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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).

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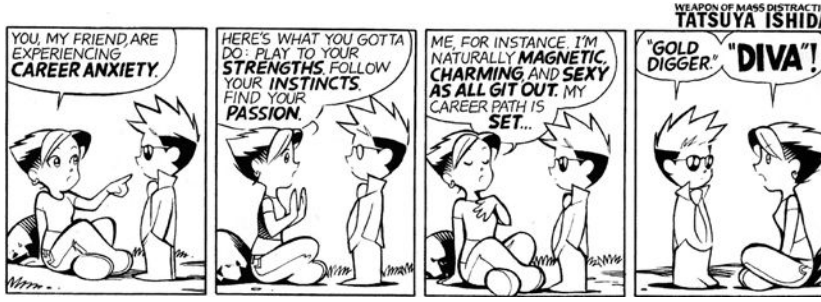

Figure 1.1 *Sinfest* (I). Source: Sinfest: Viva La Resistance™© 2012 Tatsuya Ishida.

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, your 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 onomatopoetic 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

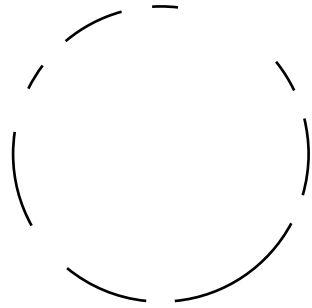

Figure 1.2 Closure.

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,

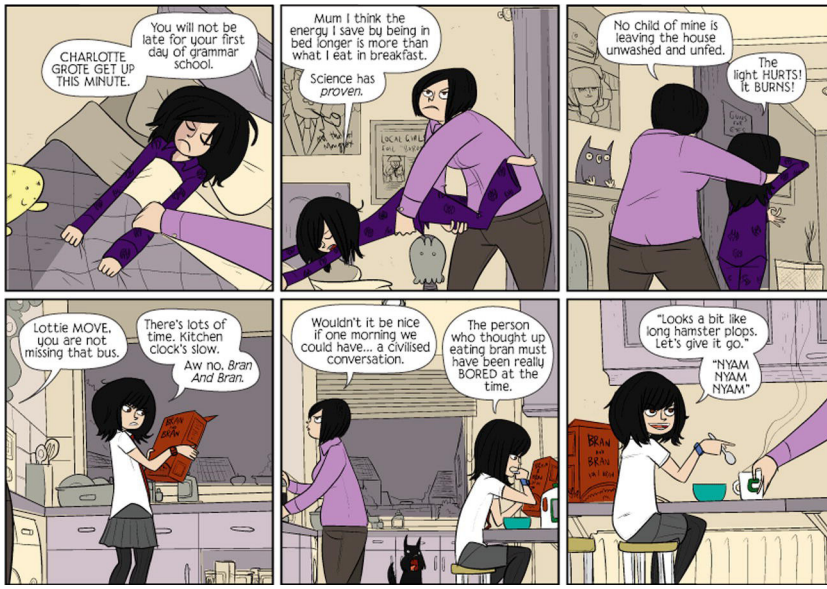

Figure 1.3 Bad Machinery. © John Allison.

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 ascendance 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 intermesh 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

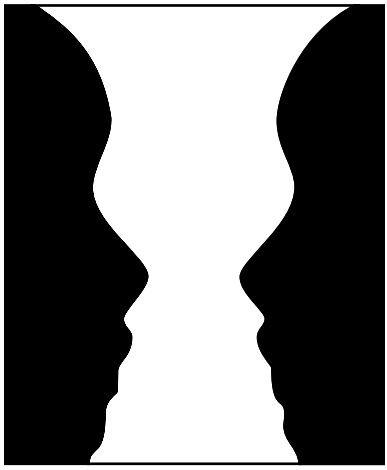

Figure 1.7 Rubin Vase.

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

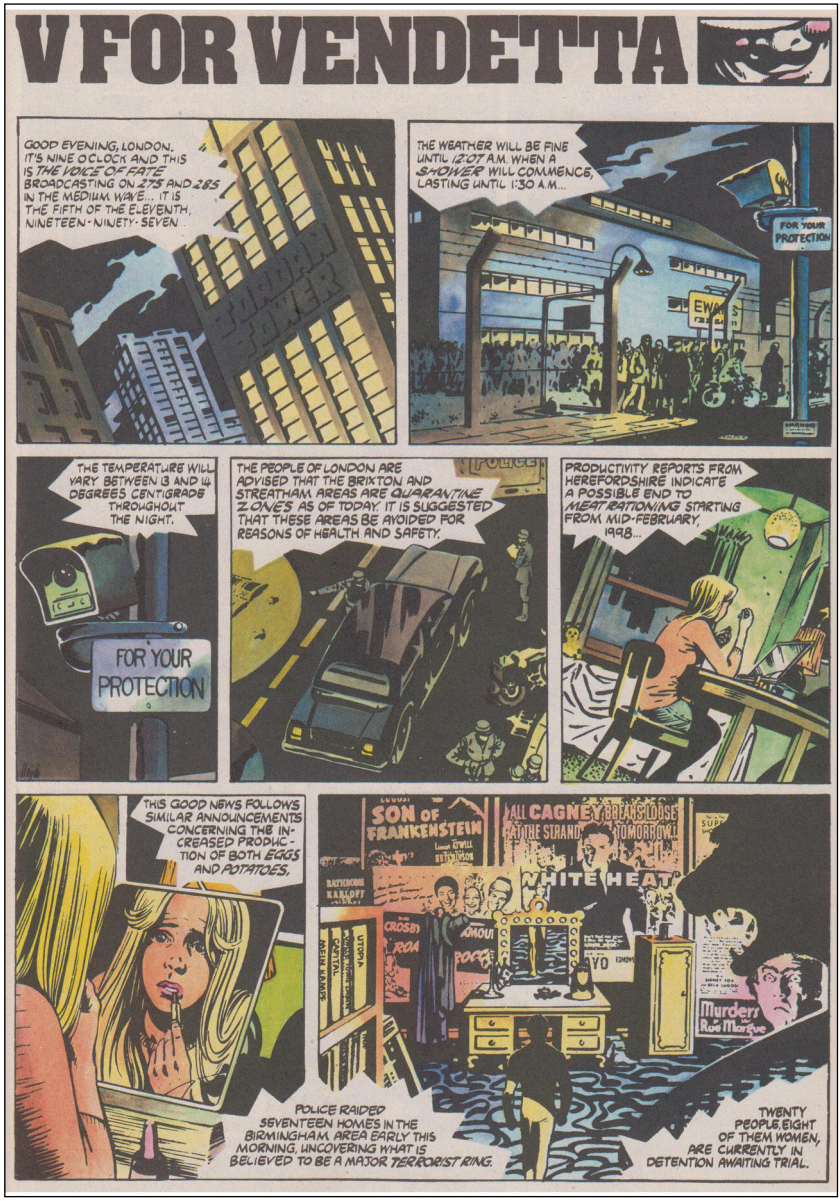

Figure 1.8 V for Vendetta. From *V for Vendetta*. © DC Comics. Used with Permission.

