Reconsidering the Conventions Employed in Comix and Comix strips.

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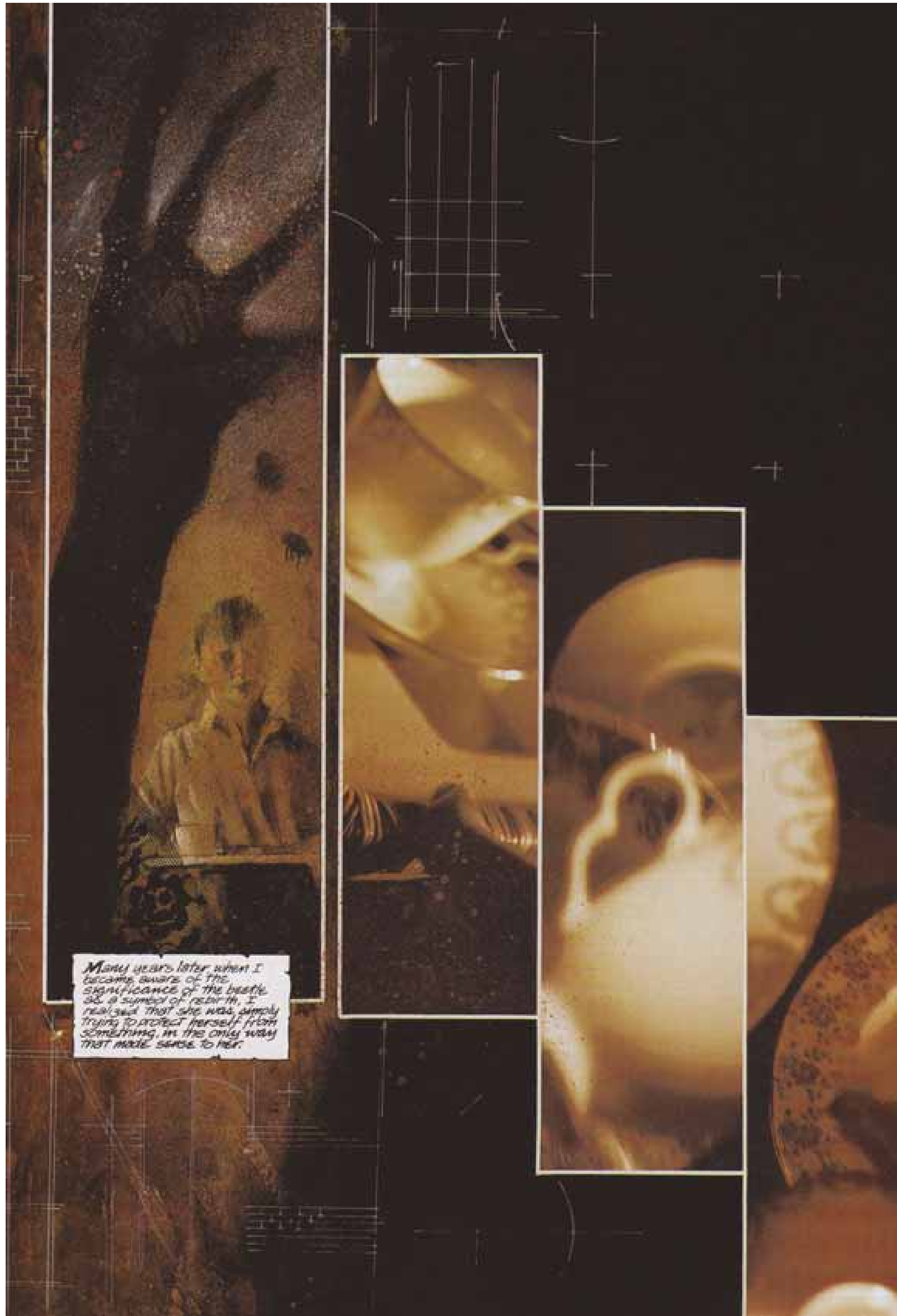

Declaration

I, the undersigned, hereby declare the work in this thesis to be my own original work, that the sources I have consulted or cited are acknowledged by means of complete references and that I have not previously submitted it in part or as a whole at any University for the purposes of attaining a degree.

Signed ....

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the conventions employed in comix and comix strips, with the intention of establishing whether these conventions can be elaborated upon or significantly changed without disrupting or disabling the communicatory function of the comix narrative. To establish and decode the dominant conventions of comix, I employ semiotic theory, particularly the theories of Derrida and Charles S. Peirce. In order to establish whether comix employ a common set of signs (a fundamental lexicon of conventions) I look at a wide selection of comix ranging from Europe and Japan to South Africa. The main aim of this study is to reconsider the conventions employed in comix and comix strips and to question whether they are immutable. Can they be elaborated upon and evolved? Derrida's *diffèrrance* and play of signification as well as Peirce's theory of three-fold semiosis play a significant role in establishing the possibility of 'altered' comix conventions. Using these theories, I propose that conventions are not immutable or fixed, and that comix can accommodate significantly more inventiveness and semiotic play than is commonly displayed.

Finally I ask whether comix with radically altered conventions can still be defined as comix. As examples of 'altered' comix conventions, I discuss some of my own comix.

Abstrak

Hierdie tesis ondersoek die konvensies wat in komix en komix strippe gebruik word met die doel om te bepaal of daar op hierdie konvensies uitgebrei kan word en of dit beduidend verander kan word sonder om die kommunikatiewe funksie van die komix vertelling te verstuer of dit te strem. Om die dominante konvensies van komix te bepaal en te dekodeer, gebruik ek semiotiese teorie en spesifiek die teorieë van Derrida en Charles S. Pierce. Om vas te stel of komix 'n bepalende stel tekens ('n leksikon van konvensies) gebruik, neem ek 'n breë seleksie van komix in ag, van Europa en Japan tot Suid-Afrika. Die hoofdoel van die studie is om die konvensies wat in komix en komix strippe gebruik word te heroorweeg en om te bevraagteken of hulle nie muteerbaar is nie. Kan hulle uitgebrei word en kan hulle evolusioneer? Derrida se *diffèrrance* en spel van beduidendheid asook Pierce se drievoudige semiose, speel 'n bepalende rol om die moontlikheid van veranderende komix konvensies vas te stel. Met hierdie teoreë as vertrekpunt hipotetiseer ek dat konvensies wel muteerbaar is (en nie vasgestel is nie) en dat komix aansienlik meer vindingrykheid en semiotiese spel kan akkomodeer as wat algemeen aangewend en aanvaar word.

Laastens vra ek die vraag of komix met radikaal veranderde konvensies nog steeds as komix gedefinieer kan word. As voorbeelde van veranderde konvensies, bespreek ek 'n paar van my eie komix.

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Reconsidering the Conventions Employed in Comix and Comix strips

Introduction

In this study, I wish to consider the nature of the conventions employed in comix[1] and comix strips[2]. I want to investigate what these conventions are, what their purposes are and finally, question whether they can be illustrated in a different way and if so, how existing conventions can be elaborated upon. I want to investigate whether changing them will interfere with the understanding of the narrative[3] and question whether these altered narratives can still be 'defined' as comix.

As the title of my article demonstrates, 'convention(s)' plays an integral part in this study. *Webster's Third New World International Dictionary* defines convention as: "d(1); a practice, device or mode of performance established by custom and widely recognised and accepted. : a representation or mode of performance recognised as a substitute for a natural form or mode. d(2); a representation (as in art or design) that simplifies, symbolises or substitutes for a natural form." (1993. S.v. 'convention'). Jeremy Hawthorn in his *A concise Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory*, cites Jonathan Culler:

> [Structuralism] is based … on the realisation that if human actions or productions have a meaning there must be an underlying system of distinctions and conventions which makes this meaning possible (1998: 33).

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[1] I will discuss the distinction between the terms 'comic(s)' and 'comix' in Chapter 2.

[2] A comix is a singular image whereas a comix strip is a series of images both containing a narrative and illustrating a narrative. These do not necessarily contain text nor are they only humorous, but can be, for example, iconoclastic, educational or be socially communicative in nature. Anton Kannemeyer writes:

> *Soos dit in die Sestigerjare (in Amerika en Europa) met die bevryding van die medium duidelik geraak het, hoef strippe nie narratief te wees nie – heelwat voorbeelde is poeties, abstrak of joernalisties. 'n Strip kan gelees word sonder dat een of 'n paar karakters herhaaldelik moet verskyn en teks hoef nie noodwendig as sulks op papier te realiseer nie* (Kannemeyer, 1997: 7).

[3] In other words, the readability of a visual text.

Hawthorn further states that not only one underlying system exists, necessarily, but possibly "many interacting and changing systems which are continually modified as a result of the uses to which they are put in the social and historical world" (1998: 34). He continues:

> A sign that derives its force from a system of conventions is said to be *unmotivated*, whereas one which has a force independent of any such agreed or accepted conventions is said to be *motivated*. 'Agreed or accepted' is important: conventions may be technically *artificial*, that is to say they may be drawn up, agreed upon, and abided by on the basis of conscious human planning and acceptance. Alternatively, they may be more *natural*, growing in a more unplanned manner, as particular tasks require a set of rules to enable and standardise communication (1998: 34).

Hawthorn clearly indicates that the 'systems of convention' are flexible and that they change according to social, historical and individual need. The signs, which 'derive their force' from these systems of convention, one can infer, are also flexible to social and historical needs and are thus also subject to change. It is therefore pertinent to my article that I discuss signs and investigate how they function.

Posing the question how conventions, and conventional signs, can be reconsidered, is therefore pertinent and, in my opinion, a necessary issue to investigate.

I wish to argue that, diversity despite, comix remains a relatively homogenous medium (across cultures) in that it repeatedly and universally uses the same conventions for gesture to illustrate certain themes[4]. Will Eisner analyses comix as a "sequential language based on a codification of gestures and facial expressions" (Christiansen and Magnussen: 2000: 13). Anton Kannemeyer regularly refers to the term 'diagramming' in his dissertation *Die ikonoklastiese strip, polimiek en Bitterkomix*. He describes it as an 'alphabet' for the comic artist. This 'alphabet' consists of an established group of conventions such as caricature, the use of symbols, movement/action, the interaction of the reader and the symbolic use of colour (Kannemeyer, 1997: 14). Kannemeyer goes on to say that:

[4] This could be because they developed in the modern era of globalisation.

> *Alhoewel* 'diagramming' *nie 'n vasgestelde 'alfabet' is nie, is daar konvensies wat 'n strip ten slotte leesbaar moet maak* (*ibid* 1997: 14).

One can therefore argue that what Kannemeyer refers to as 'diagramming', is the use of an 'alphabet' of conventions in order to reach an audience of readers more effectively and immediately. One can further argue that this practice (the use of an alphabet of diagrams) leads to the relative homogenisation of the comix and comix strip within different cultures.

Conventions may thus be regarded repetitive formal elements employed universally in comix and comix strips. Kannemeyer (1997: 2) refers to a discussion between Scott McCloud and Harvey:

> …, I think storytellers are more concerned with form. And people who are concerned with form are also concerned with breaking the form … (Harvey, R. C. 1995. *Round and Round with Scott McCloud.* The Comics Journal No 179: 52 – 81).

This raises the question: Have these conventional 'diagrams' become so much a part of the 'form' of comix, that the comix would no longer communicate if a critical amount of these conventions were disposed with? Are conventions, in other words, indispensable? If so, how do new conventions arise and old ones change?

Since conventions are signs, I will refer in this article to the semiotic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure and Derrida, but I will use as theoretical basis the theories of Charles S. Peirce. I focus particularly on his identification of the three types of signs, namely the icon, index sign and symbol as well as his ideas on the three processes/positions of semiosis - the sign, the mental image and the object. Pierce's three-fold conception of semiosis enables a reading of comix that can be flexible in their meaning. His three-fold interpretation of the sign includes the viewer meaning-giver, thereby proposing many possible meanings of signs through various individual interpretations.

For research on the conventions employed in comix and how they function, I rely largely on the writings of Scott McCloud. Christiansen and Magnussen state that

McCloud's *Understanding Comics* is primarily criticised for its lack of theoretical foundation: "He does not refer to any theoretical developments or existing academic insight into the different elements he analyses" (2000: 13&14). McCloud's book, they write, is contrary to the Structuralist approach, as some of his essential ideas "include a focus on the reader's participation in the creation of meaning. …. *Understanding Comics* is composed without any reference to any specific perceptual and semiotic theories, but on a general view on meaning production" (Christiansen and Magnussen, 2000: 13)[5].

I nonetheless found McCloud useful in that he "presents a grammar of comics based on six basic elements[6]" (Christiansen & Magnussen: 2000: 13) (which I will discuss in Chapter 2, 4 & 5) and *Understanding Comics* has become a common point of reference in comix research. For this reason I rely on McCloud's investigations into the conventions employed in comix, but do not rely on *Understanding Comics* for Post-modern, Structuralist semiotic theory. It must be noted, however, that I do not agree with some of McCloud's comments on these theories nor his use of semiotic terminology.

Chapter 1 is a concise investigation into semiotic theory where I briefly deal with the basic thought and structure of that theory. I establish what the semiotic conventions employed in comix are, as well as what the functions of some of these conventions are, thereby establishing what they signify.

Chapter 2 deals with the conventions employed in comix. I will attempt to create a list or catalogue illustrating the conventional signs and symbols commonly used.

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[5] Christiansen and Magnussen state (2000: 14) that McCloud has based his comix theory on the few theoretical works mentioned in his bibliography: Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media* (1964). McLuhan theorises that "comics constitute a 'cold' medium which leaves the viewer to give meaning to the form of expression" (2000: 14). The reader transforms configurations (simple line drawings into faces and figures) through the mental process of interpretation into something with life, personality and meaning. "When forming an interpretation of the comic, the different signs contained interact not only in a spatial dimension, but also require that the panel 'spaces' be interpreted sequentially" (Magnussen. 2000: 195). This mental process of interpretation McCloud calls 'closure' which he claims, mostly happens in the spaces between panels. It is important to mention that this means provisional closure: it is not final in that no 'conclusion' to the thought process (interpretation) is ever reached. Rather it is infinite in the amount of conclusions that can be reached. Provisional closure is a Post-Structuralist model of interpretation (or 'reading') which implies that there never is closure –no final, definite reading or interpretation of any given text. I will discuss closure in more depth Chapter 5.

[6] Drawing style, spacing of panels (closure), time, gestures, image-text relations and use of colour.

Martin Barker writes that a stereotype "is a shorthand image which fills in gaps in our knowledge. Where we do not know the reality, a stereotype gives us apparent knowledge" (1989: 196). In Chapter 3, I examine the relationship between conventions and stereotypes. I apply Post-modern, and particularly Post-Structuralist semiotic theory, to investigate whether conventions and stereotypes (as a kind of convention) can be re-examined and re-represented or used. In this chapter, I refer to the work of many comix artists –American, Japanese as well as South African.

In Chapter 4, I explore the signs and conventions pertinent to gesture[7] and expression in comix and comix strips. I use the term 'gesture' to refer to both facial expression as well as body language. I feel that a facial expression re-iterates the posture ones body takes in reaction to an action directed at the individual. Apart from the more obvious signs of gesture (e.g. facial expression and body languages illustrating emotions or particular situations, etc.), I wish to investigate the role reader participation plays in illustrating and 'initiating' gesture in comix. In Chapter 5, I examine how conventional signs and symbols are constituted in initiating reader participation and how they (signs and symbols) work in conjunction with reader participation.

In Chapter 6, I examine whether conventions can be illustrated differently and elaborated upon without interfering with the readability and understanding of the narrative. I will re-consider the conventions I examined in Chapters 2 - 5 and investigate where and how some of them can be illustrated and applied differently. By means of examples of some of my own work I will demonstrate how conventions can be amplified and illustrated differently and still communicate effectively within the comix genre.

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[7] Gesture: "1 *archaic*; the manner of carrying the body <the fashion of the countenance and the gesture of the body … is so correspondent of this state of mind – Edmund Burke> 3; the use of motion of the limbs or body as a means of intentional expression <we deduce motion from gesture – W. E. Allen> <gesture may be deliberate … or even symbolic – Susanne K. Langer> 4; a movement or usage of the body or limbs that symbolises or emphasises an idea, sentiment or attitude < she gave a gesture of despair – H. G. Wells>" (Webster's Third New World International Dictionary. 1993. S.v. 'gesture'. Germany: Köneman).

Finally, I will conclude that the conventions employed in comix are not immutable or indispensable. I will substantiate my conclusion by proving that there is no fixed definition of comix and that the existing definitions are constantly under discussion and vulnerable to change. The elaboration of and, in some cases, complete break with the conventions employed in comix, enlivens and expands the existing genre of comix, rather than necessitating a completely new category.

Chapter 1:

Reading Comix Conventions as Signs: A brief Consideration of Semiotic Theory

How we read is immensely influenced by an inundation of electronic media in the 21st Century. The printed word is currently being hijacked by another competitor for readership – film[8]. Television, videos, DVD's and films place little or no demand on a viewer's cognitive skills and make the 'tediousness' of learning to decode and digest words seem obsolete. It is clear that complex concepts and ideas are easier to digest when they are converted to imagery. Will Eisner writes that the fusion between word and image becomes a logical permutation for a generation that has become too lazy to read, and that is conditioned to appreciate visual narratives. "The resulting configuration is called comics and it fills a gap between print and film [where] the reading process in comics [becomes] an extension of text [and] images are employed as a language" (1996: 5).

If language can be broken down into a system of semantic conventions, then the 'language' of comix can be broken down into a system of semiotic[9] conventions. In many ways, one can define the conventions employed in comix as comprising the semiotic vocabulary of comix. Barker writes that within a still image, we learn to read many elements in sequence through recognising and being guided by the conventions of comic strip art: "The evolution of all these conventions has enabled even individual frames to become rich in meaning"(1989: 8).

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[8] "Accustomed to the pace of films, readers grow impatient with long text passages because they have become used to acquiring stories, ideas and information quickly and with little effort" (Eisner, W. 1996:5).

[9] Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure coined the term 'semiology' (developed from the Greek word *semeîon* meaning 'sign') referring to the (scientific) study of signs as a part of social life. Inherently it would therefore also form part of social psychology, and hence general psychology (Chandler, 2003: 1). 'Semiotics', the term coined by Charles S. Peirce, refers to the "formal doctrine of signs" (2003: 3), and is preferred by contemporary semioticians. "Saussure's term, 'semiology' is sometimes used to refer to the Saussurean tradition [of semiotic theory], whilst 'semiotics' sometimes refers to the Peircian tradition [of semiotic theory]. Nowadays, however, the term 'semiotics' is more likely to be used as an umbrella term to embrace the whole field" (Chandler, 2003: 2). Mick Underwood states that 'semiotics' is the preferred term in texts on semiotics over 'semiology', because it is more widespread in English-speaking countries (2003: 1). For these reasons (because it is the more contemporary and globally understood term), I will also adopt the term 'semiotics' over 'semiology', in this study.

In order to explore how comix conventions may be regarded as a semiotic system it is first necessary to provide a brief outline of semiotic theory.

1.1. Semiotic theory in brief

David Cunningham and Gary Shank, in their study "Semiotics, An Introduction", state that semiotic theory offers the position that a variety of problems in modern inquiry, taken from a number of different disciplines, are concerned with the same general set of problems: What is a sign? How does it work? How can I use it? (Cunningham & Shank: [S.a.]: 1).

In his dissertation[10], Rikus Ferreira refers to Mieke Bal's definition of semiotics: "Semiotics is the theory of signs and sign use, including *seeing* signs. Semiotics focuses on construction and representation, considering 'texts'[11] as specific combinations of signs yielding meaning" (2002: 4). It is evident that the foundation of semiotics, at the very least, must rest on perception, thereby also on interpretation and meaning[12]. We perceive the material world through "patterns of sensational qualities" (The Stewardship Project[13], [S.a.]: 1). Visual 'percepts' (the objects of perception/objects perceived through our senses) are patterns of area –shape, size and position, and colour –tint and tone.

Words, sounds, images, odours, flavours, acts or objects can all therefore be termed "percepts"[14]. In fact, anything we perceive with one or all of our five senses are

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[10] *'n Ondersoek na en dekonstruksie van die taal (beeld en teks) vervat in die visuele naratief met spesiale verwysing na die komiekstripmedium* (2002).
[11] "A text is an assemblage of signs (such as words, images, sounds and/gestures) constructed (and interpreted) with reference to the conventions associated with a genre and in a particular medium of communication" (Chandler, 2003: 3).
[12] Ferreira also refers to Norman Bryson's interpretation of what semiotics and its functions are:

> Semiology approaches painting as a system of signs. The emphasis on sign may seem odd, but what this term in the first instance displaces is the term perception (2002: 5).

[13] The Stewardship is an institute consisting of a collective of individuals and groups, working alone or together, conducting studies and research into areas of human rights, conservation economic welfare, government reform and mental health. The Stewardship Project works as a development of The Stewardship.
[14] Roland Barthes declared that "semiology aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all of

“percepts”. “These are the things immediately perceived by the mind; the objects they are taken to represent are a matter of inference.” (*ibid* [S.a.]: 1). The writers from The Stewardship Project state that these ‘percepts’ have no intrinsic meaning and become signs only when we invest them with meaning (Chandler, D. 2003: 1). Anything can therefore be a sign depending on whether someone interprets it as ‘signifying’ something - in other words, referring to or standing for something other than itself.

In the introduction to this study, I mentioned that I would look at the semiotic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles S. Peirce. In my opinion, they formulated the foundation of semiotic theory as well as the two dominant models of what a sign constitutes.

1.1.1. Saussure’s model of the sign and Derrida’s re-figuration of the Saussurian model

Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure offers a “dyadic” or two-part model of the sign. The sign comprises:

- a ‘signifier’ (*signifiant*), or sound image which refer to the ‘form’ the sign takes, and
- the ‘signified’ (*signifié*) which is the ‘concept’ it represents (Chandler, D. 2003: 1).

Saussure refers to the relationship between the ‘signifier’ and the ‘signified’ as ‘signification’ (Chandler, 2003: 2). “The sign is the whole that results from the association of the signifier with the signified” (Chandler, 2003: 2). The signifier never fully substitutes the signified and, in fact, it is due to this difference (between the signified and the signifier and from other signifiers) that signification is possible (Chandler, 2003: 1). The intrinsic difference between the signified and signifiers constitutes a gap that poses a challenge to achieving stable meaning.

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these, which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment: these constitute if not *languages*, at least systems of signification” (Chandler, 2003: 12). Umberto Eco defines semiotics as

The first principal of semiotics, Saussure stressed, is the "arbitrariness of the sign" and we arrive at the meanings of signs and sign systems arbitrarily through social, cultural or historical conventions (Underwood, 2003: 6). Saussure emphasised that meaning depended on the relations between the signs and not any "intrinsic feature of the signs themselves, nor any connection between the signifier and the signified"[15] (Atkinson, B. & Rosiek, J. 2003: 2). Saussure (in Chandler, 2003: 1) stressed that "meaning arises from the differences between signifiers; these differences are of two kinds: syntagmatic (concerning position) and paradigmatic signifiers (concerning substitution)" (Chandler, 2003: 1)[16].

Syntagm and syntagmatic relations deal with combination and the possibilities of combination. "Temporally, syntagmatic relations refer intratextually to other signifiers *co-present* within the text" (Chandler, 2003: 1). Within the sentence, *'The man cried'*, the syntagmatic relation is the specific sequence[17] in which one has chosen to place the words. A syntagm is therefore, an "orderly combination of interacting signifiers which forms a meaningful whole within a text[18]" and "syntagmatic relations are the various ways in which elements within the same text may be related to each other" (2003: 2)[19]. Linking together signifiers (chosen on the basis that they are conventionally compatible) from paradigm sets creates a syntagm.

The plane of paradigm and paradigmatic relations, therefore, deals with selection and are "functional contrasts involving differentiation" (2003: 1). Chandler further

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being "concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign" (2003: 3).

[15] Saussure stressed that "signifiers achieve stable meaning through their participation in systematic configurations of difference with other signifier-structures" (Chandler, 2003: 6). Chandler writes that Saussure was concerned exclusively with three types of systematic relationships:

- "that between the signifier and a signified
- those between a sign and all of the other elements of its system
- those between a sign and the elements which surround it within a concrete signifying instance" (2003: 1).

[16] Saussure also referred to paradigmatic relations as 'associative' relations (Chandler, 2003: 1).

[17] Syntagms can therefore be defined as sequential (thus temporal as in speech or music), but "they can represent spatial relationships. Saussure noted that visual signifiers can exploit more than one dimension" (Chandler, 2003: 2). Spatial systematic relations are therefore found in drawing, painting, photography or comix.

[18] 'Texts' do not necessarily refer to written texts, but any medium that can be perceived or 'read' by our senses, which we in turn interpret. Underwood asserts that semioticians "prefer the term 'reader' to 'receiver' (even of a painting, photograph or film) and often use the term 'text' to 'message' (2003: 8).

[19] Chandler also indicates that "syntagms can contain other syntagms" (2003: 2).

explains that temporally, "paradigmatic relations refer intertextually to signifiers which are absent from the text" (2003: 1)[20]. In the sentence, *'The man cried'*, *'man'* and *'cried'* is chosen instead of boy, girl or grandfather and sang, died or slept, hereby determining what the meaning will be. When we examine the range of possibilities, we are not only examining the paradigm[21], but also the paradigmatic relationship between signs.

"A paradigm is a set of associated signifiers or signifieds which are all members of some defining category, but in which each is significantly different"[22] (Chandler, 2003: 1). "A sign enters into the paradigmatic relations with all the signs which can also occur in the same context but not at the same time" (2003: 1). Signs are therefore in paradigmatic relation when the choice of one excludes another and gains much of its meaning by what it is not. Syntagms and paradigms provide a structural context within which signs make sense; "these are the structural form through which signs are organised into codes" (Chandler, 2003: 1).

Jeremy Hawthorn states that the term 'code' implies that the writer and reader are "linked by their common possession of a set of conventions governing systematic transformations" (1998: 27). It is therefore reasonable to assume that the value (Saussure termed this *valeur*) of the signs within the code and therefore, the code itself, is culture-specific as well as culturally conditioned[23].

If our codes are culturally (as well as socially and for that matter, historically) conditioned, it is natural to assume that we attach meanings to the signs within these codes through denotation or connotation. Chandler explains that "denotation and

[20] "Paradigmatic relationships can operate on the level of the signifier, the signified or both" (Chandler, 2003: 1).
[21] The range therefore constitutes a paradigm and the choice of one sign, instead of another, signifies through its opposition to the other signs in the paradigm.
[22] Paradigmatic relations can therefore be seen as "contrastive" (2003: 2).
[23] One can therefore expect that ideology is an inherent aspect of codes. Underwood cites Fiske (1987) who states that:

> … 'reality' is always encoded, or rather the only way we can perceive and make sense of reality is by the codes of our culture. There may be an objective, empiricist reality out there, but there is no universal, objective way of perceiving and making sense of it. What passes for reality in any culture is the product of the culture's codes, so 'reality' is always already encoded, it is never 'raw' (2003: 8).

connotation are the terms describing the relationship between the signifier and its signified, and an analytical distinction is made between two types of signifieds: a denotative signified and a connotative signified. Meaning includes both denotation and connotation" (2003: 1).

Denotation generally refers to the literal, often definitional and obvious, dictionary meanings of a sign. Connotation, on the other hand, is the term used to refer to the "socio-cultural and 'personal' association (ideological, emotional, etc.) of the sign" (Chandler, 2003: 1). Interpreters' class, race age, gender and so on, must therefore be related to connotations, making signs "polysemic" – more open to interpretation – in their connotations rather than their denotations (Chandler, 2003: 1).

In Saussure's model of the sign and signification, the process of the viewers'/reader's interpretation and therefore connotation, is not mentioned nor incorporated in his process of signification. As I have mentioned, Saussure stated that "signifiers achieve a stable meaning" through the "systematic configurations of difference with other signifier-systems" (Atkinson & Rosiek, 2003: 2). Saussure's model of the sign is thus more concerned with denotation and neglects the interpreter's possible individual connotations at the expense of this important dimension of meaning.

Like Roland Barthes, who concluded that it is no longer easy to distinguish between the signifier and the signified[24], Derrida also rejects the idea that "structural rules stabilised meaning in the gap between signified and signifier" (Atkinson & Rosiek, 2003: 3). What Saussure regarded as a positive, relatively fixed and stable bond

[24] Barthes adopted the notion that there are different levels of representation and orders of signification. Denotation is the first order where there is a sign consisting of a signifier and a signified. This order is seen as "primarily representational and relatively self-contained" (Chandler, 2003: 7). Connotation is the second order of signification "which uses the denotative sign (signifier and signified) as its signifier and attaches to it an additional signified" (Chandler, 2003: 4). The second, connotative order, reflects "expressive values which are attached to the sign" (Chandler, 2003:7). Denotation therefore leads to a chain of connotation. "A signified on one level can become a signifier on another level" (Chandler, 2003: 4). Barthes added a third level of representation and order of signification: myth. Barthes argued that the first two orders (denotative and connotative) combine to produce this third level, which deals with ideology. Barthes regarded myths as the "dominant ideologies of time" (Chandler, 2003: 5). This third level is therefore, a matter of the cultural meanings of signs and the way that society uses and values the signifier and the signified. In the third order (mythological or ideological) "the sign reflects major culturally-viable concepts underpinning a particular worldview – such as masculinity, femininity, freedom, individualist objectivism, Englishness and so on" (Chandler, 2003:7).

between the signifier/signified[25], Derrida countered and reformed through his concept of *'diffèrance'*.

According to Derrida, meaning is produced via dual strategies of difference and deferral[26] and *diffèrance* is intended to counter the differential nature of the sign and introduce an element of transience and instability (Portis-Winner, 2003: 3). It encapsulates the way in which elements derive meaning through their dissimilarity from other elements in the system. It further "incorporates their temporal relationships to other deferred elements which are associated to the elements which are there, thus never achieving full presence. This notion conflates and cuts across the former distinction between paradigmatic and syntagmatic relationships and replaces the concept of a closed structure with an infinite chain of signification" (Chandler, 2003: 4).

Derrida described this process as "the play of signification involving syntheses and referrals which prevent there from at any moment or in any way being a simple element which is present in and of itself and refers only to itself. … Nothing, in either the elements or in the system, is anywhere ever simply present or absent" (Atkinson & Rosiek, 2003: 3). Saussure's 'gap' between signifier and signified therefore, becomes the ultimate source of *diffèrance* and it is the mechanism by which signs may seem to signify one thing, but are loaded with multiple meanings (polysemy).

Saussure's characterisation of the relation between signifier and signified as fundamentally arbitrary, and Derrida's as well as Barthes' subsequent destabilisation of the relationship between the two, has distinct consequences as regards the question whether comix conventions can be altered without disrupting the signification process. These theories suggest that, while a certain degree of structure and stability is necessary to enable language to function, there is a considerable space between

[25] In Saussure's model, the sign's division has the tendency to privilege the signified over the signifier, which implies that the concept has an independent and prior existence to the form which represents it and acts as a vehicle or substitute.

[26] The two meanings of the French verb '*differer*' (to differ or defer) are both present in Derrida's term. Due to its spelling ('*diffèrance*' with an 'a' rather than the normal 'difference' with an 'e') however, it cannot be reduced to either or both signifieds and thus itself resists closure. Another important inversion of Derrida's spelling of the term *deffèrance*, is the fact that it is spelt differently, but sounds the same, thereby prioritising writing over speech.

signifier and signified which enables/accommodates experimentation with the conventions employed in comix.

1.1.2. Peirce's model of the sign

In contrast with Saussure's dyad model of the signifier/signified and 'semiology', Charles Peirce offers a triadic model of the sign and 'semiosis'. Peirce affirmed that all meaning[27] is mediated by signs and that (some) signs are arbitrary, but unlike Saussure, he emphasised lived human experience as an important source of meaning and insight. He therefore includes the interpreter of the sign in his model of signs and semiosis[28] where Saussure neglected 'human input'.

Peirce defined a sign as the following:

> A sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. The sign which it creates I call the interpretant[29] of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object. It stands for its object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the ground of the representamen (Ferreira, 2002: 10).

Peirce's process of semiosis is therefore three-fold: The sign (representamen), the mental image (interpretant), and that which the sign stands for namely, the object

[27] Mick Underwood (2003: 4) summarised communication theorist, David Berlo's "dimensions of meaning" as the following:

> ■ denotative or referential: the relationship between the sign and what it stands for
> ■ structural: the meanings given by the formal structure of the code
> ■ contextual: the meanings we get from the context surrounding the sign
> ■ connotative: the meanings (often highly personal) which individuals associate with a sign

[28]Semiosis, like Saussure's 'signification', is the term Peirce used to refer to the process of 'sign recognition' and attaching/deriving meaning to/from signs. Peirce, however, emphasised semiosis as a process as opposed to Saussure's "synchronic emphasis on structure" (Chandler 2003: 13). This emphasis on the *process of semiosis* highlights the notion that "the meaning of the sign is not contained within it, but arises in its interpretation" (Chandler 2003: 15).
[29]Through this third term, 'interpretant', Peirce acknowledges the importance of human experience in not only the process of signification/semiosis (without the possibility of a final or totalising closure to the process of interpretation), but also in sign-making activities. An interpretant, however, refers not to an interpreter, but rather the sense made of the sign by the interpreter.

