

What's in a Page: Close-Reading Comics

Comics seem more straightforward than written texts. Because they have images, it appears that everyone understands immediately what is going on their pages. However, as you begin to seriously consider comics and the way they tell their story, you will realize that also analyzing comics is a skill that has to be practiced. Close-reading comics is the first stepping stone toward understanding how they unfold their meaning. This chapter will explain how reading comics works by relating the elements of the comics page to what is going on in your mind as you make sense of them. It also introduces the basic terms you will need for your own comics' analysis.

Cognitive Processes and Critical Terms

The comic strip from the web comics series *Sinfest* you will find on the next page seems immediately accessible: it presents a short dialogue between a boy and a girl. The girl seems to be in control of the situation, dispensing advice to the boy, until he turns the situation around in the final panel as he challenges her moral superiority. Yet this account short-circuits your encounter with this comic: when you read a panel like the first one, your mind begins taking in all kinds of information from the images and the written text – the facial expressions, gestures, and postures of the CHARACTERS, their speech, the layout of the image and many other features. These are clues for you to make sense of the panel and the event it represents. You identify clues, you draw inferences from them, and you integrate these inferences into the basic pattern of the story. These processes are not conscious proceedings, but something which you do (almost automatically).

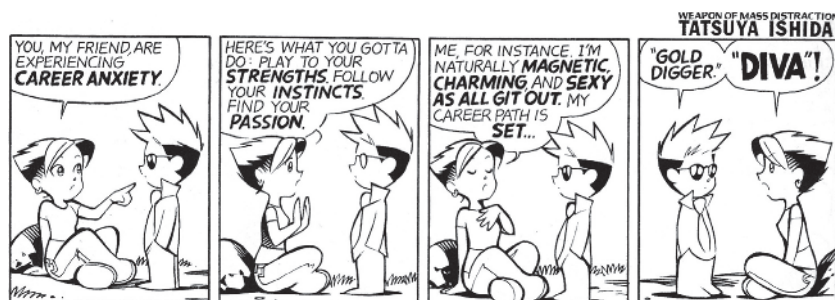


Figure 1.1 *Sinfest* (I). Source: *Sinfest: Viva La Resistance*™ © 2012 Tatsuya Ishida.

If you want to analyze comics critically, it makes sense to consider how the clues on the page and the inferences they suggest tie in with how you make sense of the comic. The cognitive processes involved in reading comics are usually pre-conscious, that is, you would not be aware of them when you are actually reading a comic, but they contribute fundamentally to your meaning-making.

First, however, in order to make the analysis as specific as possible, I will briefly introduce some basic terminology for the comic and its elements. The *Sinfest* comic is structured into four panels which are the boxes within which you see the characters. Each panel presents something like a snapshot of the action, relating to what has happened before and suggesting how the event might continue. Within the panels, you see the characters and you can read their communication in the **SPEECH BUBBLES**. Speech bubbles are spaces within which the characters' words are rendered in written text. The tail of the speech bubble is connected to the mouth of the speaker, allowing you to relate the written text to its speaker. When the speech is not located with a speaker in the image, it is rendered in a caption, a box usually at the top left-hand corner of the panel.

As you make your way through a panel, you might first get a (very rough) impression of the entire panel. This is an impression of the number of characters and their general spatial relation to each other, as well as the number of speech bubbles and their connection to the characters. This is the snapshot aspect of the panels. In the first panel, for example, you can see at first glance that the girl is in control. She is the only one speaking, privileged by her position in the left-to-right reading direction of the panel, and she points at the boy, defining him. The boy, on the other hand, stands, with his hands in his pockets, which signals being relaxed. Without even reading the speech bubbles, we can tell that this power relationship will change in the final panel, because here the image shows us the

protagonists from the other side of the encounter (which looks like the image has been flipped around), and the girl's body suddenly tenses up. This information on basic power relationships and attitudes is something you can take in at a single glance, because they relate to your own bodily experience of the world. Try sitting up in your chair, and you will feel more alert; put your hands in your pockets and slump back, and you will be more relaxed.

When we see characters do something in a panel, the processes in our brains unfold something like an imitation of these postures in motorsensory systems which prepare the action (but do not lead us to actually perform it), and we feel an echo of the character's experience. This has been discussed in terms of "embodied simulation" in the neurosciences. When an image relates characters to each other in its COMPOSITION, our BODY SCHEMA (that is, our motorsensory capacities, see Gallagher 2005) give us a sense of whether there is a balance or an imbalance between the characters, and how the dynamics of the relationship is going to unfold. In his discussion of the dynamics of composition in art, Rudolf Arnheim (2008) has noted how perception and our bodily experience of balance, gravity and other forces shape each other. What the cognitive sciences have found about the relation of body and mind suggests that a good part of our meaning-making is indeed grounded in our bodily experience of the world. A lot of information can be taken in at a single glance.

As you investigate the details of the panel then, your attention focuses and you read the speech bubbles. When you pay attention to the details of the panel, it begins to unfold through time, and a story emerges as you relate the first-glance information to the details you pick up now. The controlling attitude of the girl is confirmed, when we read that she indeed tells the boy "what you gotta do." His smart tie and carefully groomed hair suggest that he thinks highly enough of himself to take care of his appearance. The sunglasses also contribute to this attitude of studied coolness. The clothes and the looks of characters give you a lot of information, based on social conventions and expectations, about the way they want to be perceived and about what is important to them.