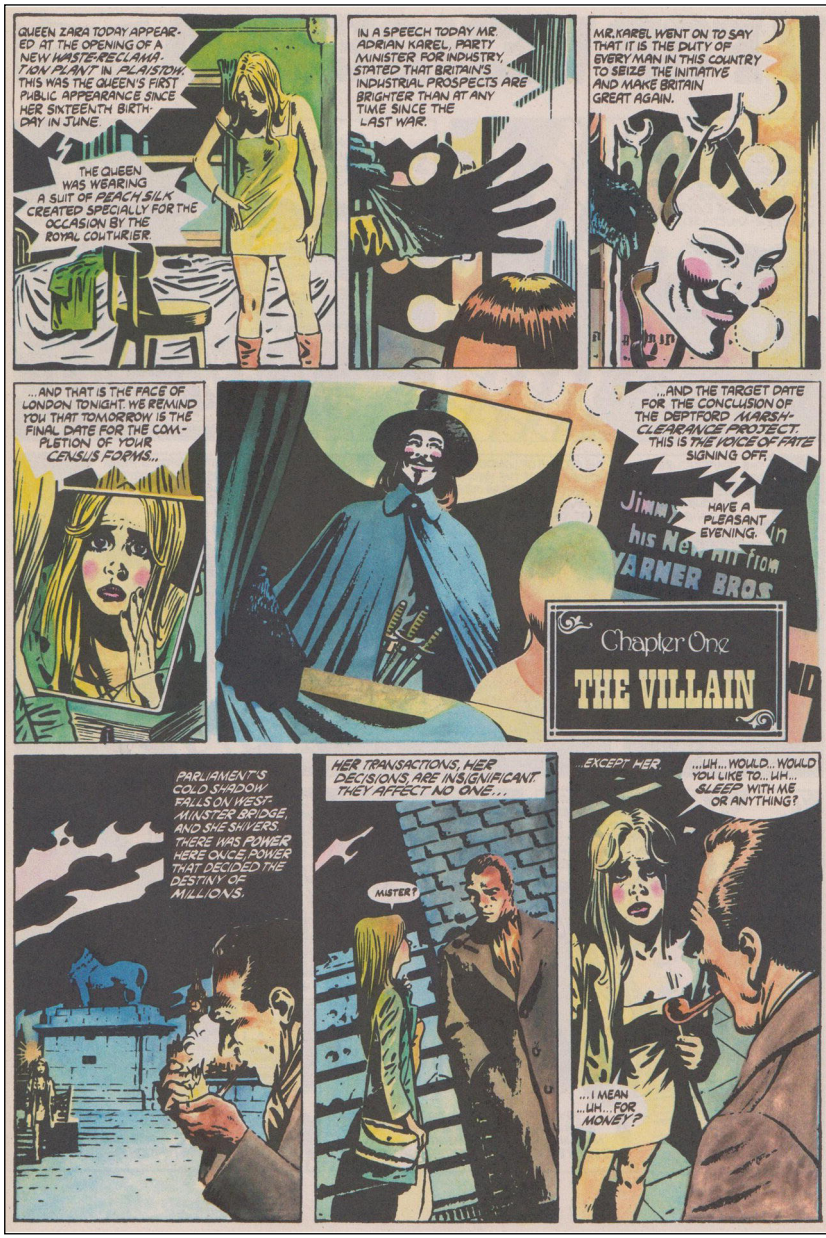

Figure 1.8 (Cont'd) V for Vendetta. From *V for Vendetta*. © DC Comics. Used with Permission.

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 Laocoön 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.

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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 of 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.

2

The Way Comics Tell it: Narration and Narrators[1]

Comics present you with a number of visual and verbal clues which allow you to follow the PLOT, enter the storyworld, and engage with the characters. These clues are not placed at random, and they establish a relationship between you, as the reader, and the teller of the STORY, the narrator. Preliminarily, a narrative can be defined as a sequence of events, in which a number of characters engage and which is recounted by a narrator. This chapter will outline how comics use images and words to tell a story, how the telling and the story relate, how different kinds of narrators are established in comics, and it will conclude with a more general account of the cultural function of storytelling.

Showing and Telling

In his book *The Craft of Fiction*, Percy Lubbock writes:

> "The art of fiction does not begin until the novelist thinks of his story as a matter to be *shown*, to be so exhibited that it will tell itself." (1965, 62)

Good fiction, Lubbock suggests, should be immediately accessible to the reader. The storyteller should retreat into the background and not intervene with excessive verbiage. In these lights, storytelling succeeds when readers see what is happening, but do not have the impression that anybody had told them what has happened. What does this mean for comics? Do they show in their images and tell in their words? And are those comics which have the least words the best?

Studying Comics and Graphic Novels, First Edition. Karin Kukkonen.
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Lubbock's statement addresses two dimensions of storytelling: on the one hand, a story lets its readers enter a storyworld and invites them to engage with the characters and their fictional minds; on the other hand, a story always emerges from a constellation of clues which prompts readers to draw a particular set of inferences. A comic's narrative always has a certain rhetoric. This rhetoric can be related to an author or to a narrator, the instance we (might) project as telling the story to us. In comics, the narrator sometimes comes to the fore as a fully-fledged personality, but sometimes the narrative only implies an ordering agency that is not personalized. Literary studies in general, and narratology in particular, tend to avoid talking about the author, because we as readers can never be certain of the real intentions of the flesh-and-blood author. We will revisit the author in the chapter on autobiographical comics; in this chapter, we will talk of the narrator as the instance (within the comic) we project as telling the narrative.