(2002: 10)[30]. In the American artist, Andy Warhol's *Marilyn* (Figure 1), for example, Warhol depicts the famous face of Marilyn Monroe. To the viewer this portrait could possibly refer to Marilyn Monroe herself, an actress, a singer, beauty, glamour or even the object of sexual desire etc. Hereby the viewer attributes other ideas/concepts to the representation and it therefore functions as a sign/representamen for something else. This 'mental image' (Marilyn Monroe herself, beauty, glamour etc.) which realises in the viewer's imagination is, according to Peirce, the interpretant which refers to the object (Marilyn Monroe). This interpretant will differ from person to person.

Peirce proposed three ways in which the sign can stand for its object: as an icon, an index or symbol:

> ■ An icon stands for an object by resembling or imitating it, not only visually, but by any means (recognisably looking, sounding, feeling, tasting or smelling like it). Broadly defined, the essential aspect of the relation of an icon to its object is one of similarity.
>
> Anne Magnussen states that an icon is sub-divisible into three sign types: "image, diagram and metaphor" (2000: 196). The *image* is as described above, resembling the object through simple qualities or material likeness. "The *diagram* represents the relations of the parts of one thing by analogous relations in its own parts, that is a relational likeness. The *metaphor* depicts the representative character (of a representamen) by expressing a parallelism in something else" (2000: 196).
>
> ■ Indexes refer to their objects not by means of any similarity relation, but rather via an actual link between the sign and its object. This relationship (between the sign and its object) is therefore, not arbitrary. "The sign and object are directly connected in some way (physically or casually) – this link can be observed or inferred: e.g. 'natural signs' (smoke, thunder, footprints, echoes, non-synthetic odours and flavours), medical symptoms (pain, a rash, pulse-rate), measuring instruments (weathercock, thermometer, clock, spirit-level), 'signals' (a knock on a door, a phone ringing), pointers (a pointing 'index' finger, a directional signpost), recordings (a photograph, a film, video or television shot, an audio-recorded voice), personal 'trademarks' (handwriting, catch-phrase) and indexical words ('that', 'this', 'here', 'there')" (Chandler 2003: 16).

[30] Peirce's "representamen is similar in meaning to Saussure's signifier whilst the interpretant is similar in meaning to the signified. However, the interpretant has a quality unlike that of the signified: it is itself a sign in the mind of the interpreter" (Chandler, 2003: 13). Umberto Eco is noted to use the phrase 'unlimited semiosis' "to refer to the way in which this could lead to a series of successive interpretants (potentially) *ad infinitum*" (*ibid* 2003: 13).

> ■ Symbols refer to their objects by virtue of a law, rule or convention. In this category the potential arbitrary and ambiguous character of signs comes to the foreground (words, prepositions and texts are obvious examples; the word 'horse' has no similarity or casual link to the object to which it refers. "A lion is the symbol of courage." "A motorbike for me is a symbol of freedom" [Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary. 1995. s.v. 'symbol']). If symbols need not bear any similarity or casual link to their object, they can be considered or interpreted by the sign user in unlimited ways, independent of any physical relationship to the sign user (Cunningham & Shank. [S.a]: 2).

Although symbols and icons (according to Webster's Third New International Dictionary. 1993. s.v. 'icon' and 'symbol'.) are almost the same in 'literal' meaning, I feel that symbols are more open to individual interpretation, whereas icons, in more cases than symbols, do refer to something specific – for instance the small icons on the computer screens representing programs (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary. 1995. s.v. 'icon'). I also maintain that symbols can, like Peirce, Cunningham and Shank suggest, refer to their object "by virtue of law, rule or convention"[31], needing neither casual link nor similarity.

Magnussen writes that the "Peircean definition of a sign is not interpreted exclusively as an icon, an index or symbol. In most cases, a sign is interpreted on the basis of iconic *and* indexical *and* symbolic relations, although in different degrees or proportions" (2000: 196).

Context and interpretation (signification/semiosis) therefore, play a great role in the reading of signs. So too does experience and memory. "Our experience of the world is mediated through signs and signs can never, therefore, be isomorphic. In essence we create our world of experience by creating signs as we interact with objects in our environment" (Cunningham & Shank, [S.a.]: 2)[32].

Signs stand for other things – they are incomplete equivalents (if signs were the same as the object, they would be the object) and it is therefore possible to determine signs

[31]"A Symbol is a sign whose association between perceptual paradigm and other concept is one of convention. (The first convention must be established by coincidence, where two interpreters form the same association based on some common experience. That first convention can then serve as the basis for further conventions)" (The Stewardship. [S.a.]: 1).

[32] "Organisms create structures of signs which then serve to mediate their experience in the world" (The Stewardship. [S.a.]: 3).

by some set of rules for those equivalencies (Cunningham & Shank, [S.a.]: 2). If signs are "incomplete equivalencies" to their objects, they are potentially free to have characteristics of their own.

> A series of signs can be linked together in a true code[33], where the rules not only express state of affairs of certain objects, but where the code rules can be manipulated so as to generate new versions of expressions and arrive at new forms of content (Cunningham & Shank, [S.a.]: 2).

This "series of signs" can include coherence with other signs to form a system that relate to their object, on the one hand. On the other hand, they inevitably can relate to the other signs in the system ([S.a.]: 2]. As such, alternate equivalence relations lead to alternate meanings. Cunningham and Shank point out that semiotic systems involve not so much the transfer of information as the exchange of meanings (*ibid* [S.a.]: 3).

> Signs are created which go beyond the immediate experience of the cognising organism. Words, pictures, bodily movements and the like generate interpretants for objects which need have no basis in the 'real' world and which can be manipulated independent of that world (Cunningham & Shank, [S.a.]: 3]).

This further points to the arbitrary nature of signs, proving that they can be manipulated in their own right independent of their relationship to the object and the sign user. Signs are not reality itself, they are only our current understanding of reality, which will inevitably change as our understanding, context, needs etc. also change. Alternate interpretations of the same sign are therefore not only possible, but also inevitable.

I have previously made reference to Barthes' statement that "text is an assemblage of signs (such as words, images sounds and/or gestures) constructed (and interpreted)

[33] The Stewardship calls this system or code a 'logic'. "A system for deriving new symbols from existing ones, by combining or altering them according to certain conventional rules. The set of all symbols and logics understood by an interpreter is that interpreter's idiolect. The intersection of two or more idiolects is a dialect" ([S.a.]: 1).

with reference to the conventions associated with a genre and in a particular medium of communication" [34] (Chandler, 2003: 3).

Taking Figure 2, based on semiotics, one can argue that the paradigmatic signifiers chosen in that page are firstly, panels (and their frames)[35]. In panel one, the flies show that the dog is dead as well as smelly. The scissors encroaching into the panel firstly indicate that someone is holding them, secondly, that that person is approaching the dog and thirdly, that the person intends to do something with the scissors to the dog. The conscious decision to show the scissors as 'encroaching' into the panel, one could argue, is the temporal syntagmatic relation of the scissors to the dog as well as to what is going to happen in the following panels.

In panel two, the onomatopoeic word 'clllip!', is chosen from a paradigmatic set of 'onomatopoeic words/icons' (instead of 'knock-knock', for example) and shows, through its syntagmatic placement in relation to the associated signifiers[36] (the character, the dog, the flies, the scissors and the word "clllip!" and so on), the relationship between the scissors and the dog as well as the character.

In panel three, a sound balloon is chosen from a paradigmatic set, which can consist of speech balloons, thought balloons or text boxes. Within the sound balloon is another set of paradigms in a syntagmatic relation to each other. The sound balloon's syntagmatic relation within the panel can serve to introduce another character (as yet unseen) into the scene as well as indicate a link/relationship between this character and the one already there. It also shows the physical placing of this new character in relation to the one already there and describes the immediate surroundings of this character[37]. In this panel, the artist has made the conscious decision to not show the

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[34] "When the Peircean is used in the study of communication, the existence of the interpretant as an integral part of the sign means that a sign is to be considered always in the act of communication" (Magnussen, 2000: 195).

[35] The reason why I say that this is the first 'paradigmatic choice', is because panels can be rectangular, square or circular. They can also differ in scale. In the case of Fig. 2, the panel borders is a simple, thin singular black line, chosen from a paradigmatic set where the other panel borders could be colourful, bold, jagged multiple lines or even a line separated from the panel itself.

[36] I have stated earlier that a paradigm is a set of "associated signifiers" (Chandler, 2003: 1).

[37] This new character is seated in his car outside the apartment building of the character holding the scissors. From the direction of the sound balloon's 'tail' as well as its jagged shape, one can see that the radio is on and a song is playing, because there are musical notes before and after the text contained within it. I will discuss sound, speech bubbles/balloons more thoroughly in Chapter 2, section 2.3.1.

dog, but the scissors, which as we have established, show the relationship between the character holding them and the dog. By the artist doing this, we can infer that there is a relationship between the new character and the dog and that the dog is the link between the new character and the one already there.

In the next chapter, I will employ semiotic theory to explore the conventions associated with the genre/medium of comix. I will investigate the "assemblage of signs" ('syntagms' and 'paradigmatic sets') which are 'conventionally' employed in comix.

Chapter 2:

The Conventions Employed in Comix

As stated in the Introduction to this study, the dictionary defines the term 'convention' as "a practice, device or mode of performance established by custom and widely recognised and accepted" (1993: Sv. 'convention'). Conventions pertinent to art or design, are representations widely recognised, and accepted, to simplify, symbolise or substitute for natural form.

Jeremy Hawthorn defines the term convention as "either the allowances which are made by the readers and audiences and required by certain genres, or the framework of formal requirements imposed by the same genres or sub-genres" (1998: 33).

Martin Barker writes that, although 'convention' originally meant a "coming together", it had over time accrued the extra meaning of an 'agreed way' of coming together (1989: 9). Barker hereby also refers to an 'alphabet' of conventions (what Kannemeyer calls 'diagramming'). He writes:

> Modern mass-produced comics are defined by much more than this one feature [a sequence made up of pictures]. All of the following seem to me importantly part of their nature:
>
> 1. they appear at regular intervals;
> 2. they have recurring characters, with relatively predictable ranges of behaviour;
> 3. characters appear within distinct genres among other characters of the same kind, involved in similar kinds of actions and events;
> 4. comics have accumulated a great number of conventions, which allow still frames to represent and enormous range of things. Among these: speech, movement, relationships, emotions, cause and effect, reader-involvement, and the fictional nature of the comic itself and its characters (Barker, 1989: 6).

The main function of conventions in comix is to make the "complex construction" (Barker, 1989: 1) of comix more accessible to the reader: "I can get to their

complexities that much quicker, and not feel overwhelmed by detail" (1989: 5)[38]. Conventions abstract and simplify reality. Referring to Figure 3, one can see that by gradually simplifying 'reality', the schematic image becomes more universally recognisable.

In his *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, Scott McCloud writes that by simplifying and abstracting images, comix artists are not simply eliminating detail but rather selectively focussing on significant detail. He calls this "amplification through simplification" (1994: 30). "By stripping down an essential 'meaning', an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't" (1994: 30).

In the next sections of this Chapter, I will investigate some of the simplified, amplified images employed by comix artists, how they function and what they signify in relation to the paradigmatic sets available and used in comix. I will also investigate the syntagmatic relations of these paradigmatic sets.

Before one can investigate the 'workings of comix' and the specific conventions employed in comix, it is important to firstly look at the history of comix and what comix are; what is the definition of 'a comix'?

2.1. A brief history of Comix: The term 'Comic(s)' vs. 'Comix' and the definition of Comic(s)/Comix

In their book *Comics and Culture* (2000), Hans-Christian Christiansen and Anne Magnussen state that comix are "a complex form of graphic expression which has been of great importance to the iconography of modern culture" (2000: 8). Since comix has an influence on the constantly changing iconography of modern culture, it is important to reconsider the conventions and conventional signs used in comix.

[38] I feel that this is a paradox: The conventions employed in comix function to simplify their "complex construction" (1989: 1) making them more accessible to the public, yet one has to be able to 'read' and understand these conventions to fully appreciate and comprehend comix. Although the apprehension of convention makes reading and interpreting comix easier, if one does not know how conventions work, their use can make comix more complex.

Many comix artists and critics have found that defining the term ‘comics’ (and thus the term ‘comix’) is precarious: “Our attempts to define comics are an on-going process which will not end anytime soon” (McCloud, 1994: 23). “Unreliable, silly things – not to be taken seriously” writes Martin Barker (1989: 9). Comix have generally been associated with people with low literacy and intellectual accomplishment and were thus never considered to be ‘literature’. Consequently, comix were never critically analysed: “This unwillingness is a product of the modernist approach to the comic as ‘low’ literature. Modernists didn’t regard comics as worthy material for critical analyses” (Rheeder, 2000: 1). Early comics were almost without exception humorous in content and function. However, in the 1950’s, Barker writes, came the “great horror comic scare”, and comix were no longer humorous; “they refused to be non-serious and harmless” (1989: 9).

Between 1965 and 1990 comix sought literary content with the development of confrontational underground comix (Eisner, 1996: 4). Will Eisner regards this as the “beginning of the maturation of the medium”, as comix sought to deal with subject matter and themes thought to be “the province of text, live theatre and film”. Eisner continues that “autobiography, social protest, reality-based human relationships and history were some of the subjects now undertaken by comics” (1996: 4). ‘Graphic novel(s)’ became the term to describe these publications addressing more ‘adult’ themes[39]. Comix today, Japan’s Manga or ‘*kommiku*’ (Japanese for comix) magazines for example, frequently deal with themes of a violent and sexual nature.

Anton Kannemeyer claims that the English term, ‘comics’, is one that proves to be problematic in that it refers to a humorous text (1997: 2). Rheeder explains that American ‘strip’ artists solved this problematic in the Sixties, by using the term ‘comix’ or ‘komix’ (Rheeder, 2000: 12). He further explains that these terms are unquestionably tied to underground comix and cannot be used as a reference to any other comic strip genres (2000: 12).

[39] “… comic book material quickly evolved into complete original stories and then into graphic novels” (1996: 3). ‘Graphic novel’ is therefore also a term used to refer to comix which are published as full-length books.

In most instances, the conventions employed in comics ('ordinary'/mainstream genres dealing with humour) and comix (underground genre dealing with mature/adult subject matter) overlap. Comix retained and developed many conventions from comics – most of the visual shorthand was adopted as is, but significant shifts in visual vocabulary were made where humorous comics proved inadequate. The expansion of the genre of comix to deal with complete literary, historical and socio-critical themes necessitated the invention of new conventions, as well as the adaptation of conventions from other media such as film, fine arts and illustration.

This study, however, is not concerned with the history and differences between these two genres. For the sake of simplicity, I have decided to use the term comix (plural and singular form), inclusively to refer to popular or conventional 'comics', as well as underground 'comix'. It therefore refers to comix dealing with not only humorous subject matter, but includes comix dealing with educational, iconoclastic, autobiographical subjects or containing social critique. I choose to use this term inclusively because, while these underground comix frequently have more serious, adult themes than 'conventional comics', they often use humour as a satirical term. Figure 4, Anton Kannemeyer's *Lag-Lag* (2001: 30), for instance, takes 'adult' subject matter and makes a humorous satirical statement on sensitive social issues – such as racism, politics and other cultural issues. I feel 'comix' is therefore the more inclusive term as opposed to 'comics' which, as Kannemeyer states, refers exclusively to humorous texts.

Another reason why I choose to use the underground term 'comix' is because most of the examples and artists I will discuss in this article are primarily artists who work in this genre.

Comix are an extremely diverse medium. In his dissertation, Rheeder states that *"…die medium se stilistiese spektrum* [*is*] *net so wyd as die inhoudelike en die tematiese"* (2000: 9), and refers to Bouckaert-Ghesquire (1948) who re-iterate this; *"…een bonte verzameling van allerlei* genres *en* subgenres[40]*"*. Rheeder states that, due to a shift in popular culture toward a more literary paradigm, of which comix is a

[40] Translated from the Dutch; '…a colourful collection of different genres and subgenres'.

good example, and due to the "pluralistic reading strategy" of Postmodernism, an academic approach to this medium is now called for (2000: 1).

Scott McCloud in his *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, makes the statement that the word 'comics' refers to the medium of comics itself, and not to the specific objects (books or strips), produced (1994: 4). He defines 'comics' as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (1994: 9)[41].

According to Christiansen and Magnussen, McCloud's definition is the most disputed, for it "contains a minimum of formal characteristics and no aspects of content or function" (2000: 10). The "only requirement (according to McCloud's definition) is that the images should be in deliberate sequence" (Magnussen. 2000: 199). They write:

> Most researchers agree on a series of formal characteristics, such as the sequence of panels, as part of a definition. Others include content and/or function as parameters. For other researchers, part of the definition of comics relates to production and market besides a series of formal characteristics. …. To others, the definition should only include formal characteristics, a definition which, in its most extreme form, would designate the Bayeux tapestry and vessels of the classic Mayan period as comics (2000: 10).

Magnussen claims that most researchers seem to agree on one defining aspect: "A comic is a sequence of images between which some kind of unity of meaning is created" (2000: 196).

In his book, *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics*, Martin Barker writes that comix is a genre in which still frames are used to tell stories "using the convention of pictures following each other" (1989: 6)[42]. Barker asserts somewhat tautologically that: "…: a comic is what has been produced under the definition of a 'comic' " (1989: 8).

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[41] An individual picture, McCloud explains, is just that –a picture; but when placed in a sequence, even if the sequence consists of only two images, it becomes "the art of comics" (1994: 5).

[42] Will Eisner defines comix as being the effort of artists to "tell stories of substance with imagery" and comix are therefore "essentially a visual medium composed of images" (1996: 1).

Scott McCloud describes the medium known as comix as a "vessel" containing any number of ideas and images emanating from the writers and artists involved in creating comix. Trends, genres, styles, subject matter and themes also form part of the content of the 'vessel' which are comix (1994: 6). There is a notable difference between a 'cartoon' and a 'comix'. Scott McCloud explains that one – cartooning - is an approach to picture making, "a style if you like", while the other – comix - is a medium which often employs that approach (1994: 21). 'Cartooning" is therefore another convention employed in comix[43].

2.2. The Paradigmatic sets of Signs: Symbols, Icons and Index signs

I already stated that signs are an important semiotic tool employed not only by comix artists, but also evidently by everyone. All paradigmatic sets employed in comix consist of various signs and along with their syntagmatic relations (which can be signs in themselves) form the code of comix. Several diverse symbols, icons and index signs are used extensively in comix. In this section, I wish to investigate what these signs are, what they denote and how they are conventionally used.

Signs can be very abstract, the most abstract of which are words themselves. In his dissertation, Rikus Ferreira cites the historian Lancelot Hogben, who explains that text can be divided into two categories/types: "We shall call the one sign-writing, the other sound-writing" (2002: 3). Sign-writing, like Chinese for example, is constituted out of iconic and index[44] signs to communicate as opposed to sound-writing (for example

[43] "An interesting thing occurs when inanimate objects are drawn cartoon-like –they seem to possess their own identities, poised to jump up at any moment. A prop like a sword might be very 'cartoony' in one sequence – due to the 'life' it possesses, can become and extension of my [a character's] identity. …. The sword might become very realistic, not only to show us the details, but to make us aware of the sword as an object, something with weight, texture and physical complexity" (McCloud, 1994: 44). Cartooning therefore becomes a 'style' comix artists use to signify something about a character and the relationship between characters and objects for example. Cartooning is thereby rather a convention of comix than 'a comix'.

[44] Here I am referring to Peirce's classifications for different types of signs wherein icons and index signs share a similarity to the object for which they stand, whereas symbols are arbitrary and only recognisable through conventions.

Japanese Kana and our own alphabet), which consists of symbols which, through convention, stand for certain sounds[45].

According to Scott McCloud, most modern writing probably developed from sign-writing[46] (see Figure 5) to sound-writing, which represent sound alone and had lost "any lingering resemblance to the visible world" (1994: 143).

Scott McCloud devised an "iconic abstraction chart", Figure 6a (1994: 51), representing three vertices – reality, language and the picture-plane which make up "the total pictorial vocabulary of comics and of any of the visual arts" (1994: 51).

The first, 'reality', is the realm of the 'received' which include photographs and other more realistic pictures. "We need no formal education to 'get the message'. The message is instantaneous" (1994: 51). If one relates this to Peirce's categories for signs, icons and certain index signs ('natural signs' like smoke or footprints and 'signals' like a pointing finger, for example) would be placed here on McCloud's chart.

At the far right is the realm of language, or rather of writing itself. "This is the realm of perceived information. It takes time and specialised knowledge to decode the abstract symbols of language" (1994: 51). One would place what Peirce referred to as 'symbols' here. Peirce defined symbols as arbitrary signs, arrived at and acquiring meaning through convention. Conventions, in turn, are socially agreed and accepted ways of 'doing things', which form certain codes. Through experience and interaction with society, one should therefore be able to read, understand and eventually make one's own codes. A degree of social and cultural knowledge or understanding is essential to enable the artist to use conventions on the right of McCloud's chart.

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[45] The letter 'h' is the symbol which stand for the sound 'h', which is used for the pronunciation of the word 'hand' for example, but has no further reference to the meaning of the letter except the sound 'h'.

[46] The earliest words were in fact stylised pictures (Egyptian hieroglyphs for example) and through time ancient writing became more abstract. Frederik Schodt, in his book *Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga* (1996: 26), writes that for most Japanese, "reading manga is almost like reading Japanese itself". Manga pictures are not unlike Japanese ideograms, which in-themselves, is sometimes a type of 'cartoon'.

The top of the chart, McCloud explains, belongs to the "art object, the picture plane where shapes, lines and colours can be themselves and not pretend otherwise" (1994: 51). Symbols, icons and index signs can all belong in the top of McCloud's chart, because, in my opinion, this is the plane were individual connotation play an important part.

In Figures 6b (1994: 54 – 55), McCloud a selection of comix artists on his chart and provides explanations for this positioning and thus demonstrates how the chart works.

> When an artist is drawn to one end of the chart or another, that artist may be revealing something about his or her strongest values in art. Those who approach the lower left, for example, are probably attracted by a sense of the beauty of nature. Those at the top by the beauty of art. And those on the right by the beauty of ideas.
>
> For comics to mature as a medium, it must be capable of expressing each artists' innermost needs and ideas. But each artist has different inner needs, different points of view, different passions and so needs to find different forms of expression (McCloud, 1994: 57).

Just as there are many signs that have personal significance that differ from person to person[47], there are also signs that serve as general visual metaphors. I propose that there are standard, purely denotative and conventional signs (iconic, symbolic and index signs[48] – depending on the context) used within comix. These are routinely used to refer to the same specific ideas and concepts, which in turn has formed the 'code' of comix.

These standard/conventional signs (chosen from paradigmatic sets) are used in syntagmatic relations to other signifiers, which in turn is chosen from other paradigmatic sets. For example, by using larger, bolder fonts, loudness is illustrated. The size of the font represents the volume of the sound, which in turn signifies emotion. This convention fits under the category for the standard/conventional set of paradigms of the speech, sound and thought bubble/balloon/box, which forms part of the code of comix. The connotative value of enlarging the texts within

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[47] Symbols can be very emotive – "We assign identities and emotion where none exist" (McCloud 1994: 33).

[48] The icons of science and maths, arbitrary symbols like words which are based on convention and index signs noting direction or instructions (many traffic signs for example).

sound/speech/thought balloons[49], thereby signify emotion which I will discuss in Chapter 2.

In the following sections, I will discuss what the most prevalent conventional paradigmatic sets of/and signs employed in comix are. In the process I will also investigate the conventions which constitute the code of this medium/genre.

2.3. Comix Conventions as 'Multisensory'

As I have stated earlier in this study, Peirce stressed that "all meaning is mediated by signs" (Chandler, 2003: 14) and emphasised lived human experience[50] as an important source of meaning and insight. Our senses play a significant part in our interacting and understanding of the world around us. We are surrounded by 'percepts' yielding signs which need interpreting.

Barthes reiterates this by stating that "human experience is inherently multisensory" (Chandler, 2003: 3). He however, continues that "every representation of experience is subject to the constraints and affordances of the medium involved. Every medium is constrained by the channels which it utilises" (2003: 3).

Comix are primarily a visual medium – 'mono-sensory' as McCloud (1994:89) puts it. Visual conventions, therefore, also attempt to fill in the gaps for our other four senses. Figure 7 (see also Fig. 2) for example, shows panels from Daniel Clowes' *Like a Velvet Glove Cast in Iron* (1993:87 & 93) depicting a dead dog. The flies buzzing around the dead dog illustrate not only that the dog is dead, but also that it has started to smell bad. The flies are symbolic (flies buzzing around objects is one conventional practice to illustrate that something is either dead or smelly or both), indexical (they

[49] Enlarging fonts inside speech/sound/thought balloons (or anywhere on the page/panel outside speech/sound/thought balloons) has an impact on the conventions of space and format in comix.

[50] Irene Portis-Winner in her *The Dynamics of Semiotics of Culture*, asserts that "there is no such thing as experience outside of embodiment of signs" (2003: 2). She refers to Peirce's 'human sign' which he saw as a "paramount construct structuring all communications of humans" (2003: 2). She goes on to stress that Peirce took the first step towards the formal study of the 'human sign', which is the "paramount construct structuring all communications of all humans … holding that all conscious perception involves self-consciousness, that is seeing oneself as object" (2003: 2).

indicate something about the dog) as well as iconic (they resemble buzzing flies). Figure 8 is a panel from Joe Sacco's *Safe Area Gorazde: The War in Eastern Bosnia 1992-95* (2001: 162), depicting a man huddled in his coat. From his posture as well as the snow surrounding him and falling around him, we see, read and imagine how cold it is to the point of actually feeling it. In Figure 9, a panel from Daniel Clowes' *Ghost World* (2000: 60), shows a character knocking on a door. Although we do not see the actual action (by means of movement lines, which I will discuss later in Chapter 2), we actually do see, hear and feel it due to the sound 'depicted' in the words "knock-knock".

2.3.1. The Speech Bubble/Balloon and Box[51]

The speech balloon, or bubble, is the most obvious and defining convention in comix. How a speech bubble/balloon works is, in one sense, quite simple and obvious. Martin Barker writes that, "a set of words are accredited to a presented character by a tail running from the balloon or by a set of small bubbles" (1989: 10)[52].

I have stated earlier that comix are essentially a visual medium ('mono-sensory') needing conventions to fill in for our other four senses. The sound balloon attempts to depict sound in a strictly visual medium.

The shape of the sound balloon varies not only according to whether it is a spoken word or thought, but also varies from artist to artist. When the sound balloon indicates speech, generally it takes the shape of a balloon, or bubble, with a tail leading to the source of the words (Figure 10). When a thought is indicated, the sound balloon takes the shape of a 'cloud' with, as Barker stated, small bubbles leading to the character whose thoughts it represents (Figure 11a&b).

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[51] Comix critics/writers and artists refer to this convention as either a speech bubble or balloon. Scott McCloud refers to it as a word balloon. I will refer to it as a sound balloon, because these indicators of 'speech' do not necessarily have to be 'words spoken', they can be songs being sung or just sounds per se. Sound balloons can also not contain 'sound' at all –they can convey the deafening sound of silence as well.

[52] One can therefore classify the speech bubble/balloon as an 'index' sign because it firstly indicates who is speaking, narrating or making a/the sound and secondly, it can also indicate the volume and therefore, emotion of the character.

The shape further varies depending on whether it is coming from an animate or inanimate object. In Figures 12a & b, we see that speech emanating from or transmitted by electronic equipment like telephones or televisions have jagged edges. The words of the 'animate' speaker usually appears in a smooth balloon, whereas the words emanating from the inanimate television set or radio[53] will have a jagged sound balloon. Tone of voice is also indicated by the shape of the sound balloon. In Frank Miller's *Sin City*, (Figure 13) the reserved aggression and anxiety of Marv's tone is signified by the wavering, jagged outline of his speech bubble.

Sound boxes are used to either contain the words spoken by the narrator or to set a scene (see Figure 14[54]). In Anton Kannemeyer's *Heaven Help Us: Part 2* (2002: 53), we see that sound boxes are also used to convey anecdotal information, therefore also serving, rather, as 'text boxes'.

Sound balloons can even convey deafening silence (Figure 15). McCloud states that inside balloons, symbols are constantly being appropriated to cover the non-verbal (1994: 134). In Conrad Botes' *Lucky-Lucky* (1999/2002: 43 - 49), the entire story is narrated using only these symbols (see Addendum A).

In Figure 16a as well as 15, it is evident that by enlarging certain words and making them bolder, those words 'read' as louder. In Figure 16b, we see that other non-verbal utterances such as the cries of the victim, are imitations of sound ("oooA**GG**…oh…GoO**O**o" etc,)[55]. The specific font used, as well as the shape of the sound balloon, reflects the tone of voice and the 'gesture'[56] of the character.

Sound, however, does not only occur inside balloons. As with our everyday lives, sound does not only emanate from people or through televisions or radios (which mostly broadcast people talking), nor are they exclusively spoken or sung – sound

[53] In Figure 12b (also see Fig.2) we can discern whether the speech/text coming from a radio or television, is sung or spoken due to the musical symbol.
[54] Figures 11b as well as 12a&b also contain text boxes.
[55] In 1975 Alan Aldrige & George Perry already identified this vocabulary of onomatopoeic words. **Boom!**, **Zap!**, **Pow!**, **Wham!**, are some examples. These expressed impact and "each was followed by a mandatory exclamation point, and usually enclosed within a starburst" (1975: 3).
[56] By gesture I mean physical 'stance' of the character, for the onomatopoeic sound indicates a physical reaction to an action carried out on the speaker.

surrounds us. “Even the variations of lettering styles, both in and out of balloons, speak of an ongoing struggle to capture the very essence of sound” (McCloud, 1994: 134).

In Figure 17, we see that other, non-verbal sounds – in this case the swallowing sound, “gulp”, and in Fig 12a the sound of eating described as “munch-munch”, form part of ‘background’ sounds, which are often described through onomatopoeic words/sounds.

Background sounds include the sounds objects make, which are also generally described through onomatopoeic sounds. In Fig. 17, the sound-effects generated when a pill bottle opens (described as “pok”) and in Fig. 12a, the telephone ringing – “**RING! RING!**”, both form part of the ‘background’ sounds. In Figure 16b, the ‘background’ sounds, “**WHUKK**”, as the handle of the gun hits the victim and the gun shooting, “**BLAM**”, are not only symbolised by the font’s style, but also by the size of the lettering. In all these examples, the sounds are amplified or reflected in the chosen lettering style. The placement of the lettering form part of the syntagmatic relation to the signified sounds in the panels. If the word “**BLAM**”, for example, was placed in the bottom left corner of the frame, it might not have been as easily read as coming from that specific gun at that specific time. If it were, it might as well have been read as a gun in the next panel being shot (in the future) at Marv (in this present frame), as a reaction to him having fired a shot.

From the instance I have just described, it is possible to gather that sound balloons and sound effects are also used to indicate that time had passed.

2.3.2. Panels

The panel is another defining paradigmatic, as well as syntagmatic, convention of comix used as part of the medium/genre’s code. McCloud asserts that the panel itself is comix’ most important ‘icon’ (1994: 98). He goes on to say that the “various shapes we call panels hold in their borders all of the icons that add up to the vocabulary of comics” (1994: 98).

Although I agree with McCloud on the importance panels, I do not agree with his use of the term 'icon'. I prefer Anne Magnussen's more appropriate semiotic approach: "The single and heterogenous signs [in a panel] are not interpreted autonomously, but in the context of each other. As a consequence, focus is on the way the signs interact, thereby creating a bigger, more complex sign, that of the panel itself" (2000: 195).

One of the main functions of panels is that of indicating transition - transitions from character to character, moment to moment and scene to scene. There are many other transitions taking place in and through panels - these I will discuss more thoroughly in Chapter 4. But first, let us look at the different kinds of panel transitions. McCloud proposes six distinct categories for panel-to-panel transitions:

> The first category, which we will call moment-to-moment, requires very little closure[57] (1994: 70).

In Figure 18, panel six shows a girl looking out behind a tree. The next (seventh) panel shows the next moment where the girl is standing away from the trees before a clearing.

> Next are those panel transitions featuring a single subject in distinct action-to-action progression (1994: 70).

In Figure 17, for example, the second panel shows Marv holding a pill bottle, which through the process of closure, we know (concluded) he just took from his coat pocket. The third panel shows the next moment[58] where he opens the bottle while the next moment (panel four) shows him shaking the pills from the bottle and so on.

Unlike moment to moment transitions, where panels are not linked by the actions of the protagonist, the actions taking place in this type of transition forms the linkage between the panels.

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[57] Closure is the process by which we mentally complete incomplete parts based on past experience. I propose that 'closure' is essential to 'reader involvement', which I feel is pertinent to reader participation and identification and will discuss it more thoroughly in Chapter 5.

[58] We know (through experience and therefore, through the process of closure) that the time-span from holding the bottle to opening it is momentary.

> The next type takes us from subject-to-subject while staying within a scene or idea (1994: 70).

In Figure 19[59] the introductory (first) panel shows a man seated by the bed of his sleeping daughter, Harriet. Papers are strewn on the floor by his feet. The first subject is therefore, a father and his worries for his daughter[60]. The next four panels (at the top on the right) suggest firstly, that the papers are drawings of the images of which Harriet dreams (which could through extensive closure, as well as having read the whole text, indicate another subject). Secondly, these panels introduce the subject of Lewis Carroll and thirdly, introduces the fact that the building is under construction. From this example, one can see that certain knowledge of the story as well as a high degree of reader involvement[61] is required to make sense and give meaning to these transitions.

