Reading Comics

Dr Chris Murray, University of Dundee

Comics are an endlessly fascinating artform. This is partly because what we now call "comics" is really a primal, prehistoric form of communication, juxtaposing words and images in a sequence. The Mayans had them on their pottery, as did the Greeks, while the Hittite and Egyptian alphabets were pictographic systems that were comic-like in some respects. Indeed, cave-paintings are quite similar to comics on some level, but how are we to define "comics"? Perhaps the most obvious point to note is that comics contain a sequence of events. This is what usually separates them from illustration. A comic may be only one image with an *internal sequence,* but it is usually two or more panels at least, arranged in a sequence.

The sequentially that we encounter in comics has some interesting consequences. One is that the interaction between comic panels on a page necessitates that the reader close a signifying "gap". In other words, when two or more panels create a sequence meaning is partly constructed through a reading of what is understood to have transpired *between* the panels. As Scott McCloud argues in *Understanding Comics* (1993);

> Comic panels fracture both time and space offering a jagged staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality.

McCloud goes on to state that comics are the "invisible art", requiring the reader to fill in the gaps between the panels, This space between panels, which is often referred to as the gutter, "allows the reader to observe the parts but perceive the whole", performing this act of "closure". In this sense much of the perceived action on a page occurs "off-screen". This

can be seen in a panel from *Phoolish Philipe* (*The New York Herald*, May 29, 1904) by Winsor McCay, one of the pioneers of early American comic strips (fig. 1).
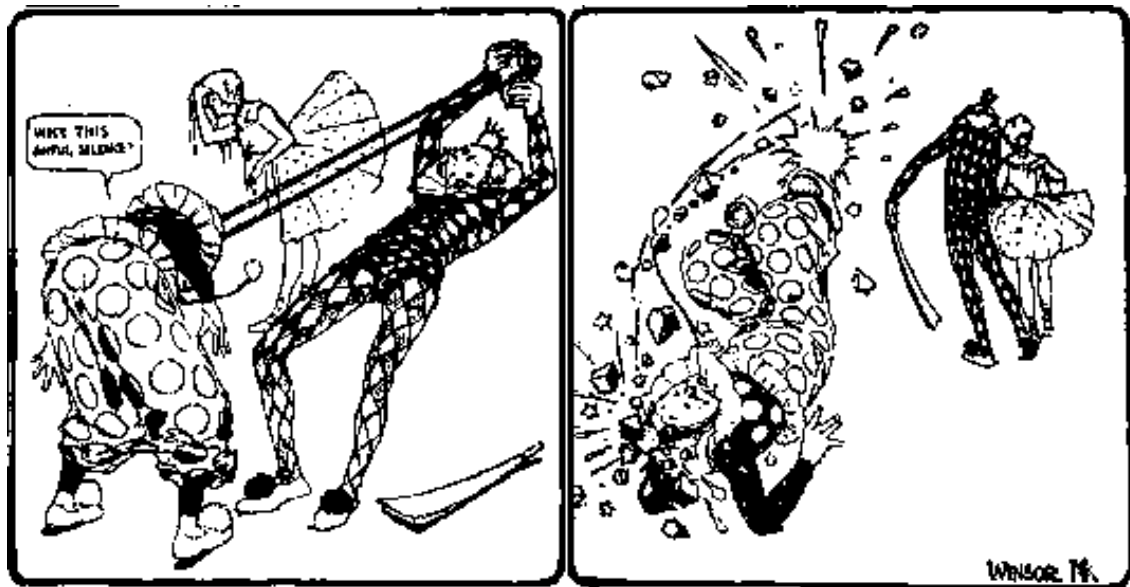

Fig. 1 Winsor McCay, *Phoolish Philipe* (*The New York Herald*, May 29, 1904)

The artist implies the action while the reader infers it. In an objective sense much of the action simply does not exist on the page, but is instead alluded to. The reader fills in the signifying gap, the dead space between panels, to produce a reading of the panels that approximates the reader's experience of the continuous nature of "reality". In this sense the gutter is far from "dead" space, rather it is the life of the comics, the absence that allows the reader to transpose an imagined narrative between the visual signifiers (the images in the panels). In *Phoolish Philipe* the reader interprets the action in terms of their foreknowledge of cause and effect, yet the moment of action is never seen, and time is internally compressed in these panels, allowing for a great deal of narrative economy. Despite this economy, this simple sequence has a great sense of movement and energy, things which are suggested by the text but imported by the reader. This is very much interactive media, and perhaps a kind of time based art. Consider then, the opportunities offered to comics by technology. In internet comics, using Flash animation and so on, panels can open up when clicked on to reveal more panels within panels, advancing the

narrative in increasingly non-linear and subjective ways, but does this technology move comics into entirely new territory, or does it allow us to remember that comics were weird and exciting all along?