The girl's speech is modulated by her gestures (pointing at the boy, calling him to attention, and referring to herself) and her facial expressions of emotional states. It is also shaped by the emphasis of the letters in bold, which indicate stress in her voice. In her final word, "diva," she seems to be positively yelling. Unlike the printed letters on a book page, the letters in speech bubbles have onomatopoeic qualities, which means that their size and boldness correspond to the volume at which they are spoken and the emphasis which is laid onto them. The bigger and bolder the letters, the louder the speech; the smaller and thinner the letters, the more quiet and subdued.

Paying attention to the details on the page fleshes out the basic impression that you get from the first glance. Your inferences get more precise and you get a clearer sense of what the story is about, of the interests and investments of the characters involved, and also of the likely course the action is going to take. The scene between the girl and the boy is set up as an encounter between two different attitudes: know-it-all versus studied cool. This is information which you can take from their body language, but also from the social knowledge you have about clothing style for example. In the beginning it looks like the girl has all the trumps in her hand: she is the only one speaking and shaping the space of interaction between them with her gestures (thereby assigning him a particular role in the encounter). Readers not only infer the meaning of the situation as it stands, but also project how the story will continue on the basis of their inferences: Will the boy accept the girl's assessment of his tuition? Will he try to turn the situation around? Will he lose his cool? These are all questions raised by the first panel. As the following panels give answers to these questions and raise new ones, your inferences about the situation, the relations of the characters and the potential outcome will change constantly, and a narrative emerges as you establish connections between the events.

In this particular comic, the panel images represent a single situation, set in a single space, and the dialogue unfolds continuously. Other comics, however, might feature long temporal gaps between panels or they might change scenes completely between panels. The space between the panels is called the "gutter", and just as you step across a gutter, your mind creates connections between the individual panels, by drawing inferences about how the action in the one can relate to the other, and thereby trying to integrate them into a single, meaningful narrative.

Scott McCloud calls the phenomenon of making sense between panels "closure" (1994, 67). To McCloud, who has a very broad-ranging understanding of closure, it is a process that turns readers into participants of the comics' narrative as they supply the missing information between panels. Closure goes back to the so-called "principle of closure" in GESTALT psychology. We perceive the Figure 1.2 as a

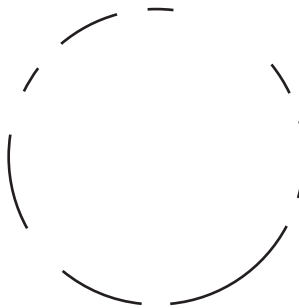


Figure 1.2 Closure.

circle, even though it is in fact an assortment of curved lines. We close the visual gaps and see a complete shape rather than lines. However, this does not mean that we have a very precise sense of the lines that fill the gaps. We simply assume that they most likely continue in roughly the same color, thickness, and curvature that we observe in the parts of the circle that we do see. Once the principle of closure is moved to panel-to-panel transitions, there is the tacit assumption that we have the same characters and locations at a slightly later point in time but we do not run an inner film of how they got there.

Consider the bodily forces of composition at work in the first row of panels in Figure 1.3. The composition of the two bodies describes a half-arc, and the impetus of the movement is from left to right. The movement of Charlotte's mother determines Charlotte's motion here, and it directs your attention. Like a wrestler, she seems to fling her daughter's body along the left to right arc. Once we have a closer look at the background of the second and third panel, however, we notice that the movement is not continuous. The mother's body has not just turned (which would be the easiest way for joining up the circle), but she has actually changed her position in the room.

The whole, the circle, we perceive, reflects the "mental model" we construct as we make sense of a narrative. We construct a mental model of the characters,



Figure 1.3 Bad Machinery. © John Allison.

the relations between them and the events that affect them. This mental model is the basis for the *STORYWORLD*, which we will discuss in the final section of this chapter (see Herman 2002). In some cases, such as the *Sinfest* and the *Bad Machinery* comics, this mental model is rather simple and straightforward. In other cases, developing a coherent mental model and a narrative out of your inferences presents much more of a challenge.

What is a narrative in the first place? “The cat sat on the mat” is no narrative because nothing is happening. “The cat sat on the dog’s mat,” however, has the potential for a conflict and for a chain of actions to unfold, and it therefore constitutes a minimal narrative, as Gerald Prince (1982, 147) suggests. In the first instance, we can say that a narrative is a chain of events that sets up a conflict and that keeps us wondering about what will happen next. I will elaborate this account in the next chapter. For now, back to *Sinfest*.

The narrative movement of the encounter in Figure 1.4 is reflected in the composition of the comic as a whole. There are alternating changes between the perspective of the panels: panel 1 shows the little devil watching TV; in panel 2, when the TV set unexpectedly begins to interact with the devil, we have a similar jump across the axis of the gaze between TV and devil as in the final panel of Figure 1.1; panel 3 shows a view from being the devil; panel 4 reestablishes the perspective of the first panel. This reflects the ways in which the TV set gains ascendancy over the devil. From an unobtrusive position in the right-hand corner of the panel, the TV set literally “jumps” into prominence (and the left-hand corner) in the second panel. It towers above the little devil in the perspective of the third panel until it moves back into



Figure 1.4 *Sinfest* (II) Source: *Sinfest: Viva La Resistance*™ © 2012 Tatsuya Ishida.

the unobtrusive position of the forth panel. Through the arrangement of perspectives in the panels, the TV set seems to circle around the little devil, asserting its dominance from every angle. The changes of perspective between panels, and the movements of bodies across a strip or a page are often used to underline narrative developments.