> The fourth type of transition is scene-to-scene transitions. Deductive reasoning is often required in reading comics such as these scene-to-scene transitions, which transport us across significant distances of time and space (1994: 71).

In Figure 20a, the second to third panels show a scene on a beach in apartheid era South Africa wherein a black man is being harassed by a white man. Panel four, takes us "a few years later" (Kannemeyer, 1996) to democratic South Africa[62] when the same black man returns to the same beach. In the following panels, the black man effectively reverses the scene from a few years' back and deals out the blows dealt to him. Again a high level of reader involvement is required. The reader needs to adjust to the time-lapse, for the comix would fall apart if the reader is unable to deduce that that a time-lapse had occurred. Similarly, in Figure 20b, panel one shows a conversation about a friend named Mandelbaum. The next panel takes us to the Holocaust in Germany approximately forty to fifty years previously. In the following panels, we are intermittently taken back and forth from the present to the past.

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[59] Dave McKean is an artist who I believe is reconsidering the conventions employed in comix and whose work I will discuss in Chapter 6. I chose to use one of his illustrations here because, I think, it exemplifies subject-to-subject transmissions the best.
[60] This worry is indicated by the text: "Harriet is plagued by nightmares" (McKean & Morrison, 1989).
[61] In other words, closure.
[62] We know it is post-1994 in other words, after South Africa's first democratic elections, because in panel five, Kannemeyer indicates that the copyright for this comix was dated in 1995 on the number plate of the car.

> A fifth type of transition, which we will call aspect-to-aspect, bypasses time for the most part and sets a wandering eye on different aspects of a place, idea or mood (1994: 72).

In Figure 21[63], the first panel sets the scene (of a psychologist and Batman facing each other) and initiates the mood of the following panels. The next panel takes us into the mind of Batman. The images evoked by the word "mother" (McKean & Morrison, 1989), can be memories or images he associates with the word. The third panel takes us back to the present where "handle" is said to him. The following (fourth) panel shows another memory or associative/connotative image (or both). It is interesting to note the pearls from the second panel falling into the fourth panel, which can serve as a link between the memories and associations from either words (mother and handle). As the panels progress over the two pages, the almost serene or calm mood of the first eight or nine panels changes to a final violent and aggressive mood. One could argue that this is due to the progression of more and more violent, aggressive associations made with the words posed to Batman throughout the last panels. It is only upon reading the subsequent panels that the reader infers that the psychologist is playing a word association game with Batman, which uncovers a traumatic childhood event.

> And finally, there is the non-sequitur, which offers no logical relationship between panels whatsoever ! (Figure 22. McCloud, 1994: 70-72.).

I propose, however, that images, concepts, ideas and subjective nuances that are presented in sequence cannot be totally unrelated to each other. Such transitions may not make 'sense' or have any correlation to each other in the 'traditional' sense, but a relationship of some sort is inevitable. McCloud affirms this by asserting that by creating a sequence, even if it consists of only two images, "we are endowing them with a single overriding identity" (1994: 73) which forces the reader to consider them as a whole. McCloud goes on to claim that non-sequitur transitions are "unconcerned with events or any narrative purposes of any sort" (1994: 77). McCloud writes that

[63] McCloud (1994: 74) states that "this sort of categorisation is an inexact science," but by applying the "transition scale," he broke down the amount of different panel transitions into percentages. What he found was that most mainstream comics in America employ mostly action-to-action (65%), subject-to-subject (20%) and scene-to-scene (15%) panel transitions. Almost none use aspect-to-aspect transitions. Yet, this is not a phenomenon exclusive to American comics. Belgian artist, Hergè's *TinTin* for example, also mainly use these same transitions (see Addendum B for bar graphs). It was therefore difficult for me to find any illustrations of this type of panel transition. Dave McKean is an

"no matter how dissimilar one image may be to another, there is a kind of alchemy at work in the space between panels which can help us find meaning or resonance in even the most jarring of combinations" (1994: 73).

In the spaces between these panels, Derrida's 'play of signification' can be endless, especially in non-sequitur panel transitions, because they are not as restricted by obvious specific intentions on the artists' part. The spaces between panels are not the only area open for play of signification, but the denotative imagery inside them and what they signify, offers another field open for infinite connotation to take place. Denotation and connotation on the readers' part, therefore play an important part in reading and forming meaning in non-sequitur panel transitions. Our individual experiences and memories supply us with images, signs, concepts and ideas with which we can make infinite connotations with the images in these types of panels.

After looking at the different types of panel transitions, it is clear that panels are sequential[64]. Panels are therefore, important tools to indicate that time has passed. McCloud writes that the duration of that time and the dimensions of the space divided, are defined by the contents of the panel rather than the panel itself (1994: 99).

By introducing time into the equation, comix artists have to arrange the compositions on their pages accordingly. Apart from time, artists have three other, conductive compositional elements to take into consideration; change, drama and memory. These all form part of the composition of one panel, one sequence and the arrangement of that sequence on one page.

The past, present and future is contained on one page of comix. The previous panel is the past, the panel one is reading is now, the present. The panels to follow are the future. Yet at the same time, our eyes take in the surrounding panels of past and future and we can go back in time by reading previous panels and pages. This is an

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artist who I believe is pushing the conventions of comics in an innovative way and I will therefore discuss some of his work in Chapter 6.

[64] Panels are therefore, primarily syntagms, but they can be seen as paradigmatic too. I will look at the different kinds of panels later in this section as well as in Chapter 4 and 6, but it is especially panel borders which serve as paradigms and in turn, denotes the level to which a panel can be paradigmatic.

element unique to comix. Unlike other media, "both past, and future are real and visible" and the past is more than a memory (1994: 104).

The content of the panel controls time, as well as the number of panels and the shape[65] of the panel. Panel borders influence time. Not having a border around a panel can also influence the reader's perception of time. McCloud states that a "borderless panel … can take on a timeless quality" (1994: 102). Borders which 'bleed' (when the panel runs off the edge of the page (See Figure 23a) compounds the reader's perception of time as continuum. McCloud explains that time is no longer contained by the closed panel and instead "haemorrhages" and escapes into timeless space (1994: 103).

"Unresolved" panels, that are mostly 'silent', also compound readers' perception of time, because they do not give us any indication of the duration of that scene through sound balloons and boxes, background noises, or actions or gestures (Figure 23b). These are often an attempt on the comix artists' part to 'find a moment within a moment' (a convention of film), which McCloud asserts is one of the "central motifs of this revolution of mature comics" (2000: 37).

Borders therefore influence the reading experience but, McCloud asserts, they "do not affect specific 'meanings' of those different panels vis-à-vis time" (1994: 99).

Will Eisner points out that "stories told with graphic narration must deal with transmission[66]. This has an influence on the manner in which the story is told and will influence the story itself" (1996: 14). Transmission influences the form of the comix. It influences the size of the panels as well as where and how panels need to be placed on the page. The form of comix is thus forced into convention by practical considerations such as this.

[65]McCloud asserts that there are various shapes of panels, which can influence the readers' perception of time. A 'longer' panel, for example, can give the illusion that time stands still within that panel or even that the time continuum of that panel is longer. The fact that there are "various shapes of panels" indicate that paradigms are not confined to the inside of panel frames, but that panels themselves can be paradigms.
[66] By the term transmission, Eisner is referring to the fact that comix is a printed medium, which will influence, for example, the scale of the page on which the panels need to be positioned.

2.3.3. The Power of Line

'Line' is undoubtedly one of the comix medium's most important devices. Scott McCloud stresses that comix is a medium "where every line has a meaning" (1994: 51).

To investigate this claim and as a starting point to this section of Chapter 2, I again pose the question – can line visually express emotion? In Figures 24a&b, McCloud (1994: 118&119) poses several similar questions along with examples of different kinds of line to illustrate each question. To the question "Anger?", McCloud answers with a background of heavy, harsh, bold and aggressive lines. To the question "Joy?", he answers with light, jumping and twirling lines. "Serenity?" is answered with meticulous cross-hatched lines depicting a quiet landscape with a simple shape in the middle of it[67]. "Madness?" is answered by lines forming a downward spiral.

In Figure 24b, McCloud (1994: 120) poses another set of similar questions; can jagged, crackling lines signify "sour"? Can lines fading away in the distance or in a shape resembling the sun's rays signify "warm"? Can sharp lines signify "cold"? Can determined, bold and imposing lines signify "loud"?

I have already established that by enlarging words and making them bolder, loudness and tone of voice can be made visible. Largeness and boldness of form thus serves as a metaphor of loudness of tone. 'Background' noises and sounds are also made visible by imitating those sounds through describing them in onomatopoeic words illustrated in various fonts or style. One can argue that different lines can also serve as onomatopoeia.

It is evident that all lines carry within them expressive potential. These examples (in Figure 24a&b) one can infer are the obvious, conventional (denotative) use of line to depict these emotive and sensory aspects. Lines, however, can be more connotative

[67] I can not help but notice the 'zen' overtones to McCloud's idea of serenity as well as with "Quiet?" (Fig. 24b). Can one assume that serenity is conventionally depicted by using zen iconography and symbols?

and subjective, because they have individual, intrinsic characteristics, open for infinite exploitation and expression at the hands of artists, and in the minds of viewers.

In Figure 25, McCloud (1994: 125) illustrates some of these individual characteristics and their expressive potential. McCloud explains that line can be "passive and timeless, proud and strong, dynamic and changing. By its shape, it can be unwelcoming and severe, warm and gentle or rational and conservative. By its character, it may seem savage and deadly, weak and unstable or honest and direct. The most bland 'expressionless' lines on earth can not help but characterise their subject in some way" (1994: 125).

In Figure 19, panels 2 - 4 show sketches which Harriet drew depicting her nightmares. The character of the line McKean chose to illustrate the child's sketches are 'savage and deadly' further illustrating the nature of her dreams.

Lines in comix speak in the distinctive voice of the artist –louder than any camera or news article or book could. In Art Spiegelman's *Maus I & II*, the holocaust, the world and experiences of the Jewish people in Nazi Germany during World War 2, is entirely made up out of lines (Figures 26 & 27. [1991: 72 & 95]).

Comix images can therefore represent 'invisible' concerns such as emotion and the realm of the senses through their rendering. The distinction between pictures and other types of expression and communication like language, which specialise in 'representing' the invisible, McCloud (1994: 127) writes, may now seem a bit blurry. He goes on to explain that "what we are seeing in the living lines of these pictures, is the primordial stuff from which a formalised language [for comix] can evolve" (1994: 127).

Certain lines used in comix, have evolved to become symbols, icon and index signs in their own right. In Figure 28a, (Richie Rich in *Look Out! There are Real Monsters*. [1990: 2.]) for example, the wavy lines used to indicate smoke coming from the burning pipe, are identical to the wavy lines used to indicate smells coming from a dog, person, socks or cooking pot as illustrated in Figure 28b (*Asterix and the Big*

Fight. [1984: 25])[68]. Yet these seemingly similar sets of lines are very different; the one (an index sign) refers to something visible – smoke, while the other represents something invisible – sense of smell (a symbol). In Carl Anderson's *Henry* (Figure 29. [Aldrige, & Perry, 1975]), the simple line following the bee again shows something that is 'invisible' – that the bee is flying (in other words, movement) and the path of the bee's flight.

Line is also an important sign in facial expressions, of time passing, movements and gesture. These are specific conventions of line pertaining to gesture, which I will examine in Chapter 4.

2.3.4. Juxtapositioning[69]: Word and Image

In literature, we find and experience that words have the power to describe the 'invisible' realm of the senses and emotions. In art, however, we find/experience that images can provoke strong emotions in the viewer, but lack the specificity of words. McCloud asserts that the juxtapositioning of words and image in comix make up the "vocabulary of the language" of this medium (1994: 46).

McCloud writes that, like the most simple line, "words can take a seemingly neutral image and invest them with a wealth of feelings and experiences" (1994: 135). He, however, continues to assert that words lack the immediate emotional charge of pictures, and that they rely, instead, on a gradual cumulative effect.

> The mere use of visual metaphors does not automatically draw out subtext in fiction, but when those symbols echo one another and relate directly to the story's central themes, the results can be mesmerising (McCloud, 2000: 34).

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[68] In this figure, we also see the familiar convention of using green to symbolise bad smells. The character's face also turns green symbolising that he feels ill.

[69] "The act or an instance of placing two or more objects in a close spatial or ideal relationship {the juxtapositioning of abstract with concrete, of the homely with the far-fetched –Lewis, C. D.}" (Webster's Third New World International Dictionary. 1993. S.v. 'juxtaposition').

By juxtapositioning the immediate emotional charge of pictures with the specificity of words, comix "can work miracles," (McCloud, 1994: 135).

Comix has traditionally been considered as a medium associated with humorous escapism to the degree that any attempt at serious narration in this medium can be utterly striking. An excellent example of this is Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986 – 1991)[70]. This graphic novel deals with Spiegelman's relationship with his father, a Jewish World War 2 survivor, while he is documenting his father's experiences during the war. Spiegelman uses the metaphor of a cat and mouse game by making the Jews mice and the Nazis cats. This metaphor and the cartoon-like characters, however, amplify their harrowing experiences and the harsh realities of war and life. McCloud (1994: 152) asserts that comix can be defined as the juxtapositioning[71] of word and image. It is clear, however, from the previous sections of this study, that this is a far too limited definition of comix.

Comix are not confined to the employment of words, but, rather, include all the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations of the medium that make up the mechanics of this art form (As Addendum A & C demonstrates).

Magnussen writes that, in comix, the combination and interaction of text and image tells a story, which is easy to understand. She re-iterates McCloud's sentiments (that juxstapositionig words with images "can work miracles") by adding that image and text are not simply added to each other, but enter into a dynamic fusion that creates new meaning (2000: 193). Following European semiology, Magnussen however continues, that this fusion forms a mixture of heterogeneous signs (iconic and symbolic) and that comix can therefore not be defined[72] only by their juxtaposing of words (symbols) with images (icons) (2000: 193).

[70] See Figures 20b, 23a, 26 and 27.

[71]McCloud's definition of comix – "Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence" (1994: 9), critics argued, could also include animation. McCloud explained that the basic difference "is that animation is sequential in time, but not spatially juxtaposed as comics are. …. Space [individual panels placed on a page in relation to the page, as well as other panels] does for comics what time does for film!" (1994: 7).

[72] Magnussen prefers to define comix as a "sequence of panels" rather than a sequence of images" (2000: 197). She adds that, in comix words and images combine in such a way that "questions a clear distinction between iconic and symbolic signs and there is a fluid transition from the verbal to the iconic" (2000: 193).

Previously in this Chapter, I described Magnussens's idea of the panel-sign. She states that single and heterogeneous signs can not be interpreted autonomously, but in context of each other[73]. As a consequence the focus lies on how they interact creating a bigger more complex sign, which is the panel itself (2000: 195). The panel-sign, in turn, "is seen in the context of its position on the page and within their sequence. The panels interact, creating an even larger sign, the comic" (195-196).

The 'comix sign' can be seen as the first sign the reader perceives and interprets. Magnussen writes: "Even before beginning a sequential interpretation, an impression of the full page, or double-page, has been made" (2000: 200). The interpretation of sequential panel-signs and the signs contained within them, is in "constant visuality of the whole page" (Magnussen, 2000: 200)[74]. Figure 4, for example, is interpreted as a comix because the "reader recognises the panel set-up" with images and text inside the panels[75] (2000: 201).

If a comix can be considered as one complex sign, it implies, Magnussen writes, "that a global coherence is sought in the interpretation of it" (2000: 196). Magnussen continues that the basis for 'global coherence' is a story[76] and that for many comix critics, it (a story) is a defining aspect of comix (2000: 197). The 'first sign' (the comix) in the interpretation process therefore includes the expectation of a story.

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[73] In my Introduction, I mentioned that the "Peircean definition of a sign is not interpreted exclusively as an icon, an index or symbol. In most cases, a sign is interpreted on the basis of iconic *and* indexical *and* symbolic relations, although in different degrees or proportions" (Magnussen, 2000: 196)

[74] Magnussen writes: "A first overall scan is not merely confined to following for example a sequence of actions but is free to be attracted by salient features like shape or colour, or by the content of relatively large panels. The particular drawing style and format will also attract the attention of this first glance and, in some cases, these aspects will indicate a specific category of comics …" (2000: 200).

[75] The reader recognises it as a comix because, as I have shown, panels (in sequence) with images and text in them is a convention of comix.

[76] "A story is about human actions. This means that a series of factors form a basic structure in order for a sign [the comix] to be considered a story. These factors are the actions themselves and the actors [characters] performing them, the time(s) at which the actions take place and the place(s) in which these are performed. A further specification is that a story has a setting, a development and a resolution, which means that it is finite, in other words one complex sign" (Magnussen, 2000: 198). Magnussen use the terms story and narrative synonymously for, "Whether a story is fiction or non-fiction is not relevant … as is makes no difference either for the structure of the story, or for the possible subject matter. The only difference is whether the interpretant considers the indices of the story as representing reality or a fictional universe" (2000: 197).

I have shown that comix are recognised as comix by their conventions (for example panels). As soon as the reader recognises a comix, an assumption is made that it is a story. By combining the conventions employed in comix, which serve as guides in the reader's interpretation process, the story is told. I propose that the combination of the various conventional paradigmatic sets of this medium (in other words, the syntagmatic relations in the comix code) is comix' most important characteristic. Through 'combination' and the consequent play of signification, which will inevitably happen when combination occurs, comix artists start illuminating the realm of the senses, emotion, subjectivity.

Chapter 3:

Stereotyping and its Relationship to the Conventions employed in Comix

In Chapter 2, I have established that conventions are signs that are simplified exaggerations of referral, and that they are specifically designed to be universally recognisable[77].

In this Chapter, I want to investigate the relationship between conventions employed in comix and stereotypes. I propose that stereotyping and stereotypes is another convention employed in comix.

Will Eisner states that stereotyping "is a fact of life in the comics medium" (1996: 17). He explains that it is a tool of communication which is an inescapable ingredient in most cartoons, given the narrative function of comix and cartoons (1996: 17).

3.1. What is a stereotype?

Stereotypes and stereotyping are an integral part of people's everyday lives. It is apparent throughout history[78] and particularly in modern society[79]. Stereotypes are pertinent in the way we think, perceive and react to people as well as the way in which we represent the people around us.

I find it necessary, first of all, to closely investigate the definition of a stereotype; how the stereotyping process works as well as what its functions are.

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[77] See page 20 - 21, Re. Barker (1989: 1) & McCloud (1994: 30).

[78] Michael Pickering writes: "…stereotypes owe their resilience to the historical accretions and sedimentations of meaning and value they carry as elements within the cultural repertory available to people in their multiple relations to others." He refers to examples Shoberl discusses in the *34th Annual Report of the Female Mission to the Fallen*, of the stereotyped way in which women were portrayed in the Victorian period (Pickering, [S.a.]: 8)

[79] The means of communication today are much more elaborate and widespread - e.g. Television, various publications of magazines and books as well as the distribution thereof. Computer technologies, not to mention the Internet, as well as the means of travel and exposure to different cultures, make society more vulnerable and exposed to stereotypes.

Dictionaries (*Webster's Third New World International Dictionary of the English Language* [1993. S.v. 'stereotype'] and *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* [1995. S.v. 'stereotype']) define *stereotype*[80] as an idea or character, which is standardised in a conventional form, without individuality.

As mentioned before, stereotypes have been summarised as "simplified 'pictures in our heads' of people and events in the world" (Hinton, 2000: 8). Hinton goes on to say that there is a "general agreement within psychology" as to the "essential features - three important components" of a stereotype (2000: 8):

> 1) A group of people is identified by a specific *characteristic*. This can be anything from a nationality … a religious belief … ethnicity … gender … hair colour … - in fact any characteristic that has meaning to the people doing the attribution. So we might identify a group of people based on the characteristic that they are … owners of a particular make of car, as well as on more obvious physical attributes, such as age, ethnicity or gender[81]. What this identification does is to separate from an undifferentiated set of people a particular identified group on the chosen characteristic. By identifying the group in this characteristic we are able to distinguish them from other groups on this characteristic[82].
>
> 2) We then attribute a set of *additional characteristics* to the group as a whole. …these characteristics are usually personality characteristics, but they need not be. Some stereotypes include physical characteristics…[83]. The important feature of a stereotype is the attribution of these additional characteristics to all members of the group.
>
> 3) Finally, on identifying a person as having the identifying meaningful characteristic, we then attribute the stereotypical characteristic to them. So we will infer that this English person, like all English people, is tradition loving (2000: 6 - 8).

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[80] "The actual word comes from the method used to mould duplicate plates in letterpress printing" (Eisner, 1996: 17).

[81] Will Eisner concurs with this statement (1996: 19). He raises an interesting theory on viewers' "reflexive response" on generally accepted 'types' of people: "I believe that modern humans still retain instincts developed as primordials. Possibly, the recognition of a dangerous person or responses to threatening postures is residuals of a primitive existence. Perhaps in the early experience with animal life, people learned which facial configurations and postures were either threatening or friendly. It was important for survival to recognise instantly which animal was dangerous" (1996: 20). See Figure 30.

[82] "In identifying *redheaded people* we are separating them from people who do not have red hair (blondes, brunettes)" (Hinton, 2000: 7).

[83]"… such as *grey-haired* for the elderly or *tall* for Scandinavians" (2000:7).

Gordon Allport defines a stereotype as "an exaggerated belief associated with a category. Its function is to justify (rationalise) our conduct in relation to that category". Social stereotypes, therefore, can be said to "exaggerate and homogenise traits" considered to be characteristic of specific categories. These serve as sweeping "generalisations for all individuals assigned to such categories". ([S.a.]: 10)

Paul Secord and Carl Backman state that stereotyping is a "sociocultural phenomenon, in that it is a property characteristic of people sharing a common culture" (1989: 203). Their account of what a stereotype is much along the same lines as the above-mentioned definitions:

> People do three things in stereotyping:
> 1) they identify a category of persons (such as policemen or hippies),
> 2) they agree in attributing sets of traits or characteristics to the category of persons, and
> 3) they attribute the characteristics to any person belonging to the category.

3.2. Why do people stereotype?

As mentioned previously, stereotypes can serve as substitutes where we lack knowledge and experience of other people and our world. It is clear that we generalise when we stereotype individuals into a certain category of people.

Put simply, we need to categorise objects and people in order to perceive and interact with people, in society and the world. It serves as a way of simplifying the enormity and complexity of our world[84]. In that sense, the stereotype is highly conventional.

Hinton states that "perception is essentially a process of classification and only when we categorise an object or an event do we give it meaning" (2000: 31). He substantiates this claim by citing Bruner and Lakoff:

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[84] Lippmann argued that we construct basic images in our heads of events in the world as well as people, and that our reactions to the 'real' world are not based on direct knowledge. He claimed that we do this because the "real environment" we live in, is "altogether too big, too complex and too fleeting for direct acquaintance" (Hinton, 2000: 8). "To cope, we construct these 'pictures' of the environment (including people and events within it), …" (2000: 8).

> Bruner claimed that 'all perception is necessarily the end product of a categorisation process'. The linguist Lakoff is equally certain: 'There is nothing more basic than categorisation to our thought, perception, action and speech' (2000: 31).

The ability to categorise is therefore an integral and central part of cognition because otherwise we would not be able to treat objects as belonging to conceptual categories. If, for example, we did not perceive a chair as something to sit on that belongs to the category of furniture, we would see it as "a novel object". Hinton quotes Frisby & Roth in this regard: "Thus the ability to place objects in conceptual categories is a fundamental property of *perception*" (2000: 31 – 32).

This reinforces the claim that we need the cognitive process of categorisation in order to function in our surrounding world. "We need to decide what is a chair and what is not a chair so that when we go into a room we can sit on the right thing" (2000: 32). At this point, one could argue that we use the same cognitive process when we perceive people[85]. "It has been suggested that we need to categorise objects in order to perceive them. Categorisation appears to play an important role in our people perception too" (2000: 51).

We can conclude that stereotypes originate from a cognitive process of categorisation where a "motivational process of comparison" is taking place - the comparison between them and us (2000: 24).

3.3. The forgotten 'twin' of stereotyping: The concept of 'The Other'

Michael Pickering considers the concept of stereotyping and the concept of the 'other' as 'twins', because he argues: "they address the same cultural and psychological processes involved in self/other relations" ([S.a.]: x - xi). Other reasons why he calls these two concepts 'twins', are because they consist of biased images often used in

[85] "In many of our everyday encounters with people we learn very little about them, but what we do learn is often information that can be used to categorise them. We notice the physical features of passers-by, such as the colour of their skin or their age or gender. … We can use this information to make stereotypical inferences about what they are like" (Hinton, 2000: 5).

media representations as well as being "superficial conceptions of 'distortions' of an otherwise readily apprehended social reality" ([S.a.]: xiii).

The words and images used in representations of society are used to stand in for various social groups and categories. "They provide ways of describing and at the same time of regarding and thinking about these groups" ([S.a.]: xiii). Pickering further explains that these 'public representations' are selective, that they have the power to arrange as well as prioritise certain assumptions and ideas concerning different kinds of people. They therefore 'bring to the fore' certain groups of people while dramatising, idealising or demonising others as well as casting others into social margins. These practices, he says, are integral to the politics of representation, which also involve the practice of 'speaking for' and 'speaking of' those who are represented ([S.a.]: xiii).

"The politics of representation cover both the power to speak of and for others, … ". Pickering continues: "… providing accounts and images of others for structures and relations of social power are central to the analysis of any study of symbolic representations, where questions of under-representation, over-representation and misrepresentation are necessarily high on the critical agenda" ([S.a.]: xiii).

3.4. Stereotypes and Stereotyping as Conventions Employed in Comix

Due to their narrative nature, comix generally illustrate human behaviour. Thus the 'tool' of stereotypes and stereotyping becomes necessary in order to produce recognisable and readable illustrated narratives. "Its [comix] drawings are a mirror reflection, and depend on the reader's stored memory of experience to visualise an idea or process quickly. This makes necessary the simplification of images into repeatable symbols" (Eisner 1996: 17 [See Fig. 30]).

Like other conventions in comix, stereotypes simplify and exaggerate reality. Where most conventions in comix 'categorise' facial expressions in categories of anger, surprise or shock and worry, for example, stereotypes order/divide people in

categories of gender, nationality and race, for example. Uniform characteristics are consequently attributed to the people in these categories.

Comix artists therefore create characters for/in their stories, by incorporating the characteristics of the stereotyped image of character(s) and social groups he/she believes the reader will accept and recognise. Will Eisner asserts that "each society has its ingrown set of accepted stereotypes", but he adds that there are "those that transcend cultural boundaries" (1996: 19 [Figure 31]).

There are, he comments, "standards of reference" and that "to communicate well, the storyteller must be conversant" with what is universally recognised (1996: 19). "Certain human characteristics are recognisable by appearance (Figure 32). … reader[s] evoke a message out of the stereotypical image. These 'standards of reference' include for example, standards for beauty[86] (Figure 33a).

Objects also become symbols employed by comix artists to indicate certain stereotyped 'traits' in characters. How these objects are used or held, become signifiers for certain stereotypes. Figure 34a, shows a paradigmatic set of these denotative objects, "which have instant significance" (Eisner, 1996: 21). How these objects are used, form the syntagmatic relation between what the paradigms signify and the objects become connotative signifiers of stereotypes (Figure 34b). Eisner explain this play of signification (between the syntagms and paradigms and their connotations): "When they [the objects in the paradigmatic set] are employed as modifying adjectives or adverbs, they provide the storyteller with an economical narrative device" (1996: 21).

One can argue that by 'employing' the characteristics stipulated in the categories of stereotypes and illustrating them in a simplified exaggerated way, the comix artist

[86] To some extent, 'homogeny' is culture specific, but even in Japan Western culture's imperialist ideals have been greatly influencial: "Western ideals of beauty were not only accepted, but pursued" writes Frederik Schodt (1996: 61). Characters are drawn with "huge saucer eyes, lanky legs, and what appears to be blonde hair" (Figure 33b & c), Schodt writes (1996: 59). Schodt explains that this was a style heavily influenced by Osamu Tekuza, considered as the "God of Comics" in Japan (1996: 61). Tekuza, in turn, derived the style from American animation and further exaggerated this tendency – "the bigger the eyes, the easier it was to depict emotions" (1996: 61). "Comics are drawings, not photographs, and as such they present a subjective view of reality" (Schodt, 1996: 61).

makes them more recognisable for readers. Readers can furthermore place the characters in categories based on the stereotypes they as individuals have formed, either through their own experience or, more likely, through the media's social discourse in general. By doing this they are also attributing certain personality traits to these characters and a 'relationship' is established.

The concept of 'the Other', inherent in stereotypes is however, also implicit in all language which defines by radical exclusion[87] and is inherent in comix as well. When comix artists make choices from a paradigmatic set of signs, the sign they choose derives much of its significance from what it is not. Alterity is thus a vital component of meaning-production.

Binary opposites are especially prolific in action comix. In the 2001 motion picture *Unbreakable*[88], the binary opposite of hero and villain is one of the main themes. The struggle between good and evil, strong and weak, which feature prominently in action comix, serve as a symbolic premise for this film. In this over-articulation of binaries, stereotypes play a very important role.

In one scene of the film, *Unbreakable*, Elijah (one of the two main characters) is explaining the conventions of an original comix artwork to a potential customer. He states that heroes are conventionally illustrated as physically strong with a square jaw. There are two types of villains, he explains to the customer: the first tries to out-do his opponent by means of physical strength or with his 'special power'. These villains are conventionally drawn as physically strong with "enlarged eyes". The other type of villain tries to outwit his opponent intellectually. These types of villains are drawn as having "disproportionally" large heads[89].

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[87] In the sentence '*The man cried*' for example, choosing the word 'cried' instead of 'died', gives the sentence its specific meaning.

[88] M. Night Shyamalan (director), Barry Mendel (producer), Bruce Willis (David Dunn) and Samuel L. Jackson (Elijah Price). Elijah Price is a comix collector with an illness, which makes his bones brittle and fragile. Suffering from many accidents which has hospitalised him most of his childhood, he found escape in the pages of comix.

[89] It is interesting to note that an attempt was made in *Unbreakable* to make the shrewd villain, Jackson's head appear bigger – he sports a-symmetrical 'big hair' in this film!

In another scene, Elijah also points out to David (the other main character) that comix are essentially exaggerations of the truth, based on something simple. Thus convention is another theme explored in the film.

From Barker's definition of stereotype as "a shorthand image which fills in the gaps in our knowledge" providing us with "apparent knowledge", we can assume that these images are drawn from the artists' personal experience, as well as reflecting what society's preconceptions of what a 'hero', for example, should look like (1989: 196). The artists are hereby also making assumptions as to their readers' experience, accepting that they will agree with their idea of what a 'hero' should look like. The above discussion demonstrates that stereotypes and stereotyping is a convention employed in comix.

Stereotypical images are created by a combination of signs – symbolic objects and how they are held and used by specific characters for example, indicate stereotypical traits in those characters. The stereotypical image is read and perceived in context and in combination with the signs and heterogeneous signs in the panel- and comix-sign. All the conventions and signs in comix combine to illustrate a narrative more effectively. It is the reader however, who 'connects' the combined signs, interprets them and gives the narrative meaning.

Chapter 4:

Conventions for Gesture and Expression

I concluded Chapter 2 by proposing that the combination of conventions is, ultimately, the most important narrative device of comix. In this Chapter, I investigate further conventions which result from these combinations. These are the conventions specifically pertaining to gesture and expression[90].

E. H Gombrich writes that gesture and expression stem from "natural symptoms"[91]: People have a 'natural reaction' to situations and events that happen every day in our lives. At the other end of the spectrum, Gombrich continues, is the "conventional symbol", which is denotative of a stylised pose or gesture[92]. In between these opposites, lie all emotive human expressions and gestures. "…the representational element of art, of course, mirrors life at least up to a point. It makes use of gestures that have their meaning in human intercourse" (1982: 66)[93].

Gestures and expressions in comix, or any representations of gesture and expression, are therefore context specific. Different kinds of inflictions of pain, for example, will influence exactly how the body responds to that infliction and will thus influence how the posture of the body is illustrated as well as the exact facial expressions. I propose,

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[90] Gesture: "1: the manner of carrying the body <the fashion of the countenance and the gesture of the body … is so correspondent to this state of mind –Burke, Edmund.>. 3: the use of motions of limbs or body as a means of intentional expression <we deduce motion from gesture –Allen, W. E.> <gesture may be deliberate … or even symbolic –Langer, Susanne, K>. 4: a movement usu. of the body or limbs that symbolises an idea, sentiment or attitude <she gave a gesture of despair –Wells, H. G> (Webster's Third New World International Dictionary. 1993. S.v. 'gesture'). In this Chapter I wish to not only refer to gestures exclusively pertaining to the body itself, but also to the conventions which evoke emotion and therefore I propose that the body is comparable to words and images in that it is what one 'reads' as such, of the 'story' going on internally. Emotions, however, can be very subtle and so are the gestures to those emotions. When trying to illustrate this on a two-dimensional plane, artists need other conventions to illuminate them more effectively.

[91] Gombrich, E. H. 1982: 63. *The Image and the Eye: Further studies in the Psychology of pictorial Representation*.

[92] Fifty's film posters for example.

