing Spider-Man* p. 36.

Spider-Man shooting web on either side of him, then pulling back on an improvised catapult, and finally in mid-flight after he has launched himself off the roof. The next tier shows how the chase continues: in panel 4 Spider-Man is suspended on a web-parachute, bearing down on a docked boat, in panel 5 he is on a speedboat, approaching a submarine on which the villain's helicopter is about to land. In the last panel of this tier Spidey has made it impossible for the Chameleon to board the submarine by webbing shut the sub's hatch. Events move at a rapid pace in this sequence and one may notice that each panel shows a moment in the middle of the action, rather than at the beginning or end. We see Spider-Man in mid-air in two different panels, never in the moment of take-off or landing. The jump between panels 4 and 5 is especially striking, since Spider-Man moves from a parachute to a boat across the break of a single gutter.

The large gap in the transition between these two panels illustrates Clive Scott's point that much of the action in comics "takes place beyond the frames, out of vision"(191). He draws attention to the "blind field" where crucial actions take place. This *Spider-Man* comic shows effects of actions, not their causes, so that the causes are only signified by the string of effects shown in the sequence of panels. Between panel 4 and 5, the actions of Spider-Man as he lands on the dock, unties the boat, starts it and drives towards the submarine, can all be filled in based on the two given moments in the sequence of events. Scott comments that it is partly the invitation of the blind field, the gutter, in comics, that gives them their interest, fed by both curiosity and frustration.[16]

This discussion has focused almost exclusively on the images in the sequence in Figure 4.9, and clearly the action sequence can be construed perfectly well without the

[16] Scott contrasts this effect of comics with the effect of the photo-story, the real subject of his study. He argues that the photo-story tends to evoke actions by showing beginnings and endings of actions, not so much the middle of the action as comics do (189-191).

help of words. Throughout, however, the panels are supplemented by the signature Spider-Man banter. The top tier reads "Well, if I'm going to catch me a speeding whirley-bird, there's only ONE way to do it.../...and that is.../to get a real fast START! Like THIS!" Spidey's tone is breezy as usual, and the monologue in this case doesn't relate directly to the actions (making a catapult). If the thought balloons have any function here, it is to increase excitement in the sequence by conveying Spidey's urgency. The next tier has more extensive balloons:

> He's already reached the sea! But I can make a parachute out of my web and float down to that motorboat below! I'm not licked yet!/ I'm just in time! There's the chopper—and there's the red submarine surfacing to meet it! / But, with my web over the conning tower, they won't be able to open the hatch! (36)

The only information available in the balloons that cannot be gleaned from the images is that the Chameleon is flying over sea in panel 4, and in panel 5 that the submarine is Soviet. But even that becomes clear from panel 6, where the hammer and sickle are clearly legible on the side of the submarine. The process of overdetermination here is the opposite of that of the "Super Wizard Stardust" story. The sequence of this page is perfectly intelligible without the text in the balloons. Whereas in Hanks the text made the images redundant, in *Spider-Man*, the images make the text superfluous.

In the case of the *Spider-Man* stories, the redundancy of (much of) the text has a contextual explanation. It is indicative of the historical period in which these comics were produced, and of the target audience of these comic books. The readership of *The Amazing Spider-Man* and many superhero titles at this time was assumed to be young. Spider-Man was billed as a teen-age idol. According to issue #9, he was "the world's most amazing teen-ager—Spider-Man—The superhero who could be—You!"(222). The first page of this issue addresses its readers as "little friend"(201). Targeted mostly at a

young audience, these comics were likely called upon to quell contradicting anxieties. On the one hand the creators wanted the comics to be legible for children who were not strong readers yet. On the other hand, the public lashing that comics had received in the 1950s[17] were still fresh in comics publishers' memories. At that time comics had been blamed for turning children into lazy readers and promoting illiteracy, among other things. In reaction to that public image, mainstream publishers wished to make sure they incorporated a certain minimal amount of textual content in comics, so that comics could not be accused of causing illiteracy again. In the early sixties, when the comics controversy was still a fresh memory and the Comics Code was still new, being seen to promote reading amongst youth would certainly have been a concern to publishers. As a result, despite the fact that the action is fast-moving in the stories collected in the first volume of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, the collection contains only a single panel that is entirely textless.

The examples in this chapter come from works that exemplify the extremes to which image-text relations in comics can run. They are taken from comics with hardly any text or with an overabundance of text. The imbalance in these works has allowed for a closer look at the interplay between text and image, because, as with so many of the processes in comics, when the verbal and the pictorial are nicely balanced, the work they do is hardly perceptible. As with layout, the use of text in comics often seems natural until a shift occurs. Indeed, the flash-back sequence in *Ghost World* is distinguished from the main narrative not only by its use of frameless panels, but also through its use of captions at the top of each panel—a form of narration that is not used in the rest of the

[17] For background on the Comics Code, see Nyberg in McLaughlin (27-45), and Beaty's *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture*.

text (36-38). In this scene Enid Coleslaw is telling a friend about telling a friend [sic] about her first sexual experience and this narrative layering is indicated in part through the use of text. Despite the insertion of text, the effect is still largely a visual effect, however: the layout of the page as a visual construct becomes very different with the inclusion of captions in every panel. Once again, the visual role that text takes on in comics becomes evident.

This chapter once again showed the distinction between images that work merely as illustrations and images that can narrate by themselves, Eisner's "visuals." The distinction is especially significant in this chapter because when the image is confronted and contrasted with text, it needs to assert its own position and its possibilities. In a visual, the image does not need text to create a representation of things or actions. Eisner misleadingly talks about the image "replacing" a "descriptive passage," still implicitly grounding the origins of narration in text. This implication is even clearer when he discusses the artistic process involved in creating sequential art, which for him starts with the creation of a textual script (122, 129). Despite this unfortunate slippage towards logocentrism, however, Eisner's insistence on the distinction between illustration and visual, and even more his practice of avoiding mere illustration in his own work, avoiding a repetition of text by images, show his belief in the visual power of comics.

The combination of image and text in comics is contested ground from the point of view of definitions, and in looking at actual comics it is easy to find examples where the balance of image and text is out of whack. The examples of silent comics demonstrated that the comics form is not dependant on text in order to function. Text can even be intrusive, as the example of Fletcher Hanks showed. Therefore it is safe to say

that comics are not inherently a hybrid form that must combine text and image. However, when the two are balanced, and image and text work together, the combination creates the possibility of "bridging the gap," allowing for new forms of intricacy and nuance in the comics form. This process often comes to the fore in long-form comics that are able to create intricate narratives by combining visuals with carefully placed text, where each supports the other, and the two together create signification that each separately does not allow. These kinds of narratives will be the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5 Show and Tell:

The Process of Narration

> In truth, in an image-based story, as in film or comics, each element, whether it is visual, linguistic, or aural, participates fully in the narration.
>
> Groensteen 11

Fig. 5.1. Schulz, pg. 46.

