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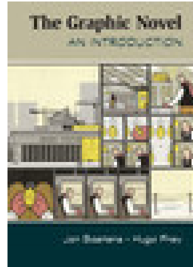

The Graphic Novel

An Introduction

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Book DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139177849

Online ISBN: 9781139177849

Hardback ISBN: 9781107025233

Paperback ISBN: 9781107655768

Chapter

5 - Understanding Panel and Page Layouts pp. 103-133

Chapter DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139177849.007

Cambridge University Press

5 Understanding Panel and Page Layouts

What are the basic formal aspects of the graphic novel, and how do we suggest one can read them for critical purposes? Rather than answering these questions by listing the features that we consider essential, we offer here and in the subsequent chapter some reflections on three fields of interest that are a necessary and an inevitable part of any graphic novel: the organization of the drawings in multipanel pages, issues of word-image combination, and questions of style. These three chosen areas have the advantage of being connected in one way or another to the narrative dimension of the graphic novel that is always, even in its nonmainstream forms, a crucial aspect of any work.

Any productive discussion of the medium can begin with understanding one of its vital and most fascinating properties: panel and page layout. As we explain below, this aspect has received extensive critical attention from scholars working on American and European comics and graphic novels, with Benoît Peeters, Thierry Groensteen, and Charles Hatfield making important contributions.[1] Here we present their approaches and discuss them with reference to notable examples such as Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*. Gradually we will move to offer a synthetic conception drawing

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on the existing theorizations that is weighted to neither privilege production nor reader reception.

Page and panel composition

As we all know, every picture tells a story, and there does exist something as simple as a single-frame narrative, not only in narrative painting or narrative photography,[2] but also in cartooning. *Dennis the Menace* is a good example of little stories told in just one captioned panel. However, the kind of narratives that we will discuss here are multiframe narratives; a graphic novel is basically conceived of as a story told by a multiplicity of panels, even if this *a priori* does not entail that a panel must contain more than one image. Many graphic novels that do not question the formal structures of the medium fundamentally do include pages or even double pages with no more than one drawing, as happens, for instance, in Bechdel's *Fun Home* at the moment of the postmortem discovery of Bechdel's father's "illicit photographs" (pp. 100–101). There the usual grid form page layout is interrupted, and what pops up is a double spread made of one panel covering all the available space, including the margins of the book. Other graphic novelists make a more systematic use of this technique, such as Frank Miller in *300* or the avant-garde graphic novelist Martin Vaughn-James in *The Cage*. And let's not forget that several of the historical forerunners of the contemporary graphic novel used this system as a kind of default option: we find it in the wordless woodcut novel, as well as in the first weekly plates of Outcault's *Hogan's Alley* (featuring the Yellow Kid) and the engraving series by William Hogarth such as *A Harlot's Progress* (1732), often mentioned in surveys of the medium. All these examples are not single-frame narratives but rather multiple-frame narratives presenting single-frame segments, which is, of course, something completely different.

How then are the panels of a graphic novel organized? In general, and regardless of any detailed discussion of their context (see below), one can argue that this organization includes and combines three levels or layers:

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- the strip or tier, which can be organized in different ways (horizontally, vertically, or a combination of both);
- the page, which can have a wide variety of sizes and formats (it can be the last page of a newspaper, as in the Sunday comics supplement, but it can also be the page of a small comic book or the A4 page of a BD magazine); and
- the book (the book not just as a compilation of pages but as a three-dimensional object, including aspects such as its dust jacket and spine), and here also size and format can diverge widely, from the small pocket book format of Frans Masereel's wordless graphic novels to the giant format of Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*, a book whose pages are as thick as the coverboards of a hardback.

Two special cases have to be added:

- first, web comics and digital graphic novels, and
- second, the insertion of graphic novel-inspired drawings in "beyond the book" installations, where the graphic novel itself becomes part of a different artistic practice closer to public architecture or installation art (these are a dimension that we will not deal with in any detail in this study[3])

These basic distinctions coincide partially with the distinctions among newspaper narratives, weeklies and magazines, and books. They may even suggest an historical evolution, from tier to page to book, although this is more doubtful; even in the nineteenth century, Rodolphe Töpffer issued his work in the form of the book.

