Uncomics

– reconsidering the comics form
through the prism of its experimental periphery

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ABSTRACT

The interdisciplinary field of Comics Studies has developed since the late 20th Century, in response to the increasing, popular reach of comics as a mass phenomenon capable of addressing a wide range of subject matter and approaches, including journalism, (auto)biography, and academical papers. Still, these apparent innovations and, in turn, their scholarly dissemination are predicated upon genre conventions and commercial dictates dating back to the period between World Wars I and II. In a word, as popular comics has thrived, its form has congealed around it. In the periphery of the comics field, however, experimenting practitioners have extended the boundaries of comics away from traditional, linear narrative, towards abstract visuals and poetic textual modes, essentially pushing comics into modernism a century later than other arts.

Challenging sequential narrative, text-image integration, and even representational art, these peripheral expressions are so deliberately contrary to the general perception of comics that they are herein considered 'uncomics', requiring a reassessment of the way comics are conceptualized as a phenomenon. In examining formal definitions of the art form formerly known as comics; selected works of this outlier comics avant garde; and the related visual phenomena they converge upon, this thesis proposes an expansion of those definitions, and of the analytical tools available to the scholarly study of the form.

Keywords: comics studies, comics theory, abstract comics, reading schema, poetry comics

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INTRODUCTION

Research question

The emergence over the past decade of abstract and poetry comics on the periphery of the popular art form raises questions to the validity of conventional definitions thereof: what does one make of a supposedly narrative form when it demonstrably refuses to narrate or visually represent identifiable objects? How does one read them? What, if anything, does that breakdown in signification mean to our understanding of comics? Perhaps more pertinently, why are comics entering post-modernity over fifty years later than most other art forms?

Colloquially defined in terms of their mass medial attributes as disposable entertainment, or aesthetically as simplified, derivative expressions, comics seem poorly equipped to contain such artistically inclined works. This thesis represents a proposal for reassessment of the comics form, focusing on genre-, medium- and industry-agnostic formalities to include a wider range of expressions and phenomena than is usually addressed in the study of comics. Examining accepted definitions of comics and holding them in comparison to the aforementioned periphery phenomena – called *uncomics* herein precisely for their resistant dissimilarity with the dominant mode of comics. A further exploration aims to uncover what reading modes may be indicated by the incipient offspring forms and, further still, if contemporary art has any import on them.

Background

While comics have gained wide acceptance in recent decades – winning Pulitzer prizes, being displayed at the Whitney biennial, why, even being subject of a prolific field of academic study – its modes of expression, even the works of its most high profile practitioners, revolve around a pedigree of visual tropes and conventions well established even before Roy Lichtenstein recognized and replicated them in his canvases. In content, it has borrowed liberally from cinema and literature rather than developing its own formal potential. However, as the formerly 'alternative' or 'underground' comics have settled into the mainstream market and best-selling lists, new modes of comics have emerged outside the centre of attention that eschew those conventions in part or entirely, in favour of appropriating characteristics from

other, perhaps unexpected art forms – abstract art and poetry, specifically. These innovations on the periphery, collectively referred to in this thesis as *uncomics* for their resistance to the connoted meaning of 'comics', have not yet been subject to cohesive formal studies, and require attention for the potential they offer in expanding the framework within which comics are read, studied and produced.

Empirical material

The empirical study of this work falls in two separate parts: The first will focus on reviewing and critically assessing the formal, scholarly definitions of comics, taking its departure from the existing research presented by Fredrik Strömberg in his book *Vad är tecknade serier? En begreppsanalys[1]*. In a further inquiry into notable definitions surveyed by Strömberg – and one more recent than his work – more in-depth discussion will be offered on Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics[2]*, Neil Cohn's *The Visual Language of Comics[3]*, and Thierry Groensteen's *The System of Comics[4]* (1999, translated to English 2007).

The second empirical study which closes off the thesis will examine three contemporary art works ('contemporary' in the broadest sense, meaning post-World War II here): A photo art book by Sol LeWitt, *Autobiography* (1980); a so-called 'shadow box' by Joseph Cornell, *Soap Bubble Set (1947-48)*; and finally, a ceramic work by John R. Williams and Edward Kinman, *Domain* (2006)[5]. These art works are selected for their modular qualities that are reminiscent of comics to different degrees, and are meant to both test and inform the tentative theoretical apparatus arrived at over the course of the preceding chapters.

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1   F. Strömberg, *Vad är tecknade serier? – en begreppsanalys*, Malmö, Seriefrämjandet, 2003.

2   S. McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, Northampton ,Kitchen Sink Press, 1993.

3   N. Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics – Introduction to the Structure and Cognition of Sequential Images,* Bloomsbury, 2013.

4   T. Groensteen, *The System of Comics,* trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2007.

5   Described by E. Kinman in W. Cartwright, G. Gartner and A. Lehn (eds.) – *Cartography and Art* (2009), pp. 307-16.

Theory

Aside from the comics scholars and theorists already mentioned in the Empirical Material section above, of which Groensteen's theories most frequently carry over into the following chapters, this thesis will include Benoît Peeters' theories on the conceptions of the comics page[6] to create a baseline of describing the formal aspects of the physical delimitations thereof, and in discussion of segmentations in poetry comics, Brian McHale[7] and Tamryn Bennet's[8] fungible theories on the subject are frequently cited. Jan Baetens' reflections on abstract comics[9] serve to inform the present discussion of that phenomenon, while Rosalind Krauss' thoughts on the blank spaces in Mallarmé's *Un coup des dés* provides a wider perspective to the constituent blanks of the comics page. To form a working model for investigating alternate reading modes, Espen J. Aarseth's concepts of cybertext and ergodic literature[10] are invoked, specifically his triad image of the labyrinth lends the structural foundation for Chapter 4. In applying cartographic principles to comics navigation, Cartwright, Gartner and Lehn's *Cartography and Art*[11] will be invaluable (not least Peter Downton's chapter, 'Maps of What Might Be'), as will Karen O'Rourke's *Walking and Mapping*, which draw in artistic practices of way-finding and navigation.

Barbara Maria Stafford's concept of visual analogy[12] and Victoria Stevens' neuroaesthetic approach to combinatorial play[13] supply the associative and ludic reasoning, respectively, to coherently argue for navigation in networked reading modes, and Mette Gieskes insights into

6   B. Peeters, 'Four Conceptions of the Page: From *Case, planche, recit: lire la bande dessinee'*, paragraph 3. Trans. Jesse Cohn. In: *ImageTexT: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies*. Vol. 3, No. 3 (2007). Dept of English, University of Florida. http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v3_3/peeters/ (Accessed 13 June 2018).

7   B. McHale, 'Narrativity and Segmentivity, or, Poetry in the Gutter', in M. Grishakova and M. L. Ryan (eds.), *Intermediality and Storytelling*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2010, pp. 27-48.

8   T. Bennett, 'Comics Poetry: The Art of the Possible', in *Cordite Poetry Review,* [website], 2014. http://cordite.org.au/scholarly/comics-poetry/ (accessed 22 October 2016), and T. Bennett, 'Comics Poetry: Beyond' Sequential Art'', in *Image [&] Narrative*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2014, p. 110. http://www.imageandnarrative.be/index.php/imagenarrative/article/download/544/397 (accessed 19 October 2016)

9   J. Baetens, 'Abstraction in comics', *SubStance* vol. 40 no. 1, 2011, pp. 94-113. Project MUSE, doi:10.1353/sub.2011.0004

10   E. J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

11   W. Cartwright, G. Gartner, and A. Lehn (eds.) – *Cartography and Art*, Berlin, Springer, 2009.

12   B. M. Stafford, *Visual Analogy: Consciousness as the Art of Connecting*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1999.

Sol LeWitt's serial work[14]s informs much of the analytical section on his photo book. Finally, Rona Cran's interpretation of collage[15] forms one line of argument, vis-à-vis Stafford, in the analysis of Cornell's shadow box.

More tangentially to the overall line of argument, Michel Foucault and his *heterotopia* (from his preface to *The Order of Things*) is mentioned in passing, as are Gilles Deleuze's concepts of *archive* and *diagram*.

Method

The method of this thesis falls into four progressive steps: First, disabusing existing definitions of comics of constraints imposed by sociocultural perceptions, means of production and industry in order to remove the parts not required for the whole to function. For this purpose I rely in Chapter 1, however loosely, on Gillian Rose's 'three sites' of *production,* the i*mage itself,* and *audiencing*.[16] Second, analyzing the peripheral phenomena of poetry comics and abstract comics to identify their special characteristics, and ways that they align with or break away from the reduced working definition arrived at in the first step. Third, drawing in existing theory and practices from outside comics studies that supplement and expand upon the theoretical apparatus emerging from previous steps. Finally, testing that cross-bred apparatus on works from the field of contemporary art in order to probe its inclusivity and expansive application on works that may look like comics but would not ordinarily fall in that category.

While the methodology in the second through last steps is quite straightforward, building primarily on reasoning supported by demonstrable evidence informed by applicable theory, its operations may appear less clear. Metaphorically speaking, the intention is to atomize formal definitions into a cloud of criteria from which those not found to operationally constitute

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13 V. Stevens, 'To Think without Thinking: The Implications of Combinatory Play and the Creative process for Neuroaesthetics' in *American Journal of Play*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2014, pp. 99-119.

14 M. Gieskes, 'Reading the Simultaneous', in *Image & Narrative,* Vol. 15, No.3, 2014, pp. 63-80. http://www.imageandnarrative.be/index.php/imagenarrative/article/view/625/454 (accessed 11 May 2018)

15 R. Cran, *Collage in Twentieth Century Art, Literature, and Culture,* London, Routledge, 2016.

16 G. Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*, third edition, Los Angeles, Sage Publications, 2012, pp. 19-40.

comics can be removed and replaced with foreign, theoretical and formal materials before resolving them into a new compound. This impermanent state of incompletion is sustained throughout in order to keep the working theory pliable and inclusive for as long as possible.

Disposition

As delineated in Method, above, the progressive and accumulative line of reasoning is pursued throughout the thesis as follows: Chapter 1 seeks to filter out extraneous sociocultural perceptions and industrially determined conventions of the mass medial mode of comics from the formal axiom on which the established definitions will subsequently be assessed. This admittedly reductive exposé is intended only to summarily clear away connotative elements superfluous to the subject proper.

In Chapter 2, the first of two empirical chapters, the evaluation of scholarly definitions takes its departure from Strömberg's survey of that subject matter to move on to more in-depth discussions of McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, Cohn's *The Visual Language of Comics,* and Groensteen's *The System of Comics*. The analytical section deliberates on the main criteria put forth in Strömberg's citations as definitive to comics: text-image integration, sequential narrative, and representational art. While all three of those will be demonstrated in the next chapter to fall away in part or entirely in the periphery *uncomics* phenomena, presently they are demonstrated to figure as definitive not on any formal grounds but primarily on their servitude to the commercial entertainment industry already sought to be expelled in the first chapter.

Chapter 3 describes the phenomena here called *uncomics* and bases the coinage of that term in their refusal to perform or engage in the sociocultural and industrial model of comics. An interlude dedicated to the negative space separating comics panels finds that it constitutes an invisible structure particular to comics. The following subsection finds a precedent for such reluctant expressions in the literary concepts of ergodic literature and cybertext, and transposes them to a visual context.

Chapter 4 explores alternative reading modes to supplement the now precarious linear sequence, and finds navigational aid in cartography, ways to get lost in the image of the labyrinth, and associative network models in cognitive functions and visual inventory. Visual

analogy and combinatorial states of play serve as connective operations to complement the latter, networked modes.

Finally, Chapter 5 is the second and last empirical chapter in which artworks by LeWitt, Williams and Kinman, and Cornell are subjected to analysis through the theoretical apparatus assembled throughout the preceding chapters. The Conclusion provides both a summary and a brief recommendation for future research along these lines.

Full disclosure

The author of this thesis also works as an experimental comics artist and had the abstract comics book *When the Last Story is Told* published in 2015. However, none of his own work is cited in this thesis, nor does his personal experience figure as research.

CHAPTER 1: COMICS AS SHE IS SPOKE[17]

As a preamble to the thesis proper, a brief inquiry is warranted into the colloquial concept of 'comics', untangling the morass of connotations and conventions that have emerged around the art form, to eventually arrive at a delineation of the elements discussed further on. For one thing, the term 'comics' itself, related to the early 20th Century newspaper 'funny pages', bears little descriptive relevance on the contemporary phenomenon or the spectrum of genres and expressions it offers beyond comedy or excitement. As the first section below lays out, the *sociocultural perception* of comics may be a perfectly valid avenue of investigation into their relevance as a mass produced form of entertainment and the multimedia franchises that have sprung from it. The commodifying consequences of that mass production, on the original artwork and its authorship, however, is discussed in the second section. What explicitly needs to be addressed is the fact that those sociocultural and industrial artefacts are extraneous to the *formal characteristics* of comics delineated in the third and last section of this chapter, which form the basis of the definitions discussed in the second, empirical chapter.

Popular, sociocultural perception

Comics as entertainment has a long history of profiteering and pandering to readers, promulgating derivative, generic and foremost *cheaply produced* serials. This has led to a popular understanding that 'comics' as a whole are represented by the large mass of those industrial products, and in themselves represent superficial, immature and exaggerated narratives – reflected in the vernacular as 'comic book-like', 'cartoonish', and similar derisively connotative terms. Those are well polemicized in an essay by critic Ole Frahm:

> What are Comics? Trivial pulps? Ridiculous humor magazines? Mass commodities of the culture industry? *Bildergeschichten*? Film on paper? […] They are neither literature nor art. They lack the depth of a novel, the richness of a painting, the density of a poem, the detailedness of a photograph, and the motion of film. [18]

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17 The title of this chapter, and its misspelling, is in reference to *English as she is spoke*, an 1883 Portuguese-English phrasebook by Pedro Carolino that is infamous for its incorrectness and unintentional humour, listing among its sections 'Idiotisms [sic] and Proverbs'. The implied meaning in this thesis chapter is – in all congeniality, of course – that much discourse about comics is misconstrued from the sociocultural perceptions surrounding the form, rather than grounded in its formal characteristics and qualities.

The epitome, or iconic image of 'a comic' is most often one of caricatured or idealized characters drawn in distinct black outlines, coloured, if such is the case, in a constrained palette of a few bright and contrasting hues – the very elements fetishized in Roy Lichtenstein's appropriations of comics panels. Where the caricature or idealization of the drawings were appellations to the audience to which the comics industry caters, the simplified renditions originally accommodated cheaper printing technologies of the early 20th century which also dictated the rudimentary colour spectrum available. The same materiality that so fascinated Lichtenstein, then, are only production artefacts, as circumstantial to the *form* of comics as is the aura of vapid entertainment that in the following decade attracted underground satirists like Gilbert Shelton or Robert Crumb to drawing comics. What better provocation against the establishment than the subversion of an expression perceived as carefree children's reading. The subsequent 'graphic novel' label (another term that has become descriptive of content and genre over form) shows that although comics are capable of expanding beyond the narrative *genre*, they maintain to a large degree the formal ticks delineated by industrial limitations of a bygone age, for instance the simplified outlines seen in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*[19] or Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*[20].

The 'comics style' in its many iterations is largely derivative of its own previous expressions, even inbred, as successive generations of comics artists working in the industrial mainstream were encouraged to produce more of what had gone before, but bigger, better and stronger. Looking at contemporary industrial comics, whether they be Japanese manga, North American superhero comics, or European album series, their visual vocabulary and rendering refer largely to comics as a historical and stylistic phenomenon than to the real-world objects that they ostensibly represent. As with Lichtenstein's focus on material production elements, the stylistic fetishization of this 'comics style' singles out an ultimately connotative surface element to represent and even constitute the comics form, a material not allowed to evolve but rather modified to purpose and refined into still more abstractedly self-referential, domesticated versions.

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18   O. Frahm, 'Too much is too much. The never innocent laughter of the Comics', in *Image [&] Narrative: Online Magazine of the Visual Narrative*, Vol. 4, #1, 2003. http://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/graphicnovel/olefrahm.htm (accessed 12 September 2013).

19   A. Spiegelman, *The complete Maus*, London, Penguin, 2003.

20   M. Satrapi, *The complete Persepolis*, New York, Pantheon Books, 2007.

Arguably, this conventional *comic book style* can be seen through the lens of Jean Baudrillard's third-order simulacra[21], a narrow spectrum of stylistic variations generated through models of other comic book artists, most often from within the same genre. The different comics styles that have developed within or across geographical markets and industries can be considered a selective pedigree of highly specialized genetic strains cultivated to accommodate either narrative requirements of artists or the tastes of the audience. At the same time, they may be seen in the light of similarly aestheticized breeding in dogs such as Pomeranians or pugs in which the beauty ideals projected on the dogs by humans has resulted in congenital chronic respiratory disability, necrotizing encephalitis and hip dysplasia throughout the breed. While an art form can be similarly misshaped and stunted by external factors and demands on its evolution, there is not the same level of physical suffering involved, of course.

Having struck out from visual arts in the early 20th Century onto its own, largely commercially determined path, the visual styles of conventional comics have thus progressively referred to its own immediate ancestors, cross-breeding an Hergé[22] with a Franquin[23] or a Ditko[24] with a Kirby[25] to refine an expression that ultimately draws entirely from the same (regional market) gene pool of commercial illustration. While particularly Western comics in the latter quarter of the 20th Century may have adopted (or have been attributed) a postmodern approach to textual narrative and structure, with the critical acclaim of mid-1980s works like *Watchmen*[26] and *Maus*, the visuals still showed little notice of the series of often parallel movements that had shaped visual arts throughout the century: only semantic levels of detail separate Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* art from the comic book artists that Roy Lichtenstein plagiarized in his 'cartoon' paintings from the 1960s on, and while Art Spiegelman's *Maus* artwork may have a sheen of underground comics of that same decade, he

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21   J. Baudrillard, 'Symbolic Exchange and death', in L. E. Cahoone (ed.), *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1996, p. 446.

22   Pseudonym of Georges Rémi, creator of the comics series *Tintin.*

23   André Franquin, author and artist of the *Spirou et Fantasio* comics franchise between 1947 and 1969.

24   Steve Ditko, artist and co-creator of Marvel Comics franchises *Spider-man* and *Doctor Strange*, among others.

25   Jack Kirby, pen name of Jacob Kurtzberg, artist and co-creator of, arguably, most of the initial, extended Marvel Comics franchise.

26   A. Moore and D. Gibbons, *Watchmen,* New York, DC Comics, 1986.

would display an outright fetishization of early newspaper comics in his 2004 book *In the Shadow of No Towers*.

Similarly, French comics theorist Thierry Groensteen debates whether comics can be said to have a 'mythopoetic' dimension, that is, a set of myths or tropes that can be said to be innate to the form[27]: to many a casual observer it might appear quite the other way around, that it is comics that seem to be endemic only to a few genres. Here, also, the truth is more likely to be found in the pursuit of profit, namely that the reason adventure genres or comedic fables have particularly flourished in comics is that they were meant to attract and appeal to readers. Meanwhile, those genres and franchises have amply demonstrated their (profit)ability to be supplanted into other forms, most presently in the tsunami of superhero film, TV shows, and computer games. Although alluring in its ostensive establishment of an apparatus idiosyncratic to comics, this *mythopoiesis* relies entirely on a set of extraneous and, ultimately, industrially determined tropes.

Factors of industrial mass media
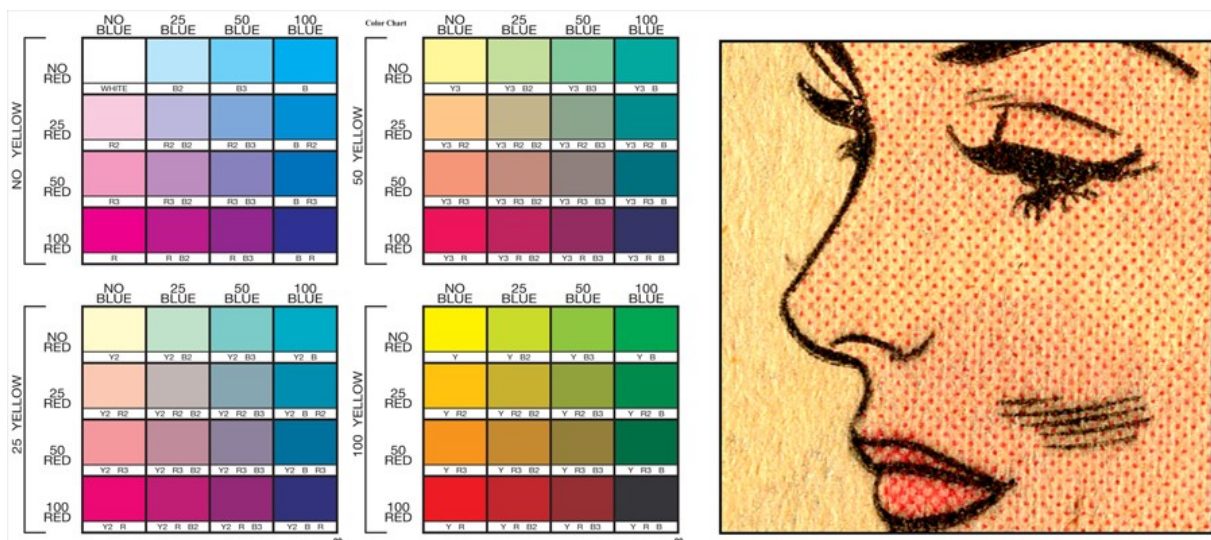
Ill. 1.1: **Left:** *Colour chart used for comics books, reproduced in Marvel Age #13 (1984).* **Right:** *Scanned detail from an issue of DC Romance shows the visible raster pattern of the reproduction.*

As already noted, the conditions under which comics were produced since their late-19th Century popularization have shaped the general perception of comics, in terms of penny

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27   T. Groensteen, 'The current state of French comics theory', in *Scandinavian Journal of Comic Art,* 1:1 2012, pp. 111-122. http://sjoca.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/SjoCA-1-1-Forum-Groensteen.pdf, (accessed 10 February 2018).

pinching reproduction values projecting an aura of disposability and tackiness; and particularly by developing a stylistic echo chamber initially as a means of conforming to anticipated (adolescent) audience inclinations, but which later devolved into a de facto prototypical 'comics style'. Since the mass reproduction of comics is so determinant of their received cultural character, the multiple copy supersedes and essentially becomes the artwork; the re-product, the product. Part of the marketability of comics entailed a steady production of new material, serialized on a regular (monthly, weekly or daily) basis, resulting in the emergence of varying models of assembly line production, sweat shops, or assistant patronage to meet schedule demands: In the United States, the creative process of comics manufacture was divided into successive subroutine steps in the production chain (writer, penciller, inker, letterer, colourist), a practice that is still prevalent in the contemporary North American mainstream; seminal comics artist Will Eisner is known to have co-managed a studio 'shop' of fifteen artists at its peak in the late 1930s[28] and, as Hergé employed several uncredited assistants in drawing *Tintin* to meet demands[29], so has the use of artist assistants become common in manga production[30]. This dispersion and outsourcing of tasks for the purpose of efficiency summarily de-authorizes the role of any single artist in like fashion to the original art ceding authority to its reproduction, further affirming the commercial art lineage of comics.

Bart Beaty, paraphrasing Groensteen, notes that the mass production allows comics to 'enter into a distribution network far removed from the sacralizing tendencies of the art world'[31] – the latter here meaning gallery and museum hangings. However, as a matter of illustration, where reproductions of fine art appears in print, they are customarily accompanied by artist's credit, title and specifications about the physical size, material, and media of the original – comics, apparently, need no such accreditation for the end product bears no fealty to the base material components from which it was assembled and transmuted. Made by committee, the

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28   D. Friedman., *Heroes of the Comics: Portraits of the Legends of Comic Books*, Seattle, Fantagraphics Books, 2014.

29   M. J .Farr, *Tintin: The complete companion*, London, John Murray, 2001, p. 141-3

30   As indicated by 'Takaya told the magazine *Time* that unlike many manga creators, she has never worked as an artist's assistant,' from B. H. Beaty and S. Weiner (eds.), *Critical Survey of Graphic Novels: Manga,* Ipswich, Salem Press, p. 131, or, on p. 276 of the same volume: 'Takeuchi wrote and drew *Sailor Moon* with the help of two anonymous assistants, a common practice in the manga industry.'