This final sample strip from *Peanuts* brings together all the levels of signification discussed in this dissertation: the image, the layout, the sequence, word-image combination and finally narrative. Schulz's familiar four-panel layout shows Violet frantically looking for something (Figure 5.1). The pictures show her searching high and low, emptying drawers and going through magazines. Since she is looking inside books and magazines, presumably the object of her search is a piece of paper. The way Violet tosses the books around and leaves them strewn on the floor signify the intensity of her search. The sequence is built up carefully. The first two panels only show Violet. The final two panels add Charlie Brown, creating a balance among the four panels. The word balloons first help to clarify what Violet is doing, indicating she is looking for something she lost. Then the word balloons lead to the point of this little scenario, with Charlie Brown setting up for the punch line: "What did you lose, Violet?" Violet's response, "My

mud-pie recipe!" completes the narrative joke. It makes perfect sense: she's a little girl, and little girls make mud-pies. But it is also perfectly ridiculous and therefore funny: who has ever needed a recipe to make mud pies?

The brief narrative that is created in this strip illustrates in a compact way how all signifying functions of comics work together, but more importantly, it demonstrates the function of the gap in narrative. The momentum from one panel to the next in this strip, the interest, is created by a fundamental elision: the first three panels leave the open the question Charlie finally vocalizes: what is Violet looking for? This unknown quantity is what creates the incentive to read to the end and find out what is going on. As is so often the case with narratives, and as Iser has argued, the gap is central to the process of narration.

Follow the Reader

In *The Act of Reading*, Wolfgang Iser discusses gaps as a condition for the existence of narrative, since the lack they represent keeps the reader involved: "[I]t is the gaps, the fundamental asymmetry between text and reader, that give rise to communication in the reading process (167). For Iser, the reader is continually involved in creating assumptions about what is missing, based on what is given in the text. Iser explains this process of trial, error and new suppositions on the part of the reader in terms of a sequence of images:

> The shifting blank [in a fictional text] is responsible for a sequence of colliding images which condition each other is the time-flow of reading. The discarded image imprints itself on its successor, even though the latter is meant to resolve the deficiencies of the former. In this respect, the images hang together in a sequence, and it is by this sequence that the meaning of the text comes alive in the reader's imagination. (203)

Iser's description closely resembles the function of the sequence of images in comics. One could say that comics provide a visual model of how all narratives function. The only difference is that in comics, the images are provided by the author, not by the reader. The productive collisions between the images remain, as the gaps in comics invite closure between images just as much as textual narratives do.

It should therefore be no surprise that in *Story and Discourse*, Seymour Chatman uses a comic to illustrate the semiotic structure of narrative and the role of the gap, especially the way in which narrative structures are never "totally 'complete'" (29). In his reading of a *Short Ribs* installment about a gambling king, Chatman demonstrates how the ten panels of the strip can be reduced to a verbal narrative statement based on information that is manifest in the panels and inferences about what is not shown. For example, "[t]he crucial event—the loss at the dice table—occurs in the space between frame V and frame VI" (38). For Chatman, the reader's inferences are central to the structure of comics, and to fiction in general, making these forms active processes.

This notion of inferences also occurs in Peter Brooks' discussion of narrative and plot. For Brooks, plot is the point of narrative. He argues that the "design and intention" of narrative (xi) comes from the temporal logic and thrust that plot provides. Brooks uses Barthes' *S/Z* to explain the source of the temporal logic and the inferences that plot invites. He discusses Barthes' *proairetic* and *hermeneutic* codes: "The proairetic concerns the logic of actions, how their completion can be derived from their initiation, how they form sequences [...] The hermeneutic code concerns rather the questions and answers that structure a story" (18). He concludes: "Plot, then, might best be thought of as an 'overcoding' of the proairetic by the hermeneutic, the latter structuring the discrete

elements of the former into larger interpretive wholes, working out their play of meaning and significance." In other words, readers use their knowledge of actions, of causality, to fill in gaps temporarily, hermeneutically, where necessary adapting them as new information becomes available in the narrative. While literature always relies on this process implicitly, it becomes explicit in the form of comics, which make the process visible in the actual sequence of images that Iser discussed metaphorically.

To avoid the obvious pitfalls of an argument involving assumptions about the reader, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan introduces the implied reader.[18] Drawing on Iser and Eco she writes: "The reader is thus both an image of a certain competence brought to the text and a structuring of such a competence within the text" (118). She continues: "The advantage of talking of an implied reader rather than of 'textual strategies' pure and simple ... is that it implies a view of the text as a system of reconstruction-inviting structures rather than an autonomous object" (119). Bringing in the notion of gaps that I have been discussing, Rimmon-Kenan writes: "Holes or gaps are so central in narrative fiction because the materials the text provides for the reconstruction of a world (or a story) are insufficient for saturation" (127). Due to the infinity of possible details, stories always leave holes, some of them significant. Reading thus involves a process of accounting for these holes: "The hermeneutic aspect of reading consists in detecting an enigma (a gap), searching for clues, forming hypotheses, trying to choose among them

[18] In comics the implied reader is often male: readers are determined to be male by a multiple choice test in front matter of *Jimmy Corrigan*, and they are addressed as "lads" in Alan Moore's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. As these two examples show, the implied reader is often made explicit in comics. It is done more or less straightforwardly (if not unproblematically) in *Amazing Spider-Man* (see Chapter 4), and ironically in Ware and Moore. McCloud's *Understanding Comics* is a direct address to an implied reader in its entirety. These examples speak to the importance of the readerly process in comics. The form always implies the reader, since the reader is necessary to "complete" the narrations that the panels and sequences start.

and (more often than not) constructing one finalized hypothesis" (128).

Rimmon-Kenan's last statement evokes detective fiction, where certain gaps explicitly require filling, most notably "who dunnit." In fact, Brooks mentions the detective story as the example *par excellence* of the hermeneutic code (18). Therefore it seems fitting that I use a comics detective story to illustrate one effect of gaps on plot. The graphic novel *Shutterbug Follies*, exists in two different versions, in the printed volume, and in an excerpt on the internet. The significant difference between the two is a change in "photographic evidence" from the comic as it was originally serialized online to the published graphic novel. In the section that can be viewed online, Bee makes out the reflection of Khatchatourian taking a picture of a suicide scene, a woman in a bath. Bee checks out the photograph with a loupe and sees his reflection in a small hand mirror hanging behind the woman's body: his clothes are stained with blood, indicating he tampered with the dead woman's body, if not worse (Figure 5.2). In subsequent panels online, one can still just make out the pink of the mirror in the photograph. The printed version of the story has Bee looking through the loupe at a close-up of the woman's head and the faucet of the bath. Subsequent appearances of the photograph also show that the mirror has been taken out, and the dialogue of the comic has been altered so as not to refer to the photographer's reflection.

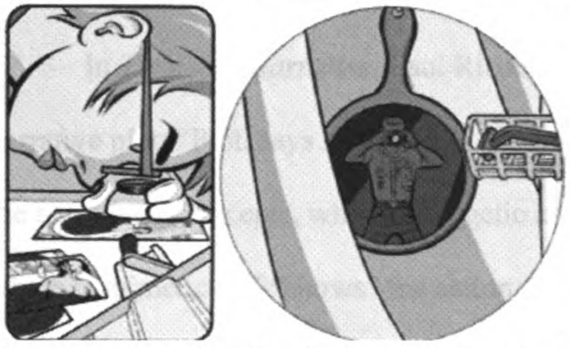


Fig. 5.2. Jason Little, *Bee: Shutterbug Follies* pg. 6.