[93] Gombrich also stated that it is possible for the artist to "evolve a pictorial language without reference to nature", that a simplified, "abbreviated" and exaggerated style "can rely on the onlooker to fill in the gaps with his imagination" (Aldridge & Perry, 1975: 9). Aldridge & Perry further asserts that "on such a simple premise the art of strip cartoon has been based" (1975: 9).

however, that there are some specific, homogenous conventions employed in comix to depict facial expressions like pain, shock, surprise and worry, for example.

McCloud reiterates Gombrich's statement by saying that "all the things we experience in life can be separated into two realms -the realm of the concept and the realm of the senses". He continues saying that "by de-emphasising the appearance of the physical world in favour of the idea of form, the cartoon places itself in the world of concepts" (1994: 39 - 41). Conventions are therefore 'simplified conceptualised images'.

4.1. Seeing our faces in other Places

Facial expressions form part of gesture in that it is the 'gestures of our faces'. People are omnipresent and in our everyday interaction with one another, we need to be able to communicate. Apart from words, we communicate, comprehend and 'read' other people by means of facial expressions. We can empathise with other people because we recognise and make connotative relations from their facial expressions[94] to our own facial expressions and visa versa. We therefore have an idea what they (other people's as well as our own facial expressions) signify. McCloud further explains this concept by stating that we sustain a constant awareness of our own face and body in our daily interaction with the world (1994: 37).

When we look at a realistic, photographic portrait, we recognise that it refers to someone specific, someone else, whereas a simple circle with two dots and a line can be anyone and everyone[95]. The schematic face in Figure 3 could therefore, refer to anyone, even you.

[94] We do not see our own facial expressions, nor do we observe the changes (unless there is constantly a mirror held in front of our faces throughout the day). This poses an interesting question: Do we 'learn' our facial expressions from the people surrounding us and visa versa?

[95] "The fact that your mind is capable of taking a circle, two dots and a line and turning them into a face is nothing short of incredible! Still more incredible is the fact that you cannot avoid seeing a face here. Your mind won't let you" (McCloud, 1994: 31).

McCloud writes; "When you enter the world of the 'cartoon', you see yourself" (1994: 36)[96]. By not using a 'realistic style' to illustrate a character in a comix, thereby referring to a generic person, the artist plays on their readers' empathy. As readers we can identify with a 'non-specific' character, relate to it, sympathise and empathise with it based on our own experiences. The 'face' therefore becomes a concept and we as readers give it 'life' by attaching meaning to it. "Icons demand our participation to make them work", McCloud asserts (1994: 59).

> Through traditional realism, the comics artist can portray the world without … and through the cartoon the world within (1994: 41).

As one way to insure this involvement and participation from readers, comix artists sometimes juxtapose cartoon-like images on realistic backgrounds. "This combination allows readers to mask themselves in a character and safely enter a sensually stimulating world. One set of lines [realistic backgrounds] to see. Another set of lines [cartoon-like characters] to be" (1994: 43). McCloud referred to this technique as the "masking effect" (1994: 43). In Figure 35, the city of Rome is depicted realistically, yet the characters in the scenes are drawn in a 'cartoon-like' style. That is also why cartoon-like superheroes like *The Incredible Hulk* (Fig. 43a), *The Fantastic Four* (Fig. 43b) or *Thor* for example are always placed within realistic backgrounds and scenery. This (the masking affect) could also explain why young boys are attracted to superhero comix like these.

McCloud further asserts that European comix (Herge's *TinTin* and *Asterix* [Figure 35]), American and especially, Japanese manga, make use of the "masking effect" (1994: 43). One can therefore argue that the masking effect is another convention employed in comix.

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[96] McCloud explains that the reason why he decided to illustrate himself (in his book Understanding Comics) in a "simple style" rather than a realistic one, was that we as readers would have been too aware of the "messenger" (him), to fully receive the message. "I'm just a little voice inside your head - A concept. Who I am is irrelevant. I am just a little piece of you. But if who I am matters less, maybe what I say matters more" (1994: 37). That, of course, is the point of his book –to convey a message, making the content more important than the character. Can one therefore conclude that if one were to illustrate the character in a comix more realistically, the character would then become the central concern rather than the 'message'? What would happen though, if one wanted to illustrate an important message conveyed by an equally important character? Art Spiegelman's *Maus* might be a good example to refer these questions to. I will refer to this work in Chapter 6, keeping these questions in mind.

Other emotions like anger and aggression (Figures 36a, b, c & 11a), pain (Figures 37a & b) as well as shock and surprise (Figures 38a, b & c) are easier to illustrate. These more obvious expressions have become simplified, conceptualised representations or "symbols" as Gombrich stated.

Figures 39a (South African) &b (Japanese), show one simplified conceptualised image: that of the familiar bead of sweat "visibly pouring from the character concerned", which Aldridge & Perry further explain, suggests worry (1975: 3). Shock and worry[97] are not, however, always depicted as sweat 'pouring' down the character's face - it can also 'jump' from the character's face (Figure 40a [Canadian/American], b [Japanese] & Addendum C [South African])[98]. McCloud writes that "when such images begin to drift out of their visual realm they drift into the invisible world of the symbol" (1994: 130)[99].

Anger is commonly illustrated by contorted or screaming mouths, furrowed brows and either wide, narrowed or clenched eyes[100]. Pain is often signified by tears streaming out of wide eyes as well as contorted mouths and eyebrows usually arching upward. Shock and surprise are often illustrated by the character 'jumping' in the air and eyes which are large and round with arched eyebrows.

Sound balloons work in intertextual relation with facial expression. The relation of the size of the font to the size of the speech balloon becomes an important formal consideration. Figure 41a, illustrates how the size and boldness of the fonts used in speech balloons can signify the volume at which the words are spoken. In the first panel the cry for help is ineffective in relation to the second panel. In the second panel, the size of and boldness of the font as well as the fact that the exclamation

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[97] See also the character on the left in Fig. 36c. Here the character is described as "nervous" (Schodt, 1996: 199), but the facial expression is very alike to an expression of worry, except that beads of sweat are not jumping or pouring from his face. Can one therefore conclude that it is less 'intense'?

[98] The reason why I use so many examples here is to illustrate the homogeny of this 'simplified conceptualised image'. It is also the reason why I indicate the origin of the artists/comix.

[99] McCloud continues to assert that this drift from the visible into the invisible has been the basis of all written languages since civilisation began (1994: 130).

[100] Again I have to state that these are exaggerated, simplified imitations of reality "designed to be universally understood" (Eisner, 1996: 2). Although these are only some examples of the more

mark goes over the edge of the balloon signifies the urgency of the need for help. In this panel, it is evident that the relation of the font size and its degree of boldness influence the volume the reader imagines. In the third panel, the font is small, swimming in the speech balloon. The reader reads this panel as quieter than the previous two. It can also be interpreted such that the person needing help is far away, or that the person screaming for help is prevented from screaming too loud. In Figure 41b, one can see the relation that these above-mentioned conventions have on the facial expression of the character. In the first panel, the size and boldness of the font does not convey the facial expression of the character involved and the panel does not communicate clearly (in comparison to the second panel).

These images are often accompanied by familiar symbols associated with these emotions. Swearing, Aldridge and Perry (1975: 3) write, is often indicated by symbols/icons like " ***©! & ?*!** " (Figure 42 & Addendum A). "Sleep is indicated by **Z-Z-Z-Z-Z-Z**" (1975: 3) and pain often by stars around the inflicted area (Fig. 37a).

Symbolic lines around figures is another common convention employed to indicate emotion in comix. Wavy lines moving away from the character's head when used in combination with the other conventions pertaining to facial expression, can indicate nervousness, anger, or shock, for example. These lines, which sometimes describe the expression, emotion or gesture better than words could, can also replace sound balloons (See Fig. 4).

McCloud states that, "within a given culture, these symbols will quickly spread until everybody knows them at a glance" (1994: 131). Will Eisner writes that, although text is an important component of comix, "the major dependence for description and narration is on universally understood images, crafted with the intention of imitating or exaggerating reality" (1996: 2). Eisner is hereby corroborating McCloud's hint at relative transcultural homogeneity within comix conventions.

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commonly used conceptualised images, they still differ from each other according to context and different actions will accordingly have different reactions.

4.2. Alive in Line: Movement in Comix

The depiction of movement in a static medium is a difficult problem for artists. The idea to paint motion as a single static image undoubtedly started with the Futurist painters[101], Balla and Duchamp, for example. I propose these painters, like comix artists, were concerned with giving form to the sensation of motion, rather than simply illustrating the idea of motion.

In comix, these dynamic concepts of motion are often reduced to a single line such as, for instance, the line signifying the path of movement of the bee in Figure 29 (panels two and three). McCloud refers to this single line as the "motion line": "Over the years these lines became more refined and stylised, even diagrammatic" (1994: 110 - 111). McCloud goes on to state that in the hands of "heroic fantasy" (action comix), these "lines became so stylised as to almost have a life and physical presence all their own". In Figure 43a & b, the motion lines overwhelm the last panels of the pages signifying fervent, vehement movement. In the introductory panel of Figure 37a, Jughead slips on a pool of oil and his path of movement is signified by two lines superimposed over Archie and Veronica standing in the background.

Simple lines around the characters' bodies can symbolise an array of gestures, from shivering, jumping, waving, shaking to a mere indication that the character's eyes open wider (See Fig. 36a & 37a).

Motion lines signify that an action has taken place. It directs and follows the path of the action to a reaction, which will naturally follow. Actions and reactions intrinsically signify gesture. Yet not all motion lines are directly connected to gesture. Motion lines, I propose, indicate actions, which in turn affect characters' reactions, which will therefore dictate the postures and gestures of the protagonist as well as antagonist characters.

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[101] *Girl Running on a Balcony* by Balla in Italy and *Nude descending a Staircase* by Duchamp in France, for example.

Various 'effects' have developed since these action comix became popular. These additional effects include multiple images of the subject[102] and photographic streaking[103] (Figure 44). McCloud asserts, however, that this 'photographic trickery' was mostly ignored in Europe where motion lines were used sparingly (1994: 113).
In Japan, McCloud continues, a style originated which he calls 'subjective motion' (1994: 114). In Figure 45, the subject position of the reader keeps shifting and changing. In the first panel, the reader sees the control panel of the motorbike from the subject position of the rider. Panels two and three introduce the riders (from whose perception the first panel was drawn) in the scene and the reader observes these riders from the outside. Panel four again shows the two riders from the outside, but also gives the impression that the reader can be a third driver. Panels two and three therefore shows the reader his/her opponent (if this is a race, for example). In panels two and three the reader thus 'chooses' whether they want to be a subject in the comix (the third rider). Alternatively, they choose in which subject position they wanted to place themselves (which of the two characters they 'want to be'). In this case, panel four only shows two riders from the outside. Reader participation is hereby more involved. McCloud describes it as "putting viewers in the driver's seat" (1994: 114).

Because time and space in comix merge, movement is also introduced when "a moving figure, or figures, is imposed over a continuous background" (McCloud 1994: 115). In this case, the same (static) scene stretches over more than one panel and the characters/figures indicates motion when they move from one panel to the next. McCloud refers to this as the "tool of polyptych" (1994: 115 [Figure 46, panels 7 - 13]).

Addendum D contains some of Frank Miller's action sequences. I feel that Miller's competent line use as well as his use of light and shadow, accurately illustrates gesture. His style is simple – black and white images composed of lines - yet his use of line is complex in its simplicity. The gestures he chooses have the same complexity – simple yet complex, but very effective.

[102] This style can be found in the work of Krigstein, Infantino and others (McCloud, 1994: 112).
[103] This style was first employed by Gene Colan with interesting results in the sixties and seventies (McCloud, 1994: 112).

McCloud asserts that “just as a single panel can represent a span of time through sound, so too can a single panel represent a span of time through pictures” (1994: 110). In the first of Miller’s action sequences (Addendum D) he illustrates many different actions and reactions in one frame.

Frequently, these are events which happen in a second, or less than a second. These are static images, but because they are all illustrated on one page, we initially read them in the time frame as these actions would actually happen. By reading and re-reading them, we can read them in ‘slow motion’ and realise the full complexity of the ‘simple’ image on the page.

In the second sequence (Addendum D), the opposite is true. Although these are ‘fast’ actions, we read the scenes slower, possibly due to the ‘pause panels’ in between the action scenes. We as readers also take a break, a breath, with the character.

By combining the conventions employed in comix, comix artists can manipulate and control the readers’ perceptions. By playing with “universal identification” and allowing readers to use their imagination, comix artists can use our constant awareness of ourselves as a tool in comix, thereby reader identification and perception becomes an important element of comix.

Chapter 5:

Reader Participation and Identification: The role of Reader Participation and Identification in the Functioning of Convention

Eisner asserts that maintaining and controlling readers' interest is fundamental when conveying a story[104] (1996: 50). McCloud reiterates this statement by asserting that "storytellers in all media know that a sure indicator of audience involvement is the degree to which the audience identifies with a story's characters" (1994: 42).

Reader identification, participation and perception, I propose, is therefore an important element comix and reader sympathy[105] and involvement is largely generated by gestural and expressive conventions. It is an important aspect, because it has relevance as to how the conventions discussed in Chapters 2, 3 & 4 work to fortify the conventions for gesture and expression employed by artists.

In order to generate 'reader identification and participation', artists rely extensively on gesture. The readers' involvement and interest in the narrative is fed by his/her identification with the characters involved in the comix' story.

One way of attaining and retaining their readers' attention, is by appealing to one of humanity's most basic attributes: our ability to empathise with others.

Will Eisner writes that "the most basic of human characteristics is empathy" (1996: 47). He continues that it can be used as a major conduit in the delivery of a narrative: "its exploitation can be counted upon as one of the teller's tools" (1996: 47).

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[104] It is important to note that there is a difference between story and plot; 'story' refers to the chronology of events whereas 'plot' deals with the strategic way in which the story is narrated. By investigating the conventions of comix in this article I am more concerned with 'plot' rather than 'story' since the conventions employed in comix are the means by which the stories are narrated.

[105] Empathy I feel assists us/the reader to recognise gesture – the way we 'hold' our bodies as either an intentional expression or subtler subjective expression of a state of mind. Gesture may be deliberate or even symbolic – gestures symbolising or emphasising an idea, sentiment or attitude (*Webster's Third New World International Dictionary*). Empathy becomes an engaging tool in regard to reader participation and the role the reader plays in 'creating' gesture.

The ability of people to feel pain, sorrow, joy or fear for someone else therefore provides an opportunity for comix artists to evoke emotional contact with the reader.

> There is a whole body of clinical studies to support the conclusion that humans learn to interpret gestures, postures, imagery and other non-verbal social signals. From these they can deduce meanings and motives like love, pain and anger, among others.
>
> The relevance of all this to graphic storytelling becomes even more apparent with claims by scientists that the evolution of hominids' ability to read the intentions of others in their group involves their visual-neural equipment. This was possible, they contend, because as the visual system evolved it became more connected to the emotional centres of the brain. It helps, therefore, for an image maker to understand that all human muscles, in one way or another, are controlled by the brain (Eisner, 1996: 48).

It is through our own experiences that we are able to recognise the emotions behind gestures and expressions. By recognising gestures, we can form a mental picture as to the emotional or physical reason for the gesture. For this reason artists can appeal to our empathy and attain reader participation.

When dealing with the 'gestures' of the face (facial expression), the minute and precise rendering of subtle emotive nuances could prove tedious. Here other conventions like juxtapositioning can be an important aspect in the facilitation of reader identification and participation. Juxtapositioning of realistic and 'cartoon' imagery[106], word and image, the text itself, good and evil, us and them, the 'other', loudness and silence to name but a few, help to illustrate these subtler expressions more accurately.

In Figure 47, Joe Sacco (2001: 122) relays some of the harrowing experiences of Dr. Alija Begovic, the director of Goražde's hospital, during the Bosnian war. The memory of one incident is told in simple, almost monotonous sound balloons. There are no larger or darker accentuated words to indicate a change in volume or in the tone of the speaker. These sounds balloons are quiet, almost silent as the doctor describes his experience.

In the third panel, Sacco superimposed the portrait of Dr. Begovic over the illustration of the memory he (the doctor) recalls. In the background, the girl's facial features are depicted realistically, yet she can signify any number of girls. As we were all small children once (some readers may be parents), we are able to identify and emphasise with her, feeling and understanding her shock, fear and disorientation. None of the lines used are excessively bold, bombastic or violent as the lines in, for example, Fig. 24a ("Anger"), which could signify pain, violence or anger. Thus the mood of the scene is quiet and tragic. The scene, however, takes place in a hospital in a country which is at war and these emotions (pain, fear, violence and anger) must inevitably be present. These emotions are subdued, lingering beneath the surface, of this tragic scene. We can see this in the more harshly drawn lines used to render the background.

The lines used to render the doctor are also more controlled, quiet and subdued. His portrait, although realistic, is not definite and specific like a photograph would be, and again we can empathise with him. The doctor's facial expression is not as obvious as for example, a smiling or screaming mouth would be. This makes it more complex and denotes that the emotions behind it is also more complex. Yet by reading and 'seeing' the sound balloons as well as by the characteristics of the lines, we recognise his facial expressions (and demeanour) as resigned. We can 'read' that his emotions are numbed by everything he has seen, lost and experienced.

I made the statement that more subtle emotions are difficult to portray with the more commonly used conventions of facial expressions like contorted mouths, furrowed brows and wide, narrowed or tightly shut eyes. Comix artists often employ the 'tool of backgrounds' to illustrate the finer nuances of human behaviour. McCloud asserts that backgrounds are "valuable tool[s] for indicating invisible ideas…particularly the world of emotions" (1994: 132).

> Even when there is little or no distortion of the characters in a given scene,
> a distorted expressionistic background will usually affect our 'reading' of

[106] Not just juxtapositioning realistic images with cartoon-like images, but also illustrating very real subject matter in comix using a cartoon style. Speigelman's "Maus", is a good example of this. See Figures 25 & 26.

> the characters' inner states. …. For some reason, readers will ascribe those feelings, not to themselves, but to the characters they identify with[107].
>
> …. Expressionism and synaesthetics[108] are distortive by their nature. If strong enough, their effects can obscure their subjects. But a lack of clarity can also foster greater participation by the reader and a sense of involvement (McCloud, 1994: 133).

Figure 48 provides an excellent example of this 'tool'. The drunken and drugged state of the character relates to, and is projected in psychedelic background in panels one and three. In panel three, the eyes of the character are drawn in a similar psychedelic pattern and re-iterates and confirms that the character is drunk and drugged (and that the background is not merely patterned wallpaper). Not many artists, however, use distorted expressive backgrounds. The main reason for this could be that these types of backgrounds threaten to obscure subjects. I propose that the reason why this device is seldom employed is, because 'clear and articulated' backgrounds are needed to illustrate movement and to keep the plot readable.

5.1. Life in the Gutter[109]

Readers give comix life. Comix artists rely on readers' experiences and make assumptions about their readers' experiences, to imbue this mono-sensory medium with all five senses. Artists rely on their readers' knowledge of convention: that "**BLAM**" is the sound a gun makes when it is shot (Fig. 16b), that "pok" is the sound of a pill bottle opening (Fig. 17). Between the gun firing and the victim falling, we as readers construe the impact of the bullet actually hitting the victim (Fig. 16b, panel one). In our mind's eye, we connect the handle of the gun to the victim's chin (Fig. 16b, panel three). We as readers actually hit the man with the handle of the gun. We give the gutters life. "There is no life here except that which you give it," McCloud writes (1994: 59).

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[107]Julie Doucet's backgrounds, for example (see Figures 10, 11a and 12a&b), are mainly informative. They describe the places where the scenes play off, or where she lives. They are specific, yet we as readers can identify with walking in a street, being part of that scene. We may even identify with objects in her room.

[108] This term refer to the idea of an art form, which unite the senses and in doing so, unite the different art forms which appealed to those senses (McCloud, 1994: 123).

[109] Gutters are the spaces between panels.

We experience the world through our senses, by what they perceive and report to us, but our senses report to us only fragments of the whole. "Our perception of 'reality' is an act of faith based on mere fragments" which our senses report to us McCloud (1994: 62) writes. We accept that the earth is round, through our 'constant awareness' of ourselves and our external world we believe this to be true, yet most of us have not actually seen that it is. We mentally complete incomplete parts based on past experience. "This phenomenon of observing the parts, but perceiving the whole," McCloud writes, "is called closure" (1994: 63).

Closure happens automatically, effortlessly, in our everyday lives. Simple shapes, outlines, a mere line, can trigger closure. Other forms of closure are deliberate inventions[110]. Comix, McCloud explains, lie in between automatic and electronic closure. We as readers are willing and conscious participants.

Like Derrida's play of signification where meaning is constituted in the space between signifier and the signified, comix artists create a scene for their readers within panels (signifiers), what happens in between these panels, in the gutters, is up to the reader (interpretant).

In a mono-sensory (visual) medium, our other four senses are compensated for by, for example, sound balloons and background noises. Our minds perceive the images and text in panels and through imagination and closure, we create whole scenes. McCloud proposes that within panels, artists can convey sensory information only visually, but between panels where there is usually no visual information (figures, sounds, scenery etc) and none of our senses (except sight) are required. All our senses are nevertheless engaged (1994: 89). This relates the concept of 'radical exclusion' which I discussed in Chapter 3: that meaning is created as much by what is shown, but also by what is not shown and comix are "as subtractive an art as it is additive" (McCloud, 1994: 85). In the section "Seeing our faces in other places" of this study (Chapter 4.1), I discuss McCloud's idea that by drawing characters realistically, we recognise them as somebody else, emphasising 'otherness'. We can empathise with

[110] "In electronic media, closure is constant. … In film closure takes place continually – twenty-four times per second, in fact - as our minds, aided by the persistence of vision, transform a series of still pictures into a story of continuous motion" (McCloud, 1994: 65).

the character by identifying, making distinctions between and comparing our different experiences and emotions to that of the character. This process of identification, differentiation, comparing and making connotations actively involves the reader in giving meaning to the narrative.

Very schematic cartoon-like images also have an effect on closure, because they are inherently abstract, therefore belonging to the realm of the concept in the reader's mind. They therefore have the ability to flow effortlessly in between and through the "conceptual" space between panels. "All these things [concepts and perception] are subjective" (1994: 91) and therefore affect closure.

The different types of panel-to-panel transitions play an important part in closure. They dictate the amount of closure required on the reader's part. "Closure can be a powerful force within panels as well as between[111] them when artists choose to show only a small piece of the picture" (1994: 86). It is here, in between panels, where the most interesting, the most powerful, closure occurs.

Artists, therefore, control closure, and thus also the amount of participation and imagination of their readers, by choosing what they want to show of their story, their characters, different scenes, themes and places. Artists can deliberately choose to be very ambiguous, thereby requiring a lot of closure from their readers, "trigger[ing] any number of images in the readers' imagination" (1994: 86). Comix artists can give a lot to their readers while also asking much of them.

Closure, I conclude, is aided by various conventions. In those 'blank ribbons', during closure, we as readers add actions, reactions and therefore, gestures in our mind's eye. We add and contribute gestures to those illustrated on the page in our imagination, and we fill in the missing pieces of narrative to complete a story-line.

[111] The illusion of time in the intervals between frames, can also be enhanced, diversified and intensified by the convention of closure.

Chapter 6:
Reconsidering the Conventions of Gesture and Expression

In this final chapter, I will reconsider some of the conventions employed in comix and will try to determine whether these conventions can be tampered with, altered or completely dispensed with without forfeiting the clarity or legibility of the narrative. Finally, I will question whether comix that radically alter or dispose with conventions still fall under 'a/the' definition of a comix. I will investigate the work of artists who, in my opinion, have approached these conventions in an innovative way, reconsidering them, bending the 'rules' and pushing the limits: Art Spiegelman (1991) and particularly, Dave McKean (1989), serve as examples of illustrators that have managed to manipulate, overthrow and reinvent comix conventions in order to provide radically different and emotionally compelling narratives. In the final section of this Chapter, I will discuss some of my own work in which I attempt to 'evolve', alter and transform some of the conventions employed in comix.

6.1. **Revel**[l]**in**[g]

Words have the power to describe and capture the naturalistic details, textures and subtlety of human behaviour and emotion more accurately and realistically than many images. Comix' visual nature poses a challenge to its artists and this quality of much enduring literature is one which comix artists strive to achieve in their work.

To achieve the descriptive quality of words, comix artists sometimes choose to depict their worlds in nearly photographic realism using traditional media, computer graphics or actual photographs. The descriptive power and realism of a great novel or short story is however, more than descriptions and depictions of mere surface detail and physical environments. Artists like Joe Sacco (see Fig.

35) and Art Spiegelman[112], have managed to use realism effectively to portray complex human relationships and emotions. Art Spiegelman's *Maus* is an excellent example of a graphic novel which portrays much more than surface detail and comprehensively deals with the subtle details and complex nuances of human behaviour, society and relationships.

6.1.1. Art Spiegelman

Spiegelman's graphic novels, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale. My Father bleeds history* and the sequel *Maus: A Survivor's Tale. And here my Troubles began*, portrays his fathers' experience of the holocaust. The characters are depicted as animals: the Germans are cats and the Jews are mice. Spiegelman chose to use cartoon images to portray actual and very real events in history and more specifically, very emotional and personal aspects of his and his father's lives. The anthropomorphic rendering of personalities as animals, is a Disney convention (Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Goofy etc.). It distances us from the characters – they become generic types rather than distinct personalities. Spiegelman however, uses anthropomorphism not to create 'cute' stereotypical character types, but to 'universalise' the experience[113] (all the mice and cats, male/female, young/old, look the same). Yet the plot is narrated (by Vladek[114] via Spiegelman) from an intensely personal vantage point. Vladek comes to life for the reader as a distinct persona via his idiosyncratic speech, and his very peculiar neuroses. The 'anonymity' of the mice enable us to concentrate on the unfolding of the plot, but the narration reminds us of the intense, personally experienced nature of the story. On the other hand, by rendering the characters schematically (simple lines for eyebrows and dots for eyes), we can identify with them – they can serve as 'everyman'.

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[112] Joe Sacco uses a realistic style of drawing to illustrate his characters and their surroundings - if you know/knew these people or the country, you could maybe recognise them. Spiegelman, on the other hand, uses an unrealistic/simplistic style to illustrate his characters (cats and mice). Both artists however, tell a realistic story – very real and actual events that happened.

[113] The characters are schematically drawn (simple lines for eyebrows and dots for eyes) which again refer to McCloud's (1994: 36) theory that we can perceive simple schematic faces as being anyone even ourselves.

[114] *Maus* tells the true-life story of Vladek's experiences in Auschwitz, and also deals with his relationship with his son (Spiegelman).

After reading *My Father bleeds History* and most of *And here my Troubles began*[115], one builds a relationship with the author and the characters and the mice become increasingly 'human', personalised and individualised. When one sees the photographic illustration of Vladek (Figure 49), on the second last page of the book, it comes as a sudden reminder that what happened in "Mauschwitz" and what these 'mice' experienced, is a reality. One is almost shocked at the reminder that this is an accurate biography/autobiography – someone else's reality and biography/autobiography. We see that it is someone else's life – the photograph reminds us and shows us this other person and we can no longer 'see ourselves' in this reality. Due to the relationship one develops with the characters, one is overwhelmed by this realisation, as well as with empathy for them. By juxtaposing a photographic image with metaphoric cartoon images, Spiegelman brilliantly illustrates the finer nuances of being human. The reader's role as identifier and participant, the way the readers' perceptions evolve while reading narratives, combine to provide a powerful example of how effective the medium of comix can be. The effect is also much more complex than mere surface detail.

I have established that comix artists maintain reader involvement by appealing to our inherent empathy - it is through our own experiences that we are able to recognise the emotions behind gestures. Yet merely recognising gestures and 'connecting' the dots as to the emotional or physical reason for the gesture or expression, is not the only way artists can appeal to our empathy (although this is the most common way artists do this). Shocking us with reality, someone else's reality, is another way artists could appeal to our empathy. Spiegelman diversifies and evolves McCloud's "non-visual self-awareness" (1994: 37) theory and plays with the "masking effect" (1994: 43) tool on various levels and in an innovative way by creating an interesting twist in the readers' identification with the cartoon-like characters. By inverting the concept of the masking effect (suddenly the background becomes cartoon-like and the character realistic), Spiegelman shows us that this is not our reality and we are distanced from not only the photograph, but the cartoon-world as well[116]. Time is suspended in this

[115] *Maus I* has 159 pages and *Maus II* 136 pages.

[116] I am referring to a quote on page 53: "Through traditional realism, the comics artists can portray the world without … and through cartoon the world within" (1994: 41).

one very silent panel and the sobering image and the realisations it triggered lingers in one's mind's eye long after the last page of the book.

The second comix artist I choose to discuss as example of an artist who elaborates, evolves, re-invents and adopts/adapts conventions to produce powerful narratives, is Dave McKean.

6.1.2. Dave McKean

McCloud (1994: 56) refers to the work of Dave McKean as comix artist, whose work spans over a large area of the 'iconic abstraction chart' (see Fig. 6a). McCloud comments that artists like him "are always on the move, experimenting, taking chances, never satisfied" (1994: 56). It is for this reason (that McKean is an artist who takes innovative, experimental chances) that I choose to discuss his work in this Chapter.

Figure 50 shows McKean's concern not only with reality (bottom left of McCloud's iconic abstraction chart), but also with the picture plane (at the top) as well as for language (bottom right).

The room in which this scene, or "feast of fools" is taking place, is rendered realistically (considering the 'decoration' in the room). The table's finishing (table top and legs) are detailed, they are not schematic lines. There are also no schematically rendered characters or objects, even though the main character (The Joker) is a fantasy figure.

McKean uses a double-page spread to render this one scene. It is not divided into six to eight panels per page like most other comix. Where other comix artists commonly use a sequence of individual/single panels to form the whole scene, McKean randomly arranged individual/single panels (on the second page), with seemingly non-sequitur transitions, to introduce the other characters in the story. These panels are not conventional 'portraits' of the characters concerned, but rather evocative bits of text and abstract, linear shapes that suggest the particular derangement of the

character concerned. By doing this, McKean is now dividing this one scene into a number of past, present and following scenes dealing with these characters. These panels can read as non-sequiturs because we (the readers) are not familiar with these new characters yet, forcing us to try to figure out what these panels are signifying[117]. These panels contain many signs to intrigue us, to give us clues, and in our minds' eye, we are making connotations and through continuous chains of closure, we are playing with signification.

Other clues as to the significance of these 'non-sequitur' panels, are the different types of text in them as well as in the central scene. Although we cannot completely understand the context and meaning of the words, we can discern certain moods and tones from the shape of the sound balloons. The ways in which McKean incorporates his tones of voice and background noises, shows that he is not merely concerned with narrating by juxtaposing image and word, but also through his choice of materials[118]. He elaborates, evolves and overthrows the conventions that are integral to the 'form' of comix as a whole[119]. His choice of materials and imagery are fully integrated with the narrative as well as with specific characters and, therefore, increases each one's individual significance.

'Personalised' sound balloons are prominent in the work of Dave McKean. In his *Arkham Asylum* [120] (1989), Batman's sound balloons are in black with white font, whereas his archenemy, The Joker's are in red (Figure 51[121]). The Joker's words are

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[117] One possible way of trying to figure out what is signified in these panels, is by placing them in syntagms with other panels. This is why I stated in the previous paragraph that McKean (although it is actually us, the readers, who are actually doing it) is dividing this single scene into past, present and future scenes.

[118] I will discuss McKean's use of materials more thoroughly later in this Chapter.

[119] As I have mentioned, in Figure 50, the panels are not neatly in a row with exact spaces in between them which is the 'form' of most comix.

[120] In this narrative, Arkham Asylum was Amadeus Arkham's (a well-know psychologist) childhood home. He converted it into an asylum for the criminally insane after his mother passed away. His mother was mentally ill and her suffering inspired him to open a place where people like her could be helped. Here he lived and worked with his wife Constance and his daughter Harriet. After his last patient, Mad Dog, killed his wife and daughter, Dr Arkham disappeared. Presently Arkham Asylum, situated in Gotham City (where the legendary hero Batman resides), is dilapidated, under-staffed and being run by the patients among whom are some of Batman's old enemies – The Joker, Harvey Dent (Two Face), The Madhatter and Clayface. The Joker has taken the remaining staff hostage, demanding that Batman come to Arkham Asylum – killing hostages while he waits.

[121] There are two scenes taking place at the same time here; we as readers are only present at one. We are 'in the company' of Batman and some police officials. On the other end of the line is The Joker and his victim.

also not contained in a sound balloon, which could point to his madness and volatile character (See Fig. 21).

Clayface's (a physically disintegrating sick character) sound balloons resemble that of a blob of phlegm in colour as well as outline (Figure 52). The shaky font and meandering line of the sound balloon McKean chose to symbolise this sickly figure, also 'feels' fragile thereby enhancing the characteristics of this figure. McKean's use of colour and texture further enriches the perception and 'feel' of this character.

In Figure 51, McKean used a sketchy, 'scratching' type of font to illustrate not merely the sound of a pencil being sharpened, but also to make reference to the actual object. The words "skrit-skritch", also becomes louder as the action of sharpening the pencil becomes more intentional and the object, the pencil, is pushed into the readers' consciousness. The rhythm of the lettering style of the words "skrit-skritch," as well as the rhythm of the words themselves, further mimic the action and the intention behind the object.