Traditionally, it seems that images are better suited for the showing of a story, and words are better suited for the telling of a story. There is even some discussion as to whether images can narrate in the first place. In sequences, images can present different events which readers understand as part of a story, but also individual images can suggest a narrative, especially, when they represent the encounter between different characters or when they indicate several (sequential) events simultaneously. In comics, readers pick up clues from both the images and the words, and mostly, the two modes work together toward unfolding the comic's narrative in the panel sequence.

We have the elements of comics, words, images and sequence, assembled as features of the medium's storytelling now. And indeed, each of these elements contributes to comics' capacity for storytelling. Let's have a look at the first page of "Imperfect Hosts" from *The Sandman* to see how this works.

At the top of the page, we see a house in a Gothic landscape. The bats and gravestones suggest a setting in the horror genre. This image takes readers directly into the storyworld of this genre with its sudden scares and life-threatening encounters; it shows markers of the genre, and we as readers cast the storyworld accordingly. As Lubbock puts it, the narrative is "so exhibited that it will tell itself." The image holds the potential for a story, and because of our reading experience in the horror genre, we have a rough idea of what these potentials are. However, they remain potential, as nothing has happened yet. When we read the speech bubble, when we look over the entire page, a narrative emerges – clues are taken up and inferences are drawn from each of these elements.

Figure 2.1 The Sandman (I) From *Sandman Vol.1: Preludes and Nocturnes*. © DC Comics. Used with Permission.

As Roland Barthes (1984) outlines, words can specify the meaning of an image – he calls this "anchorage." If we read "Wastelands, November 2011" in a caption next to the house, this would specify what we see in the image as being set in a particular time and space. Without the caption, the image could show any time and any space, and indeed, the home of Cain and Abel which we see here, is in a realm outside time and space. The dialogue in the speech bubbles anchors the image we see at a particular time and space, namely when the words are spoken, but it does not relate it to the storyworld at large. In most comics, as Barthes observes (1984, 11), words and images work as "RELAYS": they specify and describe each other. This use is employed in the second panel mid-left: Abel is staring at the present in front of himself, and from his facial expression, we see that he is afraid of it. His glance in the image specifies what the "it" in the speech bubble is, the thing he is afraid will explode. The words in the speech bubbles, on the other hand, specify what exactly he is afraid of (that it will explode) and why he is afraid (it is not his birthday and he does not trust his brother).

Words in comics are not necessarily tied to the telling, namely the explicating and specifying of the events and setting, but they can also show. Cain's choice of language, for example, shows his pompous attitude and his disrespect for his brother Abel, without the need for the narrator to tell us so. Images in comics are not necessarily tied to the showing either, namely the immediate presentation of events; they can tell through their composition and the characters' bodies. Take the second image, in which both Cain and Abel look at the present, as an example. Here, Cain encroaches on the personal space of Abel, and Abel shrinks away from Cain and the present. The postures of the two brothers form a square, with their bodies as the two vertical lines and Cain's arm as the horizontal line. Abel's arm extending towards the present works as a diagonal across this square. The diagonal, a moment of dynamics in this rather stable composition, tells us about a moment of suspense – will he or will he not open the present?

Story, Discourse, and Plot

Abel, in the tradition of the victim of the horror film, is suspicious – he expects that the present will explode. Cain, in the tradition of the perpetrator of the horror film, is threatening – he wants to see his brother open the present. This is the basic question of the plot, the lines along which the action gets tangled up and along which it gets untied (the untying is also known as "DÉNOUEMENT").

The plot connects the events and actions in the story through the reasons we perceive for them and the effects they have. Abel is afraid of opening the present, because he does not trust his brother's stated reasons for giving him a present and he suspicious of what will happen once he opens it. The plot falls between what narratology, the study of narrative, calls story and what it calls discourse. The discourse is the text as it presents itself to the readers: the images, words, panel sequences, and page layouts of the comic itself. This is the *how* of storytelling. The story is the skeleton of events and encounters which discourse relates and fleshes out. It is the *what* of storytelling. The notions of story and discourse have been discussed in detail in narratology, and they give rise to a number of categories for storytelling which can also be applied to the storytelling in comics.

First, we don't necessarily read about the story events in the order in which they happened; there is a temporal discrepancy between discourse and story which occasions FLASHBACKS (the time of the discourse is after the story) and FLASHFORWARDS (the time of the discourse is before the story). The time it takes to recount an event might be longer than the event itself (for example a description of the explosion of the present), or it might be much shorter than it actually takes the event to unfold (for example the phrase "for thousands of years, Cain and Abel had lived together in this house"). Gérard Genette (1982) has written extensively on the relationship between discourse and story. He distinguishes (in terms of "tense") between order, which is the temporal discrepancy between story and discourse; duration, which is the extension or compression of discourse time in relation to story time; and frequency, which is the number of times a particular event is recounted.

Plot is the process that falls between story and discourse. As the French term for plot, "intrigue," suggests, it is what makes the story interesting, captivating, or downright scandalous to us. First discussed by Boris Tomashevsky (1965) and reconsidered by David Bordwell (1986) as "syuzhet" and by Raphaël Baroni (2007) as "intrigue," the plot is the arrangement of story events in the discourse, which shapes the ways in which readers construct the story from discourse by delaying information or making sudden revelations. Suspense, CURIOSITY, and SURPRISE all relate back to the temporal ordering of gaps in the plot (see Sternberg 1992). Narrativity has been defined as the difference between "the cat sat on the mat" and the "cat sat on the dog's mat" by Gerald Prince (1982), and this can be specified in relation to curiosity, suspense, and surprise. If readers know that the "cat sat on the dog's mat," they are in suspense about what will happen once the dog returns. They form projections about

the future of the story, and their emotional involvement is guided by these. The mental operations of curiosity and surprise relate to gaps in the past of the story. When the dog returns to claim his mat, we might be surprised to recognize that the cat did not sit on its own mat (if the narrative left out this information) and we might be curious to find out the motivation of the cat for offending the dog (once it becomes obvious that we had insufficient information). In the example from *The Sandman*, the "dog's mat," the knot of the intrigue, is the present from Cain.

Each of the elements of the discourse of the comic's text has been put there for a reason – they all work as clues in the meaning-making process. However, they are not only there to point us towards the story, the what of narration. They pace the revelation of knowledge and they leave the readers in suspense, curiosity, and surprise. At the end of the page from *The Sandman*, readers have drawn a number of inferences concerning how the story is going to continue – they are in suspense. The final panel shows someone knocking on the door. This panel is separated from the main block of panels on the page and it is shown in a different color scheme. Visually, it represents a rupture with the previous events, and also on the level of the plot, the readers' current object of attention, the present, is replaced with a new one, the person behind the door. Now a new problem arises, new inferences emerge, the plot moves on, and a page is being turned.