Another way to work out what is going on within and between panels are the gazes of the characters. If characters look at something, chances are it's important. The gaze of the little devil is almost glued to the TV set, stressing its hypnotizing presence. Charlotte in Figure 1.3 keeps her eyes closed in the first two panels to avoid engaging with her surroundings, and her mother's dramatically averted gaze suggests that she would rather not be part of this encounter either. In the *Sinfest* comic, the fixed gaze of the little devil keeps redirecting readers to the TV set. Gazes guide our attention as we read

Box 1.1 *Lessing and Laocoön*



Figure 1.5 Laocoön. Source: Wikimedia Commons. Marie-Lan Nguyen, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Laocoon_Pio-Clementino_Inv1059-1064-1067.jpg

In 1766, the German critic Gotthold Ephraim Lessing wrote a treatise called “Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry.” More than a century before the emergence of comics as a medium, Lessing’s essay outlined a key critical issue which occupies comics scholars still today: what words and images can and cannot do. Lessing takes his cue from the famous statue of Laocoön (Figure 1.5). Laocoön was a priest who predicted the fall of Troy and was silenced by the gods. The statue shows the moment in which Laocoön and his sons are attacked and killed by sea-snakes. In the *Aeneid*, in which Virgil retells the event in words, readers get the full story. Lessing now distinguishes between painting as an “art of space” and poetry as an “art of time.” The statue of Laocoön unfolds in space through the bodies it depicts; Virgil’s epic poem unfolds in time as you read it through line by line. Lessing carves out different aesthetic territories for images and words, relating each to different parameters of our experience of the world (time and space).

Lessing’s account would suggest that comics are a mixed medium which unduly confuses basic aesthetic categories. However, if you take a close look at the statue of Laocoön, this distinction between time and space starts to get a bit blurry. As you engage with the statue, you look at the different details of it (the facial expressions, the snakes ready to strike, etc.) and then it *does* unfold in time. As you read a poem, you read the block of text as the words relate back and forth across the page, and then it *does* unfold in space. Lessing himself admits that poetry can gesture towards space and bodies, and that painting can gesture towards time and actions. Indeed, rather than confusing what words and images can do, it seems that comics are a medium which capitalizes on the overlaps of these AFFORDANCES. The words attain a spatial quality, as they are couched in speech bubbles that are located in relation to characters. The images in the panels attain a temporal quality, as you read their details bit by bit and as they are presented in sequence. Lessing’s distinction works as a helpful tool for thinking through the ways in which the spatial and temporal qualities inter-mesh in comics.

With the “PREGNANT MOMENT,” Lessing introduces another concept which we will keep coming back to in this book.¹ Images represent the “pregnant moment” of an action, the moment which captures the crucial point about a situation. It allows you to infer what happened in

the past, and it lets you project what will happen in the future. Even if we can take in much information in a single glance, as we saw for the first *Sinfest* comic, each of the panels also implies a temporal extension. In the *Bad Machinery* comic, Charlotte is eating, but this cannot happen at the same time as her talking to her mother, because it's rather hard to articulate when you have a spoon in your mouth. There is a double time scheme at work in this panel: the girl is finally, and defiantly, having her breakfast, and the spoon in her mouth communicates this at a single glance. What she says in her speech bubble, on the other hand, gives the panel and her attitude its extension in time. Reading though the text in the speech bubble and paying attention to the details of the images allow you to connect the “pregnant moment” with the larger continuity of what happened before and what happened afterwards.

Box 1.2 *Faces, Emotions, and Characters*

The faces of comics characters are spaces which give you textual clues as dense as any speech bubble. You can draw inferences on the basis not only of gaze patterns (as discussed above), but also on the basis of their facial features and expressions. The facial features of a character are often stereotyped, that is formed according to cultural prejudices, and give you information on what kind of character you are dealing with. Physiognomy, the art of assessing personality from facial features, has been discounted as unscientific by contemporary psychology. However, comics use stereotypical features to allow readers to make snap judgments about characters. Rodolphe Töpffer, one of the founding fathers of comics, wrote a treatise called “Essay on Physiognomy” (1845), in which he outlines how minute changes of facial features create a completely different impression of personality.

Facial expressions, on the other hand, give you an idea of what a character feels. If they are sad, angry, or thoughtful, these emotions will be communicated through the look on their faces. The girl's expression in the fourth panel of the *Sinfest* comic tells you a lot about what she is feeling. Her eyes widen in anger, and her body language

communicates mounting tenseness as she gets angry. The facial expression of the girl, in contrast to her aloof superiority before, gives the final panel its punch. Facial expressions, bodily postures that go with them, communicate the mental states of characters to us, and this is a line of inquiry still pursued by psychology today.