31   B. Beaty, *Comics versus Art,* University of Toronto Press, 2012, p. 186.

collective title beams from the cover, as might the date, not of creation but of publication, and rather than the hired creative hands' names, the publishing company's corporate name is certainly featured. Nowhere in comics publications is the original size of the artwork mentioned – which is usually reproduced at a considerably reduced scale – because it holds no relevance to the final work except as an inferior matrix from which the multiple, industrial originals are cast. Note for example that also in this thesis, when citing specific comics, only publication years are provided; in the majority of cases, that is the only matter of record. Once again, the physical means of representation, in Beaty/Groensteen's example *museum displays* vis-à-vis *mass print publication,* predetermine acknowledgement of authorship, of production date and of the physical properties of the work in wildly different ways: In the case of industrially produced comics, the publishing company assumes executive authorial identity by diluting and negating that of the original craftsmen; it claims the license to assert the creation date of *the copy* at the expense of that of *the original*; and sees as its prerogative to manipulate the work's material attributes. Thus, in commodifying the artwork, the company disenfranchises comics artists and promotes itself to corporate master of *creation, time* and *space*.

This assumption of ownership is entirely predicated on the market mechanisms of supply (a sustained publication of new re-produce) and demand. The encouragement of audience or fan engagement with a corporate brand through an open-ended franchise, perpetually continuous narratives based on and revolving around recurring characters, cultivates the peculiar form of commodity fetishism known as 'comics culture' that only transparently masks the reinforced consumerist loyalty. Like the individual panel or page of a comic relates serially to the ones surrounding it, so the individual issue or volume of an on-going comics series exists not only on the *promise* of the next one, but on the *premise* of all preceding volumes, creating an auxiliary after-market for the completist collector-consumers that are the ultimate outcome (indeed, themselves a product) of the industry-induced fan culture.

Formal distinctions

The preceding sections serve primarily as brief descriptions of perceptions and circumstances that, ultimately, must be considered extraneous to the basic *form* of comics. The sociocultural perceptions characterize candy wrappers as well as (or better than) they do comics, and the

depiction of industrial mass media commodification of comics might be applied to entertainment franchises in any medium: neither suffice to adequately circumscribe 'comics', but both remain tangential to the core phenomenon. Rather than contending to characterize comics by its superficial indicators or the circumstances of their production, for the benefit of the forthcoming discussion of definitions of comics, a more pervasive, formally descriptive profile is called for. Generally speaking, comics are most often encountered in one of two formats; the *strip* or the (single or multi-) *page*[32]. *Comic strips* traditionally consist of three to four equally-sized panels, most frequently arranged in a horizontal row. The *comics page* (again, single or multiple), commonly affording a larger surface than the strip format, allows for a more flexible experimentation in terms of the division of space into panels, yet some artists employ a rigid, symmetrical grid.

Those *panels* are predominantly individually outlined by a black line border, and separated from each other on all sides by a blank space contiguous to the surrounds – though there are notable examples that one or more panels may be left unframed for narrative or expressive purposes. Similarly, there are both exceptions and variations from the blank space separator, called the *gutter* in comics jargon, but instances where no separation or delineation between discrete panels exist are exceedingly rare. Throughout the 20th Century, strip and page alike traditionally adhered to continuous, rectangular outer margins, leaving an active area within from which the individual panels are hewn. Increasingly since the 1980s, however, book and magazines have allowed comics page layouts to extend beyond the margin and unto the edge of the page. The comics strip, marginalized in newspapers as printed news declined, has been less fortunately endowed in that period, and remains rather the same as previously.

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32   The term 'page' is used broadly throughout here, in recognization that an increasing number of comics are being published online. The intention in this thesis is not to ignore that growing field, but to approach the study of comics in terms that address any means of publication and presentation. Nevertheless, the metaphoric paradigm of print is still current in digital media (cp. 'web*page*'), and a surprising number of web comics still utilize aspect ratios similar to common page formats rather than screen dimensions, and I believe the term is used with due consideration here.
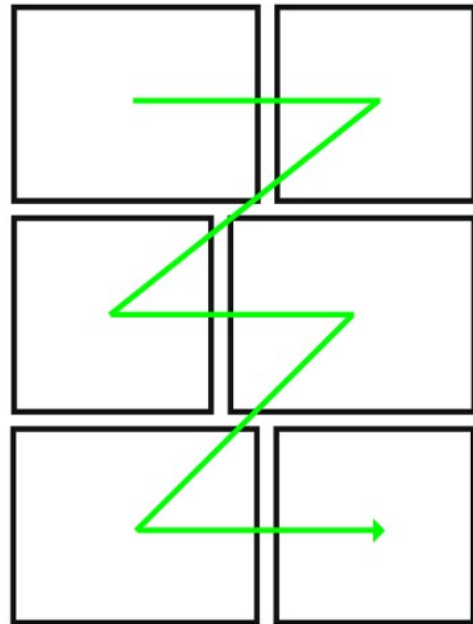
Ill. 1.2: The basic reading direction of Western comics is adopted in part from that of flowing text (in this example a passage from Bram Stoker's Dracula, *left), but also from commercial considerations that the material may be reapplied as newspaper periodicals.*

In Western comics, panels are traditionally rectangular, whereas Asian comics like Japanese manga are less likely to adhere to right angles – a generalization that is less recognizable since manga was translated to Western markets on a large scale in the late 1990s and influenced both American and European artists. Furthermore, manga is read from the upper right corner of a page while Western comics start at the upper left corner – both continuing in a downward zigzag motion, called the *z-path*, mimicking the reading direction of the regional writing system.

In order to fully appreciate the paradigm of linear sequence in comics, evoked by the 'folded filmstrip' z-path reading schema, it is worth considering that while the comics form was in its infancy, so was the motion picture. At the same time as Wilhelm Busch drew his first *Max und Moritz* stories (published 1865), and Rodolphe Töpffer had published his satirical book *Histoire de M. Vieux Bois* (1842), pioneer photographer Eadweard Muybridge gained fame for his locomotion studies of animals (1877-8). Originally a 'mere' landmark in still photography, Muybridge's split second time lapse sequences of movement in horses, bats, antelopes, and humans, kindled an early interest in cinematic displays – and were indeed turned into a cinematic lecture aid by Muybridge himself in 1880. The prints of his work, displayed as

single-file sequential progressions suggestive of a later film or comic strip, were widely circulated in their time, and have very likely impressed themselves on the zeitgeist that was soon to birth both cinema and comics.

The resultant *strip* was implemented into the full-page comics in bilateral marketing interests: Comics scholar Benoît Peeters notes that comics produced in the mid-20th Century for Franco-Belgian magazines might be laid out in evenly sized rows or tiers to facilitate marketing the same work as a periodical strip[33]; conversely, the nascent North American comics books of the 1930s were initially collections of newspaper serials pasted up to form one full-length story[34]. As, in chapter 3 and 4, we will examine reading directions and modes further, and in light of this chapter's first section on industry effects on the sociocultural perceptions on the form, note here how closely commercial considerations dictated the emergence of standard grid layouts in mainstream comics.

The more dynamic comics page layout strategy (what Peeters calls the 'rhetorical utilization'[35]), spurning a strictly tiered structure and the straightforward reading schema it implies, leads the eye instead by *stacking* panels vertically and creating visual *blockage* by extending a vertical panel across the expected z-path reading, as evidenced by (and termed in) the research of comics scholar and neurolinguist Neil Cohn[36]. Particularly stacking creates embedded groupings not unlike those of Gestalt principles, while blockage disrupts the reading, both elements creating discrete breaks or *segments* in the flow of the page – a term that will also be discussed extensively in the next chapter. The benefits of such dynamic page layouts for the artist is the ability to vary panel sizes and proportions according to narrative and/or expressive emphasis, and creating more diverse and therefore – to the reader – more inviting pages; the inherent challenge, of course, is the added creative load of constructing page layouts that attend to the requirements of both narrative articulacy, aesthetics – and legibility.

Regardless of the dynamics applied to the comics page layout, so iconic is the configuration of rectangular frames that comics theorist Thierry Groensteen invoke them as a 'mental form'

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33   Peeters, 2007, paragraph 3.

34   M. Horn, 'Comics around the world', in M. Horn (ed.), *The World Encyclopedia of Comics*, Chelsea House Publishers, New York, 1976, p. 24.

35   Peeters, 2007, paragraph 19-22.

36   Cohn, 2013, pp. 91-106.

of comics: Even in miniature with the panels left blank, '[t]hese miniature representations of comics pages are kinds of symbolic pictograms; [...] they enclose an implicit definition.'[37] That implication is as close to a definition as the purposes of this chapter allow – although this brief overview of what Cohn calls the *external compositional structure*[38] (external, that is, to the image content of the panels) draws only the barest sketch of the formal qualities and characteristics of comics, the meatier bones of contentions lie in the definitions of the form arrived at by leading comics scholars, analysed and interpreted in chapter two.

Summary

In this initial chapter, an effort has been made to briefly and concisely separate out the sociocultural and largely industrially prescribed connotations of 'comics' from the formally denotative elements which will be engaged in the chapters to follow. The detritus of convention established early on by the then-budding industrial mass production of comics, and of their cost effective production methods, have solidified around the formal features of comics as sociocultural perception that inhibits and immures the expressive potential of the form to a singular avenue that feeds primarily off its own short, isolated history for sustenance.

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37   Groensteen, 2007, p. 28.

38   Cohn, 2013, pp. 91-106.

CHAPTER 2: DEFINITIONS OF 'COMICS', AN EVALUATION

Departing from previously posed definitions as they are outlined and presented in F. Strömberg's *Vad är Tecknade Serier?*, the common criteria for what constitutes a comic are tested against both traditional comics works and the avant garde periphery. The validity of word/image integration, image sequence as determining values is particularly brought into question as 'silent' comics (i.e., without text) demonstrably exist throughout and before the 20th century, and the imposition of a text-like (sequential) reading direction is further weakened if we include abstract images into the possible expressions in comics.

Description

In order to discuss and, ultimately, dissect established perceptions and formal definitions of 'comics', a thorough examination of those must be undertaken. Fortunately, such a daunting task has already been performed by comics scholar Fredrik Strömberg, in his 2003 book, *Vad är tecknade serier? – en begreppsanalys* ('What are comics? – a concept analysis'), originally a MA thesis from the University of Malmö. That is followed by a brief, selective summary of Scott McCloud's seminal *Understanding Comics,* Cohn's linguistically predicated *The Visual Language of Comics,* and finally an outline of Groensteen's *The System of Comics,* such as they pertain to the subject of formal definitions and to the later analysis of those.

Fredrik Strömberg, *Vad är tecknade serier?* (2003)

Strömberg collects and compares more than 30 individual descriptions of what constitutes 'a comic' or 'comics', and in the process divides them into two broad, non-exclusive categories of *mass medial* and *aesthetic* definitions[39]. That is, does the individual definition tend more toward seeing comics as a mass medium characterized by its (re)production and distributional reach, or as an art form determined by formal, aesthetic traits. Incidentally, the two categories seem to generally overlap with the geographical situation of its author; American scholars throughout comics history have been more likely to land in the mass medial camp whereas

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39   Strömberg, 2003, p. 68.

European (predominantly French-speaking) writers more often lean toward an aesthetic interpretation[40].

It is worth noting that both the United States and particularly the francophone European countries are also homes to significant comics-producing industries and, possibly to counter those, Strömberg dedicates a chapter to definitions from his native Sweden, a country with more historical comics import and translation from either USA or France/Belgium than local production. This regionalized chapter shows a more even distribution across the two categories. Unfortunately, no sources or data is cited for Asian countries, although the Japanese comics (manga) industry in particular is thriving not only domestically but, through a massive export surge throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, has become a dominant comics phenomena in the West as well. Even in 2018, it is difficult to find English-language research material about manga that does not relate to its cultural import into Western countries rather than to its formal definitions and cultural perceptions in the country where it is originally produced. Consequently, the discussion of Asian or African comics and their possible distinction from Western comics will be severely limited throughout this thesis as well.

The unfortunate omission of a large part of the international phenomenon of comics notwithstanding, an inspection of the present material reveals notable similarities with only occasional contradictions, and variations of perspective as noted in the above. Different writers' personal preferences do shine through, as do the dominant types of comics in currency at the time in which their definitions are put to paper – several, like Bill Blackbeard and Roger Sabin, insist on talking about 'comic strips' rather than 'comics', suggesting a predilection for the single-row, often episodic newspaper format over longer form works [41] – although it is fair to assume that factual and objective delineations are strived for. As the material collected and presented in *Vad är tecknade serier* is too exhaustive to be recounted in its entirety to any reasonable extent, the below table aims to graphically represent and compare the writers vis-à-vis the criteria they cite as definitive for the comics form.

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40   Strömberg, 2003, p. 84.

41   Both cited in Strömberg, 2003, pp. 74-5.

Signatures:

√ Included

– Explicitly ambivalent

	Sequential or serial images	Juxtaposed images	Narrative	Recurring, identifiable characters	Mass medial, production criteria	Regular or episodic publication	Integrated text and balloons	Preponderance of images over text	Multiple images per page and on a single support	Static images	Drawn images
Töpffer (1845)			–				√	√			
Jungmarker (1946)			√	√		√					
Waugh (1947)	√		√	√		√	√				
Becker (1956)	√		√	√		√	√				
Lacassin (1963)			√			√					
Hegerfors (1966)				√		√	√				
Lacassin (1970)			√								
Knutsson (1970)	√			√	√	√					
Couperie (1972)	√	√	–				×		√	√	√
Knutsson (1972)	√		√		√						–
Kunzle (1973)	√		√		√				√		
Petersson (1976)							√	√			
Hjort-Jørgensen et al (1976)	√		√		√						
Lång (1976)	√		√	√	√						
Blackbeard (1977)			√	√		√	√	√			
Eisner (1985)			√				√				
Garnert & Rundquist (1991)	√						√		√		
McCloud (1993)	√	√									
Sabin (1993)	√		√		√		–		–		
Ribe (1995)	√		√				–				√
Sabin (1996)				√					√		
Eisner (1996)	√				√		√	√			
Harper (1996)	√						–	–			
Groensteen (1998)	√	√							√	√	
Lefevre & Dierick (1998)		√							√	√	√
Harvey (2001)	√		√				√				

Signatures: √ Included – Explicitly ambivalent	Sequential or serial images	Juxtaposed images	Narrative	Recurring, identifiable characters	Mass medial, production criteria	Regular or episodic publication	Integrated text and balloons	Preponderance of images over text	Multiple images per page and on a single support	Static images	Drawn images
Christiansen (2001)	√			√	√		√				

Table 1: Comparison table of individual definitions and discreet criteria discussed in Strömberg, Vad är Tecknade Serier?*, pp. 67-94, compiled in this form by Haverholm. Definitions listed chronologically.*

The above criteria are further identified and discussed by Strömberg in the *Analysis* chapter of his book[42], and will be elaborated upon in a similar fashion in the corresponding, analytical section of this thesis chapter. However, Strömberg first goes on to pose a series of possible biases and obscuring circumstances that may cloud the outcome or phrasing of a definition:

- *Ulterior motives* of the writer, such as personal areas of interest, local patriotism or other preconceived goals that may predetermine the definition.
- *Contemporary assessment*, the incapacity of some writers to see beyond the general perception of their subject at their time of writing.
- *Vague* or *imprecise concepts* used in definitions that, in turn, need to be further explained themselves.
- *Mass medial* versus *aesthetic perspectives*, as mentioned initially.
- *Different methodologies* produce different definitions. Strömberg advocates an acute awareness of the methods used, specifically with regard to the intended *type* of definition. [43]

Taking special notice of his own last warning, the author proposes three different types of definition as his conclusion to his research on this particular matter, a series of statements that would place Strömberg squarely in his own *aesthetic* group of definitions:

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42   Strömberg, 2003, pp. 95-122.

43   Strömberg, 2003, pp. 113-9.

Prototypical definition	Prototype/component definition	'Intuitive' definition
A narrative that consists of images, often drawn, which can be reproduced in one form of printed medium or other; and in which the text, if it contains any, is well integrated in the images.[44]	Juxtaposed, static images in deliberate sequence.[45]	A static image medium to be experienced chronologically and/or temporally.[46]

An outlier

One definition in Strömberg's chapter on Swedish variants, by Göran Ribe, stands out for not applying any criteria in Table 1, and it is omitted from the comparison chart as an outlier from the more standardized attempts at defining comics, but is worth including for a different perspective on comics as they can be perceived by general readers:

1. Comics are prone to simplification and exaggeration.
2. They are drastic and concentrated, and often narrate by way of summary, leaps and contrast.
3. They are easily overviewed. [47]

What distinguishes this is that it directly addresses the same rash or unruly, extraneous component of comics that has stigmatized the art form since the early decades of the 20th century, and inspired phrases like 'cartoony' to denote garish visuals or contrived narrative in other arts. [48] Where other writers straighten their suit jackets and avert their eyes from the slapstick and cheap thrills that litter the historical 'funny pages', Ribe, like Frahm (cited in chapter 1), focuses in on that aspect and poses it as definitive to the form – quite likely as ill-

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44   Translated from Strömberg, 2003, p. 128: 'En berättelse som utgörs av, ofta tecknade, bilder vilka kan återges i någon form av tryckt media och vars text, om sådan förekommer, är väl integrerad i bilderna.'

45   Translated from Strömberg, 2003, p. 131: 'Sidoställda, orörliga bilder i medveten sekvens.'

46   Translated from Strömberg, 2003, p. 133: 'Ett orörligt bildmedium som skall upplevas kronologiskt och/eller temporalt.'

47   Translated from Strömberg, 2003, p. 90: '1. Serien har en benägenhet att förenkla och överdriva. 2. Den är drastisk och koncentrerad, den berätter ofta i sammanfattningar, språng och kontraster. 3. Den är överblickbar.'

48   For this and other examples, see D. Marconis, *How not to write comics criticism* [website], 2012, http://www.dylanmeconis.com/how-not-to-write-comics-criticism/, (accessed February 18 2018).

informed as it would be to *deny* that a considerable portion of all comics have certainly fit Ribe's description. Firmly based in the sociocultural perception of comics, both Ribe's and Frahm's position may merit a third classification, *sociocultural definitions*, in addition to the two that Strömberg proposes, the *mass medial* and *aesthetic* classifications. Arguably, at least Ribe's first two points could also successfully be applied to the methodology pursued in this thesis, but the meta-discussion whether that makes it 'comics' is neither here nor there. What can be addressed is the normative portrayal of his contemporary mainstream comics that Ribe actually provides, and the sociocultural perception of the form sketched out in the first chapter.

Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (1993)

One *formal* definition included in *Vad är tecknade serier* that warrants more in-depth discussion is that cited from Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, a 1993 treatise on comics that is, itself, narrated in comics form. In the 25 years since its publication, McCloud's theories and definition of comics have become one of the most accepted and oft-cited. The phrasing reprinted in Strömberg's book is only the last in an accumulative series of proposals presented by McCloud's alter ego on the comics page, each new iteration adjusted according to an unseen audience's heckling. The final version summarizes comics as: 'Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence[49], intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.' This apparently rather inclusive phrasing falls close to the concept of *montage* as it is applied in film theory, though the juxtaposition found in comics is shown within the same pages to be spatial rather than temporal (see Ill. 2.1, below), and Strömberg categorizes it accordingly as 'aesthetic' or formalist rather than mass medial.

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49 That is, that one comics panel build on the previous one(s) in a linear fashion to suggest a progression in time or movement in space.
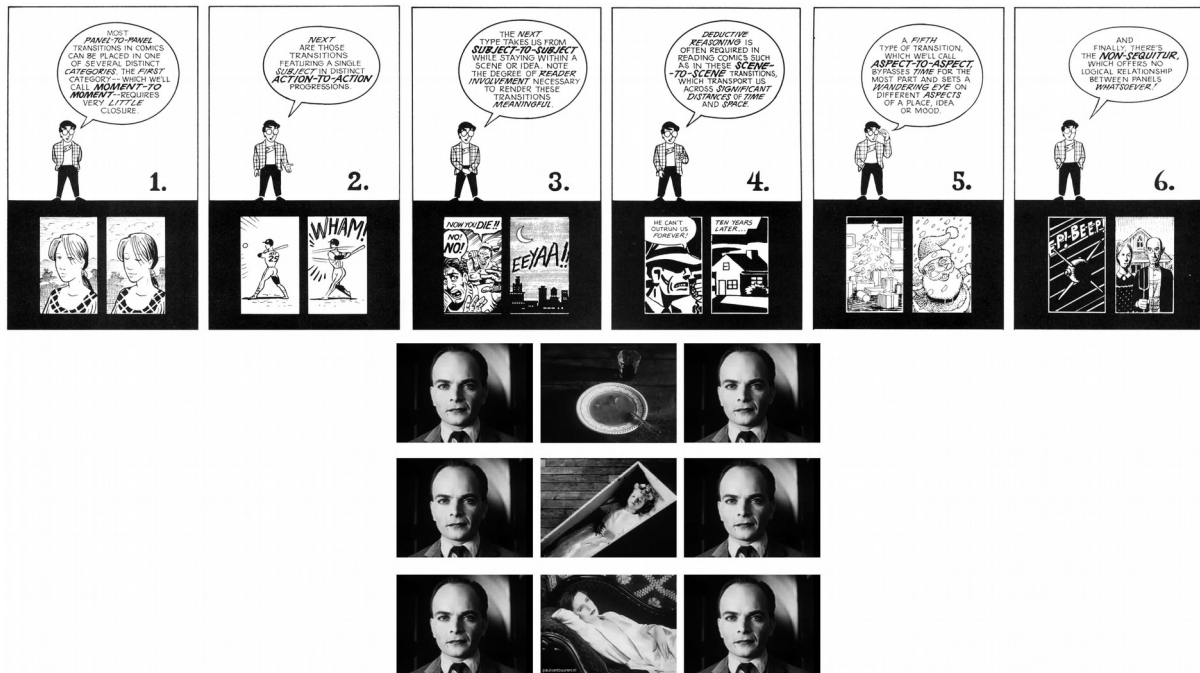
Ill. 2.1: Three levels of montage. **Top row:** *Scott McCloud's closure typology, or '6 transitions', from* Understanding Comics, *pp. 70-2.* **Bottom block:** *A reconstruction of the so-called 'Kuleshov effect', here the montage is applied spatially for print, rather than temporally as it was originally presented on film.*

Like Strömberg, McCloud adapts his initial definition from earlier ones, primarily those of comics artist and theorist Will Eisner, but it is only with his own contribution to comics terminology, that of the concept of *closure*, that his definition is really complete. Repurposing a term from psychology, McCloud uses 'closure' to describe, and eventually subcategorize, the transitions between comics panels, shifting focus, in a turn of visual rhetoric, from the individual images to the gaps between them. In the analytical section of this chapter, particularly McCloud's last closure subcategory will be discussed in greater detail in relation to the larger subject of this thesis – peripheral *uncomics* and the expanded definition of the art form they may dictate.

Neil Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics* (2013)

American neurolinguist Neil Cohn takes a quite different approach to comics than Strömberg or McCloud – for his purpose of identifying and formulating a linguistic model for the *system of communication* underlying comics, Cohn separates that *structural* component, visual language, from its *sociocultural* context, comics – as discussed at length in the first chapter of

this thesis. In his words, comics should not be conflated with the structural component: '[p]otentially, comics can be written in both a visual language (of images) and a written language (of text).' He thereby draws a clear division between other cultural contexts for visual language, such as picture books or, as McCloud suggests, the Bayeux tapestry and similar phenomena predating modern comics.

> While 'visual language' is the biological and cognitive capacity that humans have for conveying concepts in the visual-graphic modality, 'comics' are a sociocultural context in which this visual language appears (often with writing). […] Ultimately, the definition of comics includes a network of ideas composed of their subject matter, format, readership, history, industry, the specific visual languages they use, and other cultural characteristics. [50]

Grounding his theory firmly in linguistic methodology, Cohn cites *modality*, *meaning* and *grammar* as the three primary components of language; each an individual aspect of human cognition that only all converge in language forms. In the case of visual language, the meaning and grammar will then need to be interpreted within the *visual-graphic modality*.

	Modality	Meaning	Grammar
Verbal/Written Language	x	x	x
Sign Language	x	x	x
Visual Language	x	x	x
Music	x		x
Dance	x		x
Athletic skills	x		x
Gestures	x	x	
Meaningful images/paintings/diagrams/etc.	x	x	
Abstract art	x		

Table 2: 'Varying human behaviors involving similar underlying cognitive capacities', reproduced after Cohn (2013), p. 7.