Comics, in both their new forms and traditional forms, give rise to an inherently subjective reading process. In a sense the gutter *sutures* meaning, simultaneously holding the panels apart while drawing them together in an seemingly ordered relationship on the page. The illusion of a concrete structure is further complicated by the fact that a large number of panels are often visible all at once on the comics page, meaning that it is entirely possible that when a reader sees a comic page the first thing that attracts their eye may be something other than the first panel. Each reader will not only have a subjective interpretation of what is occurring in the panels (what is depicted) but will also construct a subjective and personal interpretation of what has occurred *between* panels. Indeed, "Here", by Richard McQuire (in *Raw*, Vol 2, #1, 1989), shows how comics can bend the rules of narrative time and sequentuality with nothing more than juxtaposed text and images (fig. 2).
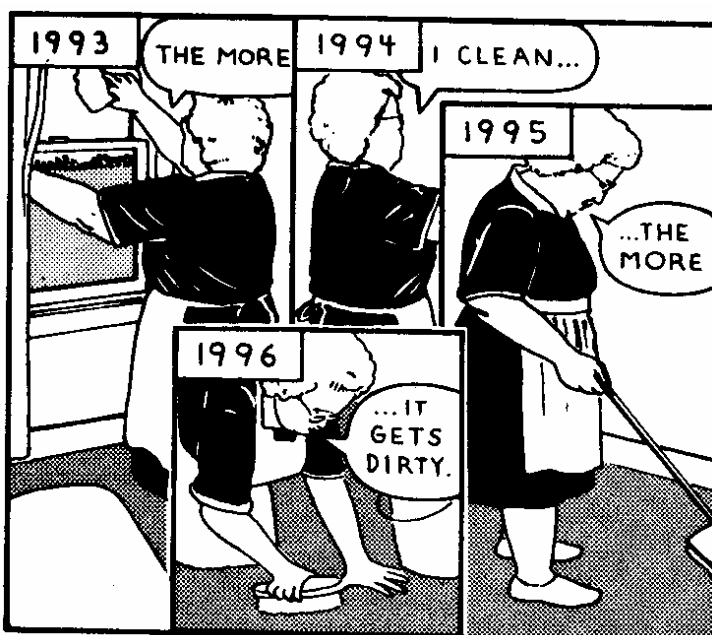

Fig. 2 Richard McQuire, *Here* **(in** *Raw***, Vol 2, #1, 1989)**

In this single panel four sub-panels inhabit one space, creating four different timeframes. The result is a montage of various temporally separate, yet spatially linked images, creating a complex topography of time and narrative and visual play. It is exactly this sort of subversive play that comics specialise in.

While the reader of a comic may be inclined to structure the narrative following certain guidelines provided by the text, such as panel layout, the Western convention of reading left to right, and so on (giving the action the semblance of a visual syntax and grammar), the reading process is fundamentally one of interpretation and decoding rather than simple perception. This indeterminacy is of exactly the same order as that defined by the philosopher Jacques Derrida in his post-structuralist theories on the nature of language, and it opens up the possibility that the recent developments in net comics are not so much innovations in how we think about comics, but rather technology revealing the inherent nature of comics as a *virtual* structure. That is one of the most interesting aspects of modern technology, how the innovations mirror the predictions made about language, artworks and signs by earlier theory. Is it the theory that reveals the practice, or the practise that reveals the theory? Maybe the very dichotomy between theory and practice is itself an illusion – the two sides of the same thing looked at from different angles.

Interestingly, given the subversive potential of comics as an unstable medium, the term "comics" came about because early cartoon strips were frequently *humorous*. While, it might seem somewhat strange to label an entire medium due to its association with one genre, it can also be seen as a strangely appropriate label, as it should be borne in mind that "komos", the origin of the word comic/comedy, means a coming together (community, commerce, communion), usually in the revels, a time of humorous and subversive transgression. Of course, comics are about the coming together of word and image, but

they are also about play and ironic juxtaposition (just like comedy). For this reason comics are inherently weird, strange, and above all, parodic, if not necessarily in their themes and narratives, then in what can be termed their "virtual structure", generating meaning in a ongoing cycle of containment and change. For that reason, the term "comics" seems more descriptive and useful that others that have been offered ("graphic novels", "sequential art", etc). Reading comics is therefore a complex negotiation which is endlessly productive in terms of meaning and ultimately subversive in its deconstruction of concepts such as sequence and order. Many of these principles have been explored in the work of comics writers Alan Moore and Grant Morrison, British writers who have tackled the American market, bringing an infusion of literary and philosophical concerns to comics, and exploring their potential as strange, post-modern structures that tell-stories in challenging and unpredictable ways.

Dr Chris Murray
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