Dave McKean's lines in his illustration of Batman are intentionally sketchy, almost anxious[122]. These lines compound the image of the pencil we do not see and becomes more expressive towards the end of the second page, re-iterating the gradual importance of the pencil itself and its violent potential. This ominous threatening line-use, I propose, also compensates for the lack of action within these panels by creating a mounting tension through a slow, arrested pace. In the first eight panels the lines are still reserved, but in the last three panels they reiterate the invisible action taking place on the other end of the line.

Taking into consideration the convention of closure, the gutters of this illustration are also interesting. Reading from top to bottom, there is little to no opportunity for closure between the panels. I propose that this is meant to speed up the time of these panels, staying true to the actual time the conversation between Batman and The Joker takes place. The large black gutters between the vertical sequences of panels, on the

[122] We do not actually see Batman's face nor is there any indication as to his state of mind through other obvious gestures. These 'anxious' lines, however, could be perceived as reflecting his state of mind.

other hand, allow for a lot of closure to take place. They also indicate the contemplation taking place on the character's part while allowing the reader to, along with the characters, figure out what The Joker is up to. As the realisation of The Joker's intentions becomes more apparent, so too do the black vertical gutters where, in the far-right 'gutter', a building becomes visible. Less closure is needed to the end of these pages.

McCloud makes the statement that panel borders have no fixed or absolute meaning, nor are their meanings as fluid and malleable as symbols (1994: 99)[123]. McKean, however, managed to create meaning in many of his borders. Some of McKean's borders even go as far as to illustrate gesture. As mentioned in Chapter 2 (section 2.3.2. Page 36) a 'bleeding' border can create a perception of timelessness. In Figure 53, the last panel on this page bleeds over the page, which could be an indication of death's timelessness, but it also sets the mood and creates a presence for the scenes and acts to follow. The panels' borders themselves show a progression of time, but also add to the gesture of the character within them as well as giving the 'silent' scream of the character a deafening sound.

In Figure 54, the gutter between panels one and two, contains a gesture. Although this 'panel' has no borders, and actually forms part of the gutter, I consider it a panel as it contains an 'image' that requires closure, which per definition, is something more pertinent to gutters. This panel also lingers in the readers' mind due to the fact that it has no borders. The blood spatter, signified by red paint splatter, in this panel also refers to the conclusion or realisation Amadeus arrives at in the following panel: "Madness is born in the blood. It is my birthright" (Morrison, 1989).

The thin gutters in Figure 55 makes transitions between panels very 'fast', almost instantaneous. These small gutters lead us from one panel to the next very quickly, according to the pace of the action(s) contained in them. The little closure that happens between panels happens very fast, firstly because the gutters are so small, and secondly because the action(s)/reaction(s) in the panels follow each other very quickly in a short space of time. Initially, we read these two pages very quickly, almost

[123] See page 36, section 2.3.2. Panels.

holding our breath until the last two or three pages when we, along with the female character, realise what actually happened. Yet this double page is quite overwhelming, containing many panels, all containing a lot of detail and various gestures as well as dense narrative. These dense panels, on the other hand, also slow these pages down. We need to take time (on the second reading) to look and read individual panels, to make connotations which enable us to truly understand the how, what and why of these two pages.

McKean's symbols are extensive and often very subjective. Others one might consider almost decorative (see Fig. 50), yet none are 'conventional'. One recurring symbol in this story is that of lace (see Figures 21 and 54 - 57). In Figure 56, this lace encroaches onto the page which is saturated in Amadeus' wife and daughter's blood. On the next page (Fig. 57), we see Amadeus wearing his mother's wedding gown. In Figure 54, which occurs later in the story than Fig. 56 & 57, the bottom part of the gown is covered in blood[124]. Whether Amadeus was wearing the gown when he killed his mother is unclear, but it might refer to possible future events. This gown could be symbolic of a protective coat, not as much for keeping things out, but more for keeping things contained. The gown being repeatedly soaked in blood, therefore, might symbolise the futile struggle of the character to contain inner anxieties. When and where the gown is covered in blood, therefore, must carry some significance. The wedding gown, or lace pieces which McKean brings into these pages, is an indeterminable sign which one can relate to Derrida's deffèrance and play of signification. The lace forbids closure and opens up room for creative interpretation and requires a lot of reader participation.

McKean's work is rich in texture: textured, tactile colours, form(s) and layers of textured narratives. He uses a variety of different mediums to create the various textures and often the mediums he uses becomes the signifier as well as signified (the pearls and lace for example). His use of digital tools (scanned objects, for example) are well incorporated with the drawn and painted images, enhancing the density of the narrative and symbols. They are not merely 'surface detail'. In his work, McKean deals with layers of meaning and subtext with great competence and dexterity,

revel[l]**in**[g] in the comix genre's endless possibilities, pushing its limits and actually *playing* with signification.

6.2. **Rec[k]on**[sider]**ing**

The controlling of reader's perceptions, identification and therefore closure, are the most pliable elements when attempting to 're-invent' conventions in comix. "In comics, reader control is attained in two stages – attention and retention. Attention is accomplished by provocative and attractive imagery. Retention is achieved by the logical and intelligible arrangement of images" (Eisner 1996: 51). I have established that comix, per definition[125], can be a varied and elaborate medium. Nothing about genres, styles or subject matter, reader age or materials are mentioned in any definition of comix. According to McCloud, "No tools are prohibited" (1994: 22).

Considering the openness of this definition, I propose that the range of materials comix artists use is unnecessarily limited and as consequence there is a lack of texture[126] in most comix. Texture/media is neglected, I suggest, because artists have to conform to the restrictions imposed by transmission and print, which influence the media used. Comix artists therefore mainly use 'flat' media such as, for example, inks (pens, markers and print mediums) and water-based media (acrylic paints, water colours and guachè) or dry media (pencils, colour pencils and pastels).

Figures 58 – 60[127], is a comix illustrating a song, *Total Eclipse of the Sun* by Einstürzende Neubauten and is intended for a Compact Disc cover.

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[124] Keep in mind that the sound boxes are the narrator's words and for the most part describe events, which happened in the past.

[125] "Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (McCloud, 1994: 9). "A comic is a sequence of images between which some kind of unity of meaning is created" (Magnussen, 2000: 196).

[126] By texture, I am implying not only media which lends itself to being rendered texturally (in Fig. 19, the crayon lines on rough paper for example) creating a tactile surface (the art work itself), but also media which are textures like the pearls and lace in Fig. 21. I am also implying media which appeal to our tactile senses as well as media which in itself is the message/meaning/signifier.

[127] See Addendum E, Compact Disc to listen to the song *Total Eclipse of the Sun*. Apart from the copies of the illustrations in the separate transcript, *Illustrations and Addenda*, Figures 58 - 60 are also on the Compact Disc.

Total Eclipse of the Sun

The beauty, tender glow extinguished
the sky dull from a breeze
ghostly the dawn without its red
uncanny, estranged to our nature
the light like lead

ripped in the dark
a tiny sickle
as small as cut by a surgical knife

the sun's last spark melts away
not unlike a dying wick
now stands disc on disc
and crushes my heart

All I really, really, really want to see
is a total eclipse of the sun

'Ah' says everyone
just the birds are silent
with surprise

All I really, really, really want to see
is a total eclipse of the sun

I used canvas as a base, paper (for the panels), oil paint and sewing thread for the borders. The panels are not drawn on the pages, they are literally attached to the pages giving the page some dimension and weight as well as texture. All the pages of this comix has a deep red background with dark grey-blue lead-like coloured panels. With this aspect of the comix I wanted to play with the convention of comix pertaining to 'amplification through simplification'. These images refer to the lines: "ghostly the dawn without its red/ uncanny, estranged to our nature/ the light like lead" (Einstürzende Neubauten, 2000) and sets the mood, atmosphere and scene/landscape of the song/story. I simplified the various shades of red of dawn's rising sun, but also overemphasised some of the red shades one would see in the sky as the sun rises, making them appear unnatural. The contrast of these unnatural reds to the cold grey-blue shades in the panels is intended to show how unnatural a dawn would seem at a solar eclipse - "without its red". It also emphasises the beauty of these reds when they are there. It is also not the "tender glow" in the first line of the song. Instead it describes and refers to the significance of solar eclipse and the

strangeness that comes over the landscape – the atmosphere, the light and the almost tense anticipation when it happens. The normally "tender glow" of dawn becomes exciting, more livid with the expectation of the solar eclipse.

Figure 58 deals with the first five lines of the song and contains only one long panel. This panel refers to the tension between the initial anticipation and, on the other hand, calmness while waiting for the eclipse to happen. It suspends time and refers to the pace of the music, its tone, its atmosphere and the scene of the song/story. It is an abstract depiction of a landscape/sky although the reader may not initially read it as such. One cannot make sense as to scale in this panel to give the reader a clue as to what the panel signifies. Reader participation is already established and required to make a connection between the imagery and the lyrics[128] and they need to go to the next page to make sense of this one. The reader's attention is hereby also retained. Abstract painterly panels can therefore also obtain and retain reader participation based on aesthetic interest. Comix artists do not need to overwhelm the reader with figures, speech balloons, movement lines and other iconography. Incorporating more abstract, textured panels are therefore another avenue comix artists can explore to attain and retain reader participation.

This page/panel is slow and quiet (the panel does not contain a lot of detail and overwhelming imagery) and gives the reader the opportunity to examine the textures, tones and intention of the panel. By examining the page/panel more closely, one sees that the panel border is not drawn, but stitched. The stitches on the left of the panel is more 'worked'. Some are in a bright contrasting orange while others are more neutral and some are double stitched. These 'busy' stitches also signify the initial anxiety and anticipation of those waiting for the eclipse to happen. In the bottom middle of the panel and top right of the panel, the stitching becomes less elaborate, less obvious and 'busy' and is in colours that are more neutral. Some are done in invisible thread to continue the stitched border, thus 'quietening' the panel border and create a pause. This 'pause' also refers to the calmness that sometimes overcome us before that which we have been anticipating happens – 'the calm before the storm'.

[128] The only reference the reader can make between the first page and the lyrics of the song is 'dawn', 'red' and "the light like lead".

The first panel of Figure 59 illustrates the lines: ripped in the dark/ a tiny sickle/ as small as cut from by a surgical knife. It has a busy overworked stitched border, but it is rendered in neutral colours, with some bright contrasting orange sewing thread at the beginning of the panel (left bottom corner). This again signifies the reserved, silent rush and excitement of the moment before the sun is totally eclipsed. It picks up the change in pace and tone of the music. The gutter between this panel and the next is fairly large and extends these emotions suspending the time before the total eclipse of the sun. The reader also recognises that the panel in Figure 58 represents a landscape so that an amount of closure occurs as regards to the setting.

The next panel of Figure 59 stands in intertextual relation to the lines: "now stands disc on disc/ and crushes my heart". In this panel, an indication of scale is given to the reader and provides further closure for Figure 57. The top left to right bottom of this panel's border is very busy and overworked with a predominance of orange thread signifying the excitement the moment before the total eclipse of the sun. When the eclipse occurs, the stitching again quietens down to single thread, neutral stitching (at the bottom of the panel), ending the panel in invisible thread. It signifies the idea of the moment 'crushing their hearts' and everyone holding their breath.

The gutter between this panel and the panel in Figure 60 extends well into the next page. In this gutter the people exhale and the gutter signifies the lines: "'Ah' says everyone/ just the birds are silent/ with surprise". This gutter could serve as a panel although it has no border. The absence of the border not only gives it the impression of being a gutter, but also amplifies the silence as well as refer to the silence in the music. Here the role of the gutter and panel change places: In the previous pages, the panels signified the lyrics and the borders for the most part, signified the music itself; its pace, melodies and moods. The gutters, one could argue, also signified the music and the breaks between the lyrics. On this page, the extended gutter signifies the lyrics whereas the panel signifies the music. The birds flying away resemble the strings in the music. The borders of this panel are done in invisible thread and, at the left side has a consistent sewing pattern. This signifies not only the pace in the music, but also the repeated lines: "All I really, really, really want to see/ is a total eclipse of the sun". At the end of the panel (bottom right and right side), the stitching becomes spaced further apart and eventually extends in length as well. These stitches echo not

only the flight of the birds[129], but also the singer/songwriter's continuing sentiment: "All I really, really, really want to see/ is a total eclipse of the sun" as well as the music fading away/ending.

In this comix I bring into question McCloud's statement that borders influence the reading experience but "do not affect specific 'meanings' of those different panels vis-a-vis time" (1994: 99). Panel borders can also be signifiers in themselves and can affect the meaning of panels.

Although this comix is not large nor elaborate, it is by no means not reproducible, therefore challenging Eisner's view that transmission is necessarily a constraint to comix artists. With today's sophisticated digital technology, anything of any size with extensive detail and texture, can be reproduced and printed. Transmission, in the modern world, should no longer be hampering to comix artists who wish to explore media, play with scale or otherwise elaborate and evolve the conventions of comix.

I propose that there is a general lack in the varieties of formal artistic properties in comix. Comix artists, in my opinion, are concerned more with the story aspect of comix, than with the formal properties of the media they use. I suggest that there is a lack of provocative imagery in comix with the result that our attention is not necessarily attained by the aesthetic qualities of comix. There is ample space for artists to revel in the unique aspects of medium and 'form' and the possibilities inherent therein as McKean does.

In none of the definitions of comix is it stated that a story or narrative is a prerequisite of comix. Rather comix are stories by virtue of their conventions. Readers expect a story when they see the first sign - the 'comix sign' (Magnussen, 2000: 200)[130]. A story serves as global coherence for the interpretation of the comix sign and guides the interpretation process – a story structure is instantly activated and works as a narrative schema when a comix is recognised as such. The comix artist could play with the reader's expectation of a story when they are presented with a page laid out

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[129] This panel is not attached to the page like the previous panels where I had sewn the 'paper panels' onto the canvas. This (the panel not being stitched to the page) makes the page's weight lighter, signifying the flight of the birds.

with a panel set-up. In Figure 61 (also on Addendum E, Compact Disc), it is my intention to examine this idea.

In Figure 61 (also on Addendum E, Compact Disc), an initial scan of the page invites the reader to perceive it as a comix, because of the sequential panel set-up. "Western cultural reading convention dictates that the sequential interpretation of the panels begin in the upper left corner. The next sign in the process is in this case, as it is very often, the title" (Magnussen, 2000: 202). Magnussen continues: "As a conventional sign type, titles are expected to express what the comic is about, which makes it [the title] a symbolic sign. The fact that the title is necessarily placed at the beginning of a text makes it an iconic-diagrammic sign. It is furthermore an indexical sign, because it points to the story" (2000: 202). The letter types in the title signify the individual characters. In Figure 61, Jim is drawn in pencil with hard jagged lines. The reader infers which of the characters is Jim since his name is written in similar hard jagged pencil lines. The other character must be Bob. The second panel shows Jim shouting "**YOU JERK!!**" to Bob. It is then induced that the reader expects Bob to react or retaliate in the next panel, because in the reader's mind a story structure has already been initiated. As the reader continues his/her sequential interpretation/reading, they however find the rest of the panels are blank.

I propose that there is a lack of non-story/fictional comix. If one wants to remove 'a story' from comix, one needs a substitute to provide 'global coherence'. I propose that the format (a panel or panel set-up for example) of comix could serve as global coherence and I propose that more comix could and should be concerned with creating a narrative effect in comix rather than illustrating a story. By focussing on a colour, a line or a panel, for example, and making this aspect the subject matter of the comix, a purely non-fictional comix genre may be attempted.

Eisner makes the statement that "unconventional formats are perceived differently" and therefore the format of comix "conforms to accepted reading disciplines" (1996: 14)[131]. Magnussen writes that after the initial scan of the page a "sequential

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[130] I have examined Magnussen's theory on the comix sign in Chapter 2, section 2.3.4. Pages 40 - 41.
[131] In other words, reading from left to right or in a very few cases, from top to bottom. The 'classic' format of comix is a 7 by 10 inch upright format.

interpretation begins, following the conventional reading pattern of the culture of which a specific comic forms part" (2000: 201). She is hereby re-iterating Eisner's claim that the format of comix is influenced by "accepted reading disciplines". Magnussen however, continues that "new interpretations include former interpretations by building upon and modifying them, or, in some cases, by questioning or even negating them" (2000: 201). This (the reading format or format of comix itself), I feel is another area open for **rec**[**k**]**on**[sider]**ing** and re-invention. Bigger formats, bigger pages, for example, would give the artists more space to explore and play with panels, text, sound balloons and boxes as well as materials.

We as Westerners are so conditioned to read in linear progressions from left to right and up and down, that comix artists could 're'-invent many different ways to place panels on a page. Artists could play with and explore different narrative techniques more often, tricking the reader, playing with their perceptions, thereby always increasing reader involvement.

Figure 62 - 66 (also on Addendum E, Compact Disc) explores the schizophrenic persona – the notion of an individual with another persona imbedded in his/her mind. This theme metaphorically serves to illustrate the relationship between stable convention and dynamic change in my own creative processes, and in the comix genre in general. Two opposites in one body. In this comix the one persona is the 'Conventional' the other is 'Change'. The Conventional is signified by the grey panels with black ballpoint pen drawings and Change by the (generally orange) panels and stitching. This comix is done in a larger format (65 x 80 cm) on canvas. Change hereby already 'infiltrates' the Conventional not only due to the scale, but also by the materials I used. Canvas replaced paper and oil paint replaced ink or guachè for example. The Conventional remains in the use of the ballpoint pen (or ink) and in the way the illustrations are rendered.

The cover of this comix (Figure 62) has only one grey panel with a realistically drawn yet unrecognisable illustration. I placed the title of the comix on the back so as not to give the comix an initial fixed meaning, and so to avoid influencing the reader's interpretation of the comix. This is unconventional for comix and again signifies Change. The stitched left-hand border further signifies Change infiltrating the

Conventional. The Conventional in turn tries to suppress Change - thus the stitches of this border are re-covered by the grey oil paint of the Conventional.

By turning the page, the weight and texture of the canvas introduces the reader for the first time to the tactile nature of this comix. The textures and tactile nature of this comix will be difficult to reproduce and impossible to mass produce, and therefore Change influences the transmission of this comix. Some comix critics' definitions of comix require that they conform to a certain size and format to comply with transmission and mass reproduction[132]. However, according to Magnussen's theory of the comix sign, the first scan (Figure 63) of these double pages show the reader a sequence of panels which confirms that this is a comix nonetheless. The convention of panels in sequence and the comix sign, still defines this as a comix although it will not be easily mass-produced.

Figure 63a begins with a thin panel that is scratched into the acrylic layer of the page revealing an orange layer underneath as opposed to the Conventional where panels are painted onto the page. This signifies Change which is always underneath the surface and in this instance, is brought to the surface by the scratching – this signifies the beginning of Change[133]. The second panel signifies the Conventional. The illustration, rendered in a realistic style, becomes more recognisable, yet remains obscure. The tension between the realistic and abstract elements of the illustration tempts the reader to start seeing, reading and recognising form in the illustration. A high degree of provisional closure[134] is constantly happening in this panel as well as between this and the first panel and reader participation is essential. The reader's participation is therefore attained and retained.

Change is further signified by the unconventional placing of the panels in this comix. The gutters are extensive and some are even larger than most of the panels. The consequence of this break with the conventional is that it slows the reading of the comix down. It also allows the reader time to make sense of the relationship between

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[132] See Chapter 2, section 2.1. page 24.

[133] This signification of Change is more obvious than the materials (canvas instead of paper and oil paint instead of guachè) which also signify the infiltration of Change.

the panels. By slowing down the reading process, it also encourages the reader to explore the textures on the page. The third panel is the 'suppressed' stitched border of the panel in Figure 62. On this page, that suppressed Change resurfaces and could signify that although the attempt to suppress Change had succeeded in the past (previous page), it was only temporary – until the reader turns the page[135]. Change will always resurface, be there and happen.

The next panel overlaps onto the next page. If the reader were to look at this page (Fig. 63a) on its own, the illustration would come across as more abstract than when it is read in context with the rest of the panel on the next page (Figure 63b). The gutters therefore also stretch over to the next page, giving the reader even more time to make sense of the illustration. In Figure 63b, the second panel resembles the first panel of Figure 63a because the panel is similarly scratched into the first layer of the page revealing an orange layer underneath which, as indicated before, signifies Change. This panel is bigger and the orange 'climbs out of the panel' in the form of stitches, becoming more solid and tactile and part of the page. In this panel the progressive acceleration of Change is therefore more obvious/visible.

In Figure 64, the progression of Change becomes even more apparent. In Figure 64 the gutters take up most of these two pages, again allowing the reader a lot of time to explore them. The reader's focus is however, immediately directed to the orange stitched panel at the top of the second page (Figure 64b). The reader hereby almost ignores the previous page (Figure 64a) and does not necessarily use the time provided by the large gutters. Because the orange panels invite the reader to focus immediately on the top panel, Change becomes the focus point and overpowers the Conventional.

The orange stitches in the panel at the top of Figure 64b are erratic and busy and one can perceive them as threatening to take over the page and break out of the page. This panel directs one's focus to the stitching underneath it. This stitching, although it has been 'suppressed', still dominates the Conventional grey panel underneath it and

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[134] Provisional closure is a Post-Structuralist model of interpretation which implies that there is never closure and no final or definite interpretation or reading of any given text can be reached (see Footnote 5, page 4).

[135] Because the stitching is obvious and instantly recognisable, the reader (might) go back to Figure 62 and re-examine the covered stitched panel border.

makes the reader aware of the next page – the future. On this page (Figure 64b), closure between the panels become more intense than in the previous pages and the reader might turn this page faster than the previous pages. The top panel also (almost as an after-thought) leads the reader's eye towards the top edge of Figure 64a, which is also stitched in orange. From there the reader might consider Figure 64a (the Conventional) as a page for the first time and investigate the overlapping (from Fig. 64a to Fig. 64b) panel. The images in these panels become more familiar, although they are not immediately recognised, again encouraging the reader to turn the page.

Figure 65 is the first double page where there is not an overlapping panel from one page to the next and the pages (Figures 65a&b) are therefore read as two separate pages next to each other. The reader's focus is however, immediately drawn to the second page (Figure 65b), because of the overwhelming, involved stitching and imagery and due to the fact that the whole page is covered – there are no neatly allocated panels. The fact that this happens signifies Change dominating and overwhelming the Conventional. In Figure 65b, the Conventional has given in to Change: The grey which use to be in a neat panel, signifying the Conventional, is spaced over the whole page with no clean, clear border and the whole page becomes the panel. The image, which use to be drawn in ballpoint pen/ink, is now almost entirely 'drawn' in stitches – the conventional medium has submitted to the unconventional medium.

The bright orange stitching on the right of Figure 65b resembles the top panel of Figure 65a and the reader's focus is drawn back to Figure 65a. On this page, the top orange panel is not covered/suppressed by the Conventional as it was done in the previous pages and comes through from the previous page (Figure 65a). Change further infiltrates the Conventional in the orange border at the top of the third panel. On this page, the image now extends over the gutter between the second and third panel. In the gutter, the conventional medium (ballpoint pen/ink) is replaced by the unconventional medium and the image is drawn in stitching. The image becomes even more recognisable and one can recognise a paw of a dog in the third panel. In Figure 65b, one recognises an open eye and the reader can ascertain that the image on the previous page was a sleeping dog which is now awake. The eye is drawn realistically in the Conventional medium of ballpoint pen/ink. In the rest of the image

the degree of realism is tampered by the stitching which in turn makes it abstract again. In the rendering of the image there is a 'tug of war' between realism and abstraction – the Conventional and Change.

The bright orange stitching on the right of Figure 65b encourages the reader to turn the page, where the title finally puts the images of the comix into context. By having the title, *Let Sleeping Dogs Lie*, on the back of the last page, the reader can now re-read the comix backwards. With the title providing a context, the reader can start to recognise the different body parts illustrated in the previous Conventional panels of the comix. On the back of the last page (Fig. 66), there is another play between realism and abstraction (the Conventional and Change): The title provides words and letters which are recognisable and readable signifying realism, but the stitches coming through from the other side of the page becomes another abstract image. The Conventional (a title with words) and Change (the abstract image and stitches as the medium) thus fuse in this image.

Although the title provides a context for this comix, I do not provide the reader with an obvious story. As inevitably happens when individuals approach and interact with any given text, a narrative forms through the sequential reading of the text. One can infer that the global coherence of this comix is attained through reader participation which is acquired by an aesthetic interest on the readers part and retained by the tactile nature of the materials used in the comix. 'Non-story'/non-narrative comix is therefore possible and can be attempted by comix artists although they "go against the conventional idea of what a comic is" (Magnussen. 2000: 199).

McCloud states that "as closure between panels become more intense, reader interpretations becomes more elastic" (1994: 86). The issue of play of signification and closure could enable comix artists to reconsider and re-invent almost any other convention. In Chapter 1[136], I discussed Derrida's '*différance*', which describes the idea that meaning is formed in the spaces between the signifier and the signified and that the chain of connotation and signification can go on *ad infinitum*. The connotations of the sign will differ from person to person. Each reader will inevitably

[136] Section 1.1.1, pages 12 - 14.

use another sign to extract the meaning of the given sign, and so meaning is deferred repeatedly and the chain is indefinitely extended. From the discussions on McKean's work (particularly the discussion of Fig. 50), it is evident that closure and '*différance*' intensely involve readers. 'Non-sequitur' transitions in particular lend themselves open to '*différance*'. Non-sequitur transitions are generally ignored and neglected and is another convention in comix which can and should be explored further.

Conclusion

The intention of this study was to consider whether the conventions employed in comix can be elaborated upon and evolved. It therefore explores the possibility of pushing the boundaries of 'traditional' comix. Consequently, the definition of comix had to be investigated to see whether transformed/altered comix still qualify as comix.

In my research it became apparent that there is no final, restrictive definition of comix, that comix 'evolve' as society and the modern world changes, and different media and technologies develop (the Internet, computers and multi-media). Certain characteristics will therefore be built upon while others will disappear over time. The definitions of comix therefore remain unstable and their foundations rests upon a notion of what most comix are like. These definitions therefore formed on the most common denominations of the existing comix genre.

I found that there are basic conventions employed in comix. By applying Post-Structuralist semiotic theory, specifically Peirce's model of the sign and Derrida's concept of *diffèrance* to my investigations into the conventions of comix, it became obvious that individual interpretation dictates that there is no fixed meaning to any given text. The signs of comix can therefore be elaborated upon and evolved. I also found that comix are one complex sign in themselves and one can therefore, by applying *diffèrance*, conclude that comix can change without radically unsettling or destabilising the definition of comix as genre.

I further demonstrated that reader identification, participation and perception, especially as it pertains to closure, is the most important component regarding the understanding of comix conventions. The gutters, where most closure takes place, holds the key to Derrida's *différance* and play of signification. I concluded by stating that the 'blank ribbons' between panels encourage closure. We as readers use our imaginations to add more gestures to those rendered in the panels hereby adding to the

plot of the narrative. The elements or 'information' omitted is equally, if not arguably more[137], important as those included.

I then dealt with the works of non-conventional comix artists, investigating how, in their unique and innovative ways, they approached the conventions of comix, pushing their deeper complexities towards the 'limit' where they no longer function as conventions. The potential for 'play of signification' lies in the choices made from the paradigmatic sets by the comix artist. In my opinion however, the potential which the 'play of signification' offers comix artists, is generally still used in a limited, obvious and conventional way by most of these artists. By means of examples I pointed out some areas and conventions that are open for re-invention. Weighed up against most of the definitions of comix, these examples can still be defined as comix. Although these comix could oppose the conventional idea of what a comix is in Western society, the distinction, I think, lies in the attitude toward the importance of convention for the definition of comix.

Readers need to develop and adjust their visual literacy to understand arbitrary signs and symbols. Their effectiveness as conventions will only develop through time. As with any new invention, it takes time before it is fully understood and, therefore, effectively used. As with any new invention, it is also inevitable that it will become a convention with frequent repetition.

It is therefore evident that the conventions of comix can be illustrated differently and, I conclude, that these conventions should be reconsidered and, to some extent, be re-invented to keep the comix genre dynamic and alive.

[137] If comix artists showed every detail of the plot, no closure and therefore reader participation would be required. Readers could get bored and might decide not to participate at all.

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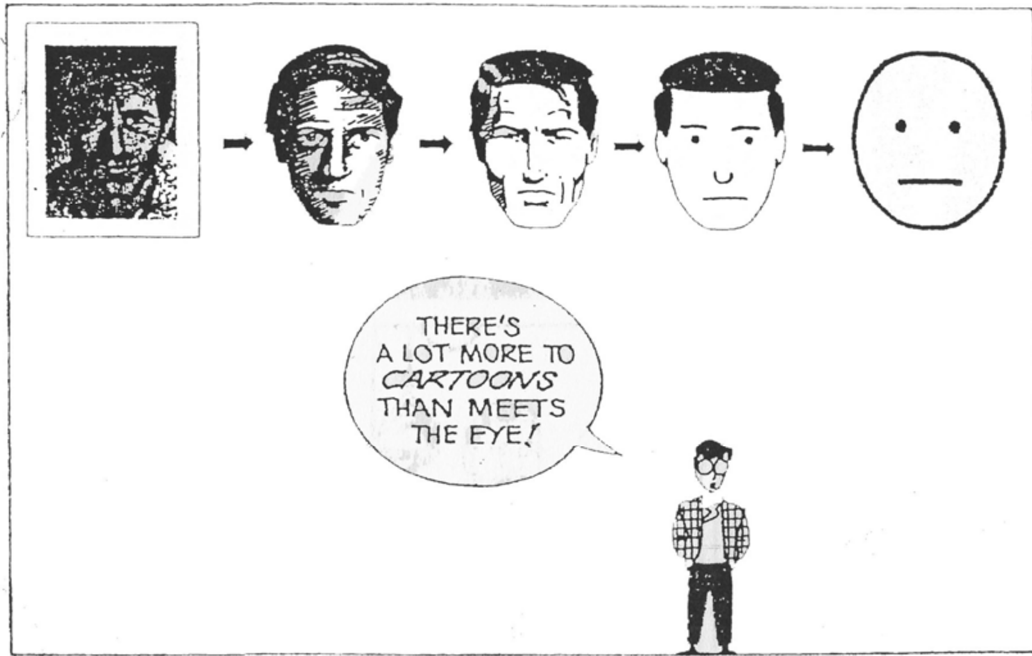

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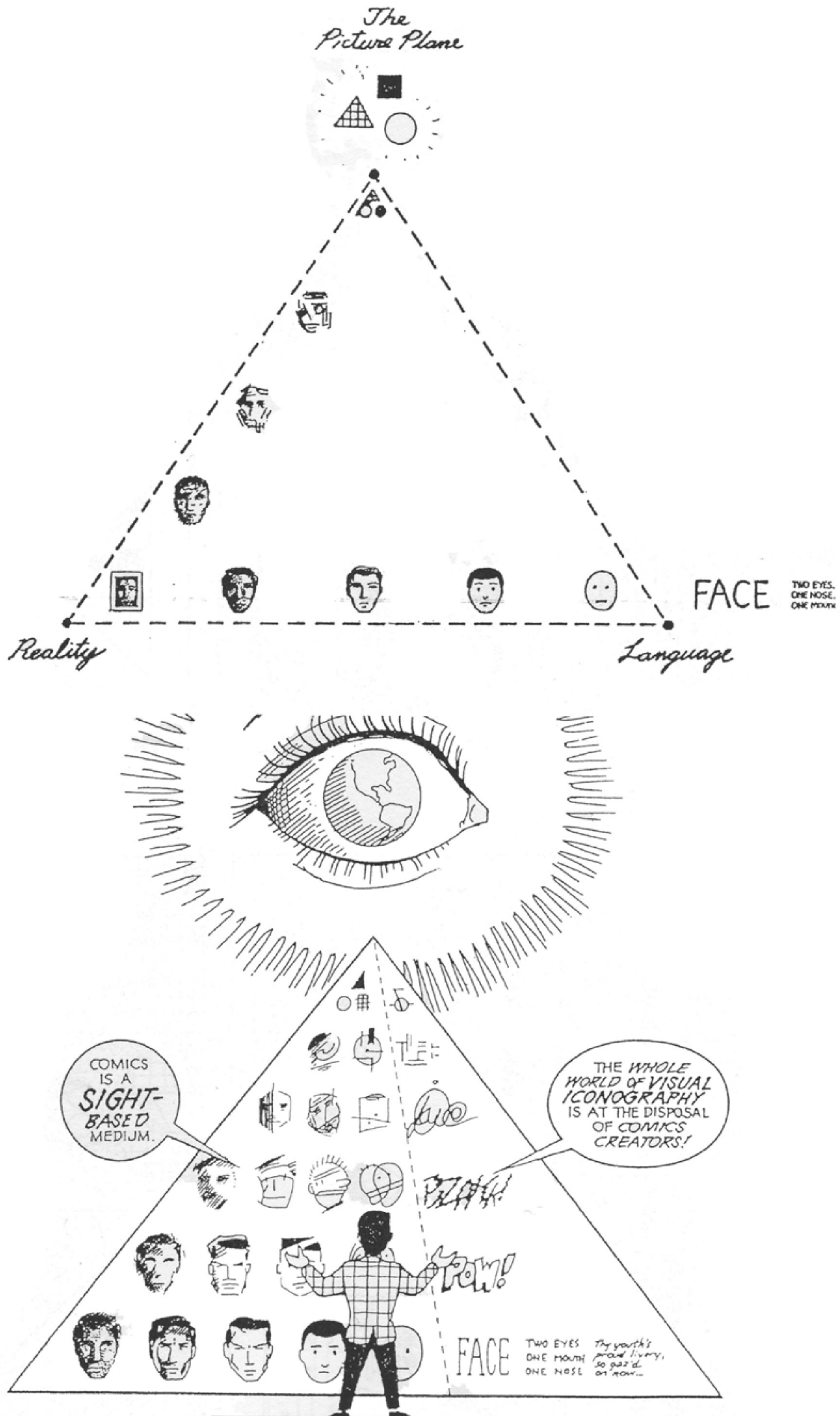

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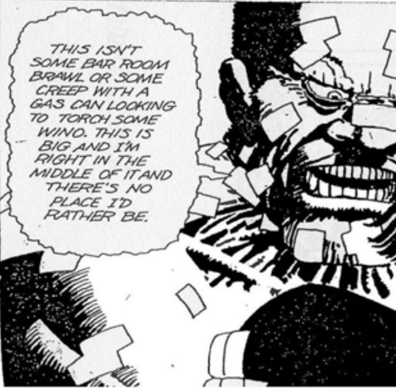

Figure 13. Miller, Frank. 1992. Sin City.