Box 2.1 *Narrative Segments and Actors*

Narratology started as the endeavor to identify the basic structure of narrative, that is, the underlying features of storytelling. One set of these underlying features unfolds in time together with the narrative being told, the "narrative segments"; another set of underlying features are the agents which interact as the narrative progresses, the "narrative actors."

Regarding narrative segments, Tzvetan Todorov (1969) for example suggests that, on a very basic level, the "minimal complete plot" begins with the disturbance of an "equilibrium" and ends with its reestablishment. Narratives pose a problem and work towards its resolution. A more detailed account of narrative segments has

emerged from linguistics and the analysis of oral storytelling with William Labov's (1999) six steps of "narrative structure." According to Labov, a narrative progresses through the following segments:

(1) Abstract. A preview of the narrative and what it's about. In Figure 2.2, Cain's suggestion to tell a "children's story" serves as an abstract.
(2) Orientation. Introducing the readers into the storyworld. Abel's description of the state before the world emerges and the introduction of the main characters serve as an orientation.
(3) Complicating action. The entanglement, problem or imbalance that gets the narrative going. The fight between Cain and Abel serves as a complicating action here, as do the alternative proposals of Death and Dream.
(4) Evaluation. Explaining what the point or purpose of the story is. Cain challenges Abel to prove the point of his story.
(5) Resolution. The conflict is cleared. Abel agreeing to Dream's offer, and living on as a storyteller in the world of dreams is the resolution.
(6) Coda. A conclusion to the story.

Elements from each of the segments may be missing, or be duplicated, in a particular story, but generally, the six steps construct a complete narrative.

The Russian fairy-tale scholar Vladimir Propp (1968) has identified thirty-one basic "functions" as narrative segments in storytelling (such as interdiction, and violation of interdiction, pursuit and rescue, etc.) which configure a tale. Propp groups his functions into "spheres" around particular character types, which are involved in several of these narrative segments. Such character types are hero, villain, dispatcher, helper, princess, father, donor and false hero. Propp's character types have been developed into a set of "actants", of narrative roles which can be found in any narrative, by Algirdas Greimas (2002). Note that the same character can take up different narrative roles, or that more than one character can take up one narrative role, depending on the situation. In Figure 2.2, Death and Dream for example both offer their services as helpers to Abel, and two characters thereby assume the same narrative role.

Box 2.2 *Serialization*

Comics are often published as comic books, which limits the number of pages available for each installment. Even though their narrative, as in *The Sandman*, might run across the entirety of a series, the individual installments each form a narrative unit. In the first issue of the *Sandman* series, Dream escapes from his imprisonment in a magician's coven in England. The issue ends with Dream's liberation and him cursing the man who imprisoned him with eternal waking. The problem introduced at the beginning of the issue (Dream is imprisoned) is resolved. Events of over seventy years are condensed into one issue, in which the discourse moves back and forth in time. The next issue, "Imperfect Hosts," follows on from this, but introduces a different unit of the narrative. It starts off with Cain and Abel, two characters who have not been introduced in the series yet, and it is set in a different world. However, readers expect that the different issues are connected into a larger narrative, and they might therefore guess who is knocking on the two brothers' door – it is Dream who seeks shelter after his escape.

The second issue spans its own narrative, in which Cain and Abel help Dream to revisit his realm and find out what he needs to do in order to regain control over it. It turns out that he has to find three artifacts of power he has lost, and this quest will be the subject matter of the following issues. The first volume of *The Sandman*, "Preludes and Nocturnes," connects the narratives of the individual issues together into the larger narrative of Dream's return and regaining of his power. Serialized narratives like *The Sandman* offer plots which have a complication at the beginning and a resolution at the end, but the resolution of each installment points forward to the complication of the next installment. The individual installments connect into a larger story arc, either through the enchainment of smaller plots or through introducing new characters or different perspectives on the same events. The publication format of the comic book accounts for the narrative peculiarities of serialization which comics share with TV series and feuilleton novels like Dumas' *Three Musketeers*.

The Narrator

So far we have been talking about the clues on the page and how they engage your minds as readers. Now we should turn our attention to the other side of this communicational exchange: who puts the clues there and with what intentions? Comics are created by writers, illustrators, inkers, and letterers. In some cases, such as *The Sandman*, each of these roles is taken up by someone different. In some other cases, such as the autobiographical comics we will address in the next chapter, one person does all of these jobs. For these purposes, we can talk of an author of the comic, who might be an individual or a collective of creators. Within the narrative, however, there is also someone who tells it. This is the narrator. Look at the following double page from *The Sandman*:

Here, Abel is the narrator. In the middle of the double page, we see a close-up of Abel's face. He begins the narrative in a speech bubble: "A long time ago, long before the world you know …" This is a basic phrase to let readers know that a story begins now. The inferences are to be drawn in the framework of the new storyworld, rather than the main storyworld of the framing narrative, from here on in. For the rest of the panels, Abel's speech is inserted into a caption as he continues his story. What we see in the panels now is not Abel, but the storyworld he imagines and tells us about. Note how the style in which the world is drawn changes between the main storyworld and the storyworld of Abel's tale. His voice is not located in the space or the time of the storyworld; it is outside. Even when we see a version of Abel on the second page, his voice telling the story is not located in the same moment in time and it is therefore shown in captions. When Abel speaks in the storyworld he imagines, as in the penultimate panel, we see it as a speech bubble. Here, the different times of story and discourse are signaled through the interplay of speech bubbles and captions.