The linguistic methodology comes with severe delineations, however: Although citing research showing grammatical or grammar-like components to arts like music and dance, Cohn fails to identify conceptual meaning in those – at least to any degree required by his criteria for being seen or treated as language (see Table 2). Music 'certainly evokes *emotions* but does not match specific sensorial forms to explicit meanings', and similarly, 'unless the

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50   Cohn, 2013, p. 2.

dancing starts bordering on pantomime,' it will not make the mark. Abstract art, in Cohn's view, is '[o]ne step further removed [...]: these images play with the modality alone, and have neither grammar *nor meaning*' (emphasis added). That latter judgement on non-representational art as conveyor of meaning is not only at odds with most modern art history, but also shows a severe bias on Cohn's part toward verbal over aesthetic meaning. As the larger, linguistic goal of Cohn's research thus seems to prohibit the expansive intention of this thesis, and indeed relies wholly on the linear type of sequence already shown to be non-exclusive in comics, this chapter will instead take note of his attention to and distinction of comics as sociocultural context, and, further on, his research into the navigation of comics pages will be used.

Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics* (2007)

French comics theorist Thierry Groensteen, who has already been mentioned several times, chooses to see comics as a system rather than a language, specifically as a spatio-topical system or simply the *spatio-topia* – one of many neologisms in Groensteen's work, this one coined to include the *space* (spatio) of a page or pages and the relative *site* (topos) of individual panels within[51]. To describe the panel configurations of the comics page discussed in chapter 1, he uses the term *multiframe* as the compartmentalization and subdivision of the *hyperframe*, that is, the outer contiguous margin inset from the edge of a printed page.[52] The multiframe is a flexible concept, however, which can be applied to any set or subset of multiple panels: Any comics strip, page or double-page, as well as an entire work of comics can be considered a multiframe. Groensteen's delimitation of the multiframe's potential sprawl, cited in Strömberg's survey of definitions and listed in Table 1, above, is the condition that the frames share a single support, for instance a book. A further requirement is the concept of *iconic solidarity* between panels, meaning that they a) interdepend in a series while b) remaining separated, yet c) coexist within the multiframe '*in praesentia*'.[53] Initially, Groensteen lists two operations determinative upon this iconic solidarity: the *breakdown* of the narrative – literally, the decomposition of the whole into a discretely paced sequence of

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51   Groensteen, 2007, p. 21.
52   Groensteen, 2007, p. 30.
53   Groensteen, 2007, p. 18.

panel units – and the *page layout,* which applies those panels to the spatio-topia, defining them in terms of area and location.

To describe the sum of possible types of relations between panels within this rather inclusive bracket of iconic solidarity, Groensteen offers the term of *arthrology*[54] which can be conjugated into a general and a restrained mode, dealing with networked and sequential panel-to-panel connections, respectively, although both adhere to the sequential narrative paradigm. *Restrained arthrology,*[55] in which the 'elementary', linear sequence is the only connecting operation, attains and produces meaning in three successive steps, or planes: First, the *panel* itself as a conveyor of meaning, precipitated on Deleuze's statement that the cinematic *movement-image* is an utterable, i.e., can be interpreted and described verbally by a reader[56]; second, the s*yntagm* of the current panel being informed by its preceding and following adjacents in the sequence; and third, the *sequence* which any story segment 'characterized by a unity of action and/or space', synthesized into a global meaning.[57]

That is not to say that, in the restrained mode, every panel is instrumental only to the progressive momentum of the narrative – Groensteen accentuates the extensive use in certain Japanese manga of 'decorative, documentary, rhythmic, or poetic' panels only incidental to the narrative drive[58], but which add instead to the ambiance or character of the story. Even moreso in the *general arthrology* mode,[59] characterized by a multi-linear network model as well as the sequence, where the panel is shown to also be subject to distant semantic determinations[60] – a third determining operation on iconic solidarity that Groensteen calls *braiding*[61] – that is, that panels resonate visually with others by similarity or analogy, not only synchronically across the visible, *in praesentia* page or spread of a book but also diachronically to the ones *in absentia;* hidden, for example, in the previous pages by the act of leafing through a book, or by scrolling through a webpage. Apparently unperturbed that the introduction of *distant* connections might contradict his initial assertion that iconic solidarity

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54   Groensteen, 2007, p. 21.

55   Groensteen, 2007, pp. 103-143.

56   Groensteen, 2007, p. 107.

57   Groensteen, 2007, p. 111.

58   Groensteen, 2007, p 116-7.

59   Groensteen, 2007, pp. 144-58.

60   Groensteen, 2007, p. 111.

61   Groensteen, 2007, pp. 146-48.

depends on '*in praesentia* coexistence', Groensteen sees in braiding more than simply a function or facilitator of this network and declares that the notion of the network itself is manifested into the reader's consciousness *by* the process of braiding, adding *associative* logic to the *syntagmatic* logic of the sequence.[62]

Originally published in French in 1999, Groensteen's book must be excused for not grappling with the implications of screen-mediated comics that were barely extant at the time; nevertheless, in his conclusion he states that comics, in its demonstrable discontinuities and features of networks and image banks, falls typologically close to 'the turning point between the civilization of the book and that of multimedia.'[63] In his efforts to formulate and establish a systematic theory of comics rather than applying that of a different modality whole cloth, and sparing in terms of absolute definitive statements, Groensteen presents a rather more inclusive view on comics than other scholars that have ventured at defining the form. His insistence on considering minutia of the creative processes such as the breakdown of the story matter, is an appealing change of perspective from the conventional narrow focus on materialities of industrial production, and the concepts of networked arthrology and analogous braiding *in absentia* offer possibilities to be explored in coming chapters.

Analysis

Before proceeding to dismantle the ruling definitions, a brief overview may be in order to evaluate the criteria gleaned from Strömberg's collection of data. In the comparative Table 1, the definitions were listed against the criteria he identified, as well as more specific ones (*juxtaposed images, mass medial production,* and *preponderance of image over text*) added to more granularly assess the characteristics contained in certain definitions. As this thesis has a stated intent to expand upon definitions of comics into other domains of communication in order to include wider ranges of expression, it leans towards establishing an aesthetic definition according to Strömberg's categorization. In summary, and attempting to synthesize the criteria found in Strömberg into more manageable subject matter, the formal definitions can be grouped under the three larger headings which will be discussed in the following subsections:

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62 Groensteen, 2007, p. 158.

63 Groensteen, 2007, p. 160.

- *Integrated text* (eg. in balloons or as onomatopoeia),
- *Sequential* and/or *juxtaposed images,* and
- *Representational art* – implied though never pronounced because, presumably, to most of the writers of the treated definitions there would be no imaginable alternative.

The *closure* concept introduced by McCloud to denote various ways in which discrete images interact will be accordingly discussed under the *Sequence/juxtaposition* heading, and Neil Cohn's distinction of 'comics' as a sociocultural context has already been described more fully in Chapter 1.

Primarily, the analysis will consist of testing the individual criterial groups against phenomena within the accepted category of 'comics', ie. 'classical' comics that may function as demonstrable counterexamples to shed doubt on the established definitions. The intention is not to disprove but to expand upon those definitions – dissolve them, using a chemical allusion, so that they may more easily absorb foreign, theoretical and formal materials before resolving them into a new compound.

The integration of text and images in comics
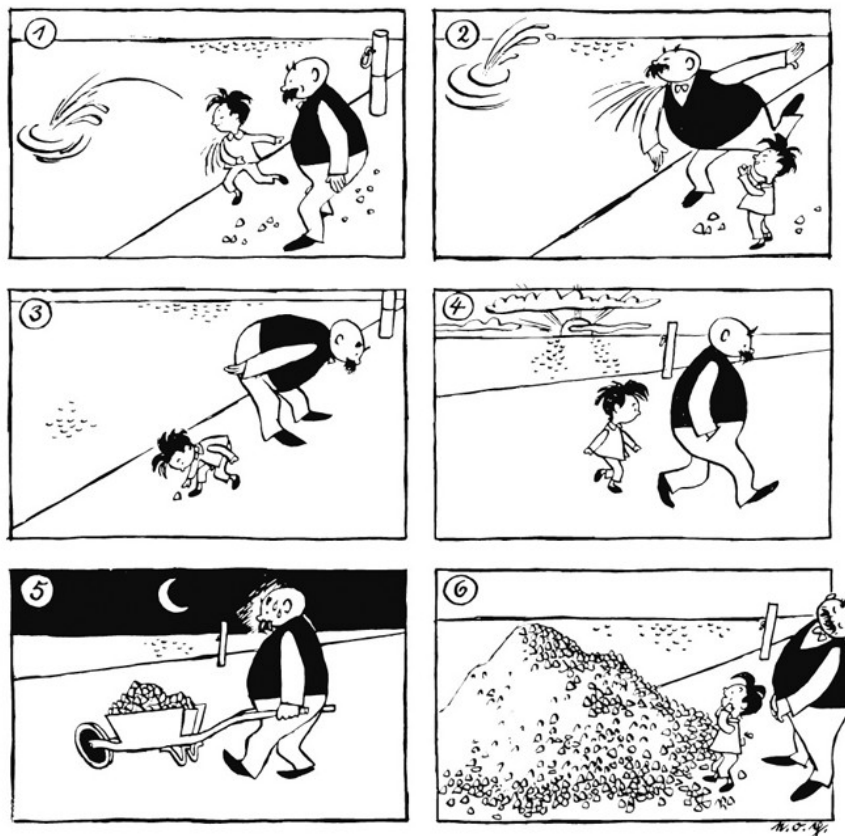
Ill. 2.2: O Plauen (Erich Ohser), Vater und Sohn.

Within the field of comics studies, comics are frequently but not consistently claimed to be a 'hybrid' medium or art form, in reference to the vast majority of comics that do integration text into the images. Nevertheless, as some of the writers cited in Strömberg's *Vad är tecknade serier* concede, that combination is too ambiguous a rule to base a formal definition on: Stephen Becker writes that 'With occasional exceptions, they make use of dialogue in 'balloons', or of a written narrative.' [64] Morten Harper states curtly that '[c]omics are images in sequence – with or without text',[65] '– usually, but not always, with text', corrects Roger Sabin.[66] There is cause to tread carefully, too, for wordless comics have been a presence even in the mass media throughout the history of comics.

The 'silent' or pantomime strip *Adamson* (in English *Silent Sam*) created by the Swedish artist Oscar Jacobsson was published worldwide from 1920 to 1964. The German weekly comic by

64   Strömberg, 2003, p. 73.

65   'Tegneserien er bilder i sekvens – med eller uten text.' Translated from Strömberg, 2003, p. 81.

66   Strömberg, 2003, pp. 74-5.

E. O. Plauen, *Vater und Sohn* (see Illustration 2.2), was only briefly in publication between 1934 and 1937, but enjoyed great popularity in the population. Danish daily strip *Ferd'nand* (Ill. 2.3), created by Henning Dahl Mikkelsen in 1937, was in continued publication worldwide after his death until production was terminated in 2012. More recently, but still in current production is *Spy vs Spy*, an irregular contribution to the American *MAD Magazine* created in 1961 by Antonio Cothias.

The allure of these predominantly humorous short-form narratives may be their unhindered readability and bite-sized entertainment. At least in the humour genre, wordless image sequences may allow only such vague stories, but in longer or more dramatical contexts the wordless display can add to the reader's immersion into the narrative as they are made to work harder to decode the message, encouraging a ludic engagement. Just as in cinema, silent passages in otherwise verbose comics may be used to add tension and heighten the attention of the audience.

Ill. 2.3: Henning Dahl Mikkelsen, Ferd'nand *(published daily 1937-2012).*

Outside of the strict definitions imposed on the current chapter, parallel developments to the modern comics such as the woodcut novels of Frans Masereel and Lynd Ward were executed with as great pathos as earnestness. Those interbellum works employ only one image per page, of course, and as such cannot be held up in direct comparison to sequential images, but their influence is palpable in much later silent comics by Peter Kuper, Eric Drooker, Martin Tom Dieck, Knut Larsson and many more. What ambiguities the absence of expository text may leave in wordless comics are compensated for by the reader's increased engagement with the work. However, as comics reading tends to follow the culturally predisposed reading

direction of *text* (eg., Western comics and Japanese manga are read in mirrored fashions to each other), would eliminating the written component not also discourage a strictly linear reading of the comics themselves? Looking back to Ill. 2.2, why else would E. O. Plauen feel the need to number the panels of his wordless comics? Or is, for instance, the front and back cover of a printed book enough to invoke in the reader the pre-learned, diagonal reading of a page?

Sequential narrative

Although some of Strömberg's sources cite the comics *strip* as comics' most elementary unit[67], from the most common defining criteria of *sequential* or *juxtaposed* images it is reasonable to assume that the smallest amount of images required to constitute comics is two. In the juxtaposition or, as proposed when summarizing *Understanding Comics*, the *montage* of two or more images, McCloud emphasizes the cellular membrane that separate them, the in-between panels that is demotically known as the *gutter*. It is the cognitive act of bridging that gutter that he calls *closure*; the capacity of connecting two dots into a line elevated into meaning-making through juxtaposition. As shown in ill. 2.1, he identifies six individual modes of transitions between panels with progressively increasing difficulty of achieving closure, culminating in 'the *non-sequitur,* which offers no logical relationship between panels *whatsoever!* This *last* category suggests an interesting *question*. Is it possible for *any* sequence of panels to be *totally unrelated* to each other?[all emphases in original]'[68]

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67   Blackbeard and Sabin, both quoted in Strömberg, 2003, pp. 74-5.

68   McCloud, 1993, pp. 72-3.
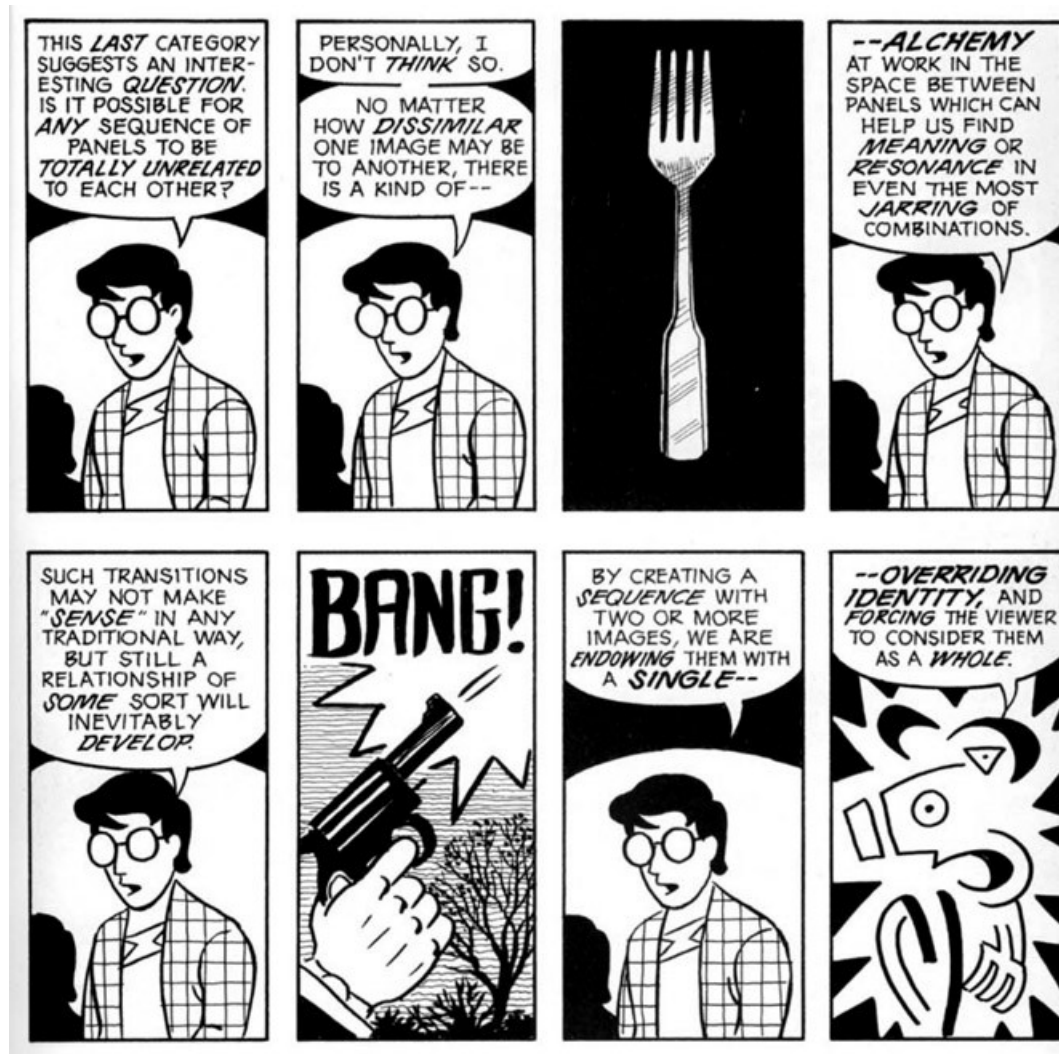
Ill. 2.4: McCloud debates himself and random objects whether he acknowledges his own 'non-sequitur' transition. Excerpt of McCloud (1993), p. 73.

While McCloud professes not to believe so, as the argument progresses, the image sequence is intermittently disrupted by single images out of context (a fork, a close-up of a handgun being fired) to visually emphasize his claims (Ill. 2.4). While the petulantly titled 'non-sequitur' is certainly at the extreme end of montage theory, McCloud attributes only a token value to its narrative applications at the same time as he poses visual strawman rhetorics to demonstrate how silly the concept is. What we see at work here is the collapse of McCloud's ability to explain a part of comics' expressive potential with the linear model of narrative which he champions, and rather than revising that model accordingly, even in a sequel book thirteen years later he still persists in summarily disposing of it as the domain of experimental

comics, 'the occasional nonsensical gag in *otherwise rational* stories' (emphasis added).[69] Of course, if all you have is a hammer, a screw or a wingnut must look like peculiar nails indeed, and in his later book McCloud draws himself as a metronome cyclops to show just how odd he finds them.

Ill. 2.5: McCloud's 'Non Sequitur' closure type (detail of closure typology from McCloud, Making Comics, *2006, p. 17.*

We leave McCloud here for the moment: To demonstrate the flexibility of montage as the cognitive adhesive enabling sequential reading of juxtaposed image pairs, there is no need to stray into experimental comics – that is, not outside the conservative domain of North American superhero comics. The narrative of *Watchmen* consists of many concurrent threads woven together into an intricate pattern, what Groensteen calls *braiding*, but the internal dialogue of one character in particular raises the stake in terms of formal self-reflectivity. The transcendent perceptions of Dr Manhattan allow him to see all of his own story simultaneously, depicted as associative leaps between seemingly random points of time in the present, past and future (Ill. 2.6). Alan Moore, the author of *Watchmen*, has stated in interviews [70] that this heightened viewpoint is meant to reflect not only the model of time

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69   S. McCloud, *Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga and Graphic Novels*, New York, Harper, 2006, p. 17.

70   D. Whiston, D. Russell and A. Fruish, 'The Craft – an interview with Alan Moore', *Engine Comics* 2002 [website], archived from the original at https://web.archive.org/web/20060410231042/%20http://enginecomics.co.uk/interviews/jan05/alanmoore.htm (accessed 31 June, 2018).

proposed by physicist Stephen Hawking (that the entirety of time and space can be imagined in a shape 'like a rugby ball' with the Big Bang and Big Crunch at either pointed end[71]), but also the simultaneity of the entire comic within the physical book covers. The extratemporal stream of consciousness allows for creative flashbacks in any direction, but it also potentially places Dr Manhattan in the same panoptic position as the reader[72] – able to flip back and forth through the pages of the book, but also up or down, left or right to any adjacent panel.

Ill. 2.6: simultaneous perception of events. Chapter 4, pages 1 and 25 from Alan Moore & Dave Gibbons, Watchmen (1986).

Throughout the work, employing a *leitmotif* of recurring allusions to the bloodied smiley badge that appears in the first and last panels of the book, Moore and artist Dave Gibbons also invite a more intuitive, multi-linear reading, disregarding the progression of the plot strands and for all intents and purposes allowing the reader to assume the perspective of Dr

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71   Whiston, Russell and Fruish, 2002.

72   M. Bernard and J. B. Carter, 'Alan Moore and the Graphic Novel: Confronting the Fourth Dimension' in *ImageTexT*, Vol. 1 no. 2, Fall, 2004, paragraph 16, http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v1_2/carter/index.shtml (accessed 20 March 2017)

Manhattan and skip from one occurrence of injured faces to another. In other words, the recurrent motifs become nodes in an associative network quite identical to the general arthrology proposed by Groensteen, wherein distant panels connect *in absentia* through the paged multiframe to present, visible ones. In this manner, analogous visual similitude (as well as textual cues) become landmarks to revisit on the route from start to finish, begging the question if the structure of *Watchmen* or of any comics might share features with cartography and mapping as well as with other network models, a question that will be revisited in chapter 4, exploring alternate reading modes.

More specific to the *topos* depicted within the panels than to its *spatio* is Richard McGuire's 1989 short comic, *Here* [73]. Originally spanning six comics pages, the work was later developed into an installation art piece, and in 2015 further expanded into a 304-page book. In Dr Manhattan-fashion, *Here* skip back and forth along a span of billions of years, but with a fixed perspective on the same place on planet Earth which, for the majority of the narrative, is the site of a living room corner in what appears to be a middle class home.

Ill. 2.7: The wealth of events in a single corner of space throughout time. Richard McGuire, 'Here' (in RAW Magazine vol. 2, #1, 1989), pp. 1-2

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73   R. McGuire, 'Here', in *Raw Magazine,* vol. 2, #1, New York, Raw Books & Graphics, 1989.

Through inserted panels-within-panels, fragments of past and future interject to comment on the surrounding panel or panels, creating a visual polyphony from changing generations of inhabitants of the house, of menial chores and childbirth, and ultimately of the rich history of a single spot in the universe. Because of the fragmented chronology, *Here* can truly be read in any which direction to a factor that *Watchmen* cannot match, and in ways that are difficult to achieve in any other form or modus: Reviewing the extended book version for the *New York Times,* one critic noted that 'novels and movies are handicapped in their presentation of simultaneity by the fact that they are shackled to time themselves, in the physical unfolding of their narratives. […] In 'Here,' McGuire has introduced a third dimension to the flat page.'[74] Arguably, he has also dissolved the monodirectional passage of time, to the extent that that is translatable into the reading order of a comics page, expanding the functional model of 'comics' from that of sequential beads on a string to one of nodes on a multidirectional, sprawling network.

What *Watchmen* and *Here* both achieve in their atomization of linear time is an assertion of the simultaneous, manifold book form wherein they appeared and, in that gesture, renouncing the sequential paradigm inherited from Muybridge while sending the reader on a scavenger hunt back and forth within the multiplex pages to find the analogous path across the work, not through it.

Representational art

McCloud briefly explores the possibility, if not the potential, of non-figurative expressive qualities available to comics artists[75], but chooses to counterpoint it with a fallow revue of comics history and of the shorthand, dubbed *indotherms* and *emanata* by cartoonist Mort Walker[76], that emerged within the comics panel to suggest movement, smell, and emotive emphasis in the picture. Here, the foundation for Cohn's later research into visual language is laid out: 'Not really a *picture* anymore, these lines are more a *visual metaphor* – a **symbol**.

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74   L. Sante, 'Richard McGuire's 'Here'', in *New York Times*' *Sunday Book Review* (12 October 2015). https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/18/books/review/richard-mcguires-here.html (accessed 24 February 2018)

75   in *Understanding Comics* ch. 5, pp. 118-37

76   M. Walker, *Lexicon of Comicana,* Port Chester, Comicana Books, 1980. Originally intended as a satire upon reference books, several of Walker's faux-technical terms featured within have since entered craft jargon and parlance.

And symbols are the basis of **language**.'[77] (emphasis in original). The chapter ends on the suggestion that comics, in their essential materiality being (ink) marks on paper, rely entirely on the co-creative ability of the reader to infuse meaning and sensation into them, illustrated by a sequence of increasingly enlarged details from comics images that are ultimately abstract calligraphic shapes. During that sequence, McCloud's narrator avatar is gradually consumed by the black background, part symbolic death of the author, part breakdown of the (linear, representative) narrative that he never explicitly articulates as a constituent of comics but which is implied to be so at every turn.