The psychologist Paul Ekman distinguishes between six basic facial expressions, which connote anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness and surprise, and can (to some extent) be understood across cultures. In comics, these facial expressions never stand on their own but are always embedded in a narrative context which helps you specify them. Emotions can be understood as appraisal mechanisms, which evaluate situations in relation to our plans and goals and lead to a readiness for action. In comics, the narrative context offers the situation to which the emotion then relates. The girl in the *Sinfest* comic for example is angry. This emotion evaluates the situation, namely that the insinuation of the boy is something that calls for a response, and it suggests her course of action, namely that she engages with him rather than carry on pontificating or stop talking altogether. Faces and emotions offer readers access into the mental operations that go on as characters encounter each other and as they evaluate events in relation to the stake they have in the situation.

panels, because we instinctively look at things other people are looking at. This is called the **DEICTIC GAZE** – a gaze that shows you something (see Butterworth 1995). In some instances, such as Figure 1.6, it can redirect your attention across panel boundaries.

Navigating the Comics Page

Let this image from *Desolation Jones* take you on a ride through a comics page. You begin reading in the top left corner, move to the right, then down a line and into the bottom right of the page. This is the basic reading direction, both of written texts and of comics. Conventionally, comics order their panels on the page in a grid of three by three or four by four panels, in which you move from the top left to top right in reading, then go down a line and repeat until you reach the end of the page (see for example Figure 5.6). This page from *Desolation Jones* both plays on and confounds this expectation. The panels are



Figure 1.6 Desolation Jones. From *Desolation Jones* © Warren Ellis and J.H. Williams III. Used with Permission of DC Comics.

superimposed onto each other, and there is no gutter but a background image underlying the entire page. Still, the central line that runs across the page, bright red in the original comic, outlines the reading path clearly.

There are numerous clues which help readers find their way through this comics page; the central line is only one among many. The deictic gazes of the characters are a second set of indicators. The speech bubbles and their reading direction are another, suggesting the movement which the readers' attention should take to make sense of the page. The movement begins, as we see the van from the front, and it ends, as we see the back of the vehicle move out of the frame. You can also follow the movement of the van itself, which travels from left to right in the first image, then down the diagonal, and then again from left to right in the bottom panels. As the characters are moved across the city, so you are moved across the face of the page by a great number of visual clues.

The page from *Desolation Jones* is structured into background and foreground. In the background, we have a city map of L.A. with the route of the van marked out as a red line. In the foreground, we have superimposed panels of the van and its passengers. While the background gives you a sense of the larger context, two characters moving across the city, the panels in the foreground give you the details of their conversation, their facial expressions, and their relation to each other. As you read a comics page, you move back and forth between background and foreground, between the general and the specific, in your inferences. Both the layout of the entire page and the details of the individual panels feed into a larger whole, a gestalt. "Gestalt" is a term from so-called "Gestalt psychology" which, at the beginning of the twentieth century, was interested in the way we intuitively chunk and group the information we perceive. The circle in Figure 1.2 illustrates the gestalt principle of closure.

Figure 1.7 illustrates a different process for forming a gestalt in perception: it can be either a vase, if you focus on the white, or a two facing profiles, if you focus on the black. You can never see both at the same time. What you see forms a closed whole, a gestalt. Still, you can switch between different gestalts and thereby reach a sense of the complexity of the image you see. This is also the case for the page from *Desolation Jones*. If you focus on the first panel, the red line is a sideline on the road. If you focus on the second panel, it is a reflection on Jones' sunglasses. If you focus on the background, it is a route on the map. If you focus on the last panel, it will be a sideline again.

The red line becomes many different things as you move your attention across the page. You focus on individual panels, which give you a moment of the action, and you process the information in the panels within the mental gestalt of this moment. As you move on across the page, however, you relate these

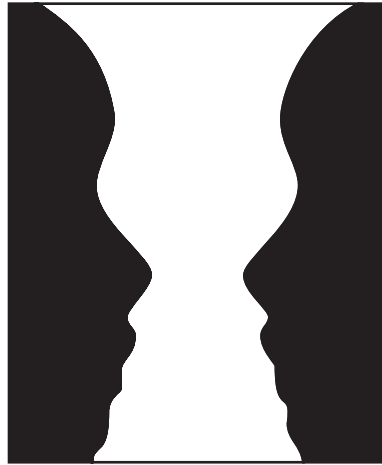


Figure 1.7 Rubin Vase.

moments to each other. The layout of the entire page, the way the panels relate to each other and the way they are arranged, is called “mise en page” in comics. Your attention as a reader fluctuates between a vague and general impression of the entire page and its composition and the specific gestalt of the event presented in a particular panel. This movement between background and foreground, between the part and the whole, creates a dynamic reading experience in comics, and it is the reason why both the unit of the panel and the unit of the page should be considered when analyzing comics.

Entering the Storyworld and Meeting its Participants

When you begin reading a comic, you take up clues from the page and construct a web of inferences from them. This web of inferences, however, is not free-floating. It is tied to the mental framework of a storyworld. A storyworld is the mental model you construct for the events which are represented in the panels. As you read, you redirect your attention from the real world into this fictional world. With more and more textual information, you elaborate and flesh out the storyworld, and you get a sense of what is likely to happen within it. Your inferences relate to the events in the storyworld, not to those in the real world.