Narratologists distinguish between different kinds of narrators. I follow here the basic distinction between narrators located in the storyworld and narrators located outside of the storyworld. Genette's technical terms for these types similarly relate to "diegesis," meaning (roughly) storyworld: "HETERODIEGETIC" for narrators located outside the storyworld and "HOMODIEGETIC" for narrators in the storyworld. In the frame story of Cain and Abel in the library, we have a narrator outside of the storyworld. Somebody selects the sequence of events depicted, the image sizes and the perspective from behind the shelf, for example, but the comic does not mark out the

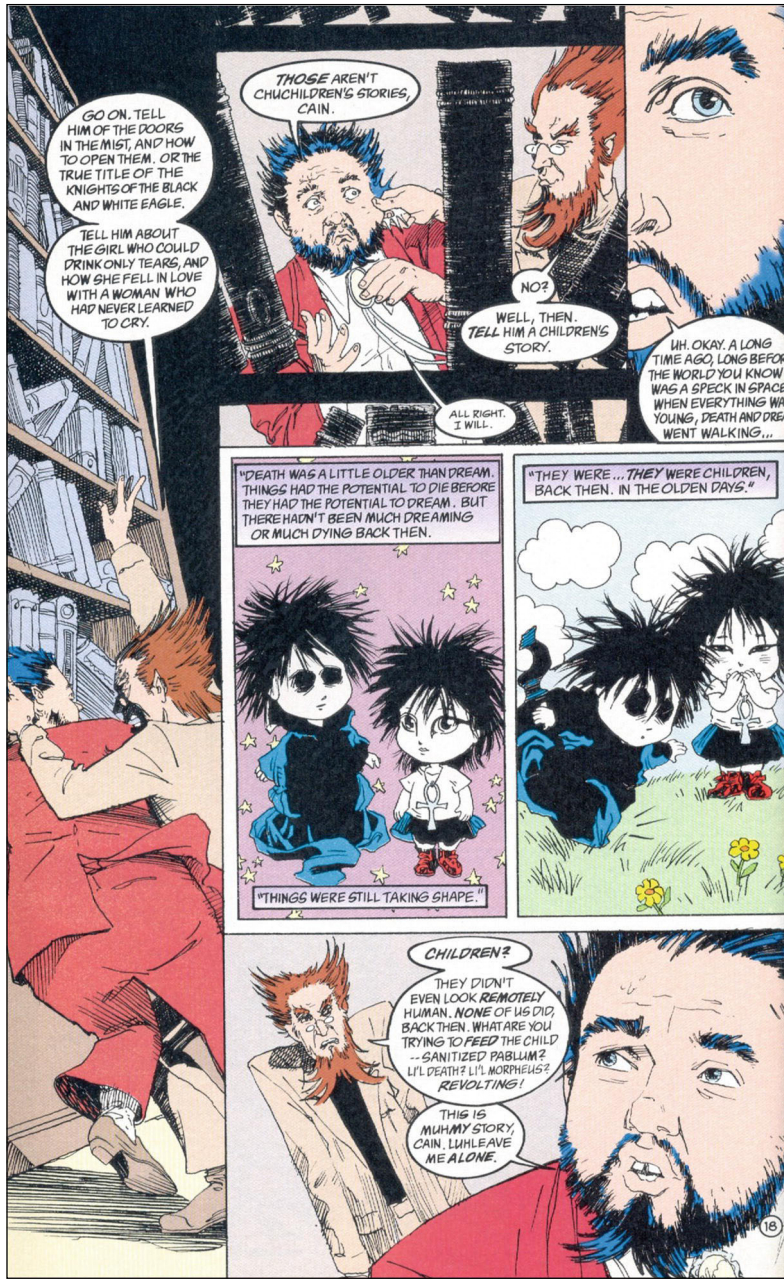

Figure 2.2 The Sandman (II). From *Sandman Vol. 6: Fables and Reflections*. © DC Comics. Used with Permission.

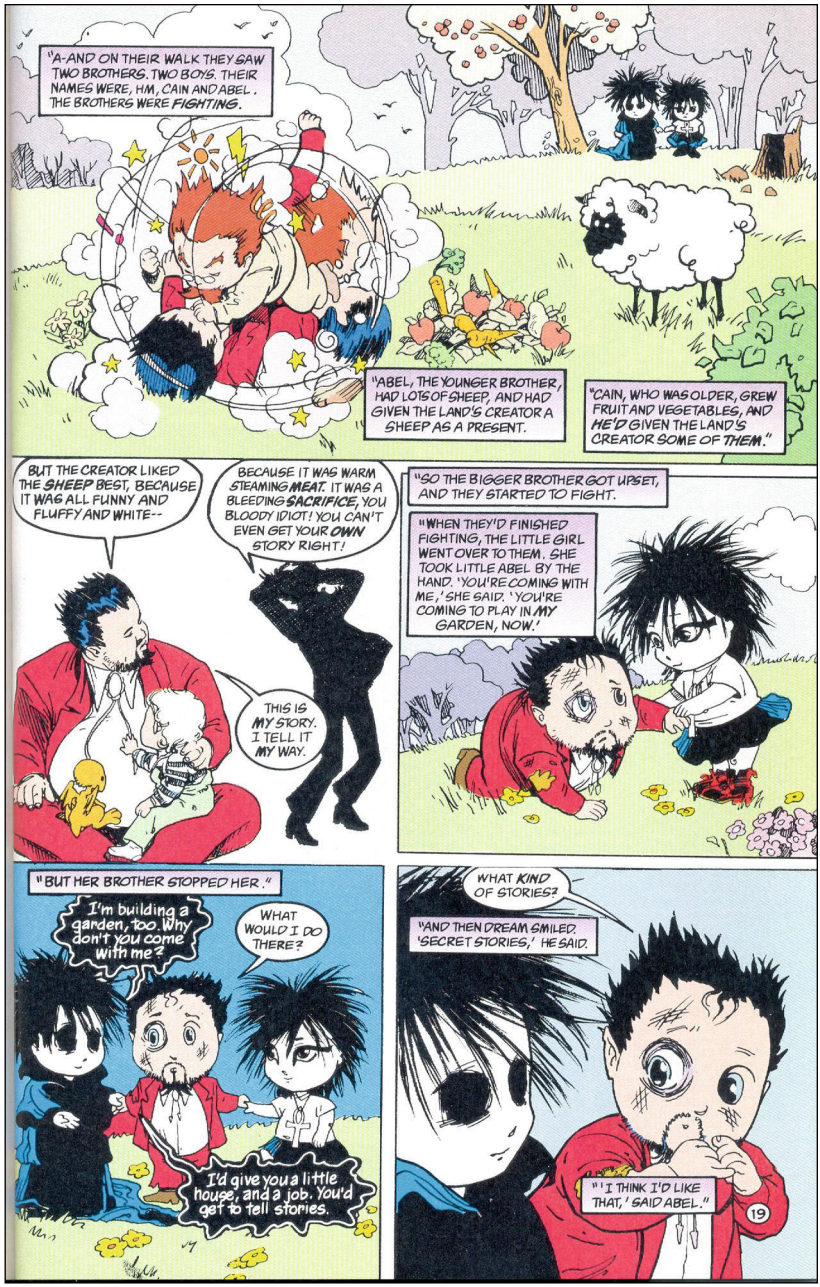

Figure 2.2 (Cont'd) The Sandman (II). From *Sandman Vol. 6: Fables and Reflections*. © DC Comics. Used with Permission.

perspective as that of a narrator and locate him/her in the storyworld. The alternative to this would be a narrator in the storyworld who tells the story from a first-person perspective. In the children's story, we have Abel as a narrator, who tells a story with himself as the main character, but he distances himself from the narrative by using the third person in the captions, and by speaking of himself as "Abel" instead of "I." Abel is a homodiegetic narrator who poses as a heterodiegetic narrator, perhaps in the convention of children's tales, perhaps in order to distance himself from the traumatic events he recounts.