Literally in the dark by the end of the chapter, McCloud never returns to the suggested co-creative potential in this or his following works. Like the comics field he operates within he is at most capable of *mirroring* the parallel histories of comics and 20th Century art, not of *intellectually reflecting upon* their potential cross-pollination. The sociocultural perception of comics, in both cases, prohibit non-narrative, non-representation or non-linearity from entering the form, as does the very entertainment features of the industrial mainstream: Telling a story within that regime, one must depict a causal, linear progression of events, on which builds the most basic narrative formula of *beginning – middle – ending*, predicated upon some semblance to real-world counterparts of the elements depicted. Furthermore, similitude to the narrative tropes of film (live action or animation) has been encouraged in mimicry and appellation of the more popular mass medium, locking comics into visual fealty to cinematic prototypes. Again, the synergic relation between market perceptions of audience demands, and the steady supply of the industrial production complex is shown to reinforce a single avenue of narrative into a closed ecosystem insulated from the developments of other art forms.

Situating the dogma of representational art firmly within the sociocultural/industrial feedback loop, other supposedly defining criteria follow in its path, such as that of a recurring character which, in the sense of a main character featured in a series of stories, constitutes the establishment of a marketable franchise. Even in the context of narrative comics and single comics narratives, Groensteen demonstrates in a series of arguments that the recurring

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77   McCloud, 1993, p. 128.

character is untenable as a definitive characteristic of comics, perhaps most devastatingly in the verifiable proposal that no character need feature in a narrative at all.[78]

Interpretation

The purpose of this chapter has been to *dissolve* accepted definitions of comics to arrive at the widest possible working definition. The next chapters, dealing with phenomena marginal, adjacent, and/or tangential to comics, will continue the trajectory toward eventually *resolving* the findings into a final proposal for an expanded view on comics as an art form. We will therefore do well to separate, like Neil Cohn, the sociocultural aspects from the formal ones.

As the previous, analytical section has sought to show, many of the assumptions made about the comics form are in fact highly apocryphal: The combination of word and image is far too pervasive in contemporary visual culture to constitute a formal criterion of defining comics – one would have to include subtitled film or television into the category, along with poster art, captioned internet photo memes, traffic signage employing iconography and text simultaneously – whereas sequential narrative and, in turn, the representational art peculiar to comics hinge to a great extent on an entertainment narrative paradigm.

By association, these criteria reflect not intrinsically formal limitations but intermediate dictates either by a) the development of (re)production methods over the 20th century or b) commercial, market and industry demands, as outlined in chapter 1, amputating the film strip model into comics strips and contorting it onto series of pages. As an example that the sequential reading schema is pre-learned and culturally predicated, when *The Health Choices Book*[79], an educational comic book, was distributed to Ugandan primary school children entirely unfamiliar with the form, one developer of the comics relates that the children 'didn't even know which order to read the comics in. They told us, 'Please put arrows [indicating the reading order] because we don't know where to go from here''.[80]

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78   Groensteen, 2007, p. 15-7.

79   Informed Health Choices Group, *The Health Choices Book: Learning to think carefully about treatments. A health science book for primary school children,* Oslo, Norwegian Institute of Public Health, 2016. https://www.informedhealthchoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/IHC-V3-Teachers-guide_with-cover_Nov2016_lowres.pdf (accessed 15 June, 2018)

80   Allen Nsangi, speaking at 00.16.55-00.17.12 in 'You Can Handle the Truth', *The Documentary*, [podcast], BBC World Service, 10 June 2018, https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3csxgn3 (accessed 12 June 2018).

In their focus on those surface cicatrices, attempted delineations of 'comics' turn description of the mass medial and the industrially reproduced cultural qualia of existing comics into prescription for the form, enforcing the resistance to formal creativity within the comics industries. Where McCloud ostensibly provides a generously broad phrasing ('Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.'), he ultimately appears too obliged to extended linear narrative and the representational art which sustains it to seriously consider or possibly imagine earnest ventures into abstract comics – and much less so the 'non sequitur' mode of juxtaposition that jeopardizes his custom version of montage, tellingly named 'closure' which, in a medical sense of the word, indicates 'the perception of incomplete figures or situations as though complete by ignoring the missing parts or by compensating for them by projection based on past experience'[81] The term would apply as neatly to McCloud's preferences toward the sociocultural predicates of comics over their formal potentials.

Cohn, on the other hand, astutely separates out those sociocultural tropes from the outset in order to elucidate what he calls the 'Visual Language' (capitalization in original) used in comics – a linguistic mode which he singularly pursues to the point of neglecting the experimental comics periphery that may utilize multi-directional navigation modes or ambiguous image juxtapositions. Ironically, as a consequence of his sharp delineation of this visual language, his ground research is entirely based on the empirical visual phenomenon of comics, which historically has been cultivated in the image of the sociocultural/industrial gestures he seeks to eliminate. A grammar, for obvious reasons, must systematize the rules of a language based on empirical linguistic data, on how the language 'is spoke [sic]', but if the sample range is too narrow the grammar may prove to only index one dialect. Inversely, not all our linguistic knowledge comes from grammatical sentence construction; the hexameters of ancient Roman poetry provides an indication of the inflexions and stresses of vernacular spoken Latin of the time it was written, with which the grammar itself is little help. Similarly, due to the parameters limiting Cohn's work and the extent that his focus serves to assert the flowing-text structure of comics sequences, it is only of occasional import to the subject of this thesis.

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81   'Closure' in: *Merriam-Webster.com*. Web resource. Accessed 8 July, 2018. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/closure.

Similar to the tacit biases of McCloud and Cohn, the multiple definitions collectively discussed by Strömberg correspond implicitly with the intertwined, external indicators of sociocultural perceptions of and industrial/commercial prescriptions upon comics – but not least their inferred conventions of linear narrative and representational art – most pronouncedly in the cited 'outlier' case of Göran Ribe's definition which can be wholly attributed to sociocultural artefacts. A notable exception is Rodolphe Töpffer, predating the commodification of comics by at least half a century, who stays relatively neutral on the matters:

> The drawings without their text would only have a vague meaning; the text without the drawings, would have no meaning at all. The combination of the two makes up a kind of novel, all the more unique in that it is no more like a novel than it is like anything else.[82]

What can be interpreted from this ambivalent passage is that a) although Töpffer emphasizes the *combination* of word and image, he considers the image component slightly more capable of conveying meaning on its own than words (that is, were the words and images in his books divorced to stand on their own); and b) attempting to describe his work in terms of pre-existing forms, he seems to grasp at the novel, not because he considers the two phenomena more alike than 'anything else'(!), but presumably because his comics-before-comics were eventually committed to print and bound in book form as would a novel. Benefiting from a far more established practice as well as theory surrounding comics than Töpffer did, Groensteen concludes that – to allow for theoretically conceivable developments both technological and formal – 'one must recognize the relational play of a plurality of interdependent images as the unique ontological foundation of comics'[83], but opines that 'simply align[ing] images, even interdependently' does not a comic make.

But is it Art?

Of course, as in evolutionary science, no orthogenesis exists that dictates identical or simultaneous developmental processes within all art forms, nor is this dissection of comics definitions meant to indicate that, if not for the workings of evil industrial empires, comics

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82   Quoted in Strömberg, 2003, p. 77 from J. Robinson, *The Comics – An Illustrated History of Comic Strip Art* (1974), p. 18. Transl. Robinson from R. Töpffer, *Essai de Physiognomie* (1845), no page citation provided.

83   Groensteen, 2007, p. 17.

would or should have expanded into abstract and conceptual modes by the 1950s. The point of interest is that they appear to have done so by the early 21st Century. Neither should the demotion of some criteria previously considered defining to comics in this thesis be interpreted as their *preclusion* from the art form, rather that they not be seen as constituent to it. When in the previous section comics are described as insulated from the concurrent movements of fine art, it should be emphasized that that separation did not prevent the implementation of formal traits of comics, such as serial multiplicity and juxtaposition, into contemporary art works. Robert Rauschenberg's *combines* might be described 'simply' as *interdependently aligned images.* Cy Twombly produced series of works combining asemic writing and abstract images. A substantial part of Sol Lewitt's œuvre consists of *sequential or serial images* of what may, in the widest sense, be considered *recurring, identifiable characters.*

So imprinted with sociocultural factors are we that the site of encounter, here a museum or gallery rather than a printed page, may codetermine whether those are seen as or considered comics.

Summary

This chapter has dissected the formal definitions discussed in Strömberg's *Vad är Tecknade Serier?,* with special attention to the definitions provided in McCloud's *Understanding Comics,* Cohn's *The Visual Language of Comics,* and Groensteen's *The System of Comics.* Of the criteria presented most frequently in Strömberg's survey, those of text-image integration, sequential narrative, and representational art were critically analyzed and found to be lacking in their definitive characteristics.

Even traditional comics, employing linear reading schemas inherited from flowing text, buckle under the structure that contradicts the simultaneity of multiple images juxtaposed on a page or on a double-page spread, or within the whole of any given work of comics. Sequentially, a panel must be seen or read in the context of the one(s) immediately preceding it, *and* the one(s) to follow, in an on-going process of meaning-making montage. However, most comics panels are not displayed daisy-chained in a linear progression (such as the comic strip), but exist in a network structure (i.e., the comics *page* and, in a larger context, the totality of the comic) that creates juxtapositions not only in a singular dimension but to all

adjacent panels – and, on an image content level, may reflect and connect to other images elsewhere in the work. The 'z-path' reading schema (Ill. 1.2) imposed on comics is based on convention, however: one does not necessarily approach similar graphical arrangements in the same way; a crossword puzzle, for instance, consists of a grid morphologically similar to a comics page layout, but requires a two-dimensionally combinatorial model to be understood, let alone solved.

CHAPTER 3: FERTILE DISSOLUTION ON THE PERIPHERY

It is important to note, particularly in relation to the critique directed at the industrial entertainment complex in chapter 1 and intermittently onward, the significant emergence of affordable home imaging technologies as coincidental to the surge of formal experimentation on the periphery of comics: Whereas many poetry and abstract comics of the last decade would not have been technically reproducible in the comic books of the preceding century, the ready availability of photo editing software and office scanners served as a factor in democratizing the (re)productive means. As already in the latter 1980s advances in printing technology had allowed for an increase in high definition photographic reproduction of painted or even mixed-media artwork – or more to the point, such printing techniques had existed for decades but were only then considered cheap enough for comics production – as well as subtler art than the heavy black outlines and limited colour palette defined by low-cost printing methods of the 1930s and dutifully implemented for over half a century since. The 'comics style' suffered an unprecedented encroachment on its own domain by the appearance of works such as Lorenzo Mattotti's *Fires* (1986) or Bill Sienkiewicz' *Stray Toasters* (1988) which are clearly produced from a fine art sensibility as well as in a comics vein. Not a decade later, the means to scan and digitally prepare similarly intricate and/or nuanced artwork for print production was within the financial reach of the common person, and soon, with the increased pervasiveness of internet access, an equally inexpensive distribution channel was launched that (initially) appeared to eliminate printing altogether. In other words, the proliferation of tools enabling wider dissemination of experimental comics independently of traditional mass production should be considered only initially as the means of increased visibility for a pre-existing niche field. Subsequent to that visibility, and more importantly, a *milieu* enabled by online discovery and communication has come to serve as a collegial, encouraging network connecting geographically distant and formally peripheral creators.

Poetry comics

Although the phenomenon of poetry comics is situated on the margins of conventional mainstream comics, they maintain the visual-verbal, sequential dogma familiar from that main stratum. What primarily offsets them from it, however, is how the often ambiguous interplay

between text and image juxtaposes the two counter-intuitively (or *precisely* intuitively in the artist's private frame of reference) for poetic purposes of enhancing the meaning of either element. In itself a renegade form intent on different modes of comics expression, comics poetry has been described as '[t]he images, the words, the structure, the rhythm, the page, all of it is used together to create [...] comics in a poetic register.'[84] Works in this mode of *uncomics* include *Q* by Aidan Koch, Ill. 3.1, in which the dissolution of characters reflect that of language to their individual constituents, floating on the naked paper like shipwrecked passengers.

Ill. 3.1: Aidan Koch, Q, Floating World Comics, 2012

Following work by literary theorist Brian McHale[85], artist/scholar Tamryn Bennett proposes *segmentivity* as a model to supplement and improve on the scorned concept of sequentiality in

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84   D. Badman, 'Comics Poetry, Poetry Comics, Graphic Poems'. *The Hooded Utilitarian*, [website], August 30, 2012 http://www.hoodedutilitarian.com/2012/08/comics-poetry-poetry-comics-graphic-poems/ (accessed 22 October 2016)

85   McHale, 2010, pp. 27-48.

poetry comics.[86] Centring her argumentation around the marginal field of comics poetry, Bennett positions herself against (linear) narrative in comics applying the concept of segmentivity to comics. Adapted from a model for interpreting poetry proposed by Rachel Blau duPlessis who argues that poetry at its core is characterised by the 'gaps and leaps' within the individual poem – line breaks, rhythm and punctuation creating irreducible segments in the text.[87] Bennett argues that the same is the case with comics, narrative or not: that comics are constituted to the same degree by the spaces between and around the panels as by the panels themselves:

> Comics, like poetry, concentrate on the aesthetic audio-visual arrangement of segments whereas other literary forms are more concerned with syntax than spatial composition. […] Akin to poetry, comics are formed by consistent use of visual and verbal segments and spaces.[88]

As Bennett suggests, gaps and cæsuræ could be the base elements of any comics – what within film studies is referred to as *constituent blanks* and within museology as *extra-visual leaps* – adding even more emphasis on the in-between than Scott McCloud's *closure* theories. Furthermore, Bennett here equates comics to a form of written language that would seem to fall outside of Cohn's linguistic model in table 2 and into more intuitive visual modes of expression.

Abstract comics

More radically, abstract comics represent a rejection of the representative conventions and sociocultural connotations of comics and, on a deeper, formal level, an exploration of the communicative/navigational modes available to practitioners not limited to the commercial, industrial tropes and style that those dictate. By drawing on art forms less directly commandeered by industries and marketers, those emerging phenomena, in effect, belatedly allow comics to fast forward into post-modernity on a formal level.

Having disseminated a number of sociocultural and formal perceptions of comics, and reviewed several accepted definitions of the form, it is time to finally turn our attention to the corresponding iconoclasm. To the casual observer, abstract comics may seem a mere oddity in

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86   T. Bennett, 'Comics Poetry: The Art of the Possible', 2014.

87   Quoted in T. Bennett, 'Comics Poetry: Beyond 'Sequential Art'', p. 110.

88   T. Bennett, 'Comics Poetry: Beyond 'Sequential Art'', p. 108

the shadow of comics as they are generally perceived, but the phenomenon has gained impetus within the avant-garde in the last decade. Exactly what is it that abstraction within comics can offer that traditional comics images can not, and how?

Abstract comics, it must be added, is here not investigated or interpreted in terms of their individual visual features (or lack thereof), but as representatives of a larger phenomenon or movement that turns away from the accretion of sociocultural sediment that has come to represent the general form of comics. In its place, abstract comics artists investigate and reflect, retrospectively, upon the developments in fine arts that industrial comics have neglected throughout the majority of the 20th Century. In doing so, the abstract comics movement offers a filter through which to sift a wider understanding of the potential applications and interpretations pertaining to that form.

Abstract Comics: The Anthology (2009)
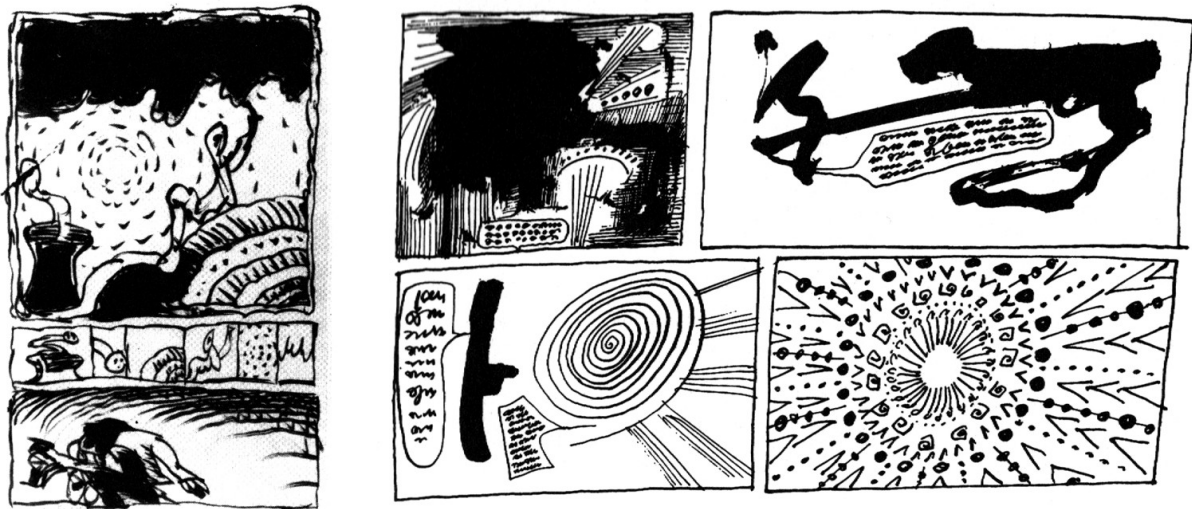
Ill. 3.2: Pierre Alechinsky (1977, left), and Saul Steinberg, from Labyrinth *(1966, right).*

In describing abstract comics, there is probably no better place to begin than *Abstract comics – the anthology*[89]. In his introduction, editor Andrei Molotiu expands an almost self-evident definition of 'sequential art consisting exclusively of abstract imagery' to include 'comics that contain some representational elements, as long as those elements do not cohere into a narrative or even into a unified narrative space' – noting a parallel to the manner in which abstract film is defined. However, where most of the forty-three contributors delight in

89   A. Molotiu (ed.), *Abstract Comics: The Anthology*, Seattle, Fantagraphics Books, 2009.

making comics equivalent to Stan Brakhage's most abrasive experimental short films, Molotiu in his wording seems beholden to McCloud's deprecatory *non sequitur*-label; perhaps to be able to include underground comics veteran Robert Crumb's 1967 *Abstract Expressionist Ultra Super Modernistic Comics* which certainly fits that category. Given the dramatic divergence that abstract comics represent, and particularly with this publication, in its approach to and reflection on fine arts over generic comics, that inclusion appears strange: Crumb's comic reads like an anti-intellectual critique of modern art, whereas a few the other featured artists work earnestly in a mode similar to abstract expressionism (like Casey Camp, John Hankiewicz or Alexey Sokolin), and almost all – including Molotiu himself – contribute work that must be considered modern, if not modern*ist.*

Ill. 3.3: Warren Craghead, double page spread from 'Une Calligramme', in Abstract Comics: The Anthology*, 2009.*

Molotiu may hint at an answer to that as he goes on to pluck from the œuvres of fine artists such as Lissitzky, Kandinsky and de Kooning examples of comics-like signs, and even of sequential narrative. Certainly, Lissitzky's Proun book *About Two Squares* (1922) ticks the boxes of the basic definition offered by Molotiu, as do the Steinberg and Alechinsky pictures

presented in Ill. 3.2. Abstract comics, in this perspective, can be viewed as the field where comics and contemporary arts cautiously approach each other – if not even intersect or cross-pollinate. Richard Hahn produces a series of multipanel watercolours that are half Klee, half LeWitt, mixing the modular, late 1920s colour compositions of the former with the systematic progression of the latter; elsewhere, Warren Craghead (Ill. 3.3) provides a canny visual essay in the development in Cubism, narrated in the colour schemes of its stages, and using a flow and ebb of layout fragmentation to represent the progression toward the movement's mature, synthetic stage.

Ill. 3.4: Gary Panter, 'Mr Mxyzptlk', in Abstract Comics: The Anthology, *2009.*

Another, more useful informal criterion that might be added to the book's description of abstract comics is that abstract comics are wordless – though not spelled out in the

introduction, the contents speak for themselves; apart from an occasional title or caption, none of the contributions in the anthology utilise text in a way as to sustain meaning. A few, such as Gary Panter (Ill. 3.4), take the abstraction into the sphere of the word balloons and fill them with nonsensical words – as does Crumb – or, like Janusz Jaworski, with asemic writing (i.e., writing without semantic content); others treat balloons as yet another image plane. Most simply abstain from text altogether, contending to let the images speak for themselves.

The collapse of linear narrative

The strategy of excluding text only emphasizes the staunchly non-narrative attitude of the works presented in the anthology, and in abstract comics as a whole: Wordless comics engage the reader on a pre-verbal level; abstraction kicks them in the teeth, and any narrative would soften the blow. Comics scholar Jan Baetens puts it somewhat more peacefully; 'abstract comics melt in the air when narrative walks in – and vice versa.'[90] Text, as we have seen, is one determining factor in imposing a linear reading and reading *direction* on comics; representational art is another, leading and guiding the eye around the page; in removing those most familiar signifiers of the comic form, we are left with the bare scaffolding, the panels now filled with inscrutable abstraction, which still invoke an instinctual reading reflex.

As readers, we are preconditioned to identify familiar patterns and structures[91], and only failing that do we go exploring for other domains of meaning-making. Refusing their readers both representational images, discernible narrative and anything but the most essential units of comics, the panels that combine to form a page unit, abstract comics pose a challenge of interpretation that may intrigue or infuriate the reader; a puzzle that does not necessarily hold the key to its own solution. If, as visual culture theorist W. J. T. Mitchell puts it, abstract pictures are pictures that do not want to be pictures[92], then what order of self-image does a comic perform when it neither displays representational elements nor a straightforward narrative? Defining itself in the negative, or absence, of the connoted sociocultural concept of comics, it foregrounds the structure and invisible support to encourage new reading patterns. In their desire not to be comics (in the broadest sense of the word; a visual phenomenon

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90 Baetens, 2011, pp. 94-113.

91 Baetens, 2011, p. 95.

92 W. J. T. Mitchell, *What do pictures want?: The lives and loves of images*. University of Chicago Press, 2005, p. 44.

inextricably tied to commercial art and the entertainment industry), abstract comics foremost reject the basic conventions of the entertainment complex – genre, visual style, and traditional narrative – in order to explore other modes of expression and exploration within the scaffolding of comics page and panels.

Order, says Michel Foucault in his preface to *The Order of Things*, is the outwardly expressed, innate syntactic law under which things (let us say *images* or *panels*) associate *with* each other[93], by degrees of similarity; whereas the *heterotopia*, a state of complete dissociation between things, disturb the viewer because it undermines that network that binds our concepts of the world[94]. Yet, he hints, 'it is only in the blank spaces of this grid that order manifests itself'[95]. In that sense, abstract comics, defined in reaction to, and in the distinct absence of the tics and trappings that normally identify comics, chart instead the *terra incognita* of the comics map, and make visible the in-between where *draconis sunt*, or rather, where the reader's associative interpretation takes precedent over authorial control.

Interlude: This space intentionally left blank
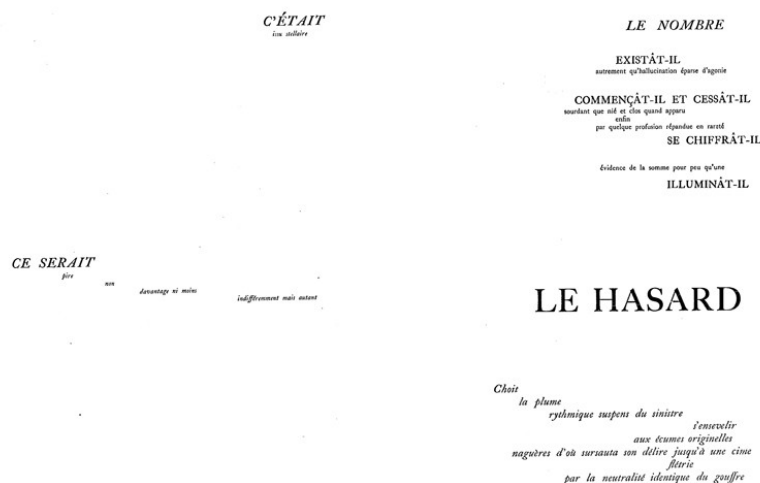
Ill. 3.5: Double page spread from Stéphane Mallarmé, Un Coup des Dés *(1914).*

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93   M. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, London, Routledge, 2002 (1966), p. xxi.