HEAVEN HELP US (part 2) by Joe Dog '99

A USEFUL POSTURE TO ADOPT
THE ONSET OF DEPRESSION MAY OFTEN BE PREVENTED BY LYING DOWN, PREFERABLY ON THE RIGHT SIDE AND WITH KNEES WELL DRAWN UP. IT MAY BE NECESSARY, HOWEVER, AT THE SAME TIME, TO ADOPT OTHER FORMS OF TREATMENT MENTIONED ELSEWHERE.

THERE ARE MANY THINGS THAT DEPRESS ME... THE FACT THAT I LOOK LIKE MY FATHER... THAT MY CAT, PIET, DIED RECENTLY... AND OF COURSE THAT I NEVER "PRACTISED" SEX AT SCHOOL.

BOX FULL OF OLD 2000 AD'S + EC-REPRINTS

IF ONLY I KNEW THEN WHAT I KNOW NOW... I LET SLIP SO MANY OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH MY FINGERS ...

...DRUNK GIRLS AT PARTIES...

HALLO, YOU...

NO FEAR AT ALL (AND ONLY IN STANDERD EIGHT THEN)

BUT OH WELL... TODAY'S STORY IS ABOUT THE FIRST TIME I HAD SEX - NOT THE KIND OF THING PEOPLE LIKE TO DISCUSS...

...THE DISILLUSIONMENT ...THE SIN... THE SHAME ... AND ESPECIALLY: THE SPECTACULAR FUCKUP.

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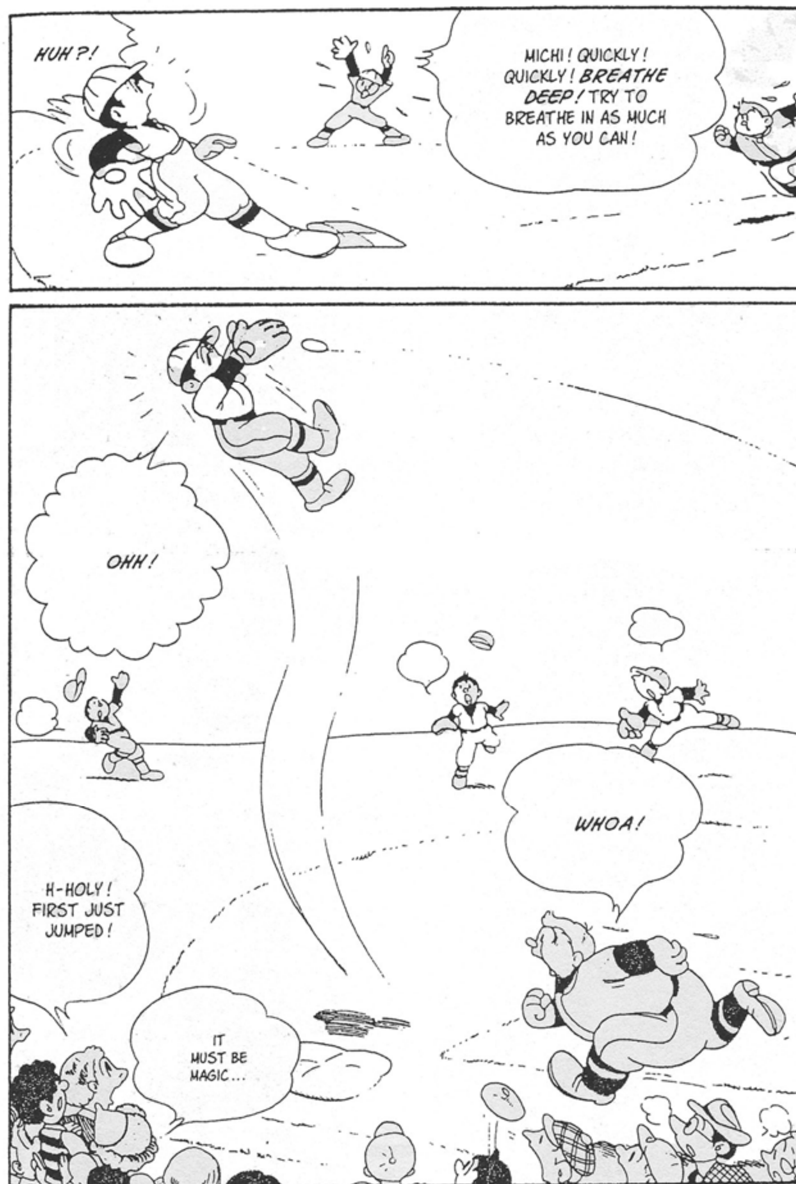
Figure 14. Kannemeyer, Anton. 1999: 6. Heaven Help Us: Part 2.



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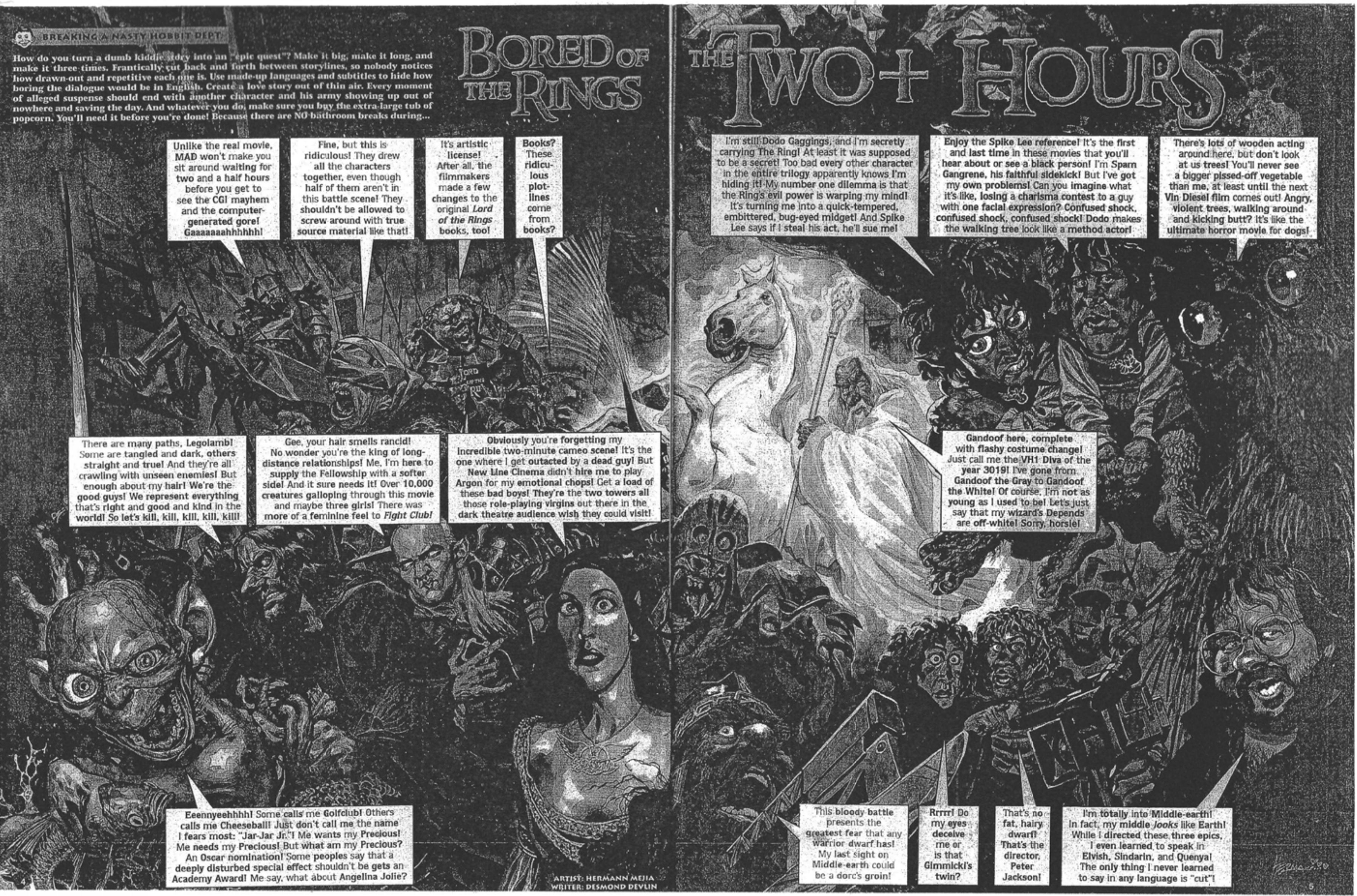

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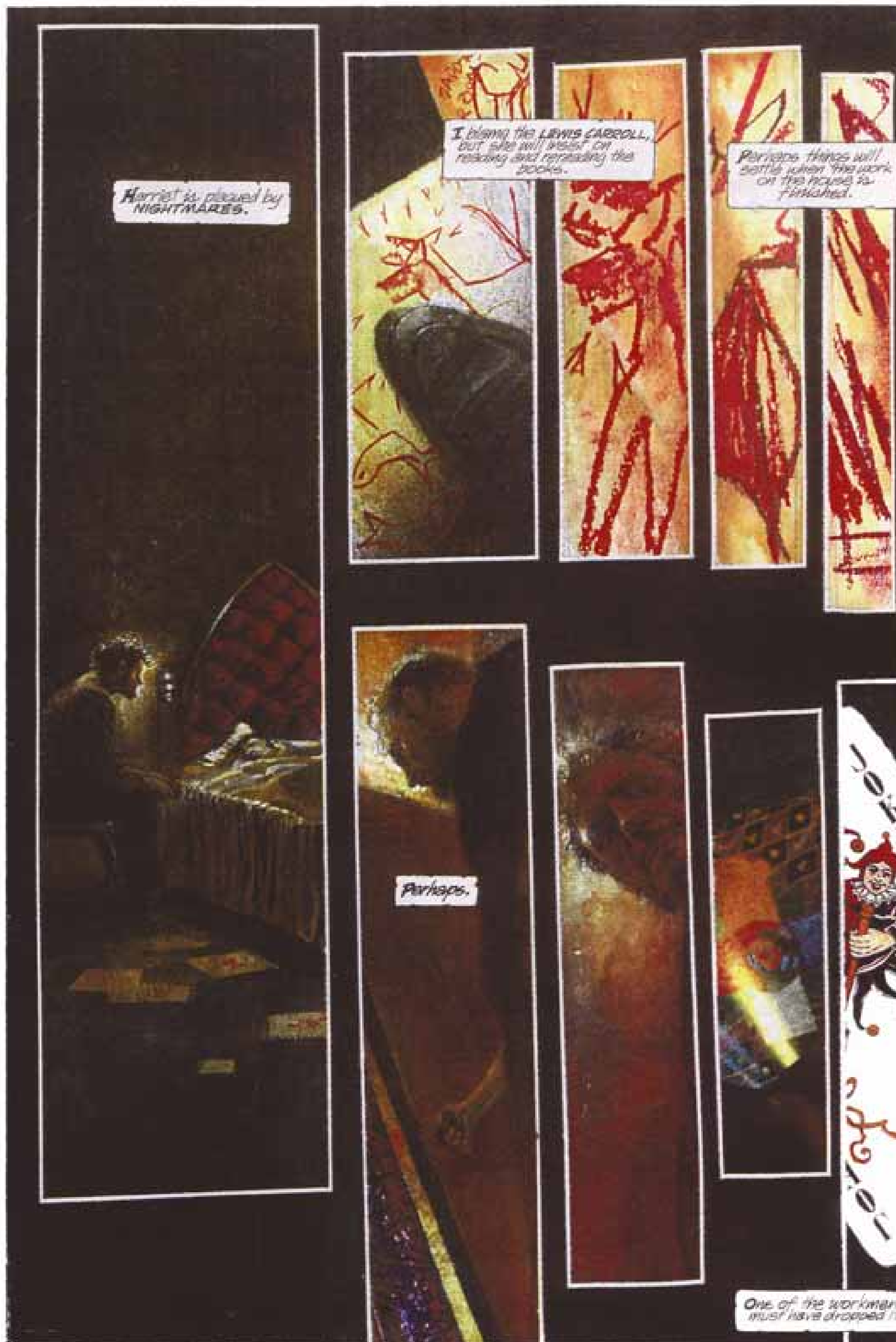

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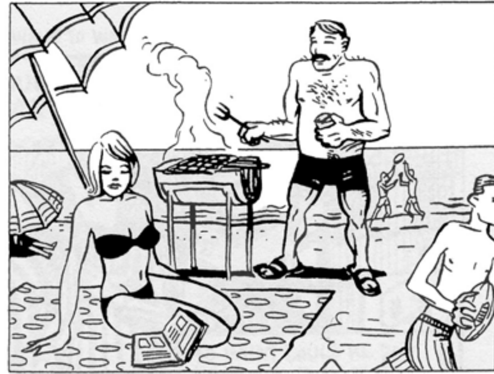

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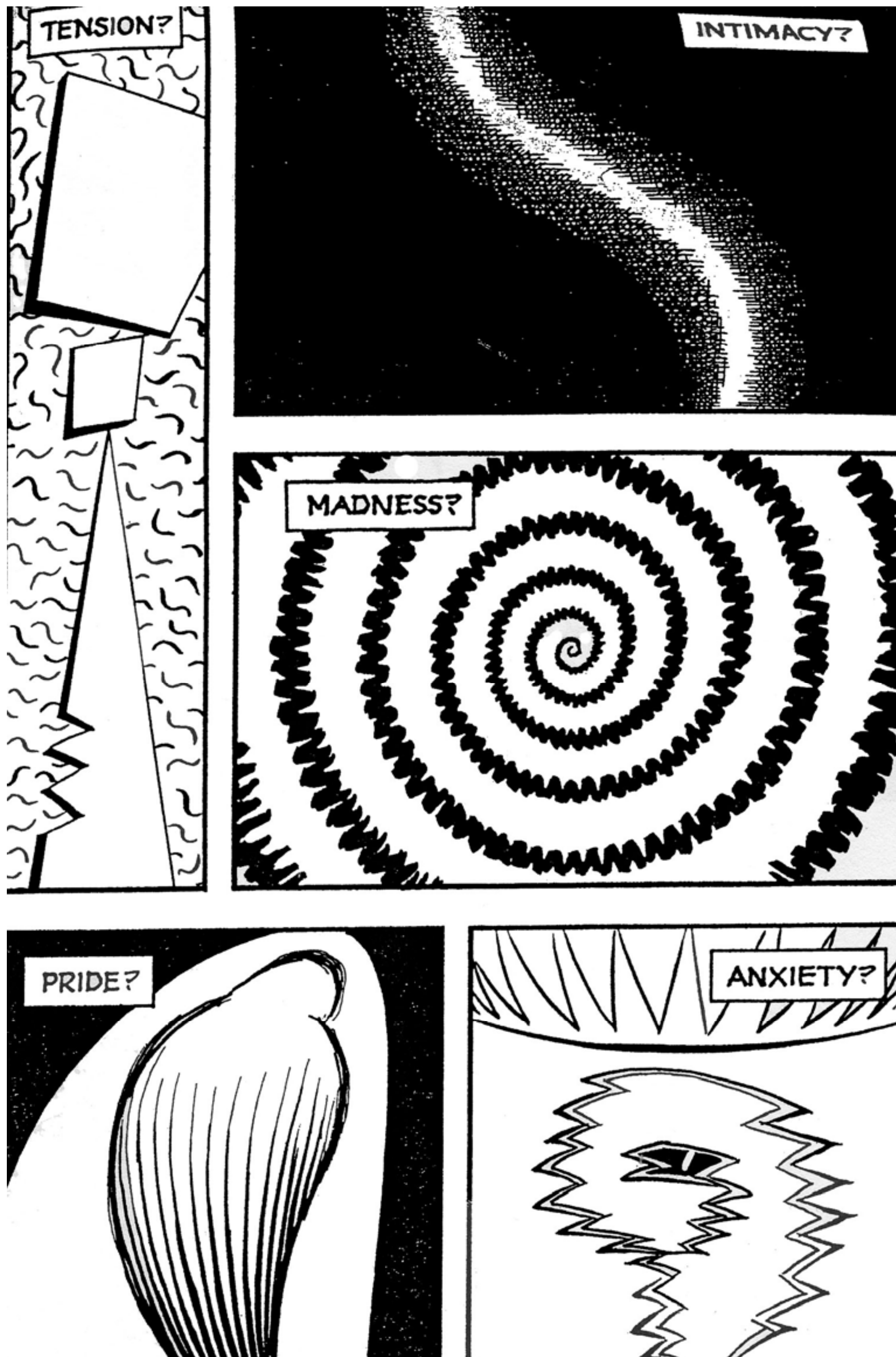

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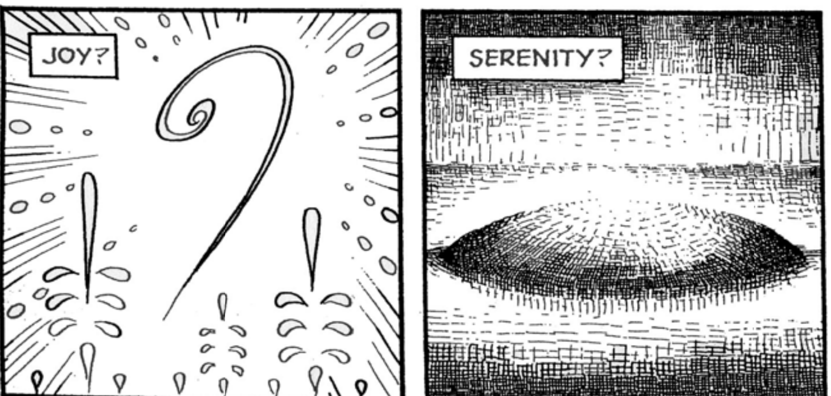

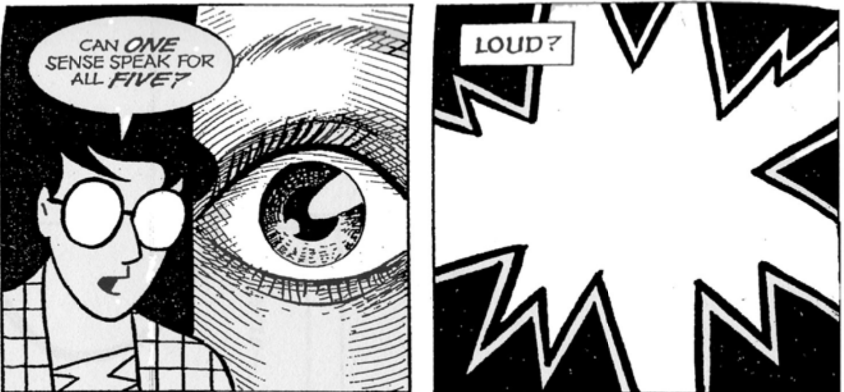

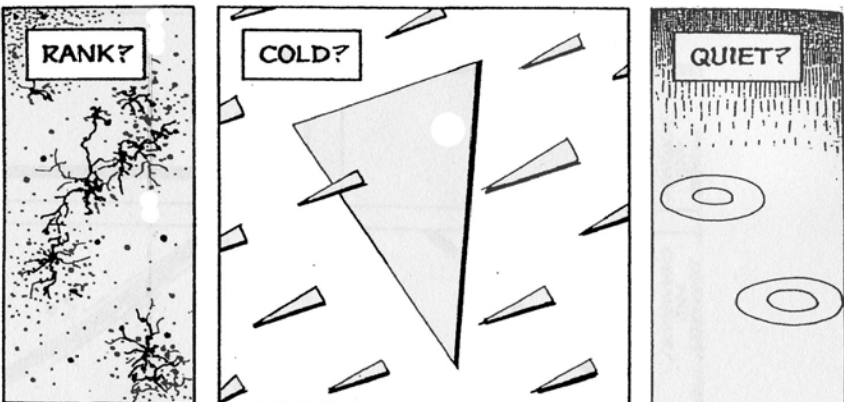

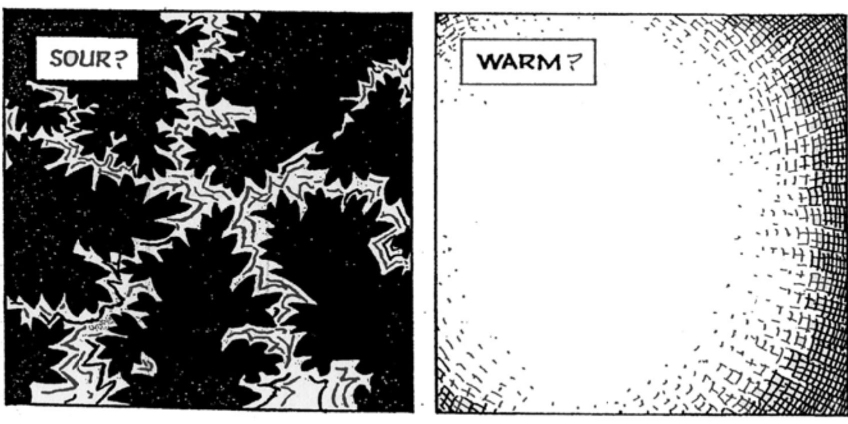

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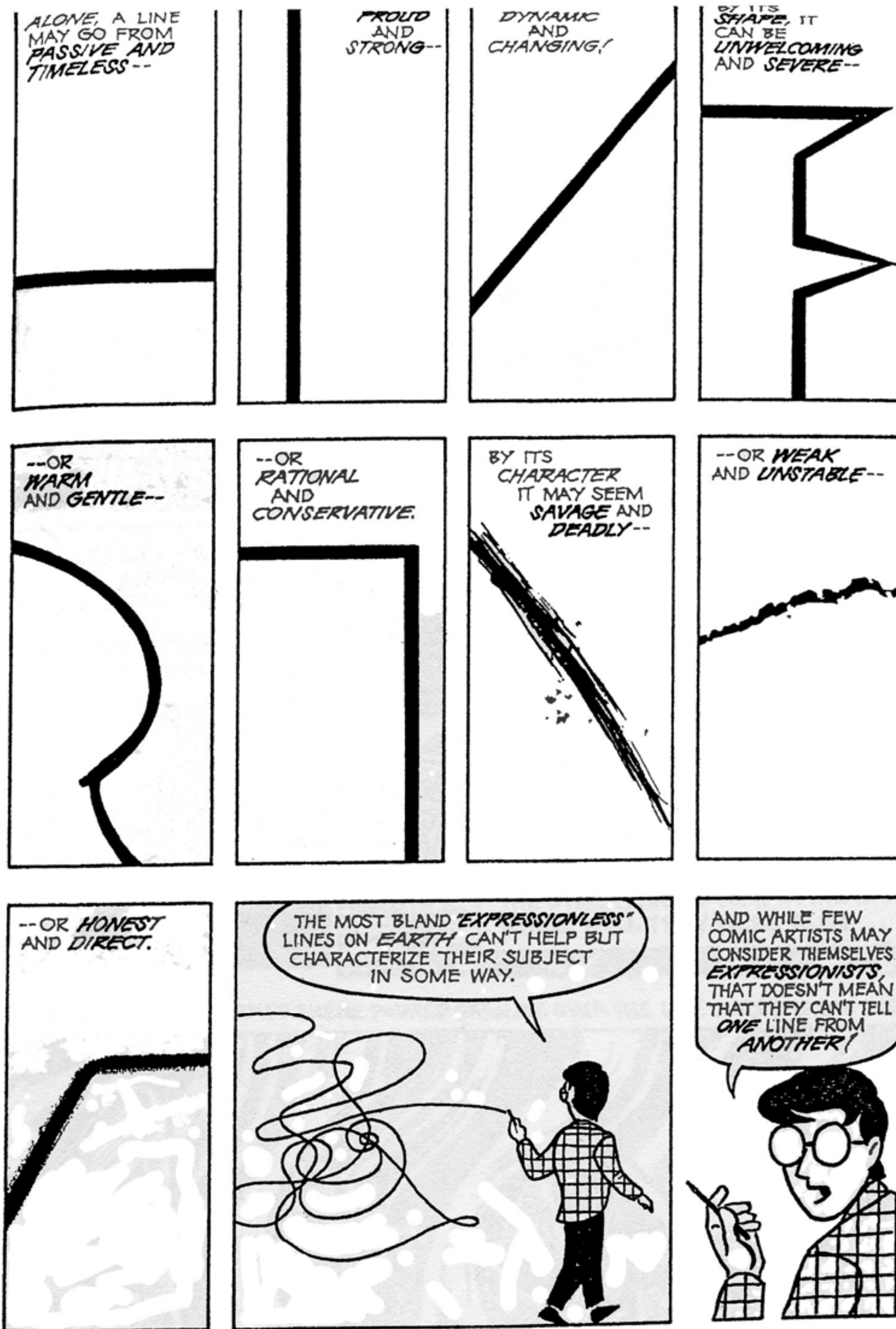

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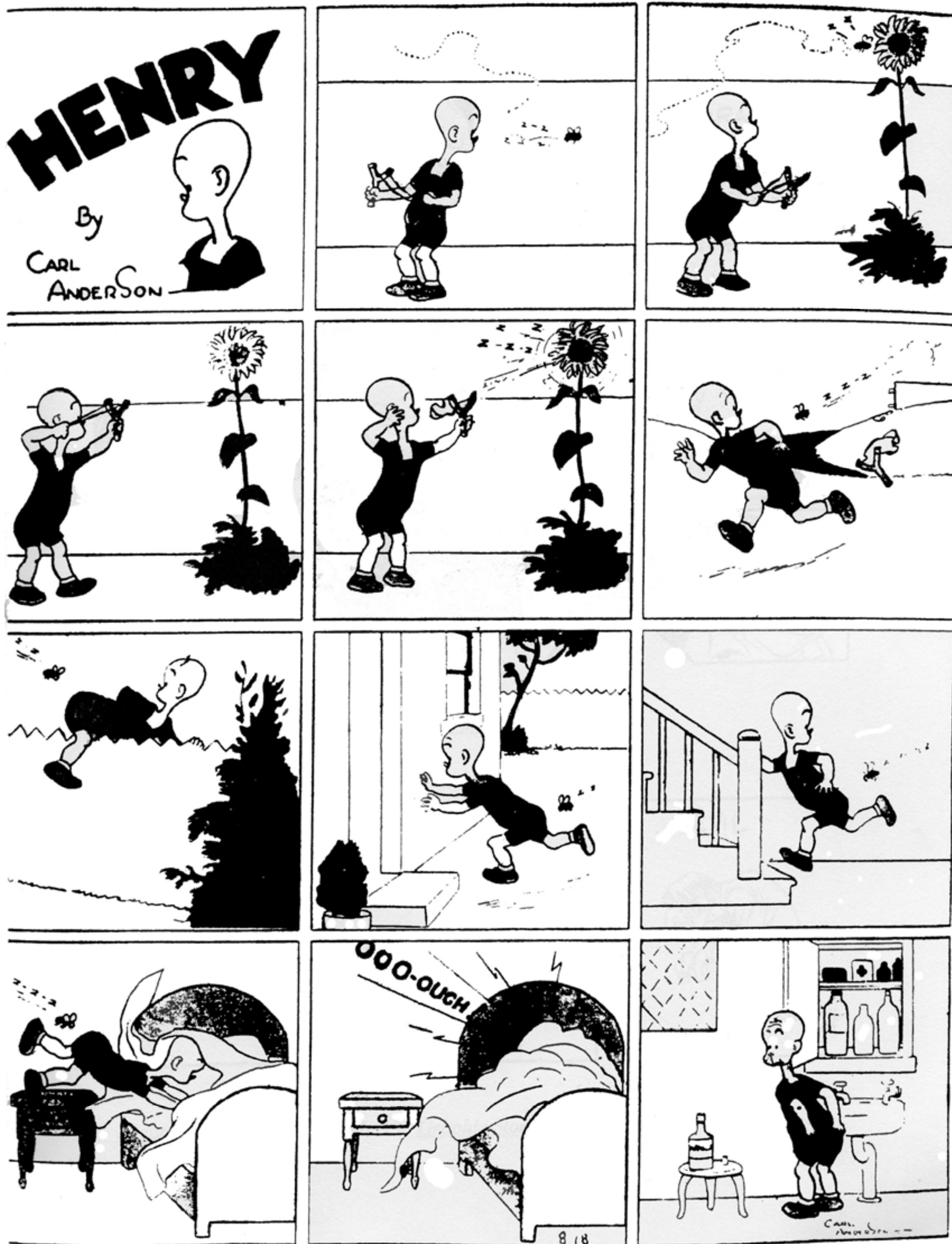

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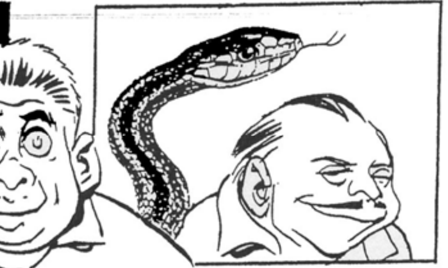

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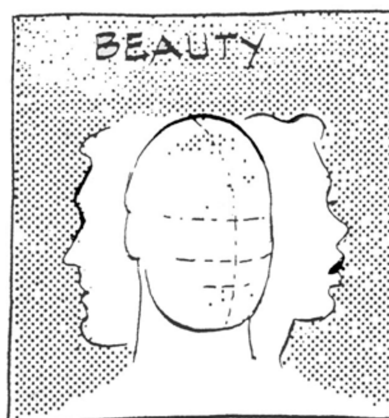

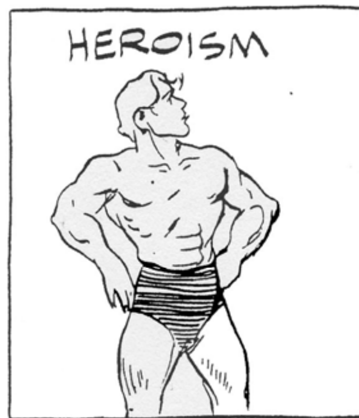

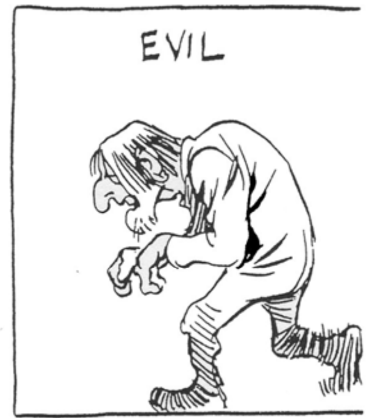

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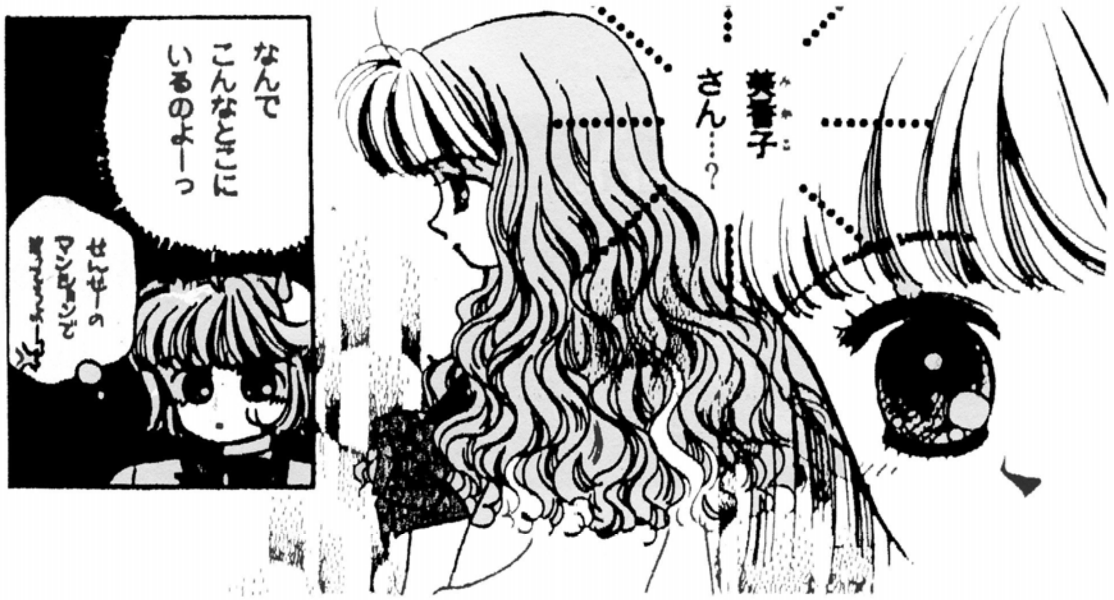