The close-up image in the published version is a lot less striking than the online version, which is foregrounded still more since the magnified view of Khatchatourian

with bloodied shirt is followed by a panel showing the photographer himself walking into Bee's shop. This short-term effect is replaced in the published version with a more sustained suspense, with Bee pursuing a hunch rather than the immediate visual evidence of Khatchatourian's bloody clothes. Instead she questions the woman's position in the bath, claiming that nobody would lie with her head at the end of the bath that has the taps. She wonders if Khatchatourian tampered with the scene, but doesn't have the evidence against him that she has in the online version. This slight alteration in the panel images allows for continued suspense, as Bee is not quite sure of Khatchatourian's involvement until much later in the narrative. The graphic novel leaves an explicit gap in Bee's and the reader's knowledge, which sustains the narrative's momentum more than the immediate pay-off of tension that the online version has. Little's images show only a certain amount of information and don't immediately tell the whole story.

Show and Tell

In *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricoeur draws on Aristotle's *Poetics* to discuss narrative plot: "Plot, says Aristotle, is the *mimēsis* of an action" (xi). Aristotle contrasts the narrative of the epic, which is diegetic and "tells" its actions, with that of drama, which is mimetic and "shows" the action. This distinction is clear in verbal literature, but much less so in graphic literature such as comics, where in effect, showing *is* telling. As discussed in Chapter Three, the panel sequences of comics discourse are well suited to show actions, things changing over time. Comics tend to be less adept at showing

introspection, and even description is a problematic process in comics.[19] Where a textual description can build an image of an object detail by verbal detail, comics images show the object as a whole, without emphasizing any particular aspect.

At the same time, text has the option of leaving out any specific detail at all. In "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives" Barthes points out the elliptic power of verbal narrative, through which verbal texts evoke completed sequences by only a short statement, leaving out any further detail (*I-M-T* 120). Thus "he had a good meal" leaves all specifics unsaid and yet completely conveys the action. In visual narrative, whether comics or film, such actions have to be conveyed with additional information—there is always a certain specificity to representation in images. Thus the statement "he had a good meal" in images would be supplemented by information that could include what he ate; whether he was sitting in a restaurant or standing at a counter, and so forth. Though the narrative essentially remains the same, the discourse is altered by these characteristics of the form used.

These observations may begin to explain why different narrative forms or media gravitate towards different genres and different kinds of narratives. Novels have been the form of choice for looking into the psyche of the characters, while the domain that comics traditionally thrive in has been action fantasy. However, this observation is not meant as an essentializing statement, and in fact there is evidence to show that in recent decades comics artists have begun to use the visual specificity of their medium to explore new ways of telling stories and, more importantly, to create new kinds of narratives. Joe Sacco's graphic journalism provides historical and cultural detail in images: how people

[19] Groensteen claims that comics in fact cannot produce "an equivalent of the operation known in the literary domain as a description" (124), but I think that is going too far. Series of panels can focus on different aspects of an object or scene, in effect producing a description.

dress, what their houses look like. Such details do not draw attention to themselves in the course of the narrative per se, but they help form and inform the text's impact nonetheless. In Alison Bechdel's memoir *Fun Home*, much of the narrative thrust comes from textual captions, as almost each panel is accompanied by a section of text above it, or in a box inside. The captions are rich with literary allusions and assertions about Bechdel's family history. However, the visual dimension of the panels makes that history come to life but also makes clear that in this history everything is filtered through Bechdel's psyche: we only see details that she remembers or even as she remembers them, which, as she herself notes, is often colored by wishful thinking or childhood imagination. The images draw attention to a subjectivity at work in the representation, where everything is filtered through the author's lens, including childhood photographs and reproductions of her family's letters, which the author painstakingly copied by hand (Canfield). Thus Bechdel's seemingly neutral, distanced verbal narration is undermined or, rather, modulated by the more personal marks of the images which include details like brand names, posters and books in the background which could not possibly be reproduced from memory.

According to Barthes, the kind of details just discussed in the work of Sacco and Bechdel occur at a different level of signification in the discourse than the plot, namely that of indices. At this level, the tables are turned on verbal narrative in comparison to visual narrative, because where verbal discourse with its verbs naturally evokes actions, visual discourse gives primacy to appearance, which is the domain of the index. Indices can work as index—an implicit signified—or as an informant, supplying pure data (94). Visual narratives, and especially comics, due to their non-photographic images, cannot

help *but* provide indices, at any moment in the discourse. The visual signs will inevitably be informants, providing the "pure data" of details about the characters, setting and so forth. As Figure 5.3, a scene in *The Dark Knight Returns*, illustrates, some of these signs will also be implicit signifieds, telling the reader not just that Margaret Corcoran is standing on the subway, wearing a long grey coat, but also implicitly that people on the subway don't show much consideration for their fellow travelers: no one gives up their seat to this woman who is obviously tired and in pain from standing, nor do they come to her aid when thugs snatch her purse.

Fig. 5.3. Frank Miller *The Dark Knight Returns* pg. II 13.

Cardinal and Catalytic Functions

Not all parts of the narrative discourse have the same relation to the plot. In terms of Barthes' discussion in "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," the function of the scene in Figure 5.3 in the narrative is catalytic, not cardinal (*I-M-T* 94). In other words, in a summary of the narrative, the scene could easily be left out, but in terms

of the discourse of this graphic novel, it has a role to play. Frank Miller's graphic novel *The Dark Knight Returns* is a dark story of violence and vigilante justice, and the scene in Figure 5.3 gives context to the situation in Gotham City. The scene introduces Margaret Corcoran, a tired mother on her way home after a long day's work, who is happy because she was able to get a special treat for her son. Her purse is snatched by two thugs, and when she struggles to get it back she doesn't notice the men have put a grenade in her bag until it is too late. This scene is similar to a number of anecdotal sequences in the book, in that it has no direct connection to Bruce Wayne and his come-back as Batman. The final panel of the scene, which avoids showing the explosion that kills Margaret, switches to the media report of the episode, where it is presented as another example of the random violence loose in Gotham City. The report turns the woman into a statistic, while the scene showed a more personal side. This scene and others like it (II, 33 for example) are not necessary for the plot as a whole, but are revealing as background information: the scene shows what kind of crime Batman is up against.

In *The Dark Knight Returns*, the proliferation of scenes like these underline the media's fascination with violence, not to mention their complicity in perpetuating it in their continued reporting. Barthes' narrative analysis is useful here, because it is as applicable to comics as it is to literature. His distinction between cardinal and catalytic functions works for visual narrative as well as it does for verbal narrative, and helps determine different functions of scenes in relation to the narrative. In the discourse of novels, linguistics ascribes different terms to words, phrases and sentences that convey meaning as functions (relating to action, and the furthering of the plot), or indices (descriptions). In comics, the discourse is one and the same. Panels convey the operations

of functions at the same time as they signify indexically. The images show the functionalities of *doing* and *being* at the same time (Barthes 93).