94   Foucault, 2002 (1966), p. xix.

95   Foucault, 2002 (1966), p. xxi.

Foucault continues to describe 'a domain which, even though its role is mainly an intermediary one, is nonetheless fundamental'[96] as well as both more confused and obscure, he estimates that it will elude facile analysis. Even so, he asserts that space as the location where a culture may cast off the prevalent orders, realizing that they 'perhaps [are] not the only possibl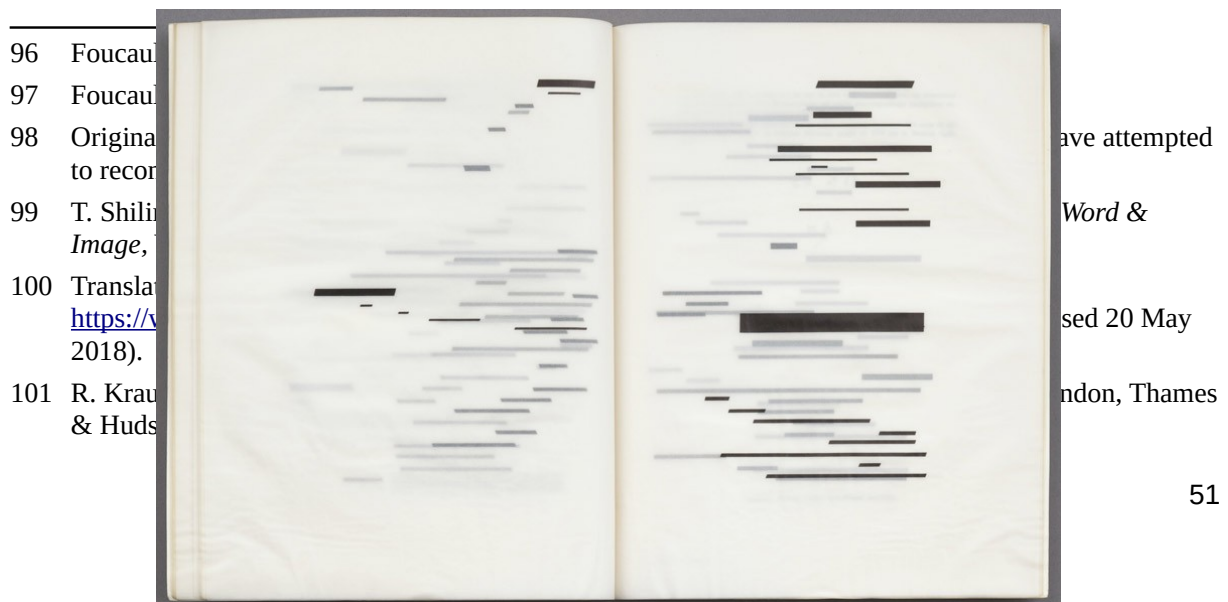e ones or the best ones[97]. Recognizing that comics were probably not at the front of Foucault's thoughts as he wrote *The Order of Things,* the sentiment that intermediary blank space can be considered a manifest site of cultural change may still be applied to visual art forms, such as to the gutter in comics. For instance, Symbolist poet Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*[98] (Ill. 3.5): A free verse and an experiment in typographic form, the twenty pages long poem makes ample use of white negative space as a vessel for meaning to convey silence and dispersion, and to evoke, in Mallarmé's sensibility, chromatic associations to sea froth, ship's sails, and glaciers[99]. The associative intent is made clear in the author's preface:

> Imagination flowers and vanishes, swiftly, following the flow of the writing, round the fragmentary stations of a capitalised phrase introduced by and extended from the title. Everything takes place, in sections, by supposition; narrative is avoided.[100]

The blank page 'intervenes', Mallarmé says, as an image of itself rather than as a vacuous support, transposing the poem from an act of sequential writing into a *simultaneous* one of seeing[101]. Artist Marcel Broodthaers formalized that operation through transfiguration in 1969 with his work *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard. Image* (Ill. 3.6), in which all verse lines are replaced by corresponding blacked-out lines, like a redacted intelligence document. Not a mere defacement of the original, all the while that Broodthaers erases the text of the

96   Foucau
97   Foucau
98   Origina   ave attempted
     to recor
99   T. Shili   *Word &*
     Image,
100 Transla
     https://v   sed 20 May
     2018).
101 R. Krau   ndon, Thames
     & Huds

Ill. 3.6: Marcel Broodthaers, Un Coup des Dés - IMAGE (1969).

verse, he emphatically underlines the blank spaces of the page – that *modern space* which he attributed Mallarmé with 'unwittingly inventing'[102] in his original iteration of *Un coup de dés*.

The blank page must then be considered not just as the raw material on which the text of a book or the panels of a comic are imprinted, nor as ellipses within those prints, but as a conceptual entity or structure of its own which is created from the process of *being* imprinted or marked, and from the process of those marks being perceived by a reader/viewer. The blanks become evident when they interrupt or impede the sequential reading of the marks, as in Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés*, and their presence is foregrounded when the marks that define them lose or refuse to perform their ability to convey meaning. Correspondingly, the apparent rejection of narrative or representational meaning in abstract comics should be seen rather as an embrace by the verbal or pictorial contingent of the blank, simultaneous space that engulfs it – the in-between where, as McCloud suggests, *closure*, i.e., *montage* happens – the blank spaces in the grid.

Remodelling theory

Fresh modes of expression – and liberation from restrictive systems as Foucault points out – also challenge the theoretical frameworks normally used to interpret and analyse comics. Attempts at viewing comics through a Peircean framework, relying on identifiable story-structures, proved insufficient for the analysis of non-narrative comics[103], and Baetens sees abstraction in comics as cause for 'a critical rethinking of the medium,' to the point that 'without accounting for these mechanisms of abstraction, it will be impossible to account for the full scope and nature of comics.'[104] In doing away with narrative, abstract comics are simultaneously unfettered from linearity and sequence, the latter of which has been a defining trait of comics for the better part of a century – including Molotiu's initial description of the phenomenon. Later, he has revised his assessment to include that abstract comics 'can model

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102 Quoted in Krauss, 2000, p. 51.

103 A. Magnussen, 'The Semiotics of C. S. Peirce as a Theoretical Framework for the Understanding of Comics', in A. Magnussen and H.-C. Christiansen (eds.), *Comics & Culture: Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics*, Copenhagen, Museum Tusculanum Press, 2000, p. 199.

104 Baetens, 2011, p. 104.

complex systems. Within the idealized, pre-existing grid, the formation of a comic necessarily involves differentiation and symmetry breaking'[105].

Agreeing with Baetens that abstraction demands a reassessment of comics, one may conclude that it is not merely abstract comics which have evolved away from the main branch of the form to become its own entity, but that we need to reevaluate the way we understand comics correspondingly to perceive it as a supercategory able to include work that is abstract on both a visual and narrative level, and adjust our definitions of it accordingly. For that purpose, the initial questions to be asked is *why* and *how* readers engage with this recalcitrant phenomenon, answers to which may be found in dialogue with other modes of expression equally resistant to facile interpretation. One such is the *ergodic literature*[106] first described by Espen J. Aarseth as requiring 'nontrivial effort' for the reader to navigate the text[107], a characterization that can be transposed with little effort onto poetry and abstract comics. A component of the multi-linear, participatory c*ybertext* concept which is Aarseth's primary concern, ergodic literature presents itself as a puzzle or cypher to be decoded, providing a challenge that balances sustained tension and excitement while also in its design displaying the 'hidden principles' of its possible solution[108]: again, features that abound in the peripheral comics investigated here. In the sense that the ergodic text prompts cognitive expenditure to find meaning in the conundrum, it is highly ludic in character, further implicating the reader's interpretation into the active creative process as *play* – Aarseth refers to the participant user in terms of the *reader as player,* but for the context of non-representational, wordless comics they might be more aptly considered a *viewer as decoder* – implying that the innate human desire to solve apparently inscrutable puzzles spurs a playful engagement with ergodic works.

Aarseth's broader construct of the cybertext might then merit a similar inspection for concepts applicable to the expansive theoretical apparatus being assembled. Despite the prefix, cybertexts are not inherently tied to electronic media in the author's understanding, but posits 'the intricacies of the medium as an integral part of the literary exchange'[109]. That is, that the

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105 A. Molotiu, 'Abstract comics and system theory', talk given at the San Diego Comic Arts Conference, 2011, http://abstractcomics.blogspot.com/2012/12/abstract-comics-and-systems-theory-talk.html (accessed on 13 May 2018).

106 Aarseth, 1997.

107 Aarseth, 1997, p. 1.

108 Aarseth, 1997, p. 179.

109 Aarseth, 1997, p. 1.

organization of the text (which will here be considered interchangeable with configurations of
a multiframe) is interdependent with the material support in facilitating the
reader/viewer/player's co-creative reception – or, appropriating Groensteen's terms, that the
(page) layout of the *breakdown* directs the viewer's interpretive efforts to assign meaning to
the work. At this point the terms of the cybertext seem perfectly accorded to those
progressively ascribed to comics in this thesis; however, because Aarseth also includes
interactive and multi-linear phenomena akin to computer games in his subject, a second visual
model is required to supplement the narrative *line.*

Conjuring a mental image of the cybertext as a *labyrinth* through which the reader passes, he
subdivides that into *unicursal* and *multicursal* (i.e., forked) models – the linear, folded path
and the maze. Although rejecting the notion of a third, network model in which all nodes are
potentially interconnectible, on the ground that it causes any delineation of restraint inherent
in the other models to fall away,[110] Aarseth does later infer from the mental leap of decoding
an in-game visual puzzle that 'once one picture is mastered, the next one is not as hard, since
a strategy has been learned and, not least, we now can believe that it is possible to extract
order from the pure chaos of any other perspective.'[111] The first part might be interpreted in
the present context as applying to conventional comics reading, but in the final statement a
possibility is suggested that the 'pure chaos', that is, the heterotopia of complete dissociation,
may give way to another, perhaps ergodic order. Though Aarseth himself does not reorient his
position to embrace the potentially omnilateral connectedness of the networked, or rhizomic
labyrinth, like Groensteen is averse to fully abandon the linear trajectory even in his multi-
linear general arthrology, the next chapter will focus on alternate reading modes to explore the
potential of comics, if not of literature, to engage in the simultaneous without discarding the
serial.

Summary

Whereas conventional comics, i.e., those produced for and within the entertainment
mainstream, to a large extent concern themselves with simply executed fable and vaudeville,
or extended episodic action and drama genre narrative, dramatizing the sum of known

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110   Aarseth, 1997, p. 6.
111   Aarseth, 1997, p. 180.

concepts, as it were, abstract comics choose in their visual content to convey or attempt to convey the inner workings of the artist. Perhaps in a response to the growing complexities of modern life – that is, the increased acuity with which the events of a globalized and pervasively interconnected world is constantly delivered to the forefront of our minds – abstract comics turn inward from the conventionalized figurations, encouraging the willing reader to follow in self-reflection; yet simultaneously they explode in an outward motion from the sequential reading order, insisting instead on unblinkered reading schemas. In a triple exposure, or multiple trompe l'œil, these abstract multiframes act as an ostensible 'window' into the mind of the artist; as a mirror into which readers need project themselves to co-create meaning; and finally as a kaleidoscopic, networked apparatus that directs attention to its constituent in-between as an entity of its own. In a sense, abstract comics approach the unknown, circumscribing the invisible in their efforts to visualize the unspeakable.

The visual phenomena of poetry and abstract comics are best characterized by their absences – of linear narrative, sequence, or, specific to a large percentage of abstract work, of representational images and textual components – a hole which abstract comics experiment to bridge with other modes of reading, which the next chapter will explore. As mentioned previously, Bennett and McHale, grounded in poetry and evidenced by Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés*, suggest that gaps and cæsuræ could be the base elements of any comics. Gaps, absences and blanks – in advice to beginning writers, Alan Moore suggests they shape their story, like a projectile, in the negative shape of the hole they want to leave on their readers[112]. In its turn, abstract comics invert the process through erasure of the image and demotion of narrative – creative iconoclasms, so to speak, that leave the reader's already scarred mind to connect the dots. The entwined concepts of cybertext and ergodic literature provide avenues of interpretation that invite further explored in the visual form of comics, as well: ludic aspects involved in decoding of puzzles, and the labyrinth as a mental model of multi-linear navigation, even into networked modes.

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112   Whiston, Russell and Fruish, 2002.

CHAPTER 4: ALTERNATE READING MODES

As stated in the previous chapter, the twin concepts of ergodic literature and the cybertext offer a triad of models within the image of the labyrinth with which this chapter will continue to mine alternate reading modes: a labyrinth, a game, or 'an imaginary world, in which the reader can explore at will, get lost, discover secret paths, play around.'[113] Adding to that the networked text rejected by Aarseth, it is possible to formulate a series of possible, mutually inclusive ways to perceive comics, each with its own set of characteristics that interchangeably affect and are defined by the emerging working definition hinted at in Chapter 2, specifically four main categories: *Mapping* and way-finding; *labyrinths* as performative navigation; models of cognitive *networks*; and *combinatorial, analogous* problem-solving in a ludic modality. First, representing the imaginary world, and as an elaboration of the argument begun in Chapter 2's discussion of *Watchmen* and its structure, suggestive of multi-directional and -linear readings[114], this chapter will start by delving more thoroughly into maps, mapping and aspects thereof.

Maps

Maps are traditionally understood as two-dimensional, spatial representations of landscape and place; requiring a great degree of accuracy of representation to be functionally usable, maps project a certain scientific authority and credibility. At the most basic level in which the term is used here, maps have been and remain a tool for navigating the world but, more importantly in this context, as graphical, spatio-topical scale representations of features and connecting structures of the world. As a tool for wayfinding[115] and planning routes, maps also have a temporal function, in the sense that a certain stretch of road will require a corresponding span of time to traverse: in uniting space and time in one depiction they appear similar to traditional comics, which are taken to equate the two.[116] As comics must be navigated differently when *deliberate sequence* falls away, so may the map that does not rely

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113 Aarseth, 1997, p. 3.

114 Although multi-linear and multi*directional* may appear to be interchangeable, they infer a slight distinction in that even linear sequences may be read bilaterally, forward and back, eg. to reaffirm previous instances in accord with the current one.

115 K. O'Rourke, *Walking and mapping: Artists as Cartographers*, MIT press, 2013, p. 101.

116 S. McCloud, 1997, p. 100.

on geography as its subject employ space for different forms of representation, as investigated in the next section.

Map-*reading*, in its turn, is invariably a search for a geographical point on the map or the most opportune course of travel between two such points, a spatio-topical process that has been much simplified by the advent of online, searchable map databases. However, being spared the inconvenience of that search includes deprivation of getting lost scanning the larger map surface and surrounding cartography, an experience that is itself a scale model of travelling off the beaten track.

On another level, reading maps almost always entails an exploration of another location, or locations, than the one in which the reader is situated, transporting them to a place rendered only sparsely and from a viewpoint that they are unlikely to inhabit, should they visit the location, leaving ground- and human-level details like local colour and smell to their imagination, as well as to their experience, such as N. Plath writes:

> When reading a map, our stories and histories lead us back and forth, toward and around places we are not, right at the moment in which we are engaged in the process of orienting ourselves in the place we actually are: movie theaters, studies, galleries, libraries, lectures halls, or the pages of a book.[117]

In that respect, a map is never representative of one place or area, nor is it objective or even finished: As much as readers must locate their objective, subtracting a percentage of the map, an addition or even multiplication of subjective narrative is also inscribed in their reading of it, leaving them co-producers of that internalized cartography. An interpretive process of this co-productive nature can be expected to play further into a reading of artistically produced works like comics that make no claim to objectivity.[118]

Situations where users produce maps more directly concern *mapping* – a verbed noun to indicate an activity or process, though not necessarily in the cartographic sense, of coherently laying out a material for ease of survey and action. Although regularly formalized as schematics, diagrams and charts, such mapping is more informally used for visual note taking, such as *mind-mapping* for structuring and developing thoughts and ideas. Particularly mind-

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117 N. Plath, 'Robert Smithson's Pursuit: Mapping some Traces of Remnants', in Cartwright, Gartner and Lehn (eds.), *Cartography and Art*, 2009, p. 264.

118 F. Thun-Hohenstein, 'From a Cartographic Glance to Synchronistic Experiences', in Cartwright, Gartner and Lehn (eds.), *Cartography and Art*, 2009, pp. 39-40.

mapping is interesting in the context of this thesis as a multi-linear, rhizomic structure to be implemented on comics navigation in place of the linear 'z-path' reading direction dictated by monodirectional narratives and, by inference, written text, as discussed in Chapter 2. Whereas mind-map nodes structurally branch out, or 'radiate', associatively from a single, central concept or task, and can easily be improvised with paper and pen, *semantic network* models, that interconnect nodes across the rhizome according to semantic similarities, are more often computer generated visualizations due to their relative complexity, but are structurally more akin to the cognitive maps that will be discussed in the next section.

Before that, a look at the rare maps that carry all the outward hallmarks of cartography, but refuse to demonstrate any informative content to the same effect – as far as can be ascertained, the subject matter is too narrow to have a common descriptive term, but for the duration of this chapter section they will be considered *non-maps*.
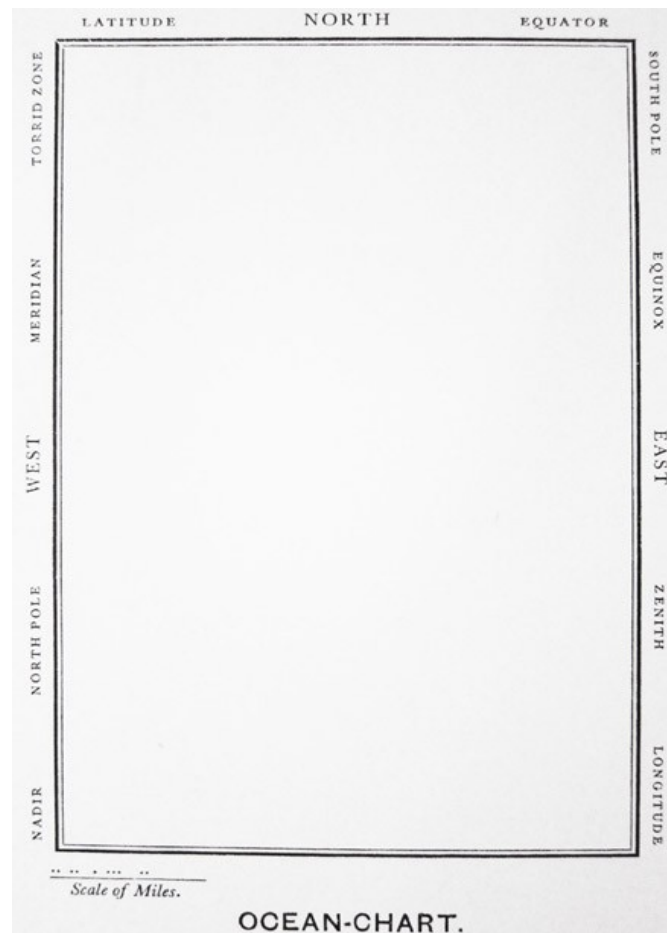
Ill. 4.1: 'A map they could all understand'; made by Lewis Carroll to accompany his poem 'The Hunting of the Snark' (1874)

The writer Lewis Carroll's non-map illustrating his poem *The Hunting of the Snark*[119] (Ill. 4.1) depicts a blank field, ostensibly an 'ocean-chart' according to its title. It corresponds to a section of the poem that goes: 'He had brought a large map representing the sea / Without the least vestige of land: / And the crew were much pleased when they found it to be / A map they could all understand.' As in the text of his books *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass,* with this blank field Carroll subverts preconception to encourage reflection on and engagement with the way we frame the world. His non-map, however humorous in intent, is somewhat resonant of abstract comics in their deliberate erasure of representation, both of them emphasizing the apparent structures of their form and playing the expectations of its functions, and in so doing encourage a narrative exploration of the void of functional absence. The shipmates of the poem 'all understand' a map that, on its surface, presents no data for them to process, but only in engaging with the map's *lack of* meaning does it become a tool for understanding, if not navigation.

Labyrinths

In *Walking and Mapping – Artists as Cartographers*[120], Karen O'Rourke positions artists and artworks within the map with the act of mapping, representative of an eye-level, physical approach to cartography, documented in text, video, or audio form, or using data-processed geolocation visualizations. Though not selected for inclusion in the book, the comics of Oliver East fits squarely within the parameters (Ill. 4.2)[121]: the majority of his work are comics documentations of pre-planned walks that are depicted after the fact, and narrated by internal monologue that is part commentary, part associative train of thought. The obstacles in translating a mapped route into physical navigation of the landscape is a recurring theme as East describe detours, shortcuts and getting off track.

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119   L. Carroll, *The Hunting of the Snark – An Agony in 8 Fits,* 1874.

120   O'Rourke, 2013.

121   O. East, *Swear Down*, London, Blank Slate Books, 2013, p. 20.
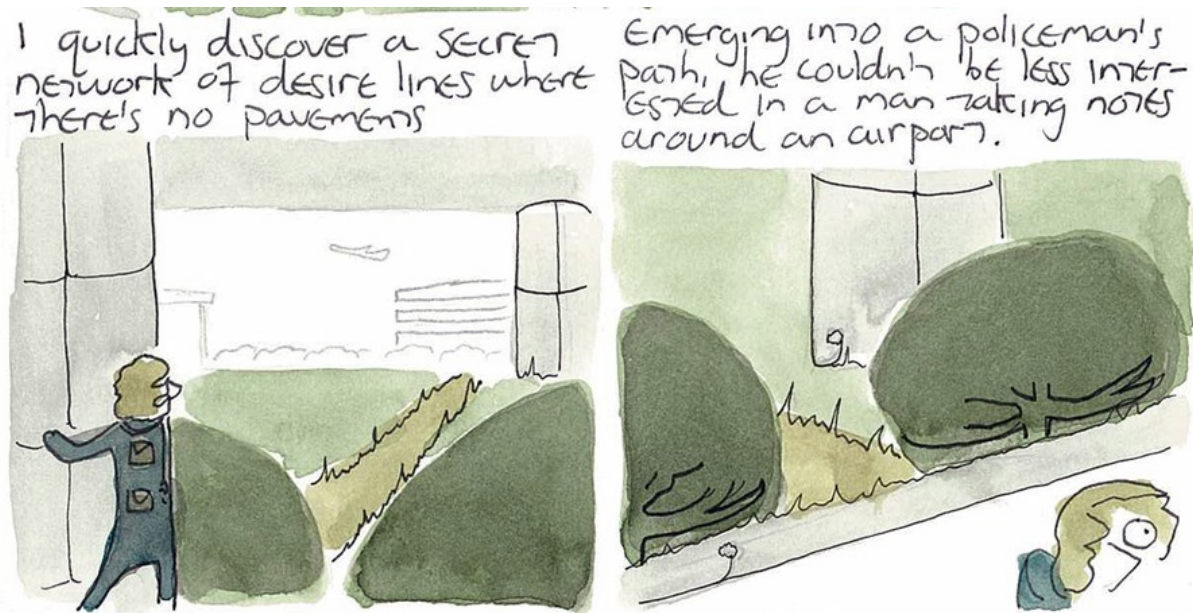
Ill. 4.2: 'A secret network of desire lines'; excerpt from Oliver East, Swear Down, *Blank Books, 2012, p. 20*

The symbolic quest of the labyrinth, in East's book, is represented by his artistic 'pilgrimage' undertaking, documenting in comics his walk along the longitude from outside his Manchester home to the southern coast of England. The inner monologue relays his terse equivalent to the corresponding spiritual journey of enlightenment intrinsic to the hero's quest of legend, processing the trauma of his partner's brush with death in giving birth to their son. Although his journey is unicursal and, ostensibly, following a straight line, East's borderless panels make up a labyrinth that reaches beyond the gutter and into the discrete images, mirroring in part his mental distress but also his progressive discovery of the landscape as it turns out that the straight coordinates of a map are difficult to reconcile with changing topology.