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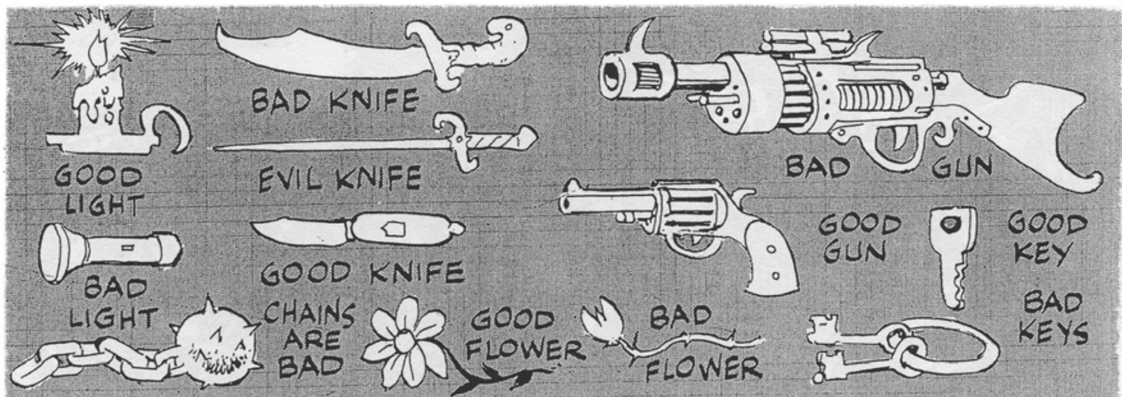

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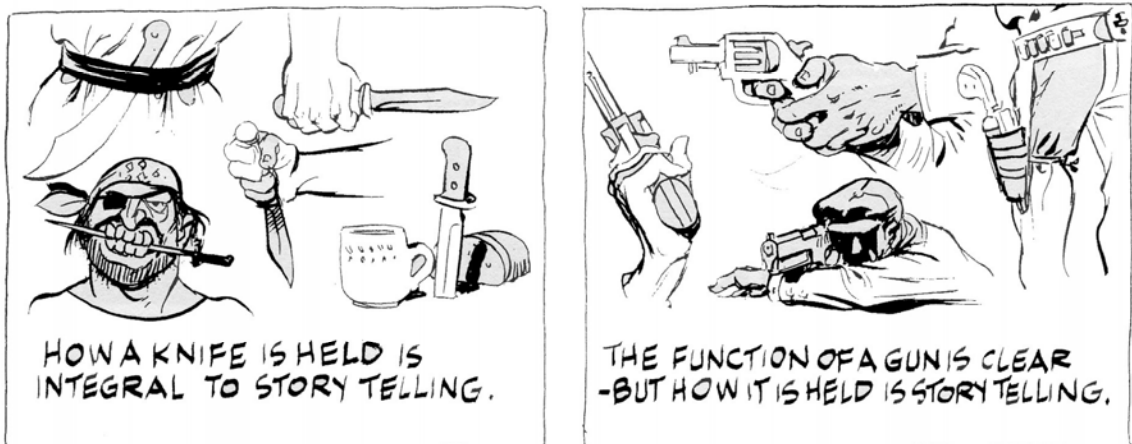

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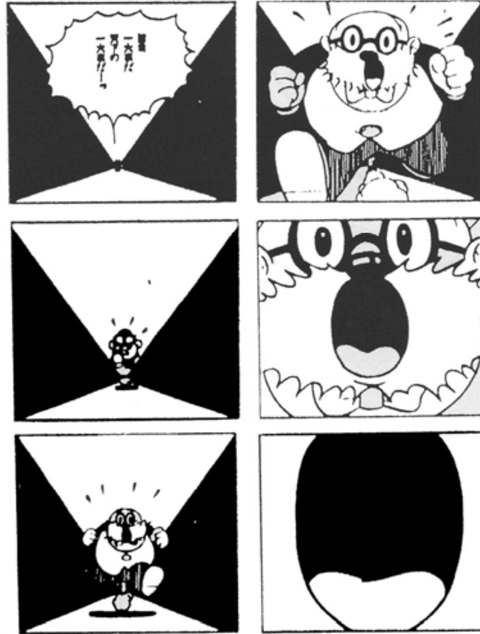

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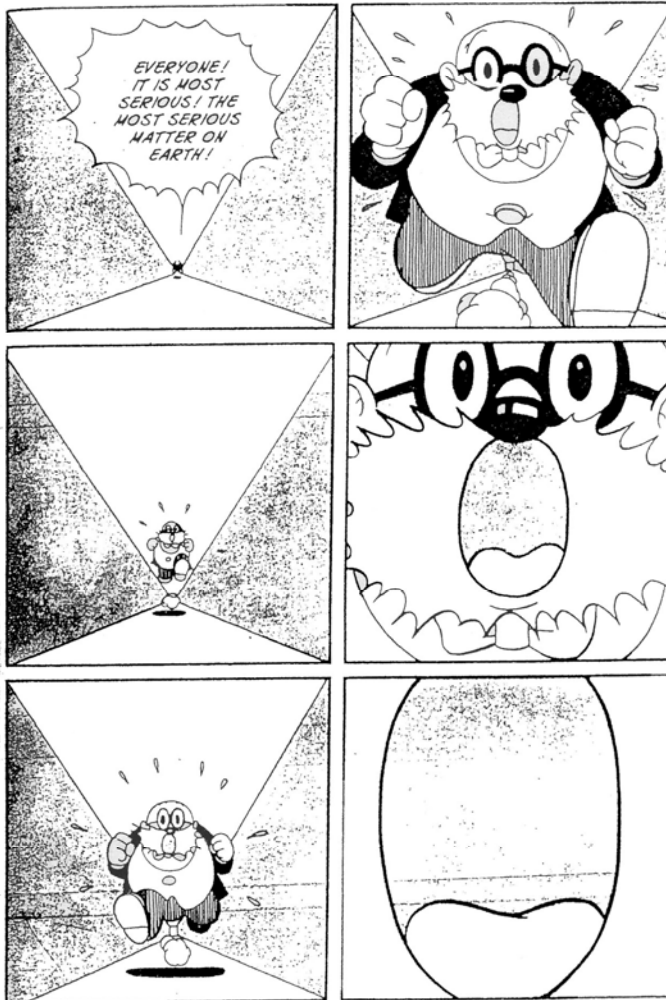

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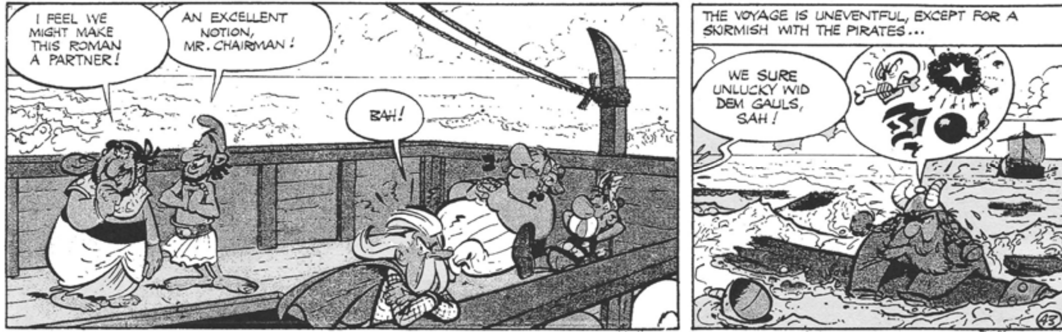

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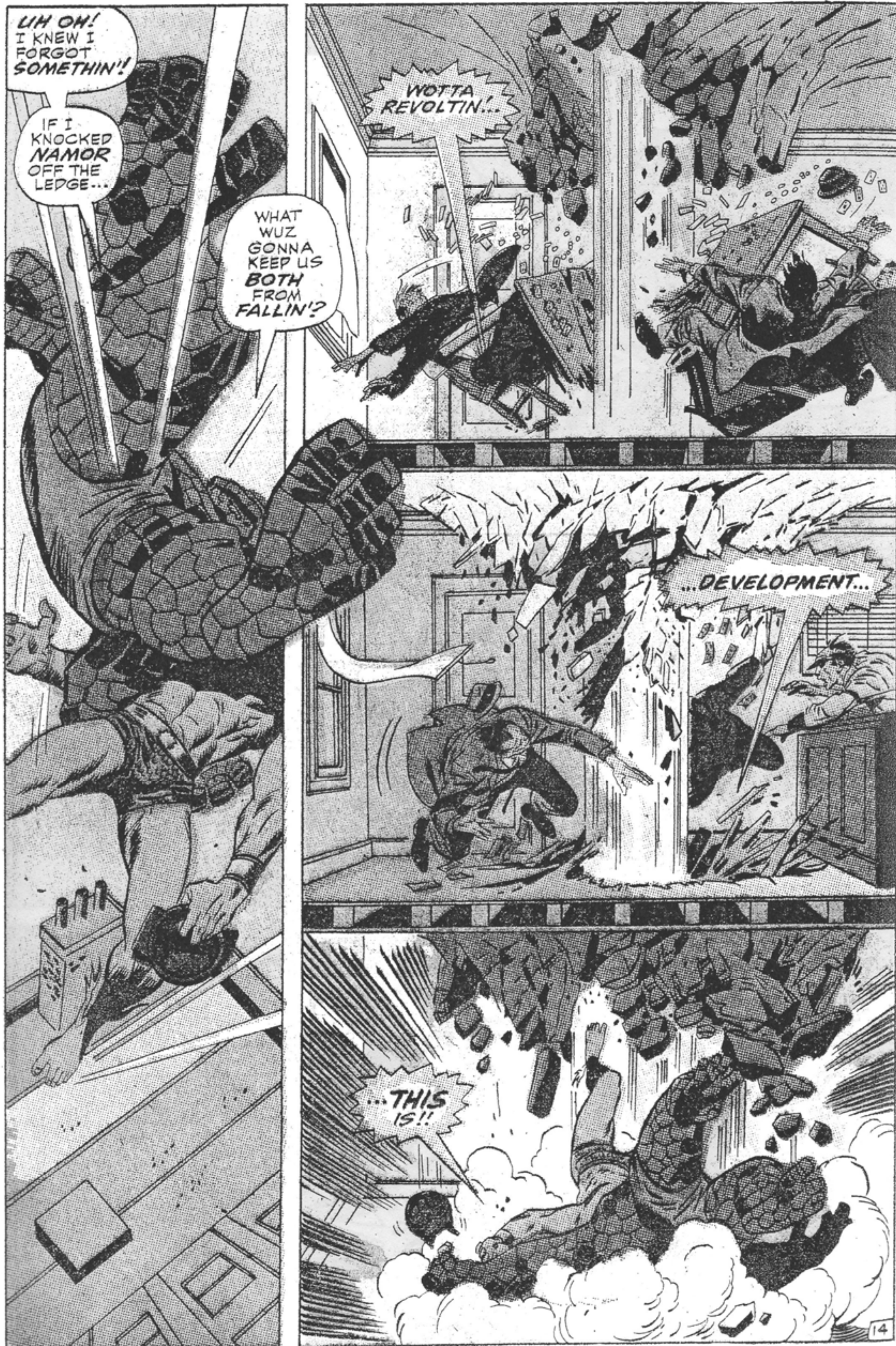

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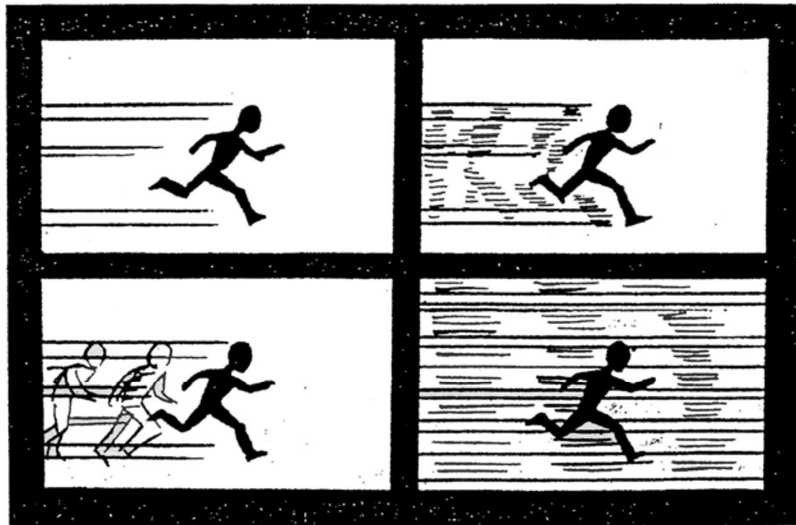

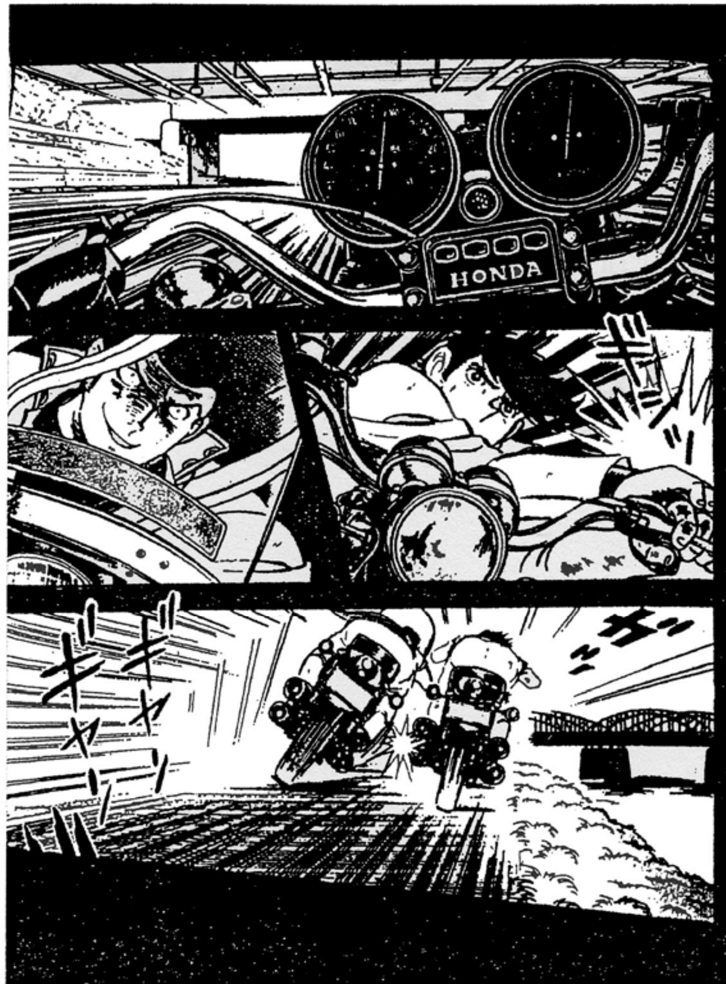

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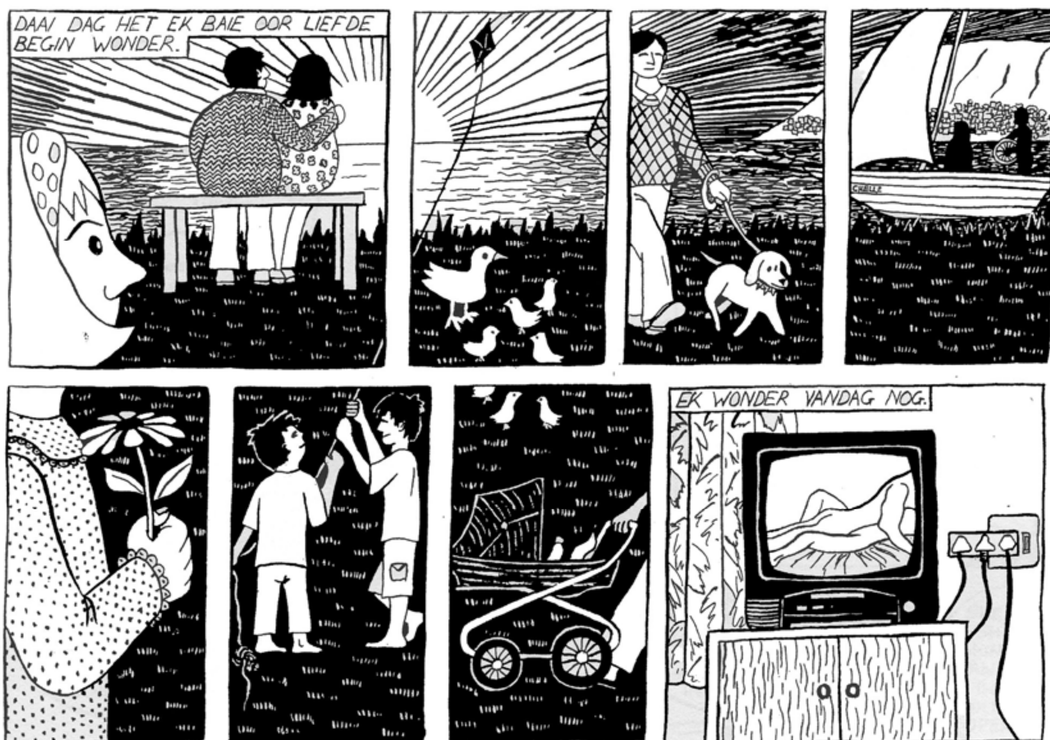

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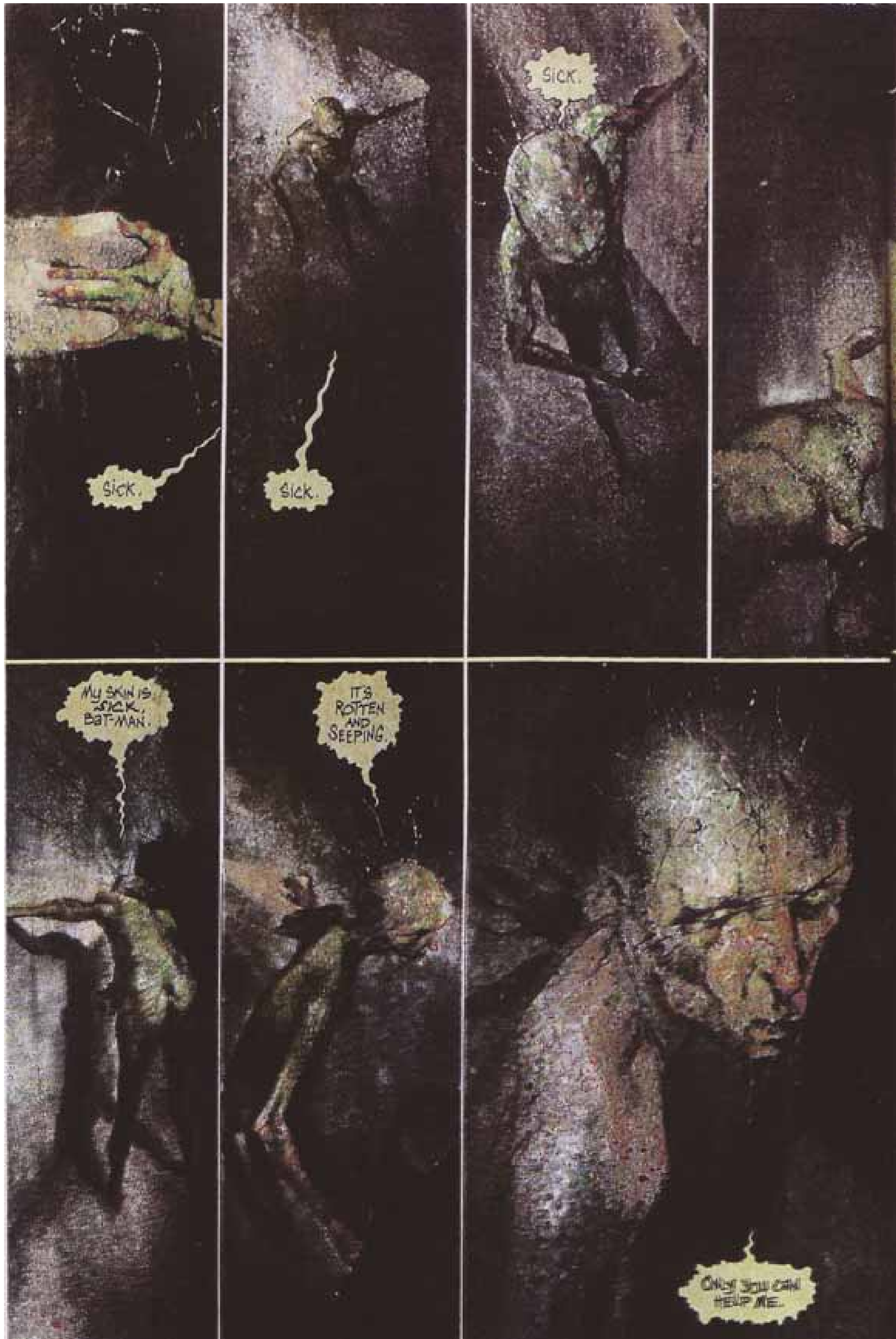

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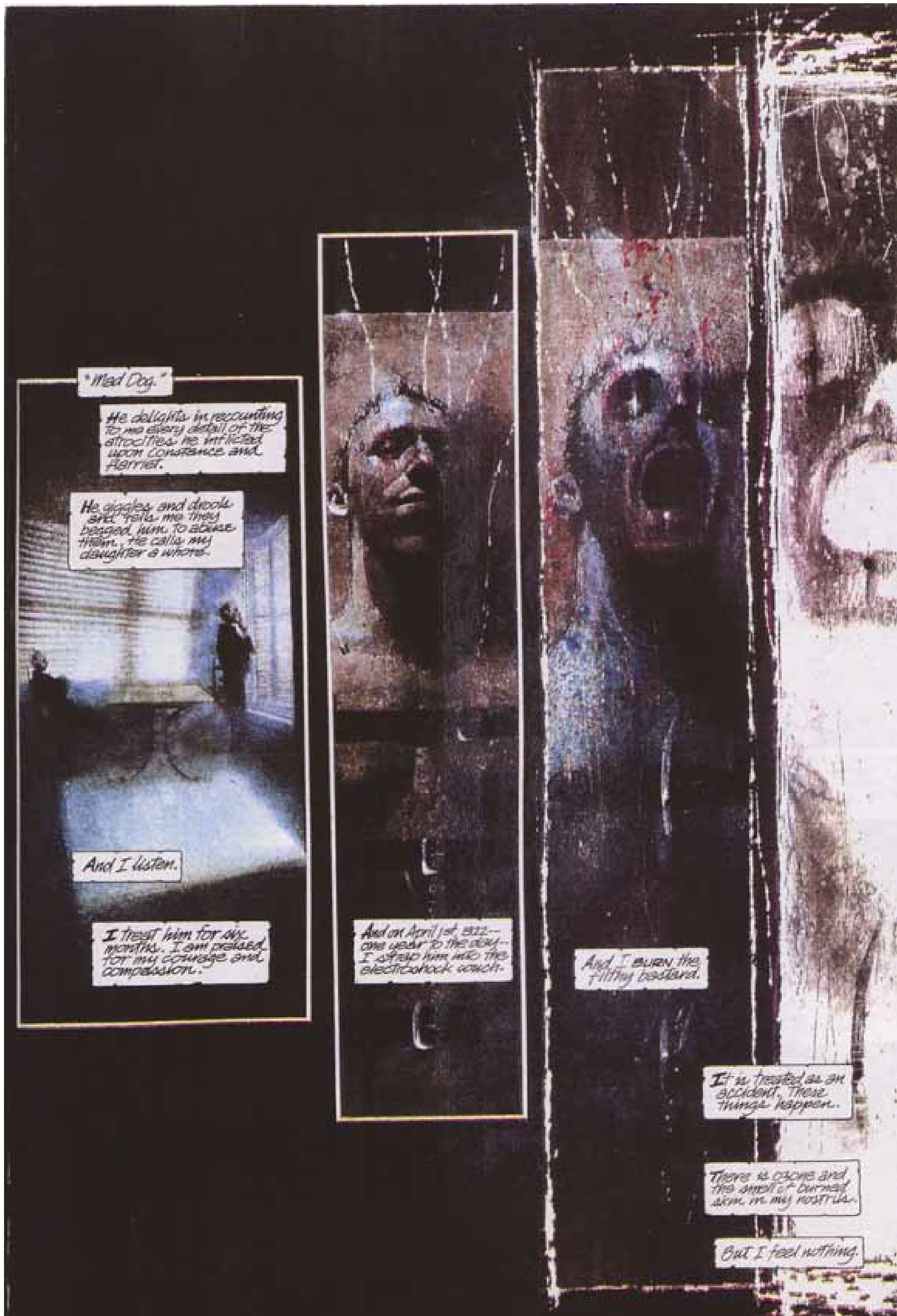

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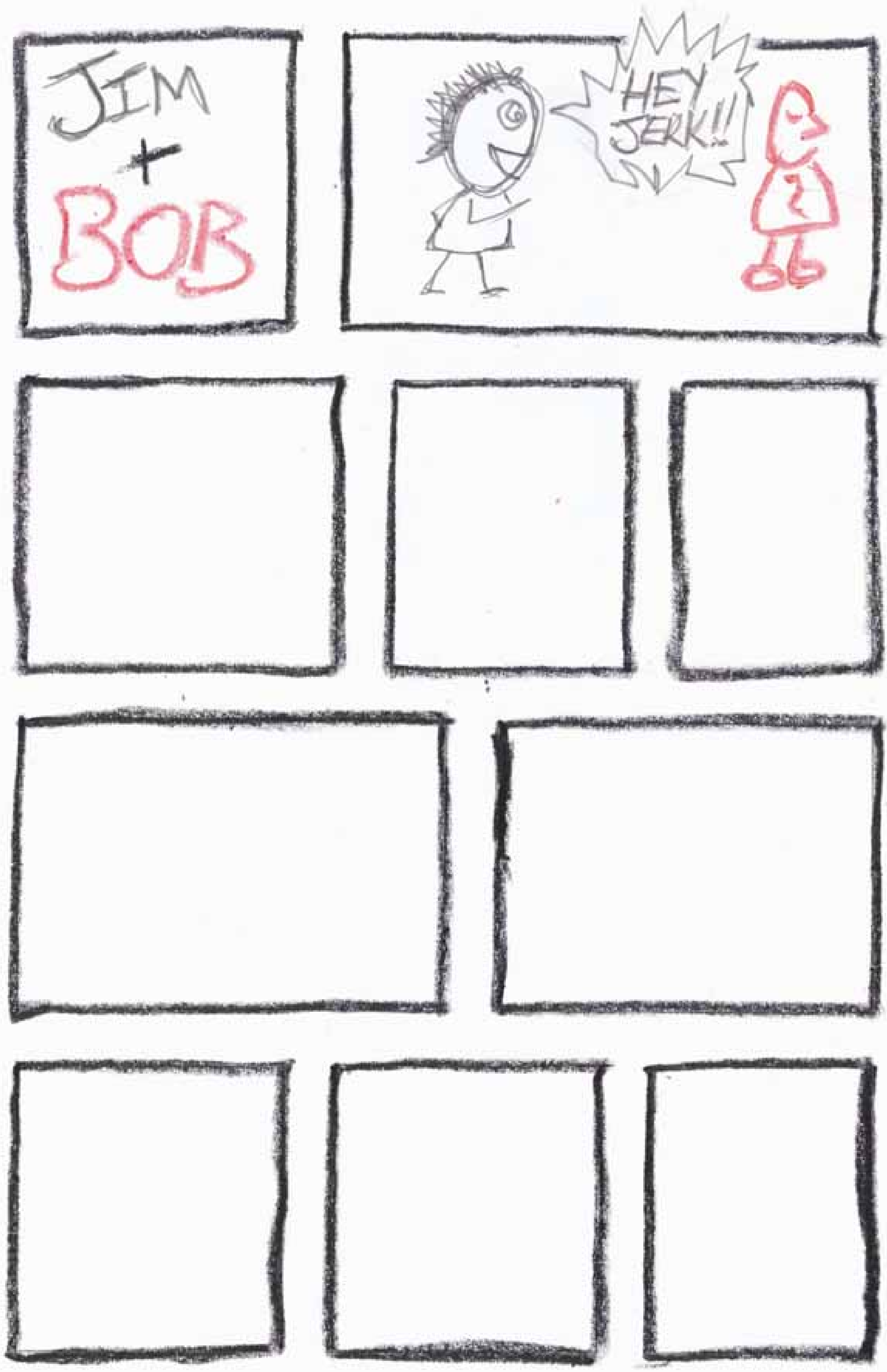

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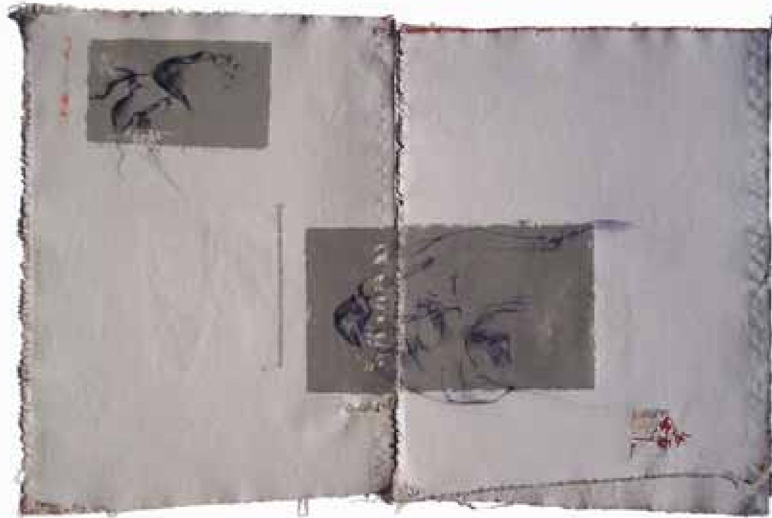

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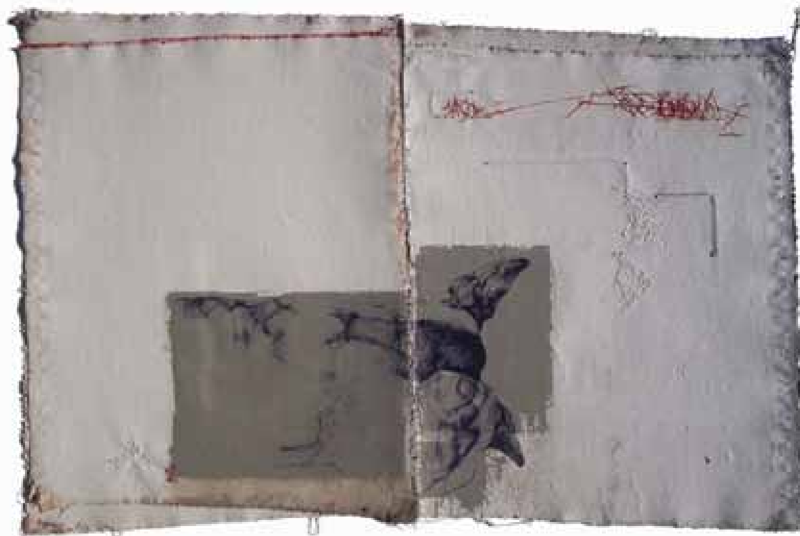

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Spiegelman, Art. 1991: 72. Maus: And here my troubles began. Great Britian: Penguin Books.

Figure 27

Spiegelman, Art. 1991: 95. Maus: And here my troubles began. Great Britian: Penguin Books.

Figure 28a

1990: 2 - 3. Richie Rich in *Look Out! There are Real Monsters.* Richie Rich: The poor Little Rich Boy Digest Magazine. Harvey Publications Inc.

Figure 28b

Uderzo (illustrator) & Goscinny (writer). 1971: 25. Asterix and the Big Fight. tr. by Bell, Anthea & Hockridge, Derek. Italy, Milan: New Interlitho.

Figure 29

Aldridge, Alan & Perry, George. 1975. The Penguin Book of Comics. Aylesbury, United Kingdom: Hazell Watson & Viney Ltd.

Figure 30

Eisner, Will. 1996: 20. Graphic Storytelling. Florida, United States: Poorhouse Press.

Figure 31

Eisner, Will. 1996: 19. Graphic Storytelling. Florida, United States: Poorhouse Press.

Figure 32

Eisner, Will. 1996: 18. Graphic Storytelling. Florida, United States: Poorhouse Press.

Figure 33a

Kannemeyer, Anton. 1993. Bitterkomix number 3: *Three One-Pagers*.

Botes, Conrad & Kannemeyer, Anton. 2001: 16. The Best of Bitterkomix Volume 1. Cape Town: Bitterkomix Pulp.

Figure 33b

Yagi, Chiaki. 1993. *Merry-Go-Round.*

Schodt, Frederik. L. 1996: 60. Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga. Berkeley, CA, United States: Stone Bridge Press.

Figure 33c

Shūeisha, 1995. *Jump Novel* (cover) 1 April 1995.

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Figure 34a&b

Eisner, Will. 1996: 21. Graphic Storytelling. Florida, United States: Poorhouse Press.

Figure 35

Uderzo (illustrator) & Goscinny (writer). 1972: 5 . Asterix and the Laurel Wreath. tr. by Bell, Anthea & Hockridge, Derek. Italy, Milan: New Interlitho.

Figure 36a

Goldwater, John. 1987: 2 - 3. Archie in *A Loanly Feeling*. Jughead with Archie Comics digest Magazine number 83, November 1987: Archie Enterprises inc.