Weaving and Braiding

Comics images do the work of narrating and describing, creating the plot and setting up atmosphere, all at the same time. This effect can be observed in *The Golem's Mighty Swing*, a work full of contradictions: although the story is about sports, with some racial violence thrown in, the images have a still quality to them, like photographs from the 1920s, when the story is set. The impression of times past is heightened by the coloring of the pictures—black and white with beige-tinted shading, and by the clear, unfussy style of the drawings. In addition, the sequences are also at the same time slow and cinematic. The difference between film and comics as moving and static images is a fundamental one, of course, but *The Golem's Mighty Swing* breaks down sequences of panels in such a way that the transitions from panel to panel on the page evoke the way a succession of shots in film create a scene. Sturm often starts scenes with the panel equivalent of an establishing shot (4), and shot and counter-shot perspectives to forward action (6). The filmic effect is increased by his frequent use of "voice-over" captions (5).

Frames in a movie come in one standard size; in comics, panel sizes can vary and hence they can be used to create or emphasize meaning. Sturm employs what Benoit Peeters calls the "rhetorical" conception of the page, in terms of panel layout, where "the dimensions of the panel conform to the action being described"(paragraph 22). The rhetorical layout is the comics equivalent of continuity editing in film, one effect of which is that this kind of layout barely draws attention to itself when read. Film has no

layout, of course, only composition of a shot and frame, paralleled in comics in the composition of panels. The rhetorical layout creates smooth sequences where the weaving between panels is barely noticeable.

In narration as it is produced in comics images, the process of weaving is essential, to allow for the retroactive resignification or projection that creates plot out of gaps. The sequence functions by weaving the individual panels together into a sense of temporality and developing action. This notion of weaving is in contrast to Groensteen's concept of braiding, which applies to the series. Both these processes are dialogic and recursive, but weaving occurs at the narrative level, while braiding is a function of the discourse. The panel transitions discussed in Chapter Three, and above in *The Golem's Mighty Swing* are examples of weaving, where the reader has to check back over previously read panels to follow the narrative. An example of braiding can be found in the first part of Seth's *Clyde Fans*. On page after page, panels show clocks and calendars (e.g. 16). A variation on the theme shows up in the close-up of an hourglass used as an egg timer (18). These panels, with their focus on time, establish a series of images in the text that, through braiding, create a thematic unity. The braided images support the main character's preoccupation with memory and the past as he reminisces about the glory days of the Clyde Fans company.

Darning Holes

Gaps in narratives are unavoidable, but sometimes they are used more deliberately than other times. The comic *La Perdida* by Jessica Abel sets up gaps at the very beginning to get narrative momentum going: the text uses analepsis that is in a way also

prolepsis, to create tension, suspense, draw readers into the story. Part One of *La Perdida* starts in Chicago, well after the main events of the story. As she is visiting the Mexican neighborhood, the main character Carla is reminded of her early days in Mexico, scenes of which are shown as flashback in the discourse (2-4). Towards the end of this introduction, Carla thinks she recognizes someone from Mexico City. She becomes fearful and gets back on the El quickly. Instead of a coherent flashback, the panels showing Carla's reaction to seeing the man she thinks might be Ricardo are interspersed with single panels from a time much later in her stay in Mexico City (5-6). These panels (Figure 5.4) do not form a coherent flashback like her memories of eating her first tacos in Mexico were; they are only flashes in single panels, from different moments during her stay in Mexico City, and with the last of these flashes, it is not even clear what is happening, only just barely that the woman in these panels is probably the protagonist, Carla.

Fig. 5.4. Jessica Abel, *La Perdida Part One* pg. 6

The next page starts her narrative "from the beginning," on the day she arrived in Mexico "two years ago today, February 23rd" (9).

Although the mystery panels are in the past in relation to the main introductory

sequence in Chicago, they are in the future in relation to the start of the main narrative on page 9 as well as in relation to the flashbacks that take up much of pages 2-4. There is a continuity between the main narrative and the first flashback, since these scenes clearly establish Carla as a newcomer in Mexico, someone who doesn't command the language or know the customs (such as how to eat a taco without dropping the filling). The time frame associated with these scenes is clear, in part because they evoke the scenario associated with "tourist getting used to a foreign country." Like the panels of the flashback, the panels evoked by seeing Ricardo are frameless. By this means these panels too are tagged as memories. But these panels are not connected to a recognizable narrative, or only tentatively so: the first three panels evoked by seeing Ricardo are linked in that all three of them represent Ricardo. If there is a narrative linking these panels, it is one of escalating violence: the first panel shows Ricardo smiling, the second panel shows him being restrained by bystanders as he shouts angrily, while the third panel shows him holding a gun. These three panels give a sense of why Carla would fear this man, but no details about their history together. The next three frameless panels are even more enigmatic. All three show a woman in a darkened room. That the woman is Carla slowly becomes clear over these pages, even though her appearance has changed since then. The connection is made explicit when in panel 8 Carla takes something out of her pocket (6) and on page 7 we see it is a small skeleton figurine, which the woman picked off a shelf in the dark room.

The panels from the past in the introduction of *La Perdida* perform a braiding as well as a weaving. The little skeleton is an image that recurs throughout the five parts. It connects to the festival of the Day of the Dead and Mexican culture in general, but it also

takes on personal meaning for Carla, when at the end of Part Five a close friend of hers is killed. The panels perform a weaving as they link together different time periods in the narrative. On page 54 of Part Five the events shown in the flashback panels on page 6 of Part One finally come to pass. The panels are not reprinted here—they are drawn from slightly different points of view—but the moments are clearly recognizable. Two pages later the narrative returns to Carla in Chicago. The narrative has come full circle, picking up where it left off at the end of the introduction, so that the entire story is framed by Carla's ride on the El. The panels representing Carla's memories stitch together present and past in her experiences, and set up deliberate gaps in the narrative to get the story going.

Narrative Blanks

As I have demonstrated, the gap functions at all levels of signification in comics. Some comics take the gap one further step, and extend it to the level of the narrative, not just as a narrative function, but as a motif. The gap becomes the point of the narrative, not just a means of creating narrative. Seth's *Wimbledon Green* is one example of a comic which takes the gap to extremes: the narrative of Wimbledon Green, "the greatest comic book collector in the world," is made up of disjuncted fictional interviews with all manner of people, including a number of real comics store owners. All that is offered is a series of seemingly random anecdotes and episodes. What ties them together is largely left unspoken and yet it is what creates the plot. The book flaunts its absences by creating questions about Wimbledon Green's identity and the fate of the Wilbur R. Webb comic book collection. Several answers are suggested and then drawn into question again, and

by the end of the book Green himself has gone missing. But the gap is especially instrumental in the way the text refuses explicit transitions between all the fragments that make it up.