Abel is a also PERSONALIZED NARRATOR, a narrator who has been introduced in some detail to the reader. This kind of narrator is common in the genre of horror comics, to which *The Sandman* refers frequently. In the classical EC horror comics (more on their historical relevance in chapter 5), there are three such narrators, the Old Witch, the Crypt Keeper and the Vault Keeper. On the following page, you see how they were used in the 1950s.

This is the final page of a story told by the Old Witch. You can read the discourse of the narrator in the captions. Up to the fourth panel, the written text does not mark whether the narrator is homo- or heterodiegetic. In the fifth panel, the pronoun "I" appears and readers know that the narrator must be located in the storyworld because she "opens a door," which has an effect on the lighting of the image. Only then, in the far right of the panel, do we see the narrator's "Heh!" in the speech bubbles, which serves as a further indicator that the narrator stands just outside the panel frame. In the last two panels, we finally see her in the storyworld, interacting with the children. From an ambiguous situation, in which we assume a heterodiegetic narrator, we (and the children) suddenly find confirmation to the suspicion that the narrator is right there in the storyworld, and this contributes to the shock and surprise ending of the story.

The Old Witch fulfills all three functions which Marie-Laure Ryan (2001) has identified for the narrator: (i) she creates the storyworld for readers (creative function); (ii) she communicates the events of the story to readers (transmissive function); (iii) she testifies to the authenticity of the story (testimonial function). The Old Witch does something more, too: she also reflects on the fact that she is the narrator of the story when she addresses the reader openly (both through her glance and through the "you" in the last panel), and when she mentions the genre and publication format the story appears in. This is called METANARRATION. Metanarration points the readers' attention to the fact that the storyworld is (i) created and (ii) communicated

Figure 2.3 Shock Suspenstories. EC logo™ and image © Wm. M. Gaines, Agent, Inc. 2012. All rights reserved.

by the narrator, and through this it threatens to undo the (iii) authenticity of the story. The Old Witch, however, places herself in her own narrative at the same time, thereby attesting to its authenticity. All the different kinds of narrators – homo- or heterodiegetic and personalized or DEPERSONALIZED NARRATOR – can be assessed through Ryan's functions of creation, transmission, and testimony.

There has been some debate as to whether, apart from personalized narrators like the Old Witch or Abel, there is a narrator in visual media like films and comics at all. As David Bordwell puts it, in a visually represented storyworld, quite often, there is "no place for the narrator to hide" (1986, 111). Indeed, in the frame story telling us about Cain and Abel, there is no ready spatial position for the narrator. The Old Witch's game of hide-and-seek in the EC comic, on the other hand, constitutes the twist of the story. She leaves her traces in the discourse until she suddenly comes to the fore. Even in the example of Abel's story, the situation is presented in a particular way, and the clues on the page guide us towards constructing it in a particular fashion. The destabilized shelf in the left-hand background points towards the dynamics of the situation, the strong change of perspective changes the pacing of the story, and the close-up on Abel's face suggest that something personal is to follow. As Bordwell proposes in his account of film narration, narration unfolds as we configure the story from the clues. For Bordwell, this means that film has a narration, but not necessarily a narrator. Indeed, the narrator is not necessarily cued as a person (like Abel and The Old Witch), but as an instance, the narrator is always implicit in the narration through the arrangement of the clues and the way this arrangement guides readers across the page. In the first example page from *The Sandman*, the narrator does not come to the fore, but the arrangement of the panels, and the gap before the final panel are clearly traces of a narrator shaping the narration.

Narration, Focalization, and Point of View

So far, we have addressed the narrator as readers' projection of the person who creates, transmits and testifies to the authenticity of the narrative. Abel as narrator also seems to create the images, and clues he presents to readers. The perspective of the images, however, is not necessarily related to a particular person's experience or spatial position. We can distinguish here between narrators, and

their narration, FOCALIZERS, and their focalization, and OBSERVERS and their point of view. In what follows, I will give a rough outline on how these three different roles can be distinguished for comics. There has been a lot of debate around narration, focalization and its overlaps, and many narratologists might disagree with my account. It is meant to be useful for a basic analysis, rather than a flawless system.

For the distinction between narration and focalization, take Abel's story in *The Sandman*: We clearly know that this is Abel's tale from the look of the images and from the way he tells his story, even though he distances himself by using the third-person pronoun. *The Sandman* presents the story through Abel's focalization. According to Gérard Genette (1982), narration refers to the voice that speaks; focalization refers to the perspective from which the narrative is recounted. As readers, we share the knowledge of the focalizer and partake in his or her experience. However, who speaks and who experiences are not necessarily the same thing. You might have a third-person depersonalized narrator, but this narrator might only present knowledge and experience that are accessible to one of the characters. You might have a first-person character narrator who tells you things which this character cannot know. Focalization is the perspective to which the text limits the knowledge we get about the storyworld.

For comics, we have a problem here – the visual perspective of the image and the narrative perspective of focalization do not always match. We see Abel acting in the images which he focalizes (see Figure 2.2). In order to account for this problem, focalization can be reconsidered in terms of "knowledge about the storyworld." The knowledge we get about the storyworld of the children's tale is limited to Abel's perspective. The images however, are presented from a neutral point of view: we see Cain and Abel fight in the foreground of the first image of the second page, but we do not ask from whose actual point of view it is shown. Still, Abel's focalization of the story is clear, as the narrative discourse talks in general terms about "fighting" and neglects to specify the brutality of the encounter and its outcome, and as the events are presented in a cute drawing style, which distracts from the murder it recounts. To reiterate, the spatial point of view of the image is usually not cued as relevant in comics. There are some cases, however, when the point of view of the image is made salient, for example through point-of-view editing (see the box on "CONTINUITY EDITING"). In these instances, the observer is cued, but comics tend not to sustain such points of view over long stretches of narrative. We will come back to the observer in the chapter on autobiographical comics.