Figure 36b

Spiegelman, Art. 1991: 33. Maus: And here my troubles began. Great Britian: Penguin Books.

Figure 36c

Aoki, Yūji. 1992. *Naniwa Kin'yūdō* (The Old Osaka Way of Finance).

Schodt, Frederik. L. 1996: 199. Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga. Berkeley, CA, United States: Stone Bridge Press.

Figure 37a

Goldwater, John. 1987: 1 - 2. Jughead in *Cast Party*. Jughead with Archie Comics digest Magazine number 83, November 1987: Archie Enterprises inc.

Figure 37b

Okano, Reiko. 1987. *Fancy Dance.*

Schodt, Frederik. L. 1996: 191. Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga. Berkeley, CA, United States: Stone Bridge Press.

Figure 38a

Uderzo (illustrator) & Goscinny (writer). 1972: 43. Asterix at the Olympic Games. tr. by Bell, Anthea & Hockridge, Derek. Italy, Milan: New Interlitho.

Figure 38b

Fujio, Fujiko, F. 1984. *Doraemon SF no Sekil* (Doraemon's Sci-Fi World).

Schodt, Frederik. L. 1996: 219. Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga. Berkeley, CA, United States: Stone Bridge Press.

Figure 38c

Doucet, Julie. 1999: 11. My New York Diary. Canada, Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly Publications.

Figure 39a

Botes, Conrad. 2002: 30. *Dullboy.*

Botes, Conrad & Kannemeyer, Anton. 2002: 30. The Best of Bitterkomix Volume 2. Cape Town: Bitterkomix Pulp.

Figure 39b

Yoshikazu, Ebisu. 1983. *Ebiso Yoshikazu no Sararliman Kyōshitsu* (Yoshikazu Ebisu's Salaryman Classroom).

Schodt, Frederik. L. 1996: 149. Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga. Berkeley, CA, United States: Stone Bridge Press.

Figure 40a

Doucet, Julie. 1999: 4. My New York Diary. Canada, Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly Publications.

Figure 40b

Tekuza, Osamu. 1949. *Metropolis*

Schodt, Frederik. L. 1996: 24. Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga. Berkeley, CA, United States: Stone Bridge Press. (Original Japanese)

Tekuza, Osamu. 2003: 19. Metropolis. tr. Sivasubramanian, Kumar. Canada: Dark Horse Comics. (English)

Figure 41a

Barker, Martin. 1989: 10. Comics: Ideology, power and the Critics. Manchester, United Kingdom: Manchester University Press.

Figure 41b

Eisner, Will. 1996: 61. Graphic Storytelling. Florida, United States: Poorhouse Press.

Figure 42

Uderzo (illustrator) & Goscinny (writer). 1984: 47. Asterix the Gladiator. tr. by Bell, Anthea & Hockridge, Derek. Italy, Milan: New Interlitho.

Figure 43a&b

Aldridge, Alan and Perry, George. 1975. The Penguin Book of Comics. Aylesbury, United Kingdom: Hazell Watson & Viney Ltd.

Figure 44&45

McCloud, Scott. 1994: 114. Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art. United States of America: Harper Perennial.

Figure 46

Van Staden, Leonora. 2003: 3. *Eendag lank, lank gelede.*

Louw, Nicolene and Van Staden, Leonora (ed.). 2000: 24. Stripshow Nr. 1. Stellenbosch: Strip Art Project.

Figure 47

Sacco, Joe. 2001: 122. Safe Area: Goražde. The War in Eastern Bosnia 1992 – 95. China: Fantagraphics Books.

Figure 48

Louw, Nicolene. 2003: 4. *Sucker.*

Louw, Nicolene and Van Staden, Leonora (ed.). 2000: 6. Stripshow Nr. 1. Stellenbosch: Strip Art Project.

Figure 49

Spiegelman, Art. 1991: 134. Maus: And here my troubles began. Great Britian: Penguin Books.

Figure 50 - 57

McKean, Dave (illustrator) & Morrison, Grant (writer). 1989. Arkham Asylum. Canada: DC Comics.

Figures 58 – 60 (also on Compact Disc [Appendix E])

Du Plessis, Carla. 2003. *Total Eclipse of the Sun.*
Approximately 25 x 19 cm. Oil, sewing thread and paper on canvas.

Figure 61 (also on Compact Disc [Appendix E]

Du Plessis, Carla. 2004. *Jim and Bob*.
21 x 24. Wax crayon and pencil on paper.

Figure 62 – 66 (also on Compact Disc [Appendix E])

Du Plessis, Carla. 2004. *Let Sleeping Dogs Lie.*
Approximately 65 x 80 cm. Acrylic PVA, Oil, ball point pen/ink and sewing thread on canvas.

Addendum A

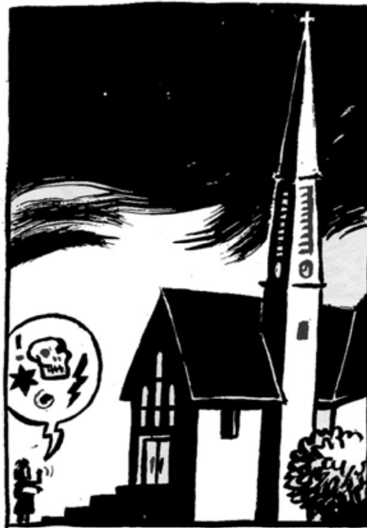
Botes, Conrad. 1999. *Lucky-Lucky*.

Botes, Conrad & Kannemeyer, Anton. 2002: 42 – 49. The Best of Bitterkomix Volume 2. Cape Town: Bitterkomix Pulp.

LUCKY LUCKY

BY CONRAD BOTES © 1999.

43



JAN 3
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DEC 26
APR 13

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45

46

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49

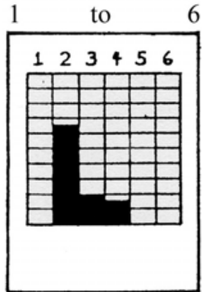
Addendum B

McCloud, Scott. 1994: 75 - 77. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art.* United States of America: Harper Perennial.

Panel Transition Bar Graphs.

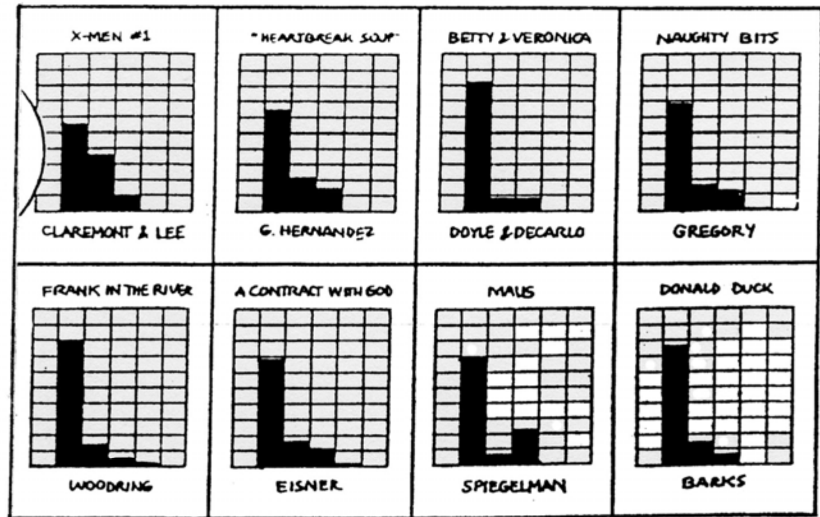
Panel Transition Types

1 to 6

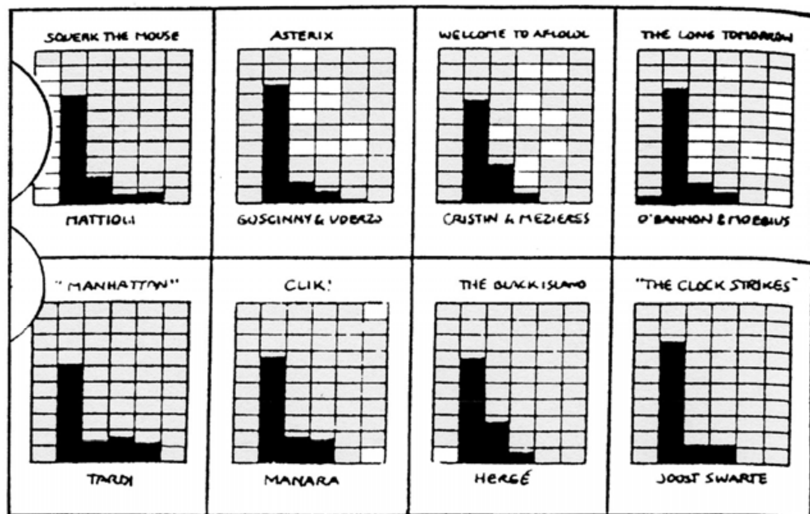


Josh Kirby's Bar Graph

American Comix



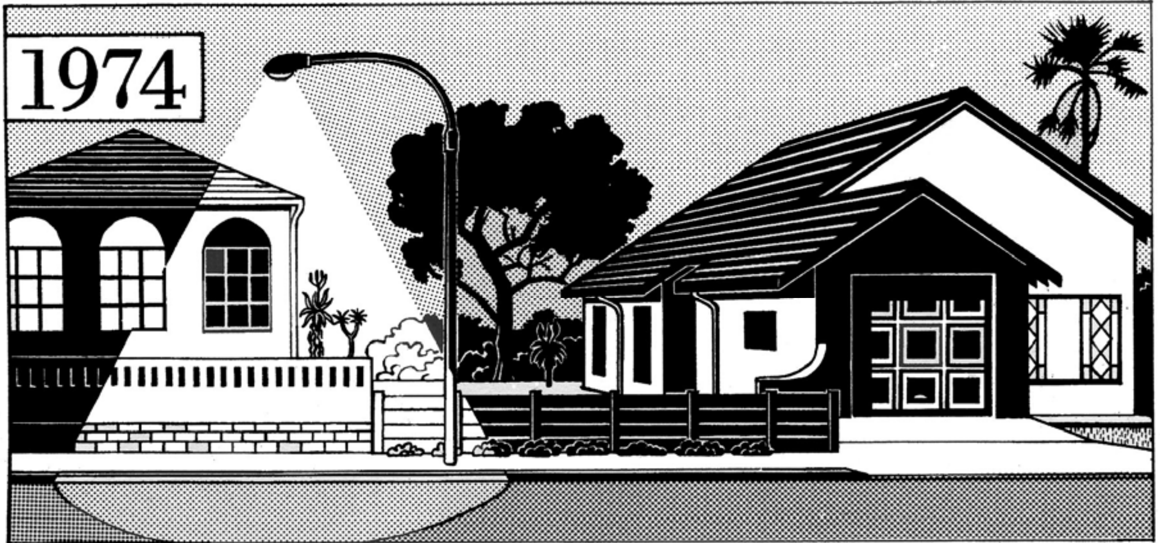
European Comix

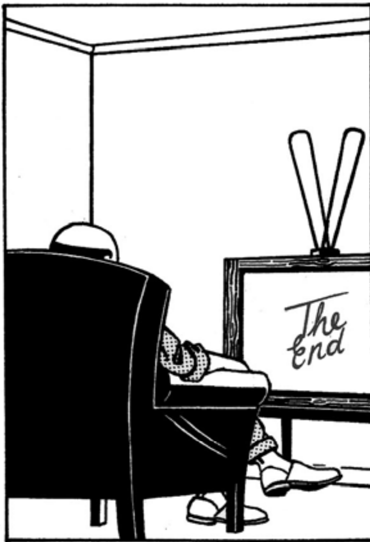


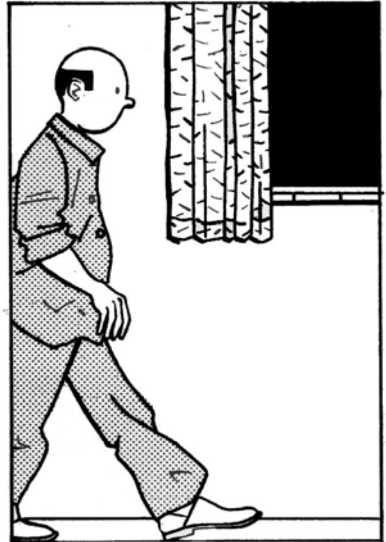
Addendum C

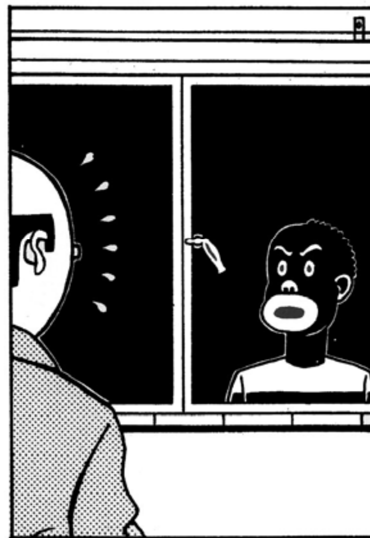
Kannemeyer, Anton. 2002. *1974*.

Botes, Conrad & Kannemeyer, Anton. 2002: 8 - 12. The Best of Bitterkomix Volume 2. Cape Town: Bitterkomix Pulp.









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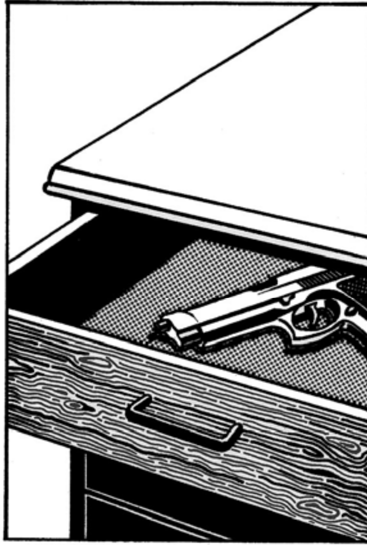
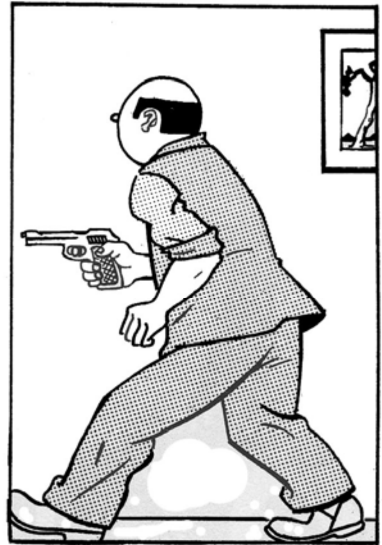
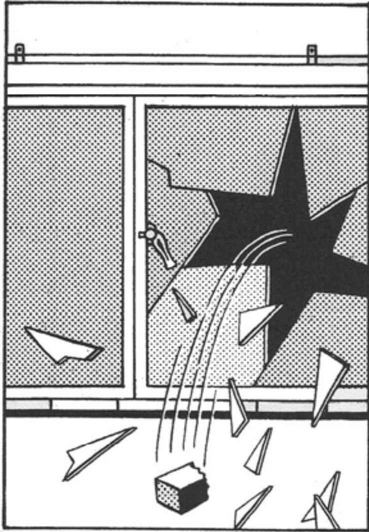
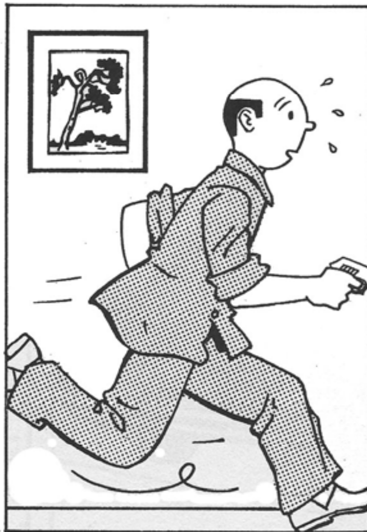

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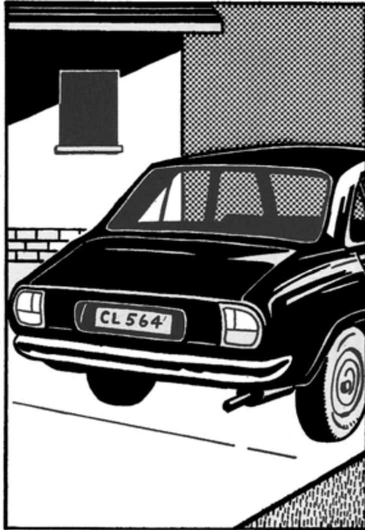

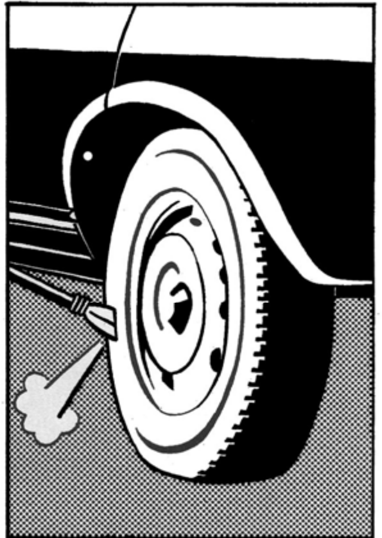

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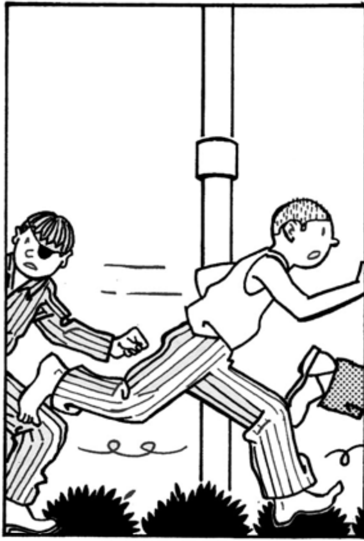
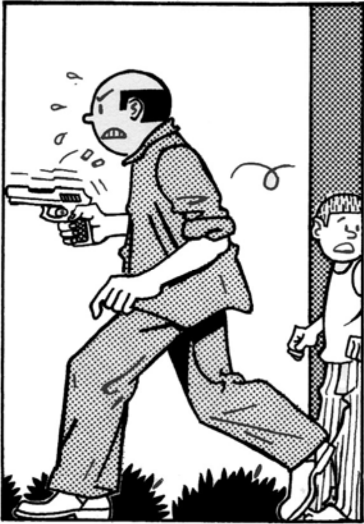
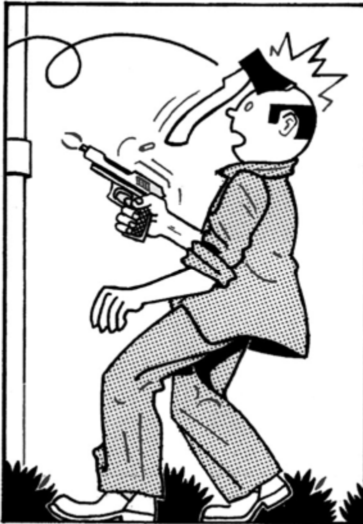
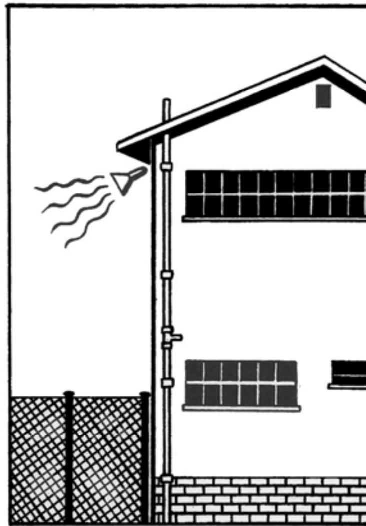


Surf

4

THE BLUE LOT



JOE DOG 1999.

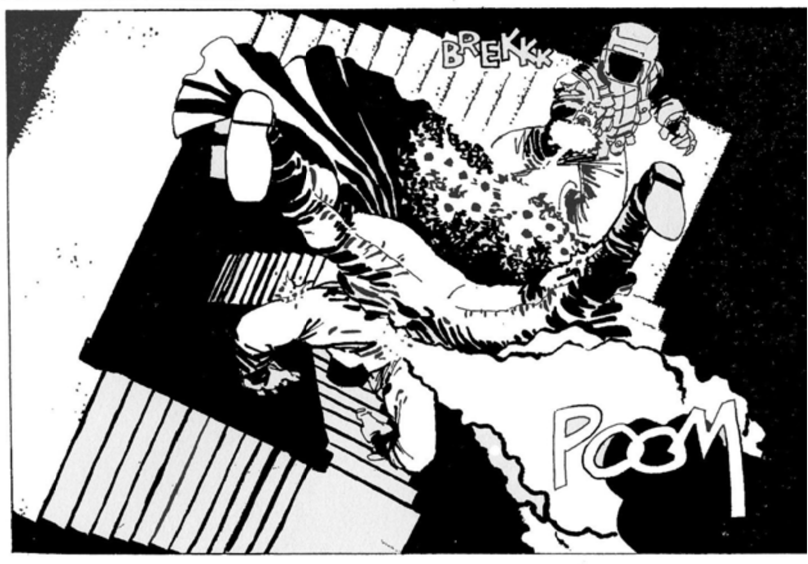
Addendum D

Miller, Frank. 1992. *Sin City.* London: Titan Books Ltd.

SKREKKK
OH NO
GRAA
HOOF
KOK
GHAA

KUDD
HUGG
POOM

POOM


BREKKK
POOM

POOM
NUFF
SPAK

POOM
POOM
GNAA
SPAK

HUFF
FUMP

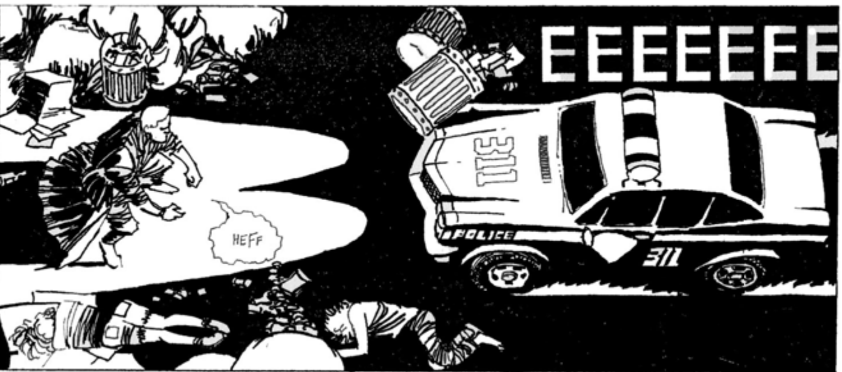
UP THERE--

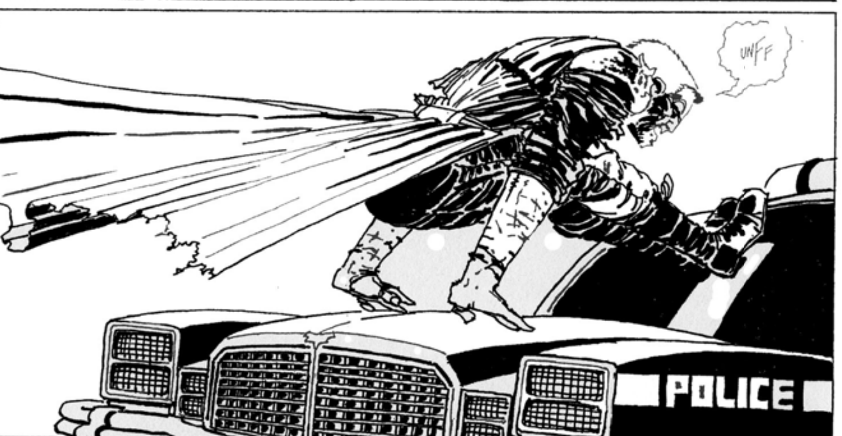
BLAM

KASHH

WUMP

UHNN


EEEEEEE
311
POLICE
HEFF


UNFF
POLICE

SKAK

SSKEEEEE
311
POLICE

SKAK
AAA

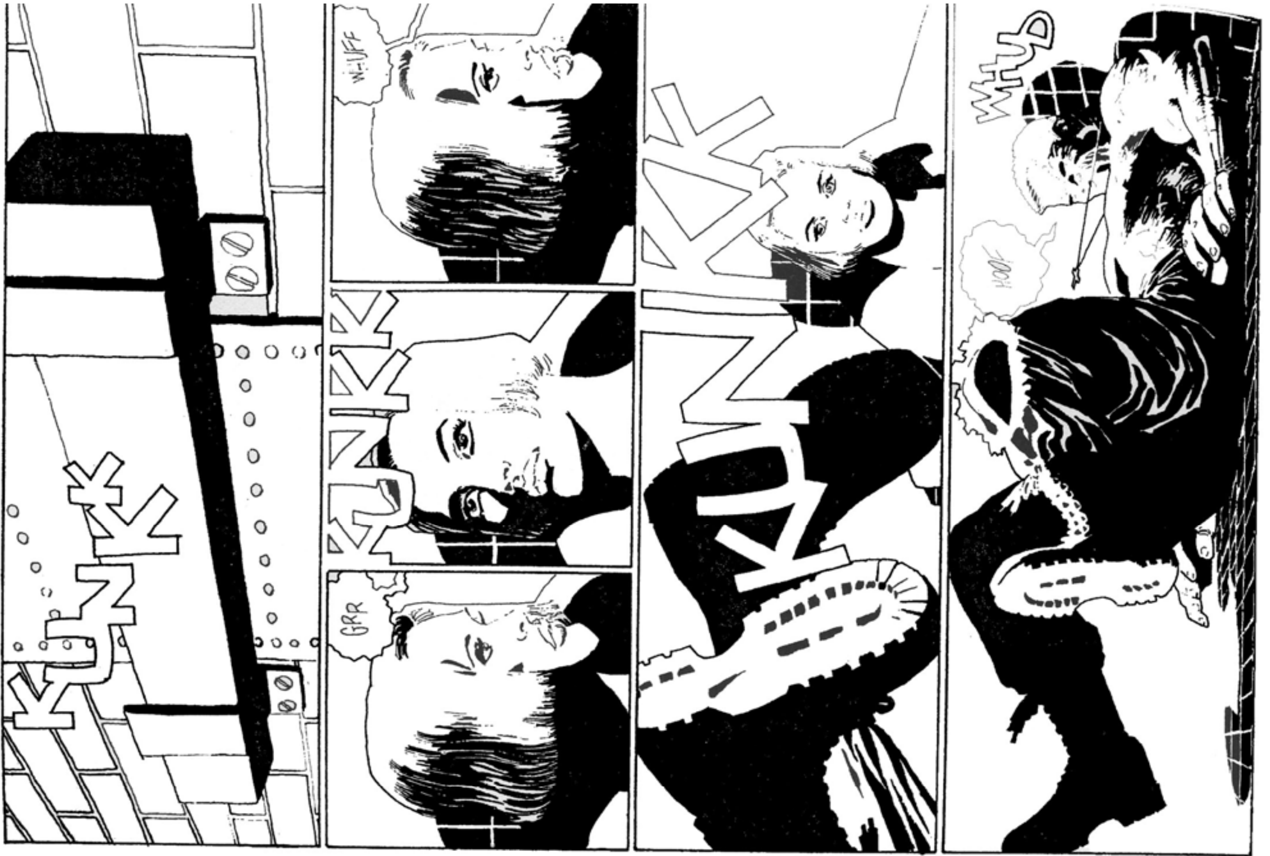
GAAA
KASH

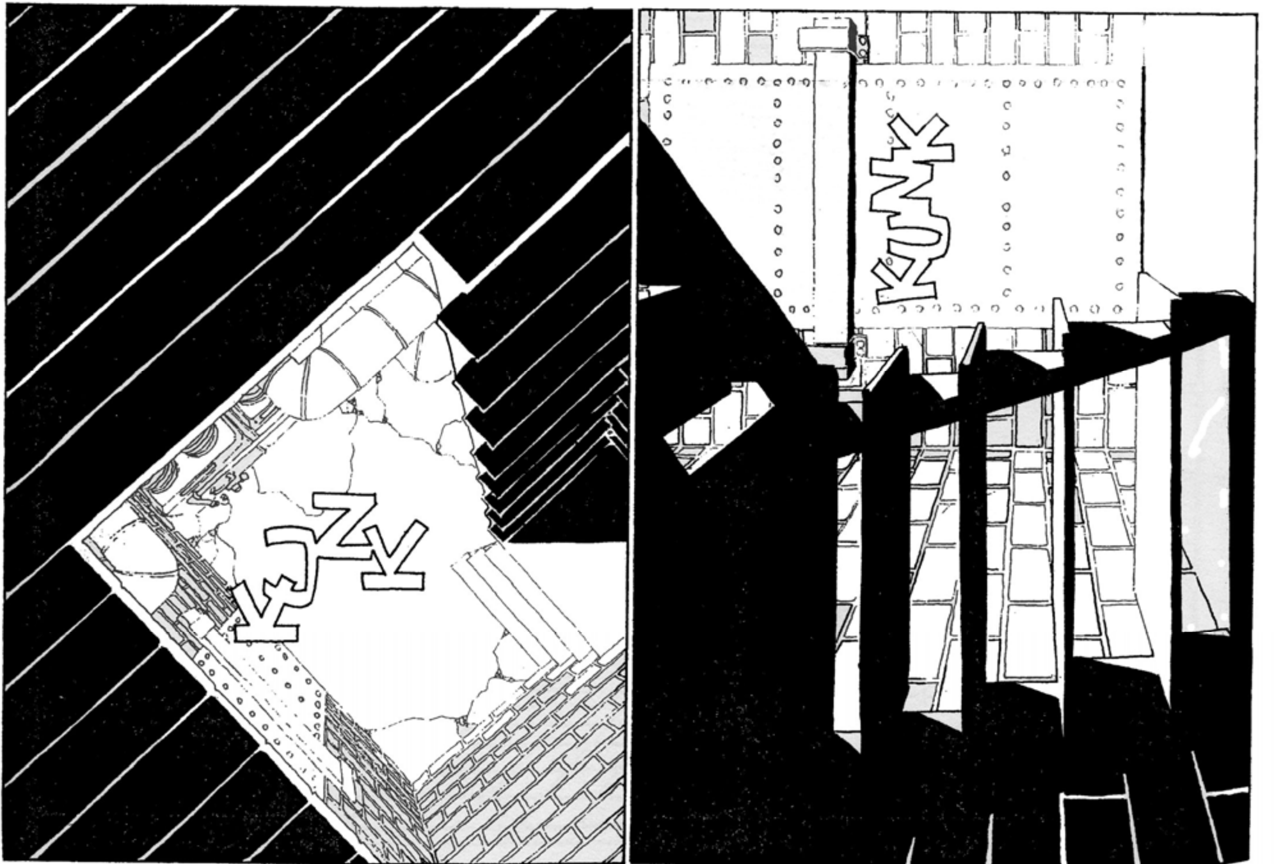
I DON'T KNOW WHY YOU DIED, GOLDIE.

Second Sequence

KUNK

KUNK


KUNK
GRR
KUNK
W-UFF
KUNK
WHUD


KUNK

GRAAA

KUNKK
HURF

HEFF HEFF HEFF

KUNK
CHIKK

CRASH

LET'S GO.
FOR A SECOND IT'S ALMOST LIKE SHE'S SCARED TO LEAVE. CRAZY, BUT AREN'T THEY ALL.
DAMES, I MEAN.
RAKKA RAKKA RAKKA RAKKA RAKKA RAKKA
RAKKA RAKKA RAKKA

Addendum E

Song *Total Eclipse of the Sun* (3:52) on Compact Disc.

Total Eclipse of the Sun

The beauty, tender glow extinguished
the sky dull from a breeze
ghostly the dawn without its red
uncanny, estranged to our nature
the light like lead

ripped in the dark
a tiny sickle
as small as cut by a surgical knife

the sun's last spark melts away
not unlike a dying wick
now stands disc on disc
and crushes my heart

All I really, really, really want to see
is a total eclipse of the sun

'Ah' says everyone
just the birds are silent
with surprise

All I really, really, really want to see
is a total eclipse of the sun

Credits for Total Eclipse of the Sun:

Alex Chudy: jet turbine, sigh
Alexander Hacke: electric bass guitar, keyboards, sigh
Blixa Bargeld: vocals, guitar amplifier manipulation
Jochen Arbeit: electric guitar, sigh
Rudi Moser: big drum, tambourine, sigh
Strings arranged by Tim Isfort, played by:
Sebastian Reimann, Alexandra Kratsch, Ruth-Maria: violins
Magnus Döhler, Christoph Rabbels: violas
Florian Döhler: cello
Hans-Jörg Wever: bassflute
Translations by Matthew Partridge
Produced by Einstürzende Neubauten and Boris Wilsdorf
Mute Records Limited 2000

Figures 58 – 60 (on Compact Disc)

Du Plessis, Carla. 2003. *Total Eclipse of the Sun.*
Approximately 25 x 19 cm. Oil, sewing thread and paper on canvas.

Figure 61 (on Compact Disc)

Du Plessis, Carla. 2004. *Jim and Bob.*
21 x 24. Wax crayon and pencil on paper.

Figure 62 – 66 (on Compact Disc)

Du Plessis, Carla. 2004. *Let Sleeping Dogs Lie.*
Approximately 65 x 80 cm. Acrylic PVA, Oil, ball point pen and sewing thread on canvas.