To East, getting lost is part of the process, whereas to others the lack of orientation might be cause for panic – to others still, like 19th-century *flâneurs* or the Situationists, aimless wandering is a deliberate practice that promotes wonder and curiosity. Constant Nieuwenhuys' planetary, Situationist *New Babylon,* a world composed of endlessly shifting, moveable modules, was intended to promote 'the disorientation that furthers adventure, play, and creative change'[122] by keeping the population in a permanent flux. The 'labyrinthine form'

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122 C. Nieuwenhuys, 'New Babylon', in *Constant: New Babylon*, 1974, p. 154.

of *New Babylon* would reflect into their social lives as a structure of liberation. O'Rourke, seizing on the labyrinth as a map of situated disorientation, recognizes that although it can bear connotations of entrapment, Constant's express interpretation is 'closer to the game end of the spectrum'[123], an assessment befitting the Situationists' playful appropriation of maps in both cut-up works and as tools for the *dérive*.
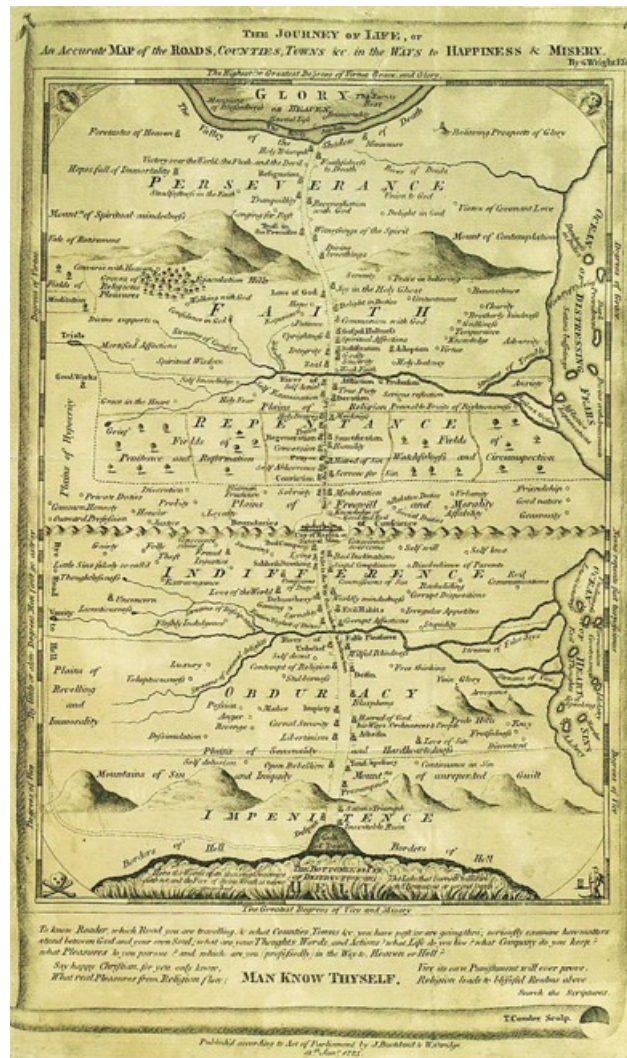
Ill. 4.3: New Map of the Journey of Life, a 1775 moral fantasy map.

In initiation rites as in Situationism, the labyrinth is a metaphor of the potential paths of existence, where minotaurs may be encountered and yarns laid out as guides for safe passage, 'a journey between the starting point and the exit, the point of no return.'[124] Similarly, 16th-19th

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123 O'Rourke, 2013, pp. 110-1.
124 O'Rourke, 2013, p. 111.

century moral fantasy maps (Ill. 4.3)[125] charted in a more traditional cartographic metaphor the possibilities and dangers readers might face in life[126], the recommended route in this case most often centred on a narrow path of virtue. Any *flânerie* might lead to corruption or despair; O'Rourke has a more optimistic interpretation, that these experiences of confusion make people better navigators, enabling us 'to make sense of our surroundings and find our way in or out'[127].

The route from A(rchive) to D(iagram)

As the above has laid out possible ways that cartography and comics draw on similar cognitive mechanics, and through what perspectives one may be mapped on to the other, a final example may be drawn from the cartography of *cinema*, as presented by Tom Conley. Although Conley appears more concerned with film appearances *of* maps, as props or expository scene transitions, he deploys the terminology and theory of Gilles Deleuze to describe the progressive perceptional models of mapping a set or *archive* of information onto a spatio-temporal multiplicity: 'As a 'diagram' or a model that maps perception and comportment through the image-field, the map is in flux where it shows how the archival aspect of the film might also be its diagram'[128].

His phrasing can be read to pertain to the subject at hand as well: Comics, in this sense, is itself as a visual merging of Deleuze's forms of *content* and of *expression,* respectively[129], transforming an *archive* of images into a *diagram* – 'no longer an auditory or visual archive but a map, a cartography' – i.e., their relative arrangement, 'the presentation of the relations between forces unique to a particular formation'[130]. Interestingly, these concepts spring directly from Deleuze discussing Foucault's concept of *panopticism,* leading Conley to conclude that a film viewer explores the 'fluid and shifting spaces of the film and its cognition

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125   Reproduced from Cartwright, Gartner and Lehn, 2009, p. 289.

126   Jongh C, Ormeling F (2003) 'Mapping Non-Spatial Phenomena'. In: *Proceedings of the Seminars on Developing the ICA-CET Internet Cartography Course held at Beijing (China), August 9, 2001 and Helsinki (Finland), May 28, 2002.* http://lazarus.elte.hu/cet/publications/proc13-ormeling.htm Accessed 17 March 2018.

127   O'Rourke, 2013, p. 111.

128   T. Conley, *Cartographic Cinema,* Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2007, pp. 20-1.

129   Conley, 2007, p. 12.

130   G. Deleuze, 'A New Cartographer', in *Foucault,* Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988, p. 34.

[…] in different directions and from various angles'[131], a notion that seems asreminiscent of comics as it does of Cubist painting. In dissolving and fragmenting the single perspective on representing the subject, the Cubists enabled viewers to see simultaneously selected, divergent aspects of a given object, mapping it facet-like onto a canvas. Such a 'fluid and shifting' relational diagram, like a comic shedding the pretence of linear sequence, not only enables but invites exploratory readings to a higher degree than does the ephemeral cinematic image..

Networks and visual inventory

Some if not all geographical maps include a key to their graphic signatures of relevant landscape representations, the so-called *legend*, informing the traveller whether the road ahead leads through prairie or swamp, or if the road is actually cul-de-sac or a highway. More conventional signatures, such as blue surfaces for water and greens or earth tones for land, are rarely explained but taken for granted – in the same way as the folded-timeline reading protocol of comics is a matter of prelearned convention. Mapping the attributes of one form or knowledge space (such as maps) onto another (such as comics) always involves a selective translation of those conventions, but allows for 'possible provocations'[132] like Carroll's non-map, creative inventions to turn the reading toward the artist's intent.
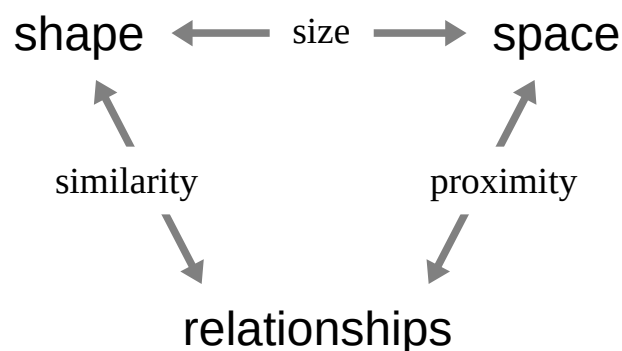
Ill. 4.4: Dimensions of cognitive maps

Rather than constructing an authoritative legend for cartographical readings of phenomena peripheral to comics, this section suggests perceptional and cognitive strategies from mapping that, in borrowing from the former, can assist in outlining an alternative navigation protocol of

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131 Conley, 2007, p. 21.

132 P. Downton, 'Maps of What Might Be: A Dozen Works on Ideas and Possibilities', in Cartwright, Gartner and Lehn, 2009, p. 333.

those comics. For this undertaking, we will turn first to *cognitive maps*, visual representations of an individual's personal knowledge and experience[133], that rely on the structuring protocol of maps and cartography to store and order that information in terms of *space, shape* and *relationships,* and reducing cognitive load in processing it.[134] Illustration 4.4 expands on the above terms to include intermediaries *size, similarity*, and *proximity*, forming an arbitrary semantic spectrum through which the dynamics of cognitive mapping may be gleaned. The following section will engage with overlapping fields within that spectrum to inspect examples of further related phenomena, and uncover strategies as they apply to non- and multi-linear readings in comics.

In printed matter such as conventional maps or comics, 'space' refers before all to distances and spans of a two-dimensional surface, relative in its folded or bound forms to a convoluted or accumulative surface mass. It is in this sense of the total multiframe that the term is used here, the shared and extended unified space of any single comic, whether that is one page, 20 or 300 pages. Within this spatio-topia, fragmented into individual panels by the artist, *relationships* and *shapes* of panels as well as of elements of their contained images negotiate the intended reading of the comic. Cognitive mapping would categorize and interconnect those data according to similarity, as does the visualization discipline of *informal geographies* – the closer spatial proximity, the higher degree of similarity.[135] This 'spatialization' of similarity takes two distinct forms in informal geographical visualization; semantic (based on textual meaning) and geometrical (based on purely numerical data)[136]. Whereas geometry, the quantifiable and measurable, are fairly easily represented visually, the semantic value attributable to, specifically, artistically ambiguous or non-figurative imagery is more difficult to discern, and a subject too wide to be thoroughly discussed within the constraints of this thesis. Nevertheless, the distinction is noteworthy and deserves further research on its own terms.

At this point it should not be forgotten that comics above all make use of spatial *juxtaposition,* as a collocated parallel to filmic montage, for its meaning-making; the 'possible

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133   V. Ambrosini and C. Bowman (2002). 'Mapping successful organizational routines', in A. S. Huff and M. Jenkins (eds.), *Mapping strategic knowledge,* London, Sage Publications, 2002, pp. 21-2.

134   O'Rourke, 2013, p. 112.

135   M. Kinberger, 'Mapping Informal Geographies', in Cartwright, Gartner and Lehn , 2009, p. 285.

136   S. I. Fabrikant and B. P. Buttenfield, 'Formalizing semantic spaces for Information access', in *Annals of the American Geographers*, #91, 2001, p. 266.

provocations' available to comic artists in *creatively contrasting images* are not limited to grouping existing data according to available information, as is the lot of the scientific visualizer – or the cartographer. Invariably, the semantics in question will be pollinated by unexpected elements and deliberate data pollution. The relational network we will eventually arrive at is likely to be more along the lines of 'an abstract concept of spatial elements' and 'inherent groupings or codes of semantic fields'[137], being the domain of individual, subjective expression.

Perhaps the push of spatial distance between segments only becomes relevant to comics' endemic modes of expression with the pull of human cognitive affinity for pattern-finding. In art as well as in the world we are prone to finding patterns of recurrent events, marks or shapes, and to construe meaning from fragments or connotation[138], no different than creating new meaning from the juxtaposition of two discrete images. While *dissimilar* images clustered together stimulate synthesis to effect montage, similar images or distinct image elements can be placed at considerable distance from each other and still form a pattern: As Moore and Gibbons used visual leitmotifs throughout *Watchmen* – clockwork and marked faces – so might the artist entirely unconcerned with linear narrative use repetitions of visual semantics to stimulate readers pattern recognition instincts and subvert their navigation of the knowledge space, mapped onto the work surface.

Visual analogy, combination and play

Such intertextual visual leaps of association are the subject of Barbara Maria Stafford's book, *Visual Analogy[139]*, in which she not only argues that they mimic the way the brain organizes and process visual information[140], but also proposes that *rhetorical* analogy is 'inherently visual'[141]. That is, that the ability to align disparate entities, positions or arguments is conditioned on visual precepts like simile, continuity and synecdoche – or their absence. 'Perceiving the lack of something – whether physical, emotional, spiritual, or intellectual',

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137 A. von Ungern-Sternberg, 'Dots, Lines, Areas and Words: Mapping Literature and Narration', in Cartwright, Gartner and Lehn, 2009, p. 235.

138 P. Downton, 'Maps of What Might Be: A Dozen Works on Ideas and Possibilities', in Cartwright, Gartner and Lehn, 2009, p. 340.

139 Stafford, 1999.

140 Stafford, 1999, p. 146.

141 Stafford, 1999, p. 3.

argues Stafford, 'inspires us to search for an approximating resemblance to fill its place'[142]. Rhetorical analogy is offered as a more constructive counterpart to *allegory* which, in Stafford's argument, takes on a polarizing dichotomous nature that eviscerates any middle ground; modes of analogy inspired by visual perceptions and art are used to propose more fluid, reciprocal discursive perspectives.

Of more direct relevance to the present subject, however, is her previous argument that visually analogous correlation is a model of our cognitive functions, specifically those that facilitate learning and invention: Human cognition is nonlinear in structure, traversing 'random and multiple pathways and [choosing] options by making associative links'[143] quite like the ones of then-emerging *hypermedia*. Invoking not comics to demonstrate the manifestation of such hyperlinkage, but collage and assemblage – equally reliant on the juxtaposed collocation of discrete elements into a transformative whole – Stafford emphasizes their 'in-betweenness' as a prototypical montage employing 'relocatable patterns'[144] for its navigation. Transposing that sentiment into terms of comics theory, Stafford here turns McCloud's concept of closure on its head to reposition the *non sequitur* as its main focal point, but brings a wider perspective on the socioculturally conditioned industrial criterion of *recurring characters*: in a story and on a comics page, those characters serve as visual cues that interlink the panels and encourage the z-path reading protocol, but in an abstract or poetry comics mode not intrinsically enmeshed in linear narrative, the concept of visually analogous hyperlinks may send the reader farther than to an adjacent neighbour panel.

Where Stafford acknowledges that the cognitive load of on-going non-linear pattern- and wayfinding is the cost of understanding[145], Cohn disagrees that it is a feasible navigational strategy to begin with, as the reader would continually need to engage the entirety of the comics' panels to choose the next possible one, encumbering working memory. Citing eye-tracking studies performed on 'expert' comics readers, he asserts that they favoured a linear reading sequence over exploring all available options before proceeding[146] – of course, one must assume that an expert comics reader is preconditioned exactly toward that dominant

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142 Stafford, 1999, p. 2.

143 Stafford, 1999, p. 48.

144 Stafford, 1999, p. 146.

145 Stafford, 1999, p. 146.

146 N. Cohn, 'Navigating Comics: An Empirical and Theoretical Approach to Strategies of Reading Comics Page Layouts', in *Frontiers in Psychology*, Volume 4, Article 186, 2013.

reading protocol rather than search for visual rhymes and analogies, leaving the argument somewhat redundant. To Stafford's thinking, that constant synthetic process of connecting stored or new fragments in changing contexts[147] does not represent cognitive overload but simply a day's work for the non-linear brain – in fact, the pattern seeking eye (i.e., visual cortex) eases the load by identifying and categorizing new objects on the basis of generalized similarity to known traits rather than processing the totality of each item. In problem solving, that process of inference is utilized to inductively regroup mental representations in to novel co-ordinations[148].

The role of associative juxtaposition of different phenomena in learning and creative thinking (in science as well as in art) seems to support Stafford's points. Writing on the combinatorial, ludic element to creativity, Victoria Stevens emphasizes both the paradoxical experience of connecting phenomena – such as images – within heterogeneous fields by analogy, and the cognitive abilities to abstract and recognize patterns, as key components to imaginative and combinatory play[149] – as well as to our transformation of experience into meaning: 'playful acts that are essentially aesthetic experiences and that inform our imagination'[150]. That element of *play* to problem solving and meaning-making would be essential also to the intuitive navigation of a comics page that does not indicate or obey the linear z-path reading schema and, as Stevens demonstrates, is well documented in neuroscience research of the creative mental processes[151]. Notably, the brain has been found to be more active when the mind is 'at play or wandering' (cp. The Situationis *dérive*) than when engaged in focused reasoning on a problem[152] – lending another perspective on Cohn's worries that cognitive processes involved in nonlinear readings might prove strenuous on the mind. That activity would appear to be part of the lower-latency background routines that do not necessarily involve the 'working memory', and may in fact employ a basic human tendency toward meaning-making to stimulate the formation of new concepts and ideas, or even new schemas (eg., for reading) if the lack of precedent for new information requires it.

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147 B. M. Stafford, 'The Combinatorial Aesthetics of Neurobiology', in M. Jay, P. R. Matthews and D. McWhirter (eds.), *Aesthetic Subjects*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2003, p. 265.

148 Stafford, 1999, p. 61

149 Stevens, 2014, p. 104.

150 Stevens, 2014, p. 105.

151 Stevens, 2014, pp. 109-13.

152 Stevens, 2014, p. 113.

As the works of Stafford and Stevens suggest, respectively, that the juxtaposed visual elements of collage and combinatory (visual) play could be instrumental to also understanding associative, multi-linear navigation in comics, they merit speculation whether other convergences of visual juxtaposition, montage and play hold any useful resources that may be applied to the subject as well – such as rebuses or visual puzzles. The rebus, though usually linear in the sense that its composite (frequently) visual elements are meant to form a word or phrase when decoded and combined, is an interesting detour at the least, as it employs phonetics to bridge the gap between the humorous and often counter-intuitive image assemblage and its verbal solution. In a work on *pattern poetry,* Dick Higgins lends a brief chapter to 'puzzle poems', the category into which he groups rebuses[153], citing their ludic elements and the 'charm' of visual aspects as 'mak[ing] up enough of a poetic, aesthetic element to transform the piece into an art experience'[154]. In these puzzle poems, the reader is invited by the poet to decipher their meaning 'not by learned allusions or such-like, but by taking only the evidence given in the poem', echoing Aarseth's definition of ergodic literature as predicated on an intrinsic, structural key to its own solution. In the same manner as Aarseth suggests that a player-reader can 'lose' at cybertext[155], Higgins muses that the reader's successful decoding is required in order for puzzle poems to be more than 'visual hieroglyphics' or 'calligraphic labyrinths'[156]. The inclusion, here, of rebuses is meant to illustrate the efforts of an artist to predetermine their *message* or *narrative* – no matter how ambiguously conveyed and how much agency is put into the interpretative co-creation of the reader, a bull-headed authorial agenda or intent remains within the labyrinth for the participant to slay, or crack.

Where Stevens talks of overcoming the fear of ambiguity and uncertainty through imaginative play[157], Stafford highlights the double exposure of trompe l'œil as an intermediary state between tenuous dichotomy and the ability to reconcile apparently discordant positions[158] – the latter of the two is also known as *cognitive dissonance,* which both scholars argue as a

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153 D. Higgins, *Pattern Poetry: Guide to an Unknown Literature,* State University of New York Press, 1987, pp. 184-6.

154 Higgins, 1987, p. 186.

155 Aarseth, 1997, p. 4.

156 Higgins, 1987, p. 184.

157 Stevens, 2014, p. 104

158 Stafford, 2003, p. 265.

constructive component of creative, analogous thinking. Those multiple positions run rife in comics, as has been demonstrated in previous chapters: In order to reconcile the simultaneity and seriality of a comics assemblage, or the simultaneity of the panels and their supporting in-between, the reductive instinct to eliminate all but one position needs to be discouraged, as abstract or other non-linear comics works achieve in their very de-emphasis of the accustomed conventions of the form, disorienting the reader into an ambiguous state more open to (co-)creative idea generation, or to further 'adventure, play, and creative change', in Constant's words.

Summary

In searching for alternative reading modes and protocols in and potential to comics, we do well to look beyond the printed and bound medium with which the form has been afilliated and consider, for instance, the navigational possibilities of other forms like Aarseth's cybertext and *ergodos*, which have served if not as maps then as guides in this exploration.

Aarseth prefaces his book with a quote by Italo Calvino describing literature as 'a combinatorial game that pursues the possibilities implicit in its own material'[159] a statement that, in light of Stafford and Stevens' previous assertions, should be taken to heart as appropriate to comics as well. At their root, story and play both function as didactic instructables, whether they take the form of cautionary fables, moral maps, ormodes that encourage performative interaction, such as hopscotch grids. Aarseth asserts that the cybertext 'is a game-world or world-game; it *is* possible to explore, get lost, and discover secret paths in these texts, not metaphorically, but through the topological structures of the textual machinery'[160]; in other words, the structure or form of the game-world is as determinant to the player-reader's interactions with it as is the narrative.

Comics, on the other hand, and particularly the peripheral forms discussed here, are clearly readable as maps, though innately latticed by the *terra incognita* of their constituent in-between, the gutter populated by the reader's imagination with creatures of fable, perhaps, or with the potential of a Situationist *dérive*. If we cross our eyes and look, unfocused, at a

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159 I. Calvino, 'Cybernetics and Ghost', in *The Literature Machine*, trans. Patrick Creagh, London: Pan/Secker & Warbrug. 1987.

160 Aarseth, 1997, p. 5.

comics page, we may perceive it as a *trompe l'œil* where the panels are not mere snapshots of a sequence hung in a void but coexist symbiotically with and within the forked-road territory made up of the liminal spaces. That 'negative space', then, is not one of separation but in itself a guiding rhizomic network connecting the nodes across tiers of panels, pages, and bodies of work.

In applying Bennett's and McHale's concept of segmentivity to more traditional comics, the leisure paths and alleyways can be promoted and expanded to major traffic arteries and public spaces, a stage for the 'social lives' of images. Should readers explore this labyrinth of boulevards and arcades – taking the scenic route, as it were – rather than follow the prescribed z-path suggested by now-subordinate flowing text, they will almost certainly see the work in new combinations and perspectives. In this way, the work as an invariably selective transcription of an artist's cognitive map, is subjectively and interpretatively consumed and internalized by readers into their own mental map.

Stafford concedes that superficially, the concept of visual analogy 'conjur[es] up fantasies of the free-associationist impulse run amok', a 'paranoid credulity that uncritically leaps to link everything in the cosmos to everything else'[161], the latter sentence somewhat overbearingly attached by Umberto Eco who advocated for the all-connecting, rhizomic *net* model of the labyrinth.

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161 Stafford, 1999, p. 8.

CHAPTER 5: THINGS THAT LOOK LIKE COMICS

In previous chapters, the theme of the trompe l'œil, ambiguity and double positions has recurred on several occasions: The outward perceptions of comics needing separation from its ulterior industry and entertainment heritage to arrive at a formal starting point; the conceptual double exposure of language on comics; abstract comics revealing its supporting structure; the serial vis-à-vis simultaneous nature of the comics multiframe; and the questionable definition criterion of recurring characters substituted for association by analogous similarity. This chapter will look at three works of art that usually would not be considered under the umbrella of comics studies, but which bear one or more characteristic formal features of comics, and inspect them as *trompe l'œil* phenomena on the periphery thereof through the perspectives generated over the course of previous chapters.

The works in question are Sol LeWitt's photo book *Autobiography* (1980); John Williams' and Edward Kinman's ceramic work *Domain* (2007); and Joseph Cornell's Shadow Boxes, exemplified here by *Soap Bubble Set* (1947-8). Each work will be treated under its separate heading to a description and an analysis, while a collective interpretation will then be performed to better juxtapose and combine the multiple possibilities relevant to the subject of this thesis that arise from individual analyses.

LeWitt, Autobiography (1980)

Description

This 260 millimetres square photo book[162] presents well over a thousand photographies, each 66 ⅔ mm square, laid out in a grid of 3 × 3 images per page over the span of 126 unnumbered pages, with a few exceptions to the number of images to a page but never a digression from the grid. No images adorn the paperback cover, however; only the title in a serif typeset as a horizontal banner across the middle of the page; only the title page, set in similar type and size, announces the author and publication year. The next spread provides a more modestly set colophon on the left-hand page while the right-hand page continues the typographic progression from the cover and title page to add the publishers' names to the incrementally

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162   S. LeWitt, *Autobiography,* New York and Boston, Multiple and Lois and Michael K. Torf, 1980.

elaborated canon. That sparse publication data constitutes the entirety of the book's text (not counting diegetic text within images to follow, such as notes and book titles) which is unceremoniously dispersed by the next spread, occupied entirely by the aforementioned layout grids.