Let's see how this works. Here are the first two pages of *V for Vendetta* (Figure 1.8). They take readers into the dystopian storyworld of a fascist Britain. The first panel gives you a basic exposition of the time and place: as the broadcast

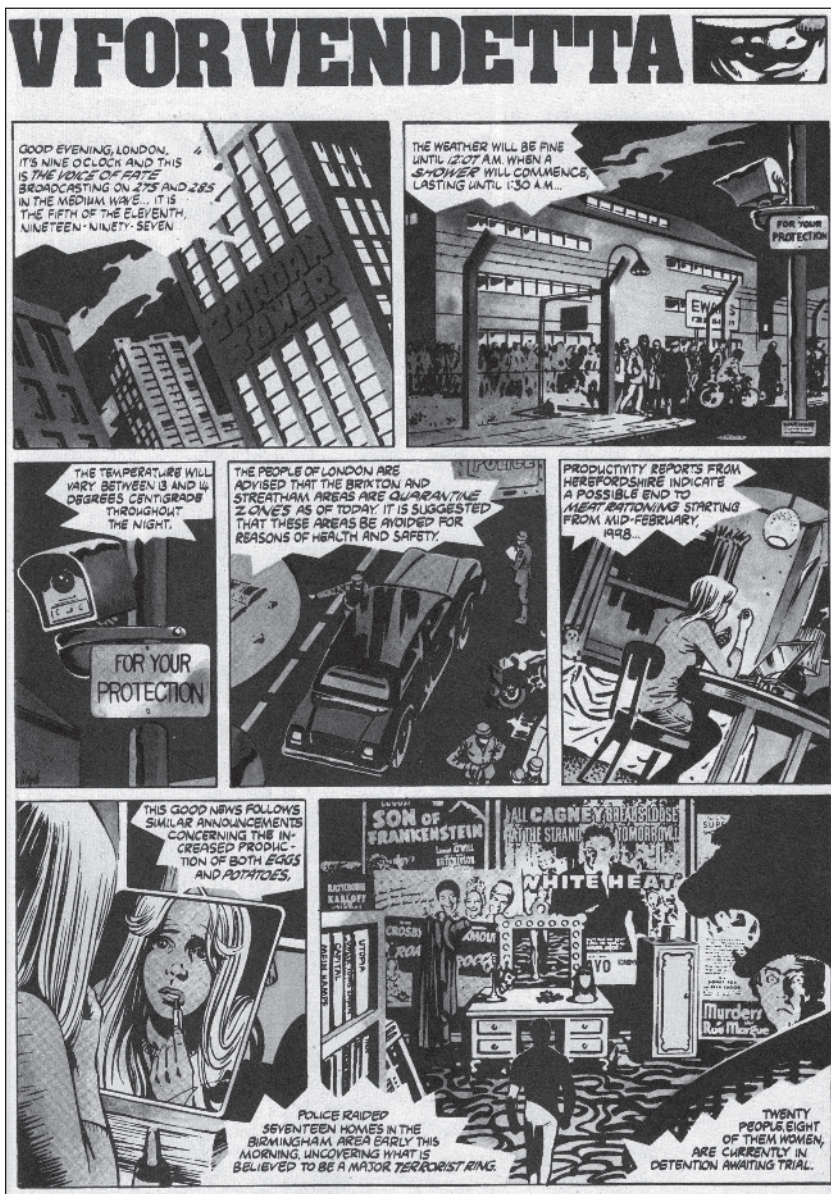


Figure 1.8 V for Vendetta. From *V for Vendetta*. © DC Comics. Used with Permission.