The principle at the basis of creating the readable sequence in comics—the gap—is expanded to apply to the narrative in other comics as well. Daniel Clowes' *Ice Haven* elides crucial story moments, so that a coherent reading of the narrative can only be based on assumptions. Rocco Versaci discusses the many different narrative perspectives that *Ice Haven* employs in *This Book Contains Graphic Language: Comics as Literature.* The perspectives set up different ways of accessing the characters. Versaci mentions direct address for Random Wilder; diary excerpts from Violet and a poetry 'zine from Vida, all of which use different forms of first person narrative (17). Versaci also shows how various comics "textures" create another way of engaging with characters, such as stylistic variations in terms of color and level of abstraction (19). *Ice Haven* even uses references to other comics and comics history to create a self-reflexivity of the form: newspaper strip format, funny animal, a "B.C." character (20), and, to my mind, the character of Charles who evokes Charlie Brown (Clowes has done "homages" to Schulz and *Peanuts* elsewhere too).

These practices in *Ice Haven* foreground that one is reading a comic and thus work to make one aware of the process of "leaving out" that gives shape to the comics form in general but is taken to new limits in this story. The central narrative premise of *Ice Haven* is never expressed directly, that Random Wilder kidnapped David Goldberg. The gap thus becomes a self-reflexive point in some comics, and absence is elevated to a thematic presence. In a very different way this is also the case in Charles Burns' *Black*

Hole, where the image of a hole or gap recurs in different ways throughout the text. The black hole of the title is visualized as wounds, surgical incisions, open mouths, and by implication the vagina. These visual gaps echo the gaps of knowledge the teenage protagonists of the book face, both in a general sense of adolescents figuring out how the world around them works, and in a specific sense as they try to deal with a mysterious disease that causes disfigurations. A less spectacular but no less sustained example of a thematic gap in comics is the absence of grown-ups in *Peanuts*.

Putting it Together

As the gap operates so that image, layout and sequence work together in comics to create meaning, the conventions they rely on can be stretched in comics, as the following example from *Calvin and Hobbes* by Bill Watterson will show (Figure 5.5). This strip demonstrates that comics signal their own reading processes, creating and instructing new ways of signification as necessary.

This strip is a Sunday page and thus larger than the usual weekday strips, and in addition it is in color. The frame delimiting the borders of the strip as a whole on the page is almost entirely filled by a ruled notebook page (perforated for easy filing), with only one separate, standard panel in the bottom right-hand corner—this inset is in the position the last panel on a conventional comics page would hold. The notebook page is covered in drawings of tanks and shells that Calvin has presumably been doing instead of paying attention in class. It is a jumble of pictures, but the comics convention that images that follow each other form a sequence is strong, and in this case the repeated figure of Calvin helps determine that the page forms a sequence over time. Also by convention, Western

comics pages are read from top-left to right, so the reader is likely to start in the top, left corner, to find Calvin and read his word balloon: "Wow! Calvin suddenly finds himself

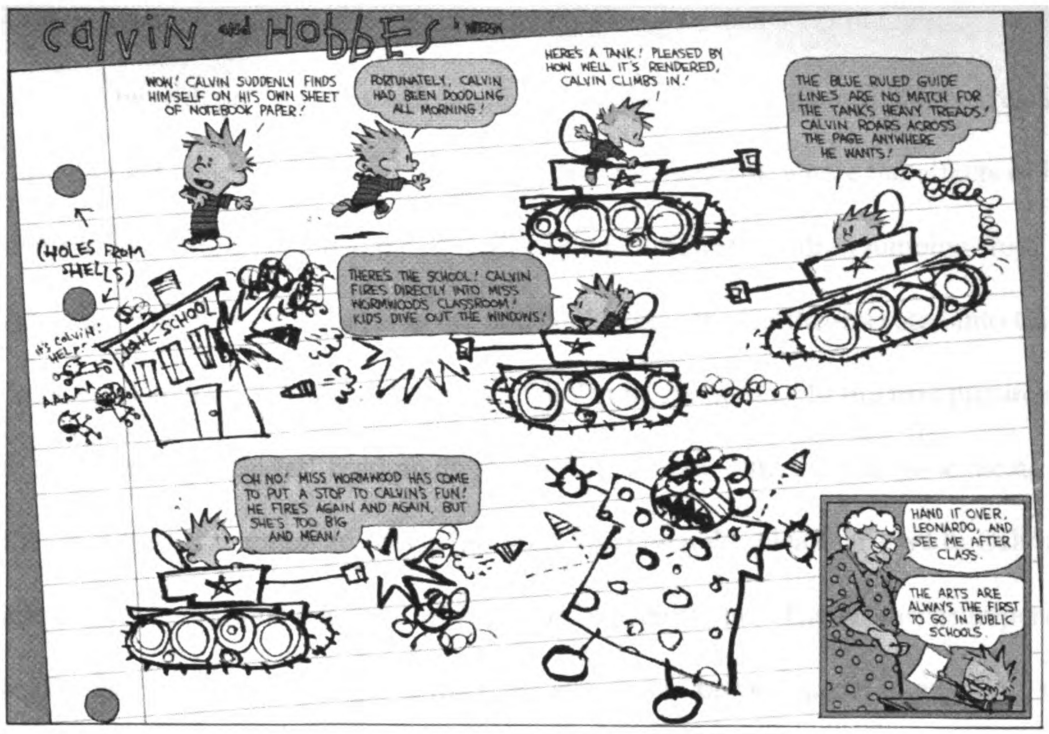


Fig. 5.5. Bill Watterson, *The Days are Just Packed: Calvin and Hobbes Collection* pg. 173.

on his own sheet of notebook paper!" This comment sets up the premise of the page, as Calvin in the next image runs towards his first doodle and is consequently represented climbing into the tank he drew. So far, the images have taken up more or less the positions of panels 1, 2 and 3 on the top tier of a standard page. However, the reading paradigm changes with the fourth image. This "doodle" is slightly below the first tier, and the direction of the tank shifts the direction of the action from right to left. A trail of smoke behind the tank traces the hairpin curve the tank took around the corner, and the barrel at the front puts emphasis on the reversal of the regular reading direction. Rather than at the end of tier one skipping back to the left to begin tier two, a set of signals has been created to invoke the reverse reading direction, and this direction is created

organically, using only signifiers that are inherently part of the image. No external indices such as arrows or panel numbering are necessary to change the direction of reading.

The fifth panel in this order, which is enforced by the images themselves, is of Calvin in the tank firing at a school building on the far right, where the effects of his shells are visible: an explosion as a shell hits the building; children jumping from the windows. The perforated holes in the notebook page are also incorporated into Calvin's fantasy, labeled as they are with arrows: "(holes from shells)." In the first picture of the bottom tier, the "regular" reading direction is reinstated, with the tank now facing left. Calvin shoots at the monstrously large Miss Wormwood (at least relative to Calvin and his tank) and she flails her arms as the shells bounce off her. The teacher is impervious to his fantasies, as becomes clear in the final and single "proper" panel in this strip, when Calvin is caught in the act of doodling by Miss Wormwood, and has to hand over the page.

Color is a strong signifying tool on this page. Everything on the page is drawn, as is customary in comics, and therefore color is used to differentiate between the drawings that represent the text-world of the comic, and the images that represent the drawings *within* the drawing. The lines on the notebook page are according to tradition: horizontal blue lines and a vertical red line on the left. The page is "real." The messily drawn tanks, school and teacher/monster on the page are black. Their color and style mark them as Calvin's doodles. They are "real" as doodles (Calvin compliments himself on how well his tank is rendered), but they are imaginary as the tank that Calvin climbs into and shoots the school with. Calvin, by contrast, is in full color, with his customary red shirt.