Every page of photographs is traced by a slim black line running approximately one centimetre within the edges of the page; a white margin of 5-6 mm within that line and separating the photographs, divides the space. The handful of exceptions from the fully occupied grid are arranged in a manner as to further divide the image corpus into discrete parts or chapters[163], leaving white space instead of images within the black border as a rhetorical pause. Each of these parts is thematically concerned with a distinct aspect or area of a living and working space – though not identified in the book, the space in question is well-known to be Sol LeWitt's own loft apartment in New York City[164]. The photos themselves are detail close-ups of elements of the apartment and its contents, presenting each as a free-standing portrait of a fragment of the twenty years LeWitt lived there; the title of the book, then, refers to the biographical nature of the artist documenting the minutiae of his quarters.
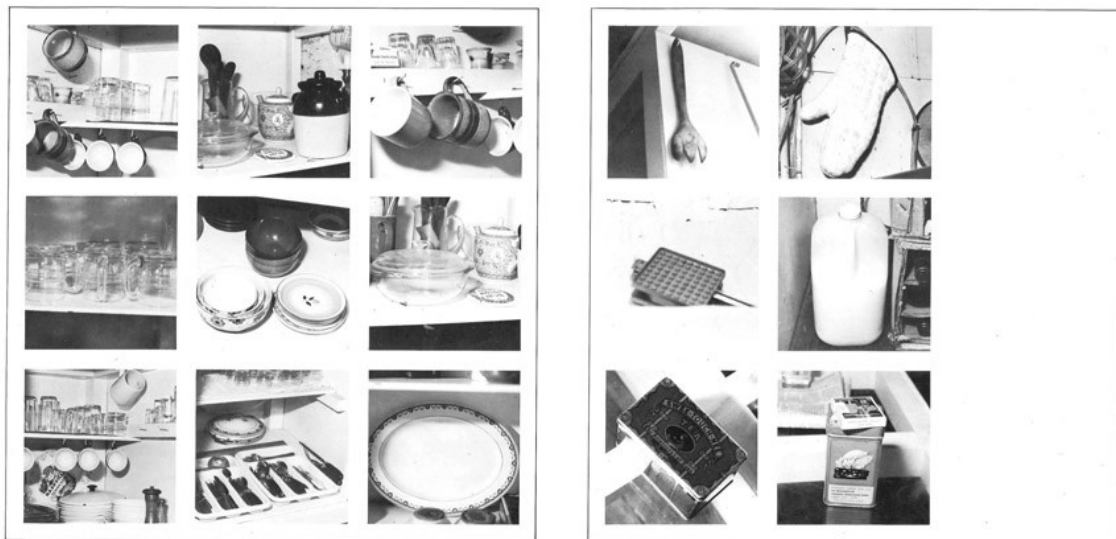

Ill. 5.1: The end of act one. Pages 45-6 from LeWitt, Autobiography

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163 A. D. Weinberg, 'LeWitt's *Autobiography*: Inventory of the Present', in G. Grassels (ed.), *Sol LeWitt: A Retrospective*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2000, p. 103.

164 Cited, for instance, in Weinberg, 2000, p. 102.

First 'chapter', or segment, sets the physical stage, investigating over the course of 42 pages the loft and its construction; floor boards and plaster ceilings; electrical cords and outlets as well as water taps and drains; the studio space and the artist's tools, and finally the bathroom and kitchen, the segment closing on a blank third column of a page (Ill. 5.1). A brief, eight pages second segment presents clothes on hangers and shelves, footwear, and textiles, possibly the artist's sleeping quarters. Even shorter, a mere limerick at three pages, the third part lingers on potted houseplants before closing on a decorative feather and assorted baubles on display in what appears to be a glass vitrine. Fourth, apparently, the artist's study, inventoried over 24 pages in images of side tables and lounge chairs; more prominently, shelf after shelf of books (among them several copies of LeWitt's own publications), vinyl records and cassette tapes; and paper clippings, memos and notes, maps, and photographs within the photographs. In a mirror effect of the blank right-hand column that ended the first segment, the fifth one opens with the leftmost third of the page entirely empty. This final segment initially continues the themes and subjects of the previous one, exploring the ephemeral clippings and snapshots accumulated through many years, but expands to include and juxtapose those with LeWitt's sketches, models for sculptures, and family photos. The segment winds down in three series of images of boxes, lamps, clocks and calculators, respectively, before the book closes.
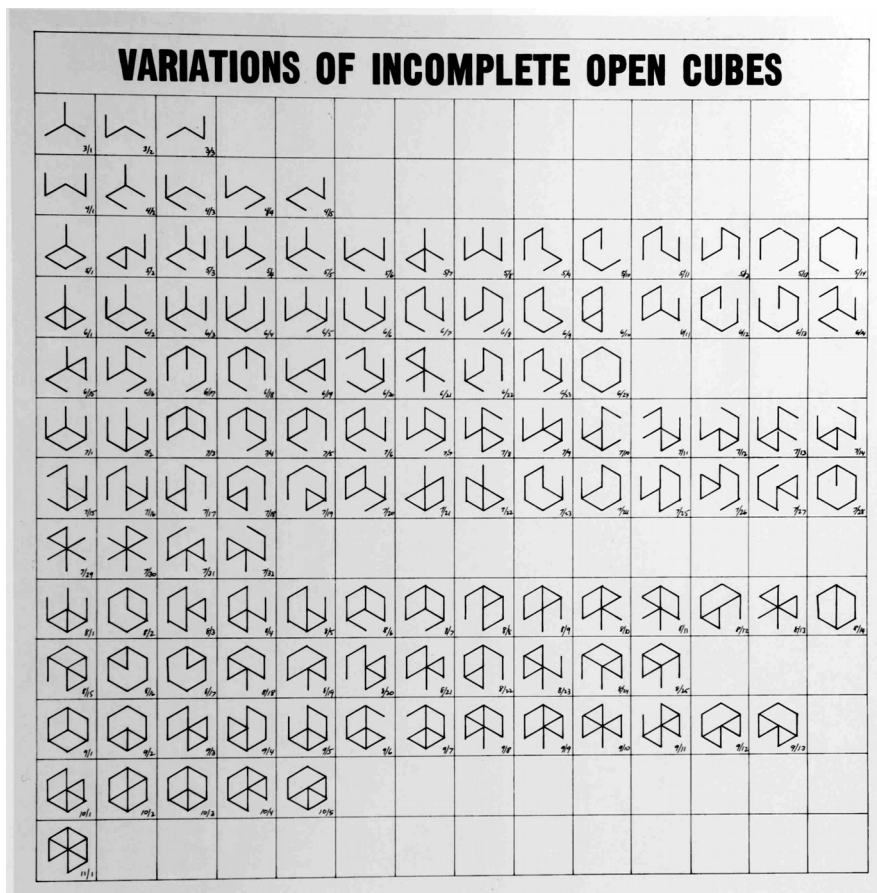
Ill. 5.2: LeWitt,Variations of Incomplete Open Cubes, schematic, 1974.

Analysis

Although the trajectory and thrust of this analysis aims at the implications on comics theory that *Autobiography* may uncover rather than the book's position and standing within either LeWitt's œuvre or in Conceptual Art as such, it would be remiss to consider it entirely in isolation from the artist's other, serial works that exhaustively mine a subject matter for its potential. In the accompanying text to *Serial project I (ABCD)* (1966),[165] LeWitt describes serial artworks as *multipart pieces with regulated changes,* in which the difference between parts comprise the very subject matter of the work: 'The series would be read by the viewer in a linear or narrative manner [...] even though in its final form many of these sets would be operating simultaneously'. Similarly, his book *Arcs, from Corners & Sides, Circles, & Grids*

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165 Opening paragraph of LeWitt, 'Serial Project No. 1', in G. Garrels, 2000, pp. 373.

and All Their Combinations (1972),[166] serving as the groundwork for several conceptually related wall drawings, systematically identifies and itemizes every combination of the shapes drily listed in the title, just as *Variations of Incomplete Open Cubes* (1974) is exactly that, an exhaustive visual inventory presented as three-dimensional structures and corresponding gelatine prints[167] (Ill. 5.3). The tension between linear seriality and simultaneousness in LeWitt's work as well as in comics, at the very least, interconnects the two phenomena – and its application in three-dimensional work reaffirms the notion hinted at in previous chapters that comics are required to be neither printed, drawn, nor even confined to flat surfaces.
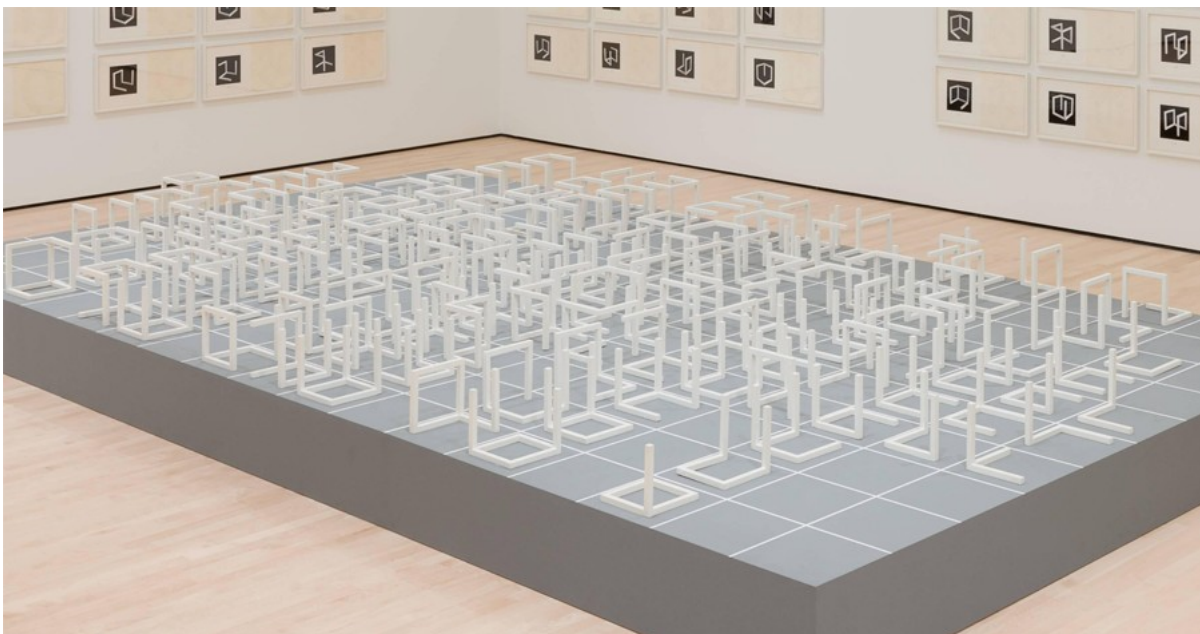
Ill. 5.3: LeWitt, Variations of incomplete Open Cubes, 1974, detail

Considering the insistence on linear, narrative readings of his other work[168], the open-ended simultaneity of *Autobiography* is remarkable, giving preponderance of Groensteen's general arthrology over the restrained mode. Although the book as a medium invites a one-directional reading in the same way that LeWitt stipulated his other series be viewed[169], and although its contents are ordered into distinct parts suggesting chapters, the lack of an obvious narrative

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166 LeWitt, *Arcs, from Corners & Sides, Circles, & Grids and All Their Combinations*. Bern, Kunsthalle Bern & Paul Biancini, 1972.

167 The parameters of *Variations of incomplete open cubes* exclude any variation of less than three cube edges, however, and any two-dimensional combinations; i.e., any structure that could lay flat on a horizontal support.

168 Gieskes, 2014.

169 Weinberg, 2000, pp. 102-3.

through-line sets the reader wandering, *flâneur*-like, through the images of the apartment, not unlike a visitor might explore the loft itself in the tenant's absence. What guest, left to their own devices for a spell, has escaped the gravitational pull of the bookshelves[170], or the private notes and postcards hung over the desk? *Autobiography* gives free reins and no shortage of time for the readers to sate their voyeuristic appetites, and to find analogous connections criss-crossing back and forth through the book. One visual *leitmotif* for such associative *dérive* is the artist's predilection for cubes, grids and squares, evident in the layout and design of the very book, found also in pictures not only of LeWitt's sculpture models, but also in those of bookshelves, wine racks, crossword puzzles, several images of tins and cigar boxes, and the wooden structure supporting a glass top table – even other forms of lattices are suggested in window guards as well as in the stems of houseplants or textile patterns. The rhythmic strata of folded and stacked clothes are revisited in the floor boards, reeded stucco ceiling trimmings, book spines neatly shelved, in transistor radio speaker grills and in heating radiators.

All of the above motifs can be recognized in the textiles presented in the second segment, one image in *Autobiography* even depicts nine photos arranged similarly to the grid within which they are included. However, in *Autobiography*, reflecting both on the form of the present bookwork itself and on the artist's propensity for serial work, prints of Eadweard Muybridge's motion studies are littered mainly throughout the latter half of the book, as are variations on the theme: A small concertina book of photos, a contact sheet from a roll of film, two consecutive snapshots hung beside each other on a bulletin board, and nude photographies from LeWitt's own *Muybridge II* series (1964). Again, those do suggest in their insistent display one contingent reading mode for the book, perhaps the only one the author intended, but their distribution on different pages encourage instead the mystic, associative leaps that LeWitt attributed to the conceptual artist in his *Sentences on Conceptual Art[171]*, thereby cementing the shifted position of the reader to co-creator, or semantic co-ordinator of the visual inventory compiled and presented in *Autobiography*. This glimpse into the creative thought process is reminiscent of Groensteen's networked model of general arthrology, and of

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170 Gieskes, in 'Reading the Simultaneous' p. 75, finds works by Borges, Nabokov, Robbe-Grillet, and
      Beckett in photos of LeWitt's library, all authors 'resist[ing] progressive plots and narratives with a
      beginning and an end.' Also clearly identifiable in *Autobiography* are William S. Burroughs' *Naked
      Lunch –* and *75 years of the comics* by Maurice Horn.

171 LeWitt, 'Sentences on Conceptual Art', in G. Garrels, 2000, pp. 371-2.

several of the reading models described in chapter 4 of this thesis, most notably semantic networks and visual analogy, in Stafford's direct correlation of cognitive operations with hyperlinks, and Stevens' combinatorial play, all of which will be discussed further in the joint interpretative subsection below.

Williams and Kinman, Domain (2006)

Ill. 5.4: Kinman and Williams, Domain (2016). Longwood Center for the Visual Arts permanent collection. Photo from Cartography and Art (2009), p. 310

Description

This subsection investigates cartographer Edward L Kinman and artist John R. Williams' collaborative ceramic work *Domain* (2006), consisting of glazed stoneware with inlay and incised design, mounted on steel plates. The work occupies 396 × 183 centimetres display area in total, weighing approximately 455 kilograms[172]. Each section consists of four to twelve tiles, or panels, varying in size from 18 × 21 centimetres to 31 × 31 centimetres and 10

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172 E. Kinman and J. R. Williams, 'Domain: collaborating with clay and cartography', in *Cultural Geographies* Vol 14, Issue 3, 2007, p. 441. Measurements originally cited in U.S. customary units (13 × 6 feet and 1000 pounds), converted to metric units for clarity in this context.

centimetres thick, and is mounted on separate stained steel plates.[173] The panel sizes vary between sections but remain uniform in size and proportion within a section. As the work is accompanied by an artists' statement detailing its context and intent to the public[174], parts of that background information will also be included in this description: *Domain* depicts in temporal and spatial perspectives the relationship between Longwood University, Virginia (the United States), and a nearby African American neighbourhood – strained by the expansion of the university campus which over decades consumed still larger parts of the domestic area through acquisition.

The central section of the work shows in six panels the growth of the campus over the course of a century (1900-2000) in twenty-year increments, the light blue representation of the original campus surrounded by gradually darker blues to signal later expansions into the neutral grey community surrounding it. The side sections depict (left) a map of the neighbourhood considered for purchase by the university, colour coded green and brown according to expected affordability, showing only roads and land parcel boundaries; (lower right) the relative locations and ground area of the houses omitted from the previous panel, carved into the clay that has then been glazed a light green; and (upper right) a similarly carved outline of the original university buildings, these glazed in a light blue tone reminiscent of the one used in the central section. The upper right section stands out from the lower one not only in colour and panel shape, but is also distinct in the form and size of its back plate; they are, however, by far the ones closest to each other in comparison to the relative vicinities of other sections.

Analysis

The central section, or group of panels, describes a progression over time depicted in twenty-year increments, and as such is necessarily presented as a linear sequence. The left section, on the other hand, is similarly divided into discrete panels, but the scale of difference here is not a *temporal* one like in the central section. Instead, the combined panels of the left section depict a domestic area colour coded according to *affordability*; the contiguous coloured

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173 E. L. Kinman, 'Sculpting Place Through Ceramic Maps', in Cartwright, Gartner and Lehn, 2009, p. 309. Here, the original text provides measurements in metrics..

174 The artists' statement proved unavailable to this author. However, the summary given in Kinman, 2009, p. 313, indicates that the contents of Kinman & Williams, 2007, corresponds largely with the missing document.

surfaces across panels are the most poignant division of elements, and the fragmentation into square ceramic panels becomes a secondary, *forced* construct, like the ruler-straight border demarcations imposed by colonial cartographers upon the new worlds, that symbolically (though not morphologically) represent the plans to 'take apart' the depicted neighbourhood through acquisition.

The right section is split in two and displayed one above the other in the arrangement of a dotted 'i', the smaller, topmost one depicting an outline of the university campus laid over four square panels. In contrast, the lower subsection is divided into twelve rectangular panels that show the footprints of individual houses in the area; the ordered, unified campus and the fragmentary, organically evolved clusters of family houses illustrating the power imbalance between the authoritative institution and the individual, vulnerable citizen. Significantly, the *scales* of upper and lower right panels are not the same either – the lower one is 'zoomed in' on to emphasize home units and the 'threatened sense of place' felt by the community[175]. The 'gutter' spaces between panels also plays a part in the presentation, as the upper right section panels comprising the original campus are mounted closely next to each other to represent stability and unity, while the spacing of the lower right section correlates with that of the left section, both of which show different perspectives on the domestic area. The square shape that recurs in the upper right section – holding a privileged position over the lower right section depicting precarious homes – comes to represent also the authoritarian view that dissects the financially determined map in the left section into similarly proportioned pieces.

Overall, *Domain* is a fascinating piece that amalgamates cartography with the visual characteristics of map signature, and in implementing the landscape material in the material, clay, the artists build a formally and tangibly solid, *common* ground for their broader goal of 'telling a story that was only a whisper'[176] and – in spite of their positions as employees of Longwood University – facilitate a reconciliation in the wider community. More relevant to the subject of this thesis, their reflections on the development and creative processes provide interesting perspectives on the potential benefits from more complex, even nontrivial reading modes. Williams argues that the effort required to read a map, involving connecting elements and identifying relations, the understanding achieved 'has a stronger staying power and a

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175   Kinman and Williams, 2007, p. 441.
176   Kinman and Williams, 2007, p. 436.

deeper impact on our behaviours and perceptions'[177], supported by Stevens' arguments about learning. Kinman, unprepared for the physical limitation the kiln would have on the size of individual tiles they could burn, realized that splitting a larger image into several panels might be an asset, allowing him to consider the entire wall as a canvas for multiple panels: 'Literally unpacking the overall work into [sections] comprised of multiple [panels] provides design possibilities that wouldn't be as easy to combine on a single map'[178] Similar to the fruitful labour involved in interpreting a map noted by Williams, Kinman observes that working the clay made him *think* harder, that the material inflicted its own geological pace on the work process and that the deliberate planning required improved creative thinking[179]. Considering the co-creative position of the reader suggested both by Stevens and Aarseth, the resistant, even unwilling material provoking creativity in the (co-)creator seems may be seen as an original *'ergodos'* of production which is conveyed to and shared with viewers in their process of receptively decoding the work.

Cornell, Soap Bubble Set (1947-8)

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177 Kinman and Williams, 2007, p. 435-6.

178 Kinman and Williams, 2007, p. 441. On a language note: The artists consistently speak about the larger groupings of the work as 'panels', and the discrete subdivisions as 'tiles', which for the majority of this section has been rephrased 'sections' and 'panels', respectively, to avoid confusion with the overall use of the term 'panel' in this thesis. The single exception is in the previous passage where the ceramic process of burning tiles is mentioned. As 'panel' is used to describe the formal element of comics and its counterparts in other forms, it made no sense to talk about burning one for any purpose.

179 Kinman and Williams, 2007, p. 441.
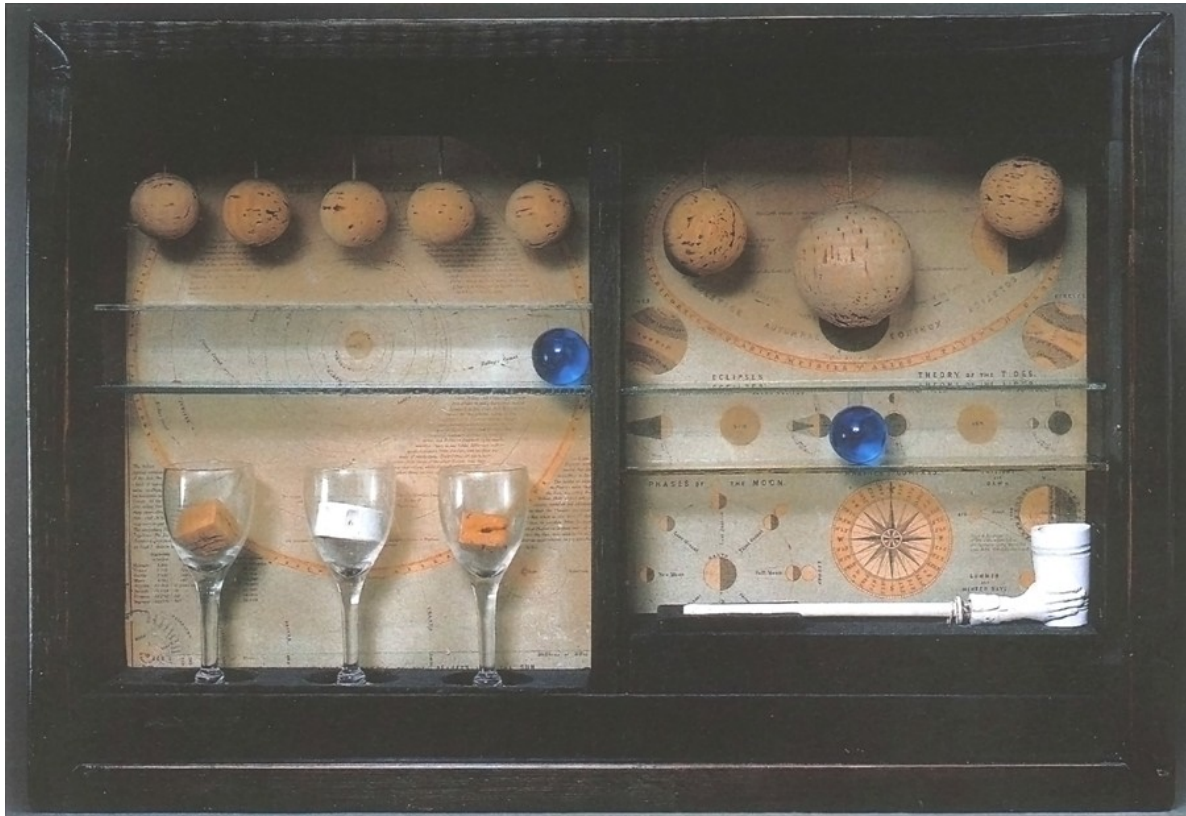
Ill. 5.5: Cornell, Soap Bubble Set (1947-8)

Description

Soap Bubble Set (1947-8) is one of several boxed assemblage works of the same name by Joseph Cornell, a subset of the Shadow Boxes that make up the majority of his work. This particular box, measuring 324 × 467 × 76 millimetres, is built in dark stained wood on five sides with a front glass face. The interior of the box is divided evenly through the middle by a vertical wooden bar, similarly stained to be part and parcel with the supporting structure. Of the two main subdivisions or panels created by that bar, the right-hand panel's bottom is slightly raised from the inner base of the box, creating an imbalance in the box layout. Through the centre of that rightmost panel a horizontal glass shelf which is continued into the left-hand panel by an identical shelf, the two functioning as essentially one further subdivision of the box's interior. In the left panel, a parallel shelf sits approximately 3 ½ centimetres above the horizontal mean shelf; in the right panel another shelf is set equidistantly below it.