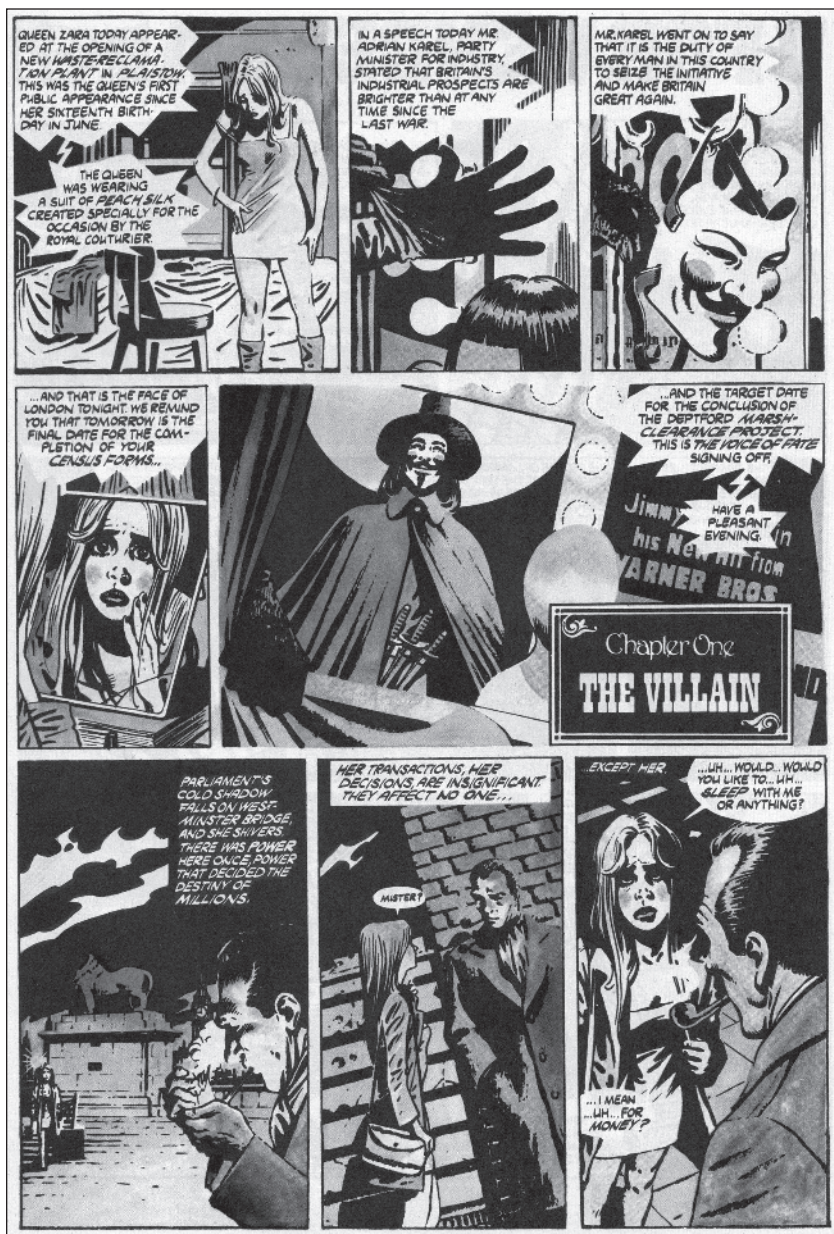


Figure 1.8 (Cont'd) V for Vendetta. From *V for Vendetta*. © DC Comics. Used with Permission.

informs us, we are in London in the year 1997. The voice seems to be located in the building of “Jordan Tower,” as the tail of the speech bubble suggests. Its ragged edges imply that the speech is transmitted electronically, a visual indicator that the language sounds not “round” but rough and fractured. The panel image lets us know that London in 1997 is not a happy place: large, featureless skyscrapers dominate the landscape, and it is dark and cloudy. As you continue reading through the page, you are taken to other places within the storyworld where the broadcast can be heard. The second panel shows people leaving a factory through a gate with a camera watching them. Nine o’clock is the time you finish work in this storyworld. Everyone seems to leave work at the same time, and the fences and camera seem to be the trappings of a repressive regime. The broadcast continues to predict the weather, tells people to avoid certain areas, reports increases in productivity, and a police raid. This broadcast is not news, but an instruction, a warning, and a demonstration that whoever issues them is in control of every aspect of these people’s lives. In the third panel, we see a camera, monitoring the situation, and in the fourth policemen controlling traffic. The storyworld is now set up. It is a totalitarian world, whose denizens are under constant surveillance. From this set-up, you can expect certain narrative probabilities: someone will rise up against it, and the totalitarian regime will strike back and attempt to suppress this rebellion.

What is missing now are characters, fictional people who will set the narrative in motion. The following panels introduce these characters. We assume that both the girl and the man live in the same storyworld that has just been established. The girl’s home seems average, whereas the man’s abode is set up as an actor’s dressing room with an illuminated mirror and film posters on the wall. While the girl seems fearful and uncertain, the man strides towards the mirror. The broadcast talks about rationing and food stuffs when we see the girl; we therefore assume that she is affected by lack of food. It talks about terrorists and suspects awaiting trials when we see the man; we can therefore assume that he is planning a subversive act. The silhouette of the open animal jaw in the top right corner suggests aggressiveness and the readiness to strike. The awaiting of trial could refer to a deadline, namely that the man will try to free the suspects, or that he will perform a trial for the regime itself. Much information about the two characters is communicated in these three panels. Even though the broadcast is probably not talking about them, as it places certain topics and terms within the panel’s caption, we still connect these terms with the characters. They form part of our inference-making.

On the second page, the contrasting characterization of the girl and the man continues. Both are getting ready for an act which is probably illegal in this storyworld. The girl is putting on make-up and a short dress. She is probably

going to solicit as a prostitute. By the final panel of this page, we know this to be the case. The page is a narrative unit in comics: it shows action potentials, such as the girl dressing up, and then brings them to a preliminary conclusion, such as the girl actually soliciting. At the same time, the final panel also raises a new question: how is the man going to react? Is he going to take up the offer? Is he going to reject? How will the girl react? Or is he maybe a government agent? The final panel of the page often leaves a gap that makes you go on to the next page to find an answer. Because we have seen two characters on these pages, we also wonder how these two characters are connected: do they know each other? Will they meet? Does the man set out to meet the girl? These questions remain in the back of our heads as we read on. They are part of the preconscious inferencing process, and you might not be aware of them. For your analysis of a comic, however, it makes sense to trace the inferences and spell out the questions and their answers.

The broadcast continues on the second page as well. In the first panel, it describes the outfit of “Queen Zara” as the girl looks down her own dress. The dress of the queen implies a proud display of couture, whereas the girl’s unhappy look suggests that she is not sure that she is wearing (and doing) the right thing. As we draw our inferences, we connect and contrast the queen (or rather the stereotypical ideas we have about queens) with the girl. This highlights the insecurity of the girl. The process is that of *METAPHORS*: you think of something in terms of something else. Cognitive linguistics proposes that metaphors are mechanisms in which you project one thing (a king) onto another (a lion’s heart) and compare their common features (probably courage). This panel works similarly, except that you take information from both the verbal discourse and the image: you compare the queen to the girl for her poise, self-assuredness, and the dignity of her fashion display. In contrast to a queen, the demeaning and pitiful situation of the girl is all the more striking.