He is only real as his imaginary self, driving around in his tank. The final panel on the page is a step out of Calvin's fantasy, and into the reality of being in trouble with his teacher yet again. This strip plays with the different "media" of cartooning and children's drawings. Calvin's drawings stay drawings in the strip; however, his drawings simultaneously call attention to the work of creation and imagination that is performed by artists. The fact that Calvin sees himself as an artist is made clear by his final comment when the teacher confiscates his drawing, which itself makes this strip speak to an altogether different level, this time one of social commentary: "The arts are always the first to go in public schools."

For the most part this strip does not use the conventional panel layout of a comics page. Nevertheless, when we read the page it is easily broken into the separate moments or panels. However, the lack of formal panel divisions or gutters draws attention to a process that certainly goes on when reading standard panels, but that is perhaps not recognized as much when the panels are clearly demarcated on the page. To use the bottom tier as an example, the "doodled" section of this tier can be broken into four or even five moments, even though it is made up of only two separate drawings. The striation of moments is achieved by a combination of the way the drawing is spread across the page and the text in the single word balloon. The balloon reads: "Oh no! Miss Wormwood has come to put an end to Calvin's fun! He fires again and again, but she's too big and mean!" Sections of this text match with various moments represented in the drawings. First there is Calvin with his mouth open as he yells "Oh no!" As he mentions Miss Wormwood the reader can scan ahead and see her further to the right. For "He fires again and again" the eye is drawn backwards again, to the explosion at the mouth of the

tank's barrel, and then ahead following the shells. The trajectories of the shells are traced in discontinuous lines as they glance harmlessly off the teacher's body, explained by Calvin's comment "She's too big and mean." In the course of this section, the eye must wander back and forth across the tier, perhaps two or three times. This movement is partially guided by the text, but also steered by the images themselves, as different aspects of the drawings come to the forefront at different moments, as is appropriate to events. The process of weaving back and forth between panels becomes very evident here, due to the lack of clear demarcation between "moments" with the omission of panel borders.

On Watterson's page the separate "panels" are implied: the conventions of comics panels is so strong that comics without frames still evoke panels as moments. This is what Groensteen seems to imply on page 44: comics without panels borders work by virtue of reference to panels that do have frames. But comics without panels or gutters existed before the conventions of comics language were established. The lines and spaces between panels are not as necessary as Groensteen suggests. At one level the *Calvin and Hobbes* page is a single, multiphase image showing a notebook page with the Z-shaped path of the tank across space and time. Once one takes the figure of Calvin and the text balloons into account, the page more or less naturally breaks apart into separate moments and separate implied panels, defined by a sense of cause and effect. But the rule of the panel is not absolute: several of the drawings refuse to be clearly parsed out into individual panels based on the moments they represent. On tier two the drawing of the firing tank and the bombarded school building can be seen as one wide panel or on the other hand it could be read as two, three, perhaps even four panels, each depicting in

separate moments the flying shells, the hit to the school, the building collapsing, the children falling and shouting. These images are more productively read as examples where a panel breakdown becomes restrictive. An imposition even of implied panels would eliminate the possibilities the organic back-and-forth between image and sequence that this page allows. Both in terms of establishing a reading direction and of time delineation, this seemingly whimsical strip shows a glimpse at the possibilities of comics experimentation. The final traditional panel doesn't just deliver the punch line to this strip, it also re-establishes comic's conventions after Calvin's rampage across the page.

In this *Calvin and Hobbes* strip, the word balloons play a significant part in directing the action; they set up the premise of the page and helped guide the reading path across the page. Most of the word balloons are colored in order to create effective direction. The color designates that they are not part of Calvin's doodles. This distinction is emphasized by the ruled lines on the page that can be seen through the drawings of the tanks and school, but that are not visible through the figure of Calvin and through the balloons. The word balloons are part of the imaginary action Calvin creates during class. Calvin even draws attention to that in one of his speeches: "The blue ruled guide lines are no match for the tank's heavy treads! Calvin roars across the page anywhere he wants!" At first glance the word balloons contribute to the jumble of this page, but closer inspection reveals that they assist in negotiating the page; in the absence of panel borders, the balloons help determine separate moments and reading direction. By emphasizing the z-shaped path of action across the page, the word balloons make the strip cohere as a unit which, with its lack of conventional panels, is at once chaotic and elegant in its simplicity. The word balloons also underline the return to normalcy in the last panel,

where the balloons have gone back to their standard appearance in comics: plain white. The balloons are integral to the flow of the page, where image and text work together. Chaotic as the page may be on first sight—crammed full, hodgepodge—it creates its own logic.

Out of Sequence

The Watterson strip is not alone in establishing new reading conventions as it goes along. Comics do this regularly, and often in much longer formats than the *Calvin and Hobbes* strip. They teach readers their own conventions. Examples already mentioned in the course of this dissertation are Richard McGuire's "Here," which created narrative by using insets representing different years of a single place, and *Rabbithead* by Rebecca Dart, which creates parallel courses of events on the separate tiers across the pages. Nick Bertozzi's *Boswash* is another example. The comic is printed on a large sheet of paper and folded like a map. Unfolding the "map" makes the story unfold, which revolves around cartography and national boundaries. Finally, Ben Katchor's "The Corner Location" in Raw 2.2 uses the fold in the page (between verso and recto) to mimic the corner so central to the story, as a separate story unfolds on the two facing pages. The story on the left-hand page is called "The Collapsible Table Company," while the story on the right is "The Drink of Life." These examples show how these comics guide their readings, as well as the flexibility of the form.

Comics signal their reading processes, time and again changing the rules of how they are to be read, but simultaneously offering a manual of how to approach them. Within their elasticity the use of gaps is a constant. The gaps signify in numerous

different ways. It can be based on the interplay between words and images, where words take on the expressionistic qualities of images and images take on some of the rules of words; playing with rigid structure and the limits of that structure by collapsing boundaries such as panel and frame; evoking narrative flow from fragments; creating characters in tiny figures that crawl on the pages and take on lives of their own. From Charlie Brown to Batman, and from the Yellow Kid to Enid Coleslaw, these characters and their stories come to life in fragments; abstracted marks on the page, captured in scattered moments.

Paradoxically, comics are so engaging, so immersive, exactly because they foreground the process of narration. In comics the implied reader is an especially strong construct, due to the degree of "involvement" required by comics. The gaps continuously ask to be filled. Concurrently, the implied author is also a strong presence. Comics always raise the sense that "these things were chosen, were arranged, this mark comes from the artist's hand" (even though comics are often created by committee, "assembly-line style"). As Hans-Christian Christiansen puts it in "Comics and Film: A Narrative Perspective:"

> Comics foreground the presence of the enunciator; this to a degree blocks the identification process in making it more difficult for the spectator to create an illusion of being in the locus and unique origin of all identification [as film does]: to comics readers the master of enunciation has become a figure with whom to identify. (Magnussen and Christiansen 115).

