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A Guide to Reading Graphic Novels*

What Are Comics?

Comics use a combination of words and images to tell a story. Master comics artist Will Eisner uses the term “Sequential Art” in describing comics. In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud, another renowned comic artist and theorist, offers this definition: More technically, comics are “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (20). McCloud makes a distinction between cartoons, which are single images, and comics, which depict images in sequence.

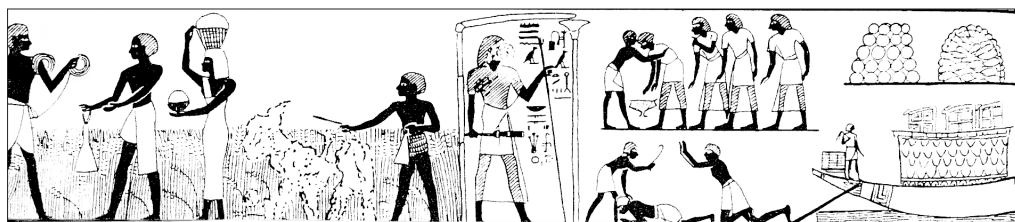
SINGLE PANELS LIKE THIS ONE ARE OFTEN LUMPED IN WITH COMICS, YET THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A SEQUENCE OF ONE!



“Mommy, why ain't I Juxtaposed?”

According to this definition, comics have been around over 3,000 years. McCloud points to Egyptian tomb paintings done thirty-two centuries ago; the Bayeux tapestry, which depicted the Norman conquest of England in 1066 in pictures reading left to right; and a pre-Columbian picture manuscript discovered by Cortez around 1519.

When you start looking, comics are everywhere. “From stained glass windows showing Biblical scenes in order,” McCloud points out, “to Monet’s series paintings, to your car owner’s manual, comics turn up all over when sequential art is employed as a definition” (20).



How Do Comics Work?

Icons: Amplification Through Simplification

McCloud makes the shrewd observation that the more abstract an image is, the more easily people identify with it. “When we abstract an image through cartooning, we’re not so much eliminat-

ing details as we are focusing on specific details,” he argues. “By stripping down an image to its essential ‘meaning,’ an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can’t” (30), thus lending universality to the image.

Given the abstract image of a circle, two



ONE



A FEW



THOUSANDS



MILLIONS



(NEARLY) ALL



dots, and a line, for example, we instantaneously convert it into a human face. By participating in this fashion, albeit unconsciously, we actually enter into the comic.

Closure:

In combining words and images, comics occupy a place between paintings and photographs, which communicate through images only, and literature, which, relying solely on the written word, requires readers to visualize what is being described. Thus comics are situated midway between the totally concrete (visual art) and the totally abstract (literature). One of the ways comics communicate is through what McCloud calls “closure,” in which readers unconsciously supply whatever is missing between individual panels (a space called the “gutter”).

Closure relies on the brain’s automatic practice of observing the parts but perceiving the whole.

Closure is at the very heart of the magic of comics. For the story to make sense, artists must supply us with enough clues to allow us to fill in the missing information. They must select the key moments in the story, and those moments only.



the story to include and which to omit. In *Making Comics*, McCloud outlines four additional critical choices: choice of frame (choosing the right distance and angle to view those moments), choice of image (how to render characters, objects, and environments), choice of words (selecting words that add information and work well with the images), and choice of flow (guiding readers through and between panels on a page).

Other Decisions:

The comic artist must make decisions about:

- The size and shape of the panels, which can vary from page to page.
- Content of panels: Wide view, medium shot, or close up? Detailed or pared down? Shading or line drawings? Realistic or distorted?
- Eye level, bird’s eye, or worm’s eye view? Images centered or off center?
- Borders: framed (contains the image & action), unframed (suggests limitless space), or “bleeding” frames (subjects overflow into other panels).
- Flow: the arrangement of panels.
- Typography: font type and size, special effects.



Crucial Choices:

Most panels represent a single moment in time, though some show movement through time. In moving us through time and space, the comic artist’s challenge is choosing which moments of

Glossary of Terms:

Panel: a box which contains a given scene (box, frame)

Border: the outline of the panel

Gutters: the space between panels

Tier: row of panels (left to right) on page

Balloons: the container of the text-dialogue spoken by the characters

Tail: pointer leading from balloon to speaker

Birds’ Eye View: the scene as seen from above it

Worm’s Eye View: the scene as seen from beneath it

Gesture: human movement or expression

Posture: attitude of the body

Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, p. 163

Other Challenges:

- Depicting motion with static images.
- Creating and sustaining a mood.
- Indicating sounds.
- Revealing emotions.