In the following panels, this metaphorical process is used for a different purpose: irony. As the man’s hand takes the mask, we read in the caption that one of the government officials instructs the population that “every man in this country [is] to seize the initiative and make Britain great again.” Since the announcer talks about industry and economic prospects, we can infer that for him “making Britain great again” refers to productivity and work ethic. The man in the image seizes the mask, but he is probably not going to work in a factory. Rather, we infer that he is “seizing his own initiative” in a bid against the regime. His smiling mask, the bright lights and theatrical atmosphere go against everything the totalitarian regime stands for. For the man with the mask,

“making Britain great again” carries a different meaning than for the announcer. The discrepancy between these meanings creates irony in the panel.

As we read through a comics page, we create a storyworld. This storyworld has basic features and probabilities, i.e. things that are likely to happen within it, and we draw our inferences within the framework of this storyworld. Characters are storyworld participants, and different things in the storyworld can mean different things to them. When we draw inferences, we try to relate these to characters and their intentions. These processes create a storyworld peopled with characters with different intentions, attitudes, and convictions. Comics can unfold a narrative in which many different voices interact. The Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) calls the phenomenon of multivoiced narrative “HETEROGLOSSIA” and states that this is a key feature of the modern novel. It is also crucial to many comics and graphic novels which exploit the comics’ medium’s inherent juxtaposition of images and words. When you analyze comics, relate what you read to individual storyworld participants and ask yourself what it means to them. As I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, reading comics is not always straightforward, and their analysis needs to take into account the many different processes involved in making meaning from the lines and colors on the page.

Box 1.3 *Comics-Specific Signs and Conceptual Metaphors*

There is nothing that says “this is a comic” like a speech bubble, a SPEED LINE or an ONOMATOPOETIC EFFECT. These elements might not have their origin in the comics medium (see Chapter 5 for “proto-speech bubbles”), but comics have developed their narrative functions and often use them in their storytelling, and they are therefore often considered “comics-specific.”

The speech bubble presents what a speaker says. Its tail points toward the speaker’s mouth and locates what is said in the panel image. When this discourse cannot be located with a speaker in the panel image, it is represented in a caption, a box superimposed on the panel. When the discourse is not spoken, but only in the character’s thoughts, the tail turns into a series of little dots, creating a THOUGHT

BUBBLE. The principle of the speech bubble, that is discourse emerging from a speaker's mouth and being directed at the listener, could be based on the CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR of "communication as conduit." Conceptual metaphors shape our way of thinking about something (see Lakoff and Johnson 2003); they can be discerned in verbal discourse but are also visually represented. Understanding the abstract notion of "communication" in the specific terms of a "conduit," we can try to "get the message across," "pack" our ideas into words, or "extract" meaning from a sentence. Speech bubbles show this conduit visually, and they are easy to understand because they draw on a conceptual metaphor which underlies the way we understand communication.

Speed lines are another comics-specific sign which show that a character moves very fast through space. They connect the space where the person stood before with the space where we can see them now. This implies that the character is moving so fast that their movement becomes a blur in our perception. Because we have a bodily conception of moving through space from a starting point to a goal (the so-called source-path-goal schema), we understand that the movement must be very fast. The aesthetic of the speed line is also connected to the rise of stop-motion photography at the beginning of the twentieth century, and it has been used in painting, such as Duchamp's *Nude descending a Staircase*. Comics sometimes feature visual signs connoting the emotional state of characters, like steam coming out of the character's ears when he is angry, or birds and stars to show bedazzlement. Some of these signs can be traced back to conceptual metaphors, like the steam to the conceptual metaphor that "anger is like a hot liquid in a container"; others seem more based on conventions.

Comics-specific signs, like speech bubbles and the visual signs I just discussed, are highly embodied pointers of action and provide shortcuts into the mental states of characters. Therefore, they have been singled out as signifying the infantile and hyperbolic nature of comics, and comics like *V for Vendetta* (that consider themselves to be serious narratives) tend to avoid them in favor of seemingly more subtle strategies of characterization and narration.

Comics Analysis – A Basic Checklist

- ✓ What is the spatial layout of the page? Does the mise en page follow the classical three by three pattern or does it suggest an alternative reading path? How does the comic strike a balance between the “pregnant moments” of the individual panels and the entire page?
- ✓ How do the characters relate to each other in the individual panels? How do their postures, gestures, and indicated movements underline the encounter? How do their bodies relate to each other across the page? What does the exchange of their deictic gazes tell you? How does this relate to the narrative?
- ✓ How do the facial expressions and the “pregnant moments” of the image relate to the dialogue as it unfolds in the speech bubbles?
- ✓ How does the comic establish the storyworld?
- ✓ Does the comic present different perspectives on the events? Does it juxtapose different takes on what happens in the storyworld through the combination of panels, or the combination of words and images within a panel?

Note

- 1 Lessing’s original German term is “fruchtbarer moment,” which is perhaps better translated as “critical” or “fruitful moment” (see the editor’s notes in Lessing 1965, 275).

Recommended Reading

Bordwell, David. 1986. *Narration in the Fiction Film*. London: Methuen.

The basic account of meaning-making in this chapter, namely, that we take up clues from the text and then draw inferences from them, is taken from David Bordwell’s approach to films. *Narration in the Fiction Film* gives a basic outline of this approach; read his newer publications for the ways in which Bordwell has developed this account.