The degree to which the implied author exists in comics may explain why fandom and the veneration of artists and creators are such a big part of comics culture. It is invited by the form itself: Through their involvement in the process of reading comics, readers get invested in the comics they read, which leads to the culture of fanzines and more recently blogging. The connection to the presence—the mark—of the artist in comics also leads to

a culture of fandom, in this case one interested in the creators. This is visible in the cult of personality surrounding comics artists like Eisner, Moore, Hergé and numerous others, and is expressed in the popularity of comicons, where fans have the chance to meet their heroes and collect autographs and drawings. (But that's a different story.)

A Note on Style

In literature, in writing, the author is working with a system, language, which is bound by conventions (grammar, vocabulary etc.). Language signifies by convention, certainly in terms of denotation, but also connotation. The idiosyncratic ways on which the artist works within these conventions creates a sense of style. Stein's style can be distinguished from Hemingway's, Auster's style can be distinguished from Morisson's. But the building blocks—the words—are shared. They are what Barthes calls a "social institution" (*Elements* 14). What I find so appealing about comics is that their conventions work very differently. Certainly, comics as a form has its own conventions. Comics layouts, sequences and narratives are all guided by their own conventions, and the conventions of language apply where comics use language. In addition, certain comics genres are highly conventionalized, as can be seen in formulaic romance comics and the established traditions of mainstream superhero comics.

However, the basic building blocks of comics—the images or cartoons—are not ruled by conventions, not in the absolute way of language. There is a greater variety in indexicality because there are no rules for what a person, a car, or a cat are supposed to look like; these things are not ruled by a grammar. They have to be recognizable as referring to the object they represent, but there is remarkable flexibility in this

representation. The style of individual artists in comics does not only determine how elements of the comics are used; in comics, style determines what these elements are, what they look like. A cat by R. Crumb looks nothing at all like a cat by Sara Varon, which in no way resembles a cat drawn by Art Spiegelman. Style in comics is much more easily identifiable than in literature and in some ways also much more idiosyncratic, because it is not based in a system that is used commonly by everyone as language is.[20] This is not to say that style in comics never becomes conventionalized: the Disney studio developed a house style that their artists had to follow. But despite that it is possible to discern the style of Carl Barks from that of Don Rosa within Disney comics. Creators of superheroes sometimes establish styles that get formalized in style sheets for other artists to follow. And yet Bob Kane's Batman is very different from Frank Miller's or Bill McKean's: other artists are able to make the characters their own.

In comics, style is so pervasive that it encompasses the entire experience of the comic: the characters, the look—often even down to the shape of the letters, and the storyline. Style in effect ceases to be style, since it is no longer a superficial, surface matter. Style becomes the substance of comics, through which each text speaks in a voice that is completely its own. Style signifies in comics.

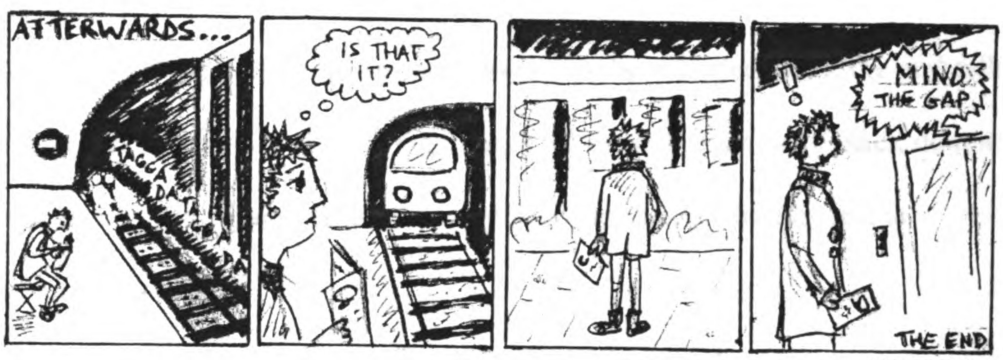
The style of the images signifies in comics, but even more so do the gaps and absences that the images allow to fall. In his study *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*, Charles Hatfield draws attention to the interrupted nature of storytelling in comics,

[20] Matt Madden's *99 Ways to Tell a Story: Exercises in Style*, illustrates the many different aspects of comics that can be seen to fall under the rubric of "style." Most of his 99 versions actually employ the same drawing style, but vary in terms of layout, order, use of text etc. Madden does however also pastiche the drawing styles of other cartoonists, playing with the more traditional definition of "style," for example with Töppfer, McCay and Herriman (81, 99, and 101).

arguing that the form is "at once seductively visual and radically fragmented," leading to "incompleteness and indeterminacy" (xiii). Comics as a narrative form and as a body of narrative work—a literature—thrives on the breaking up of actions and operations, excels in leaving things unsaid in order to articulate them all the clearer. Narration does not occur smoothly and gradually, but in starts, hitches and elisions, with things left out—invisible.

It is telling that the subtitle to Scott McCloud's seminal work *Understanding Comics* is *The Invisible Art*. So much in comics happens without its being shown, or if it is shown, the processes by which it works are easily hidden or ignored. Certainly, McCloud is also commenting on the cultural status of comics, ignored for the most part as a form of art. But McCloud was writing in 1993, and much has changed since then regarding the position of comics in literary culture and popular culture alike. Still invisible though, have been many of the signifying processes at work within comics texts, and these are the processes that I have addressed and made visible in this dissertation.

CONCLUSION **Afterwards...**



APPENDIX

COMICS TERMINOLOGY

Cartoon: This term has several different meanings, some of which are not relevant to comics per se, but which need to be discussed in order to avoid confusion. The word *cartoon* refers to short animated films such as *Tom and Jerry*, but it is also applied to single panel visual gags such as those in the *New Yorker*. Animated films are clearly a different form from comics, but single panel gags are a contested territory. Critics like R.C. Harvey and David Carrier argue cartoon gags should be included under the umbrella of comics due to their visual-verbal blending. Others, like Groensteen and Eisner, do not count cartoons as comics: gag panels do not pass the sequentiality test they feel is essential to the comics form.

In relation to comics the term *cartoon* is generally used to describe the drawing style associated with comics. The word cartoon comes from the Italian term *carton* for the board on which old masters tried out sketches and which they used to transfer designs to walls for frescoes (Chute 454). With the rise of print the word came to designate easily transferable and reproducible drawings. The cartoon style is a simplified drawing style based on well-defined outlines. It is related to caricature, as discussed by Gombrich in *Art and Illusion*. The difference between cartoon and caricature lies mostly in the intentions of the drawings: caricature is meant to capture real, current people, while in comics a similar style of drawing is used represent fictional characters. How thin this line actually is may be seen in autobiographical comics. Minnie, in *David Chelsea in Love*, and Joe Sacco's self-renditions are only two examples of figures with caricatural qualities.