Box 2.3 *Image Sizes and Angles*

For discussing the individual panel images and the relation between the section of the storyworld we see and its relation to the storyworld itself, it is useful to consider the vocabulary film studies have developed for image sizes and angles. By choosing a particular image size and angle, the comic presents you with a clue on how the story is to be perceived. There are four basic image sizes in film (see Figure 2.2 for reference):

- Long shot (the top panel on the second page). You see the entire scene with the characters from a distance.
- Medium long shot (the third and forth panel on the second page). It shows the acting characters in their entirety or most of their bodies.
- Medium shot (the final panel of the second page). The upper body and the hand gestures of the characters can be seen in detail; the setting becomes less relevant.
- Close up (the shot of Abel's face on the first page when he starts telling the story). Details of the object are visible and, often, the focus is on the character's facial expression.

In addition to shot sizes, you can also detect the angle of the image. Usually, this is on the level of the characters' eyes (eye-level angle). Sometimes, however, the image can be framed from a low angle (frog's eye) or from a high angle (bird's eye). The EC comic (Figure 2.3) uses a switch from low to high angle framing to underline the manifestation of the homodiegetic narrator between the fourth and fifth panel.

What is shown in a comic's image is usually carefully selected in terms of framing (image size and angle). In the last three panels of the Cain and Abel story, for example, you see first Abel with Death, the little girl, then with Dream and Death and then just with Dream. In the last panel, Death disappears. This makes sense when you consider how the selection of the shot contributes to the storytelling: at first, Death approaches Abel and offers to take him into her garden. Then Dream makes his offer, and Abel stands between Death and Dream. When Abel considers Dream's offer and is finally convinced by it, Death literally drops out of the picture.

Box 2.4 *Continuity Editing*

Films combine their individual shots in editing. Classical Hollywood Cinema has developed a style of editing which ties into our (spatial) perception so well that we get a sense of narrative continuity just from the arrangement of the shots. It is called "continuity editing." Comics often use conventions of continuity editing as well when combining panels, even though they do not create the continuous flow of film (see the section on closure in Chapter 1). The individual images in the panels present "pregnant moments" of the events. We rarely read comics images as one-to-one representations of different stages of the events, but as sets of clues for salient features of the story. Still, panels are often arranged similar to the shot sequences of film. Keeping this in mind, the terminology from film studies is useful for comics analysis as well.

Here are two of the basic conventions of continuity editing: point-of-view editing and the 180-degree rule.

Point-of-view-editing is one of the ways in which images can highlight the observer, i.e. the instance from whose spatial position an image is perceived. There are three shots involved: the first shows you who is looking, the second what he/she is seeing and the third how the onlooker reacts. Sometimes, the first shot (who is looking) is missing and this can create suspense because we sense that this is someone's point of view, but we do not know where in the storyworld it is located. Sometimes, the final shot which gives the reaction is missing.

When films show a dialogue, they usually alternate between the partners in the conversation, showing first the one and then the other. If you draw a line between the two partners in conversation, the camera tends to stay on one side of it, moving from overshoulder view to overshoulder view. This is called the 180-degree rule. In the last three panels of Figure 2.2, for example, the images show the exchange between Abel, Dream, and Death from the same line, moving from the right of the field to the center, and then on to the left. As Abel makes his decision, the vantage point of the images (what would be the camera in film), pivots around him. In the two *Sinfest* comics (Figures 1.1 and 1.4), the 180-degree rule is violated, creating the impression of a rupture in the narrative flow. If you look closely at

the relative positions of characters and consecutive positions from which the images are taken, you might find that the 180-degree rule is often violated in comics. Mostly, however, this violation is not noticed in reading comics (because we do not seem to reconstruct a "film" of the events between panels).

Narrative as Meaning-Making

We find stories not just in the fictional narratives of comics, films, and novels. In decidedly fact-based genres and media environments like journalism, history-writing, and the courtroom, stories shape our meaning-making. Stories underlie the way we communicate our experience of the world and the way our cultures make sense of their history and their present. Narrative in this capacity can be defined as a process which establishes causal connections between events, which introduces agency and intentions for characters and which suggests that there is a "point" (a term from Labov 1999) which makes the story worth telling. *The Sandman*, a long-running comics series, gives many different examples of how we create, individually and collectively, meaning through narrative patterns.

In *The Sandman* the theatrical career of William Shakespeare is reinterpreted: Shakespeare made a deal with Dream, who gives him access to the deepest dreams of mankind in exchange for two plays. The hapless young actor and playwright turns into a successful star of the Elizabethan stage. Gaiman does not simply outline the career of Shakespeare, but his narrative establishes a causal explanation for his success. As E.M. Forster observes, in the narrative kernel "the king died and then the queen died of grief," the causal connector "of grief" is the most important (2005, 87). Causality and the agency and intentions of characters are closely connected: Shakespeare wants to become a successful playwright, and he therefore strikes a deal with Dream. Dream wants to give the world some idea about his workings, he wants to impress the fairy queen Titania, and he therefore offers the deal to Shakespeare. By adding causality and agency to Shakespeare's career course, Gaiman makes these events tellable, he gives them a "point." When the pay-back becomes imminent, the story arrives at a crisis, and this is the moment when Gaiman has the narrative discourse begin.

The Sandman revisits narrative patterns throughout mythology, history, religion and popular culture, and thereby highlights that stories are everywhere in human culture. Stories are important to us as human beings, because they allow us to make meaning from the world as it presents itself to us and to communicate that meaning. As cognitive approaches to literature suggest, not

only do stories help us make sense of what has happened but also of what might happen: by imagining alternative scenarios, we can reason through problems and find solutions without having to put ourselves in danger. Narrative patterns allow us to connect events into meaningful wholes and into complexes of intentions and agency to which we can relate and which we can evaluate. Perhaps not all thinking is shaped by the causality, agency and tellability of stories, but they help us to understand and communicate what happened when, where, and why.

* * *

Comics are, generally speaking, a narrative medium – they tell stories. Their words, images, and their arrangement in sequences and page layouts create a story. This narrative unfolds from complication to resolution, between story, discourse and plot, and narrator, focalizer and observer can feature when the story is communicated to readers. When you consider the narrative of a comic, you look into the connections between the clues and the uses to which they are put. Stories can be "exhibited so as to tell themselves" as Lubbock suggests, but there is always a set of rhetorical strategies at work.