Grodal, Torben. 1997. *Moving Pictures: A New Theory of Film Genres, Feelings, and Cognition*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Johnson, Mark. 1987. *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination and Reason*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Arnheim, Rudolf. 2008. *The Power of the Center: A Study of Composition in the Visual Arts*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

These accounts outline the cognitive, emotional, and embodied approach, which underlies this chapter. Grodal presents an early model of embodied meaning-making in film, drawing on the cognitive sciences, while Johnson develops a larger aesthetic programme. Arnheim is an early account of embodied meaning-making and composition in the visual arts, first published in 1982.

Groensteen, Thierry. 2007. *The System of Comics*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press.

Little, Ben. 2009. "Constructing the Reader's Perspective in *V for Vendetta*." *International Journal of Comic Art*, 11 1: 182–202.

Groensteen's basic outline of comics, their individual elements and how they work, offers a valuable introduction to the dynamics of the mise en page and spatial arrangement in comics. Little's article presents a detailed reading of *V for Vendetta*, and its effects on readers.

Jenkins, Jennifer M., Keith Oatley and Nancy Stein, eds. 1998. *Human Emotions: A Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Gombrich, Ernst. 2002. *Art and Illusion: A Study in the History of Pictorial Representation*. London: Phaidon.

The *Human Emotions* reader presents an overview of contemporary psychological theories of emotions. Of particular interest are the articles by Ekman and Friesen, Oatley and Johnson-Laird, as well as Frijda. Ernst Gombrich's chapter on caricature discusses the impact of physiognomy and facial expression on our understanding of drawn characters. He explains "Töpffer's law," referring back to Rodolphe Töpffer's "Essay on Physiognomy," as the fact that we read a face always for its emotional expression.

Lessing, G.E. 1965. *Laokoön*, edited by Dorothy Reich. Oxford: Oxford University Press (several translations available).

Tucker, Brian. 2009. "Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laokoön* and the Lesson of Comics." In *Teaching the Graphic Novel*, edited by Stephen Tabachnik, 28–35. Modern Language Association.

Lessing's essay distinguishes between the functions of time and space in the arts. A classic, but not unproblematic account. If you want to make your own way through Lessing's essay, Tucker's article, written from the perspective of a teacher, can be a helpful guide.

Forceville, Charles. 2005. "Visual Representations of the Idealised Abstract Concept Model of Anger in the Asterix Album *La Zizanie*." *Journal of Pragmatics*, 37.1: 69–88.

Forceville develops an account of conceptual metaphors in comics, in particular for the expression of anger.

References

- Arnheim, Rudolf. 2008. *The Power of the Center: A Study of Composition in the Visual Arts*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist. Austin: The University of Texas Press.
- Butterworth, George. 1995. "Origins of Mind in Perception and Action." In *Joint Attention: Its Origin and Role in Development*, edited by Chris Moore and Patricia Dunham, 29–40. Hillsdale: Erlbaum.
- Gallagher, Shaun. 2005. *How the Body Shapes the Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Herman, David. 2002. *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson. 2003. *Metaphors We Live By*. Updated edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lessing, G.E. 1965. *Laokoön*, edited by Dorothy Reich. Oxford: Oxford University Press (several translations available).
- McCloud, Scott. 1994. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Prince, Gerard. 1982. *Narratology: The Form and Function of Narrative*. Berlin: Mouton.
- Töpffer, Rodolphe. 2003. *Essai de physiognomie*. Edited by Thierry Groensteen. Paris: Kargo.

Comics Discussed

- Allison, John. 2009. *Bad Machinery*. Web. Last Accessed 28 Oct 2012.
- Ellis, Warren. 2008. *Desolation Jones 1: Made In England*. Illustrated by J.H. Williams III. New York: DC Comics.
- Ishida, Tatsuya. 2011. *Sinfest: Viva La Resitance*. Milwaukee: Dark Horse Books.
- Moore, Alan. 2007. *V for Vendetta*. Illustrated by Dave Gibbons. New York: DC Comics.

Class Activity: Cut-up Comics

Get together in groups. Make two copies of a comic strip or a page-based comic. Cut up one of the copies into its individual panels and mix them. Exchange the cut-up comics between groups. Within your group, try to reconstruct the sequence of the comic strip or comic page and take into account the clues and the inferences possible between the panels. What other sequences are possible and how can you make sense of them? At the end of the exercise, compare your reassembled comic with the original and try to discuss why you might have chosen a different order.

A possible variation of this exercise would be a competition between groups with multiple cut-up comics, in which either (i) the greatest number of correctly reassembled comics or (ii) the greatest number of alternative, but feasible sequences are rewarded with a prize.

Writing Assignment 1

Go online and pick a web comic of your choice. Write a close-reading of this comic, going through it panel by panel. Describe the clues you pick up on, what kind of inferences you draw from them, and how they contribute to the narrative of the comic. Try to cover as many points from the checklist as you can and write 300–500 words.

Essay Question 1

Embodiment in Desolation Jones

Desolation Jones tells the narrative of a former MI5 agent, whose body has been marked by medical experiments. How is Jones' bodily experience represented in the comic? How are the bodily experiences of the other characters represented? How do their experiences and perceptions meet in their encounters? What kind of a story-world is communicated to readers through embodiment in page layouts (this has a much broader relevance in the comic than just Figure 1.6)?

Consider the composition of the pages, and the bodily postures and facial expressions of characters, in order to develop your analysis of what it means to have a body in the world of *Desolation Jones* – in relation to the character's experience of the storyworld, to their ability to move around within it and to the larger themes which the comic addresses.