Pasted onto the interior back panel of the box are maps of the moon and diagrams of its phases and orbits around the Earth, the restrained colour scheme consisting of subdued or

faded blue, orange brown, and a muted grey used mostly for contours. These charts are arranged so as to sit symmetrically within the panel divisions created by the wooden bar and glass shelves. The interior base of each compartment is clad in deep blue velvet. Hung by threads from the top of the box are eight cork balls; five balls of approximately 2 ½ centimetres diameter in the left panel, and in the right panel two balls of approx. 3 ½ centimetres surround a larger one, approx. 4 ½ centimetre in diameter. Whereas the cork balls in the left panel are hung at regular intervals and at the same level, the central ball of the right panel is at a lower level and appears to be slightly left off centre from the panel and lunar map; the rightmost cork ball is slightly closer to the top of the box, its lowest point almost corresponding with those of the smaller balls of the left panel.

Resting on the lower glass shelf of the left panel is a translucent blue marble, and correspondingly on the bottom shelf of the right panel a similar marble – whether those marbles are in a fixed position or able to shift is uncertain, judging only from available photographs and descriptions, as Cornell's box works were often made to be handled and interacted with. On the elevated base of the right panel rests an ornamented white clay pipe, the head of which is shaped as a drinking cup held by a sleeved arm and hand extending from the stem of the pipe. In the lower half of left panel, three cordial classes are set into depressions cut to size into the velvet-covered base, distributed more or less evenly across the width of the panel. Though the available sources give no detail on the glasses' contents, the ones on either flank contain cubes of a similar texture and colour to the cork used elsewhere in the box; in the middle glass sits a piece of white, porous material similar if not identical to the clay used to make the pipe in the opposite panel.

Analysis

As in the case of LeWitt, Cornell's individual works deserve to be seen in the light of the artist's larger œuvre and practice. Throughout his box constructions, he worked consistently (though not exclusively) with subdivided, wooden structures resembling *Wunderkammer* vitrines or Victorian museum displays, though their contents represent the artist's inner world rather than empirical reality, and as such deliberately avoided any single, direct interpretation. The *Soap Bubble Set* works, specifically, more often implied than showed the soap bubble by way of isomorphic spheres or orb-like objects, and by the recurrent pipe motif. The transitory

nature of soap bubbles and their connotation of childhood is regularly contrasted by the astronomical scale (of time as well as size) implied by star or planetary charts. Likewise, in the box referenced here, the material lightness of cork belies the gravitational mass of moons and planets that the balls are implied to signify, both in their present arrangement as a home-made orrery, and in their colour similitude to the moon in the backdrop illustrations. Either blue glass marble, in this discombobulation of scales, could represent a solidified drop of water, the new moon – or the blue planet Earth.
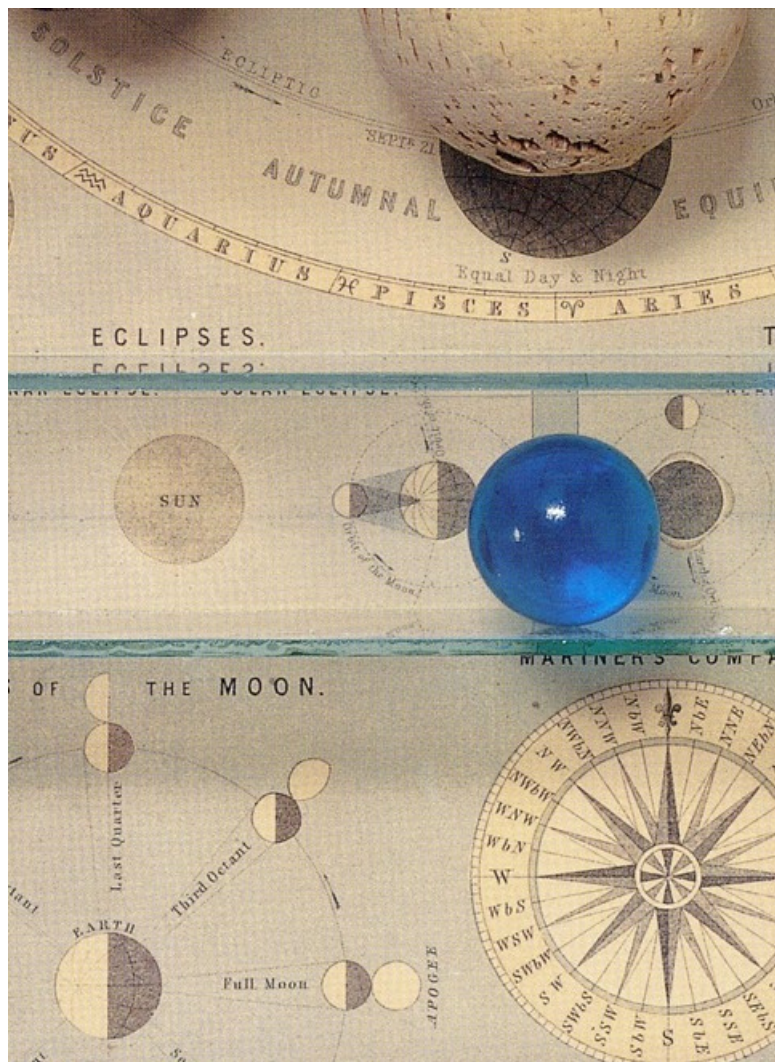
Ill. 5.6: Detail from Cornell, Soap Bubble Set (1947-8).

Also like LeWitt, Cornell collected a massive archive of materials, an apparatus for his use in artistic work, but where the former kept his mementos for inspiration, the latter employed

them directly in his assemblages – 'poetic theatres or settings', as he called them[180] – for the aura and symbolism they would enact in combination with other elements. Even more, as Rona Cran among others observe, Cornell actively scoured for found objects to infix into his idiosyncratic works, from his home in the New York suburb Flushing to to the somewhat more dazzling Manhattan.[181]

Barbara Stafford, singling out Cornell's assemblage work and foraging practice as exemplary of the visual analogy she compellingly describes, identifies the cognitive network model of creating – as well as co-creating in the process of 'reading' – his Shadow Boxes, 'capturing the chimera of consciousness in action'[182] as elements are ordered, distinguished by salience, and recombined to attain new import. Significantly, both Cran and Stafford de-emphasize the Surrealist category that Cornell has often been associated with, in favour of viewing his box assemblages as a three-dimensional evolution from the paper collages he gained initial notice for, and which he returned to intermittently throughout his life. Certainly, both construction and collage were employed by Surrealists,[183] but especially Cran, noting that Cornell's connection was biographical rather than aesthetic, enforces the notion that he was more indebted to the practice of collage than to any particular movement, insisting that his entire œuvre be seen as 'an extended personal collage'[184].

The juxtaposition of collage elements relate directly to *Wunderkammer* exhibits, provoking in the beholder associative leaps akin to hyperlinks, argues Stafford: 'Simultaneously homogeneous and heterogeneous, the knowledge produced in this network of intersecting coordinates was synthetic'[185] in the sense that the disparate elements are synthesized as they coexist on a shared support. In its ability to assemble and transmute even conflicting ephemera through juxtaposition, then, box art as an intensification of both cabinets of curiosities and of collage, resemble the 'chambered brain' in cognitive action.[186] The evocation of collage as an externalization of cognitive processes is not only interesting in and

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180   J. Cornell, in exhibition catalogue: *Joseph Cornell: Objects*, Beverly Hills, Copley Galleries, September 28, 1948.

181   Cran, 2016, p. 49.

182   Stafford, 1999, p. 146.

183   D. Waldman, *Joseph Cornell: Master of Dreams*, New York, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2002, p. 22.

184   Cran, 2016, p. 55.

185   Stafford, 2003, p. 122.

186   Stafford, 1999, p. 153.

of itself, but the language used by both Cran and Stafford is highly suggestive of the montage at work in comics, as well.

Where Cran argues in her initial mission statement that the basic principle of collage 'is the experimentation with and the linking of disparate phenomena[…] Collage is about encounters. It is about bringing ideas into conversation with one another'[187], Stafford writes about Robert Rauschenberg's *Combines*: 'Fragments engage in a suggestive dialogue across the vast surfaces of these multidirectional and nonhierarchical paintings'[188]. À propos the sociocultural connotations discussed in chapter 1, Frederic Jameson is quoted by Cran as writing that 'the collage composition … draws heavily and centrally on the warehouse of cultural and mass-cultural cliché – on the junk materials of industrial capitalism'[189]. While mass produced comics throughout large parts of the century were indeed ensconced in cliché as well as industrial junk, the use of collage in comics was rarely attempted with such consequence or importunity that it reflected into their structure or narrative form.

Interpretation

Applying the works discussed above to the cloud of accumulated, still-atomized comics theory, it should come as no surprise that particularly Stafford's approach lends itself to these ends, hinging as it does exactly on the analogous qualities of visual art. Nor is it cause for great wonder that works like *Domain* and *Soap Bubble Set* are situated more within Groensteen's general arthrology than in the sequentially restrained one, as neither are produced with linear comics readings in mind, or even intended for the printed book medium suggestive of that folded z-path schema in the way that *Autobiography* is. However, both the central section of *Domain* and the backdrop schematic of lunar phases in *Soap Bubble Set* represent linear sequential progressions, but neither can be said to dominate as much as inform the larger, multi-linear works.

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187 Cran, 2016, p. 4.

188 Stafford, 2003, p.148

189 F. Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist,*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1981, p 73

The spatio-topia, the multiframe, and the in-between

Where all three converge is on their clear usage of the spatio-topic convergence of *space* and *site,* and in their utilization of cartography, itself a visual representation of those elements, in different guises and levels: least obviously of the three, LeWitt depicts maps only sporadically in his extensive apparatus, and less so than for example books, newspaper clippings or clock faces, but cartographic elements are implied throughout the book by the rigid layout grid echoing longitudinal and latitudinal coordinates, aggrandizing perhaps the scale of his studio and quarters.

While *Domain* is an attempt to unite both the map with the material landscape, and two communities separated by interests and purchasing power, in an affective gesture of reconciliatory empathy, *Soap Bubble Set* uses the lunar map not to signify the moon as a concrete place, but as an enchantment by proxy of the multiple analogous spheres present in the work and of the soap bubbles only implied by the title and pipe. Of course, the subdividing multiframe is employed in all works as well, and the segment-building feature of its in-between utilized in both *Autobiography* and *Domain,* though most notably in the latter where varying proximities come to symbolize stability and precariousness within the communities involved, reinforced by the added level of support, or perhaps multiple hyperframes, of metal plates on which segments are mounted. In *Autobiography,* the egalitarian uniformity in size and representation of panels in the constant grid, on the other hand, provides an evenly rhythmic flow only interrupted by highly regularized blank spaces to mark intervals within the body of the work. The sites treated in the three works vary similarly, from the contested neighbourhood in *Domain* via the habitat in *Autobiography* to the privately mythological sphere depicted in *Soap Bubble Set* – the latter located in an ephemeral in-between the pipe's potentiality of blowing bubbles and the authoritative circumscriptions of the moon.

Ergodic features

While all the three works require nontrivial effort to decode, establishing them as visual ergodic 'texts', they represent varying levels of challenge to such efforts, and for different purposes. *Soap Bubble Set* contains within its own formal confines, visible at a glance, all elements needed to raise the ambiguities of Cornell's personal mythology in the reader's

mind, not a finalized narrative in itself but a set of referent charms to project one's own imaginative play onto. Although Aarseth might object to his concept of cybertext applied to purely visual works, *Soap Bubble Set* can surely be considered to focus its 'mechanical organization' by positing intricacies of its material presentation as an 'integral part' of the aesthetic exchange. *Autobiography,* a paged multiframe only visible two pages at a time, demands slightly more engagement for readers to orient themselves in the corpus of images, and to identify those intricacies fundamental to navigating it, the analogous 'hyperlinks' allowing a networked exploration of its symmetrically arranged labyrinth. Unlike *Soap Bubble Set,* the sheer mass of pictures in *Autobiography* need not instil an immediate internalized co-creative state but can suffice to send the reader-as-explorer leaping from point to point in the work in an on-going interactive state of playful association.

Of the three, only *Domain* disappoint in providing in its presentation significant indication of its intended reading: ultimately reliant on the textual background information provided in the artists' statement for the key to its solution, its iconic map features and scrupulous spatio-topical arrangement fall short of independently conveying the very concrete conflict pertinent to the local area. Whereas LeWitt's and Cornell's works bank at most on their respective titles for textual support and information, Kinman and Williams' ceramics work requires the viewer's comprehension of a decades long exertion of socio-economic advantage by an institution over an underprivileged citizen group. It can be argued, of course, that the intended audience of the work are precisely those involved in and familiar by association with that conflict-- the people the artists set out to reconcile – in which case the textual component is merely meant to inform those unfamiliar with the background. The reductivism and abstraction of the visuals in *Domain* that necessitate the artists' statement, then, can be seen as shorthand referring to an experiential knowledge understood to be shared between the parties to the dispute.

Implications on comics

If any gain is to be made from this exercise of bringing to bear the loan-blend apparatus drawn together in the previous inquest upon works from the contemporary arts world, the process must be reflected to identify in the resultant findings novel or expanded perspectives applicable to comics. In *Soap Bubble Set,* montage is utilized as the merging of discrete

elements into a cohesive, accumulative whole, similar to collage, providing not a progressive closure as suggested by McCloud, but a simultaneous, rhizomic synthesis determined by the pictorial field known from classical, painterly arts. *Domain* employs a more schematic, cartographical approach to lend a scientific aura to its affective semantics: proximity, relative size and groupings conjoin to build *an abstract concept of spatial elements,*[190] in effect a complex infographic of codes and signatures communicating a highly specific message axiomatic only to a regional audience. *Autobiography*, perhaps the most superficially comics-like of the three inspected works, offers in a conventional reading only a catalogue of the artist's personal belongings and quotidian space, but upon that, (perhaps only cursory) serial orientation of the assemblage lends itself to a far more intuitive *flânerie* of visual association and analogy.

All of the above must be considered part and parcel of the greater panoramic view on comics which is the purpose and working theory of this thesis. As much as this formal reassessment of comics can be employed as a perspective upon contemporary art, so need scholars and critics alike adopt analytical tools previously reserved for those institutional art forms in order to fully measure the artistic potential in and multiplicity of interpretive strategies available to comics. That is, that not only does the *expressive content* of comics span a much wider field than that of sequential narrative, however poignant or eloquent the story, but that also their *reading schemas* in terms of meaning-making structures are far more diverse and ambiguous than their entertainment mode implies, and finally, that their *materiality*, subject to some fetishization by fine artists and readers alike, extends far beyond the print or screen with which they are most commonly associated.

It can be inferred from *Autobiography* that comics may constitute a visual inventory that – unlike Aarseth's delimitations for the cybertextual labyrinth – can be navigated from any point or panel to any other instance by virtue of analogy, be that by similarity or association of content or theme. From *Soap Bubble Set* it is demonstrable that the same visual analogy can act as a synthetic metaphor where the entire work is visible *in praesentia,* a trompe l'œil that doubles as a projectile in the shape of a dream and the mechanism that fires it. *Domain*, a visual puzzle aimed only at those conversant in the shibboleth of its referent system, exhibit ergodic features *ad extremis* that indicate the imperative of knowing one's audience and the

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190   von Ungern-Sternberg, 2009, p. 235.

benefits of drawing on the collective experience of that in-group, no matter the internal schisms it may pertain.

Particularly the site of encounter for *Domain* and *Soap Bubble Set* projects an expanded concept of the 'shared support' proposed by Groensteen, not in the sense of the individual work's base – as already noted, *Domain* introduces an intermediate metal support to reinforce panel groupings – but of the gallery wall serving as a spatio-topia onto which multiple existing pictures are placed. Even proponents of the more conventional definitions of comics, specifying linear progression of events and recurring characters, would have difficulties arguing against a chronological hanging, for example, of Rembrandt's self portraits qualifying as comics – tracing the adult life of the artist sequentially over multiple paintings. Less conservatively, the curatorial practice of juxtaposing disparate artists' works to construct a multifaceted mosaic on a shared theme, era or subject falls neatly within the generous confines of comics theory presented here, and such theories as have emerged around the practice may conversely prove as useful to that of comics.

Additionally, by example of *Soap Bubble Set*, and in inference of Sol LeWitt's other serial works such as the *Variations of Incomplete Open Cubes*, another convention of comics falls away to reveal further potential means of exploration: that comics needs be limited to two-dimensional manifestations. It is therefore not only reasonable to propose that sculptural comics be produced by artists or assembled by curators from existing works to create contextual exhibitions as described above; one should expect to find instances of those three-dimensional comics exhibitions already on view.

Summary

This chapter has sought to inform the expanded working theory of comics with another peripheral perspective of the art form, this iteration performed from the contemporary (i.e., post-World War II) arts field. The expected results of applying the preliminary theoretical apparatus constelled through the previous chapters on Sol LeWitt's photo art book *Autobiography*, Edward Kinman and John Williams' ceramic work *Domain*, and Joseph Cornell's 'shadow box' *Soap Bubble Set*, was that that apparatus might prove relevant to that field of multiframe practice, and that the subsequent insights might in turn supplement to reinforce the theories arrived at so far. While the first part of the inquest may show that the

still-prototypical theory is not quite adequate in fully analysing those works, it does bring forth novel perspectives on them in a wider context of combinatorial, multi-linear meaning-making, in which comics have figured prominently to consider practices like collage, cartography and play.

More productively for the second goal of the on-going process, the analyses provided an understanding that concepts like ergodic features and the interpretive co-creation of the viewer operate on varying scales of apprehension – i.e., that the ease of reception may be determined by the intentional ambiguity of the intended message vis-à-vis the specificity of the target group as defined by the pre-acquired knowledge necessary to discern that message, or by the viewer performing an initial overview of a substantial body of images in order to glean the structural 'hidden principles' required to navigate it. No less integral to this exercise is the importation by association of potential sites of presentation from the printed page where comics are conventionally found to the shared support of venue walls – and *spaces*, as it is further inferred from *Soap Bubble Set* and from LeWitt's spatially serial practice that a three-dimensional spatio-topia is a yet-unexplored component of comics theory. Finally, with the implication of the exhibitional organization structure, curatorial practices of juxtaposition may be included into the productive aspect of comics via the notion of collage as foraging-combinatorial process involving found or pre-existing objects.

CONCLUSION

Summary

As should be expected when commencing on an expansive exploration of ill-defined borderlands, the scale of the task does not lessen as one proceeds in charting the territory; on the contrary, challenges of topology and circumferent landscapes perplex and complicate the undertaking. In the preceding chapters, an early delineating effort was made to separate the *form* of comics from its sociocultural connotations and the industrial production complex that largely dictate those. On that basis, the definitions listed and compared in the first empirical chapter were dissected with relative ease, particularly their preponderant focus on features attributable to that industry: comics as narrative form; as mass medium; as entertainment commodity.

Asserting the purely formal focus on comics within this thesis, with an intention to extend the potential for both creative and analytical scholarly work on the subject, dominant theories were undressed of their biases favouring those extraneous characteristics. That is, for one, Scott McCloud's preference for the linear narrative to the point of exclusivity in a purportedly comprehensive work on the possibilities of comics; Neil Cohn's linguistically predicated insistence on the same linearity, for another. Thierry Groensteen's concept of *arthrology*, though steeped in base sequence, proved instrumental in identifying further modes of reading and navigating the spatio-topia of comics.

The very structure of the comics page, the forked in-between emphasized by the periphery phenomena of abstract and poetry comics, belies the singularity of that unilinear reading schema, dominant though it may be, as the indismissible historical presence of wordless comics disperse the notion that word-image combination in any way constitute the form. Similarly, the very existence of nonfigurative comics art is cause to dethrone the definitive qualities of representational art in comics. Identifying those abstract and poetic forms as wilful subversions to evade the sociocultural tangle of misconceptions immuring comics from decades of modernist and post-modernist developments in both visual art and poetry, they may in the sociocultural sense be considered *uncomics*, but formally they represent different degrees of innovation that simply cast off the implied limitations of that paradigm.

Using the literary concept of the *ergodic cybertext* as a model, it became possible to identify the corresponding reading schemas of the *map*, the *labyrinth*, and the *network*, and eventually to the operations of *visual analogy* and *combinatorial play* as conducive to the engagement of the spectator in decoding the visual puzzle represented by any multi-linear comics. That engagement was found to transform the position of the spectator to an interpretive participant, co-creating the work in that process. Finally, in testing the neoteric working theory of comics against contemporary artworks, other perspectives from that sphere emerged to expand upon that developing theoretical apparatus beyond the limits of this thesis: that gallery walls and indeed its space total can be considered a spatio-topical system akin to the comics page, opening avenues for implementing both creative and scholarly work within the comics field into a new domain, permitting not only curatorial practices of juxtaposed combination, but also installational or sculptural, three-dimensional works.

Recommendations for a formalized, expanded analytical framework

As has been shown repeatedly throughout the preceding chapters, a majority of the previously proposed definitions of comics – informally connotative or scholarly – are untenable when held up to the peripheral phenomenon called *uncomics* herein, i.e., foremost non-representational, multi-linear or poetically ambiguous comics. Failing to separate the inherent formal qualities of comics from external mass medial and/or sociocultural ones perpetuates a blinkered view of an art form that is demonstrably capable of far wider expressions than those parroted from literature or cinema. In accordance with Jan Baetens' inference that abstract comics in particular require a reassessment of the comics form, discussed in Chapter 3, and without automatically detracting from pre-eminent works produced within the linear, literary paradigm, these following recommendations are offered for the purpose of establishing a more inclusive analytical framework than is currently available to the comics scholar.

First and foremost, comics should be considered a visual art form with distinctive characteristics that differentiate it from others, most notably the basic unit of the *panels*, and the spatio-topical implementation of *montage*. Further, that that montage is multidirectional and associative, meaning that a panel relates synthetically with any and all of its neighbours *in praesentia*, and analogously to images *in absentia*, hidden from view but part of the same multiframe. Also, that the spatio-topia may depend on a *shared support*, the definitions and

stratification of which must remain open-ended and inclusive. For any formal study of comics to be perpetrated, it must be delimited and dissociated from the industrial production structure that has emerged around it, and from the sociocultural perceptions derived primarily from the entertainment products of that structure, in order to simultaneously focus on the subject and widen the perspectives for potential inclusion. Often enough has the psychology or queerness of Batman been masticated within comics studies, or the literary qualities of one manga or other.

More specifically, in addition to the avenues of analysis pursued in this thesis, elements of Gestalt theory pertaining to pattern-making and groupings may advantageously be mined for further insights, as may well spatial, curatorial practices. Fields already touched cursorily upon in the above certainly merit further study to correlate them more thoroughly with this multidisciplinary proposal: The similarity between the analogous network reading schema and cognitive network models, to this author's mind, is too serendipitous to be entirely coincidental, and the ludic element to visual puzzles and ergodic works begs the question to what extent game studies can be implemented in reading (and compositional) strategies in comics.

As the area of research spreads out of sight beyond the horizon from the starting point, the subject matter may not ultimately be comics any longer, but a larger field of combinatorial sensorial phenomena.

Closing words

Returning to the question repurposed from W. J. T. Mitchell in Chapter 3, *what do comics want if they do not want to be comics* (in the conventional sense of the term), the answer is found in no small measure in what the more narrowly, mass medial and socio-culturally defined parameters deny them. It is not a matter of low art aspiring to be high art, those are terms that are only defined commercially by the price tag on any given work, and which only serve to obscure the aesthetic axis of assessment privileged herein. In the sense that comics are industrial products that elevate the reproduction over the original, they predate Andy Warhol's serial multiples; like comics publishers have appropriated authorial rights of those mass products by turning creators into subcontracted conveyor belt workers, so has Damien Hirst employed hired hands and craftsmen to produce artworks bearing his signature. This is

not a value judgment, simply observation indicating that the difference between high and low art is entirely conceived and sustained by the respective commercial industries. *What do comics want if they do not want to be comics?* For one example, Cohn refuses roundly that they can be abstract – a statement subsequently demonstrated to be incorrect – nor do music, dance or athletic skills apply in his perspective. Those are four things those uncomics want: To not be figurative, but also to sing, dance, and to jump hurdles, all made possible by the subversive maneuver of declining sociocultural perceptions, and of conjugating linear narrative into labyrinths or rhizomic networks. They want to be *uncomics.*

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