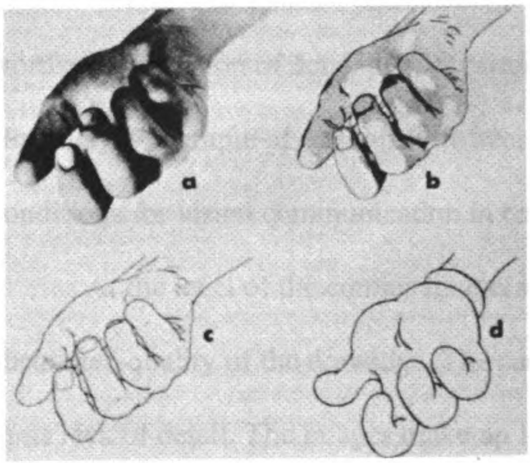


Fig. 6.1. Hochberg, pg. 75.

Of the four pictures shown in Figure 6.1, picture d is drawn in the style that in generally identified as classic "cartoon" style. Julian Hochberg uses this figure in his essay "The Representation of Things and People," where he cites a study that showed that the more basic and caricatural an image is, the more easily it is perceived correctly by a viewer (74). In Figure 6.1, picture d was identified correctly in the shortest period of time, whereas picture a took the longest to process. Hochberg argues that this experiment shows that caricatures and cartoons such as the one shown in image d are grasped more easily because they are "simplified." Since fewer details are provided, fewer "fixations" on the image are needed to scan it and glean meaning from it. He concludes that caricatures "make possible a more compact visual vocabulary" (90), eliding many of the details present in realistic representations of people and things. Many of the details, or "differences" between individual examples of a larger group (such as faces) are left out of the image as "redundant" (91), while "inconsistencies are tolerated" in the simplified form of representation (such as the missing digit in 1.1 d). These factors explain for Hochberg why a caricatural representation is easier to understand than the more realistic image of a photograph.

Both the vocabulary Hochberg uses and the picture used to illustrate his point are revealing in answering the question "how do images in comics signify." Hochberg's

psychological experiment foregrounds the importance of reducing the amount of detail in the picture, leaving out information that a more realistic image would reflect. In other words, the omission of detail allows cartoons to communicate. The missing finger in Hochberg's example of cartoon style becomes emblematic of the gap that creates the conditions for visual communication in comics images.

At the level of the comics image, what I call the gap functions in the simplified, abstracted quality of the drawings. The cartoon style of drawing in comics contains gaps in its lack of detail. The images make up for a lack of information through the use of strong outlines. Rudolf Arnheim explains their function as follows: "All outline drawing is successful because the completion effect fills the contoured shapes with substance" (*Visual Thinking* 85). In what Arnheim calls the "completion effect," the reader is again called upon to fill in the absent information. Unnecessary details are elided in comics drawing, so that the image invites concentration on what *is* there. This is one of the ways in which comics create engagement: less is shown, gaps are left, and what is there is more likely to be significant.

The style of the art in comics is shaped by the overall economy of the way comics function—less is more—which goes on to shape the way comics address their readers and create narrative. The most simplified form of comics images is often found in newspaper strips, one of the earliest genres of comics. The simplicity of the newspaper strips was, and is, in part dictated by the speed that the publication schedule of daily papers demands of its contributing artists, but as a style this had its origins in caricature in the eighteenth century, and continued to be a stylistic feature of comics even when the need for speed in the production of the comics ceased to be a factor.

The cartoon style of simplified, clearly outlined drawings is shared by comics, animated cartoons and gag cartoons. The term cartoon is often used as an adjective, as in "this artist uses a cartoony style," and has led to the title numerous comics artists embrace. For example Seth makes a point of calling himself a cartoonist, not artist or comics artist, though those terms are also common.[21] One of the appealing features of the term cartoonist may be that it implies the entire process of cartooning, from the sketches to the final inking and lettering. Comics may be created by one person, who is artist, author and designer all in one. But especially in mainstream publishing, comics are often created by teams of people that can include a writer, penciler, inker, letterer and colorist. To keep it simple, the verb cartooning can be used as a catch-all phrase that includes all the steps in the creative process of making a comic.

Gutter: The *gutter* is the space that separates panels. Gutters are usually blank and are therefore white, or rather, the color of the unprinted paper. However, in some cases the background field of the panels are a different color, in which case the gutters show that color. Black is most commonly used in this fashion, for example in Ted McKeever's *Metropol* series. In a layout that employs *insets*, i.e. panels placed into larger panels, there is no empty gutter between or around the inset panels. Also, in comics that employ panels without frames it is sometimes hard to determine where the panel ends and the gutter begins.

Panel, Frame: A *panel* is the usually rectangular or square area of the comics image. Panels do not all have to be the same size, but comics artists tend to use a default panel size that they will vary upon to accommodate visual or narrative effects. The panel

[21] See for example the front cover of Seth's *Wimbledon Green*. Incidentally, people who create animated cartoons are not called cartoonists but animators.

may or may not be surrounded by a formal *frame*, which in its simplest form is four black lines outlining the panel area. Panels sometimes appear in more expressionistic forms like a circle or a starburst, in order to amplify the scene depicted within the panel. Similarly, frames can also be used in a more imagistic fashion, for example with wobbly lines or jagged lines. The frame may be reinforced with double lines or an actual drawn picture frame, or on the other hand panels can appear without any lines framing them at all. The terms panel and frame are sometimes used interchangeably (e.g. Berlatsky 174) but Thierry Groensteen discusses the theoretical advantages of reserving the terms for two discrete concepts (39).

Comics theorists have added specific uses of these concepts. Will Eisner suggests the term *meta panel* for a comics page that should be viewed as a whole rather than as a series of separate panels (*Comics* 63). Here the layout of the panels on the page is considered as a composed whole. Groensteen uses the term *hyperframe* for a unit that encloses all the smaller panels on a page (30). In effect, the hyperframe encompasses the page similarly to the way the meta panel does. However, the meta panel emphasizes the composition of the page, while hyperframe puts more weight on the page as a reading unit. Groensteen also suggests the term *multiframe*, which applies to any unit made up of multiple panels. A single strip can be a multiframe, but so can a page, a series of pages or an entire album.

Strip, Tier: A *strip* is a row of panels that often form a single unit. Daily newspaper strips, for example, are made up of four or so panels that together create one gag or (less frequently) one episode in a continuing story. The term strip can also be used for a single row of panels on the page of a comic book or graphic novel. Sometimes the

word *tier* is used to distinguish this usage from strip, since strip may imply a completeness that a tier in a continuing narrative does not necessarily provide. Conventionally, comics pages tend to be divided up into three tiers or strips.

Word balloon, Caption: *Balloons* are inserted into comics panels as the carrier for texts spoken or thought by characters represented in the panels. Speech balloons are most common, but comics also often employ thought balloons and other variations. Speech balloons tend to be ovals with a short tail pointing toward the speaker. Thought balloons come with scalloped edges and a trail of bubbles connecting to the thinker's head. However, there is much variation in the appearance of word balloons, partly dependent on individual artists' style and usage, and partly to help convey emotions or meanings verbalized within the balloons (Eisner 27). The appearance of word balloons can be extremely expressive. *Captions* are another form of space set aside for text in the comics panel. Captions are usually placed horizontally across the top or bottom of panels, but they can also be inserted vertically or fill up a panel completely. Captions may or may not be framed.

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