Graphic Narrative – A Basic Checklist

- ✓ Identify elements of "showing" and "telling" in the panels. How do the comic's modes of images and words contribute to these narrative activities?
- ✓ How are story and discourse related to each other? Does the discourse reorganize the order of the story events? Which story event does it begin with? Does it retell story events more than once? What is the rhetorical effect of this organization?
- ✓ What is the crucial conflict of the story? How does it find its dénouement? Can you identify the narrative segments?
- ✓ Does the narrative work with curiosity, suspense and surprise?
- ✓ What type of narrator do you have? How does the narrator deal with the creative, communicative and authenticating functions? How can you discern the rhetoric of the narrator? Where does she leave her traces? Consider images sizes, image angles, and drawing style (among other things).
- ✓ Can you identify a particular focalization in the text? Can you identify an observer and her point of view?

Note

1 With apologies to David Bordwell. 2006. *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Recommended Reading

Miller, Ann. 2007. *Reading Bande Dessinée: Critical Approaches to French Language Comic Strip*. Bristol: Intellect. Ch.6. Bande dessinée and narrative theory.

Herman, David. 2009. *Basic Elements of Narrative*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Groensteen, Thierry, 2011. *Bande dessinée et narration*. Paris: PUF.

Gardner, Jared and David Herman, eds. 2011. *Graphic Narratives and Narrative Theory*. Special issue of *SubStance* 40 1.

These accounts concern themselves specifically with the applications of narrative theory to comics and its problems.

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

Fludernik, Monika. 2006. *An Introduction to Narratology*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Herman, David. 2002. *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Three key overview works on narrative theory: Bordwell lays the foundations of a narrative theory of film (and visual media). Fludernik offers an introduction to the manifold accounts of narrative which narratology offers. Herman presents narratology from a cognitive point of view, discussing storyworlds and pointing towards the larger cultural functions of storytelling.

Branigan, Edward. 1992. *Narrative Comprehension and Film*. London: Routledge.

Genette, Gérard. 1982. *Figures of Literary Discourse*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Horstkotte, Silke and Nancy Pedri. 2011. "Focalisation in Graphic Narratives." *Narrative*, 19.3: 330–57.

Mikkonen, Kai. 2008. "Presenting Minds in Graphic Narratives." *Partial Answers*, 6.2: 301–21.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. 2001. "The Narratorial Functions: Breaking Down a Theoretical Primitive." *Narrative*, 9: 146–52.

Sternberg, Meir. 1992. "Telling in Time (II): Chronology, Teleology, Narrativity." *Poetics Today*, 13.3: 463–541.

Labov, William. 1999. "The Transformation of Experience in Narrative." In *The Discourse Reader*, edited by Adam Jaworski and Nicolas Coupland, 221–35. London: Routledge, 1999.

Barthes, Roland. 1984. "The Rhetoric of the Image." In *Image – Music – Text*, 32–51. London: Fontana.

These books and articles outline different aspects of narrative, and narrative and comics. Branigan, Genette, Horstkotte and Pedri as well as Mikkonen tackle the issue of focalization. Ryan addresses the function of the narrator. Sternberg looks into surprise, curiosity, and suspense (in the third section of his paper), Labov outlines six steps in narrative sequence, and Barthes talks about the different relations between images and words in meaning-making.

Bordwell, David. 1988. "The Classical Hollywood Style, 1917–1960." In *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*, edited by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, 1–84. London: Routledge.

David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson. 2004. *Film Art: An Introduction*. 7th edition. Boston: McGraw Hill.

Bordwell's section on "Continuity Editing" offers an introduction to the topic from a cognitive perspective. *Film Art* introduces technical terms from film, such as shot sizes and angles.

H. Porter Abbott. 2008. *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*. 2nd edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Abbott's introduction discusses in detail the social relevance of narrative and its importance in meaning-making outside fiction.

References

Baroni, Raphaël. 2007. *La Tension Narrative: Suspense, Curiosité et Surprise*. Paris: Seuil.

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Sternberg, Meir. 1992. "Telling in Time (II): Chronology, Teleology, Narrativity." *Poetics Today*, 13.3: 463–541.

Todorov, Tzvetan. 1969. "Structural Analysis of Narrative." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 3.1: 70–6.

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Comics Discussed

Gaiman, Neil. 1995. *The Sandman 1: Preludes and Nocturnes*. Illustrated by Sam Keith, Mike Dringenberg and Malcolm Jones III. New York: DC Comics.

Gaiman, Neil. 1993. *The Sandman 3: Fables and Reflections*. Illustrated by Jill Thomson et al. New York: DC Comics.

Ingels, Graham. 2006 (1953). "Sugar'N Spice 'N …." *Shock Suspenstories*. Vol. 1 Issues 1–6, 205–211. Timonium: Gemstone Publishing.

Class Activity 2: Tall Tales

Take the first feature or capacity you can think of, either mental or physical. Imagine this feature or capacity in terms of a superpower, amplifying its scope or force. Now identify the uses this superpower can be put to in an encounter between characters. What could be the larger plot complications this feature gives rise to? How can they be resolved? How can you implement suspense, surprise, and curiosity in your narrative? Can you think of any particular use of narrator, focalizer, or observer to render your tall tale more interesting or more intensely felt by the reader? Outline your narrative in bullet points, discuss it with other members of your group and present your "tall tale" in class.

Writing Assignment 2

Take a short comics sequence (2–3 pages). Identify the narrator, the point of view of the images and the focalization from which the story is told. Identify the relation between the discourse and the story, as well as the points at which the plot is complicated and at which it is resolved, and how clues (like size and perspective of images, as well as panel combinations) contribute to the build-up of suspense, curiosity, or surprise in the plot. Write about 300–500 words.

Essay Question 2

Story, Myth and History in The Sandman

We have talked about *The Sandman* in terms of narrative as a means of cultural meaning-making in the final section of this chapter. Consider on a broader scale how the series uses this function of narrative, when it retells stories familiar from myth and history. What different traditions can you distinguish? How does the series change these stories? How does it combine them into its own, larger narrative? How does this relate to the general features of meaning-making through storytelling?

Consider both the stories themselves (such as Orpheus' tale) and their modes of storytelling and genre (such as the multiple narratives of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* or tragedy in *The Kindly Ones*).