Why is the description in terms of strip/page/book then not sufficient? Two reasons come to mind. The first has to do with the fact that the contact between the frames can, at each of the three levels distinguished above, be just sequential (one reads first this and then that, even if the order between these two panels is not necessarily chronological[4]) or more like a single picture than a sequence (as the many "checkerboard" pages of *Watchmen* make immediately clear: the rows and panels

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of these pages are meant to be read both one next to another and all at once, in order to highlight the underlying grid). Sequential organization is necessary, given the basic need of putting images next to one another in order to keep the story going. Nonsequential reading is inevitable, given the impossibility for the human eye to separate the panel from the page. In other words, the sequential structure of the images is made more complex by a second type of organization, which some scholars call "tabular" (Fresnault-Deruelle),[5] but which can be called perhaps more cautiously "translinear" (Thierry Groensteen, who has most convincingly written to establish the importance of this dimension, uses the metaphor of "braiding"). At the level of the page, the reader notices that there is in the checkerboard pages of *Watchmen* (and many other examples we will analyze later) a more generalized use of these tabular/translinear elements. We notice, for instance, an attempt to achieve a certain kind of chromatic balance or a certain kind of alternation of action and stasis. These elements are not incompatible at all with sequentiality; rather they are intermingled with it, and both enrich each other.

There is, however, a second reason, on top of the inherent tension between linear and nonlinear uses of the frame organization, to try to exceed the initial triad of strip/page/book. This reason has to do with the fact that the relationship between image and "level" (strip/page/book) is never fixed and definitive. First of all, most graphic novels are not published in one single format but instead have an editorial trajectory that engenders shifting relationships between the unit (the image or the panel) and the whole (strip/page/book). In many cases, graphic novels are serialized before they are printed in book form, if they ever are (and with Porter Abbott,[6] we have to admit that certain stories have no endings, since they can continue eternally, at least long as there is a public that is interested in them; for instance, Frank King's soap opera strip *Gasoline Alley* has continued for numerous decades). Many authors – Hergé is a good example, and Chris Ware no less so – develop all kinds of strategies to make their work function at various levels (that is, in various editorial contexts such as installments as well as books). Second, the publication business of the graphic novel is such that between two editions, formats

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can change quite dramatically. A simple example of this is the reprint in one volume of the original four books of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*: the reading of the translinear effects is inevitably different because the page length is different (far longer in the single edition). And the same applies to, for instance, reissues in pocket book form that alter, and often destroy, the original page layout. But even if the modern publisher tries to respect as much as possible the original layout, the results are not always successful. Take, for instance, the book version of Milton Caniff's *Terry and the Pirates*. This adventure strip from the 1940s, which can be read as a primitive form of graphic novel, was not supposed to be reprinted in book format; it was meant in the first place to be an exciting installment narrative, and therefore Caniff repeatedly employed cliffhangers at the opening of each new daily strip. The book version publication makes this device appear odd and tiresomely repetitive. Here, it is harmful to the immersive reading experience of the new reader.

Much more than the novel, here then is the graphic novel differential. Marjorie Perloff describes the migration of literary works in the multimedia environment of cyberculture: "[Differential texts are] texts that exist in different material forms, with no single version being the definitive one."[7] Novels and graphic novels, as well as films, games, oral histories, and so on, merge increasingly in one global novelistic continuum – a subfield of the all-encompassing field of narrative. Differentialization of the graphic novel can be easily observed and, as we suggested above, has been a long-standing feature in a field where relationships between image and page have been subject to variation because of differing and multiple publication venues.

Some fundamental taxonomies

Following Fresnault-Deruelle's pioneering discussion of linearity versus tabularity, there have been many attempts to further describe the relationships between image and strip/page/book. Here we first present and discuss the two most important "formal" descriptions, the one given by Benoît Peeters in "Four Conceptions of the Page"[8] and the one given

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by Thierry Groensteen in his book *System of Comics*, which we illustrate with North American examples, since most works studied by these authors are European. Then we compare this still rather formal reading method with the more reader-oriented vision advocated by Charles Hatfield in *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*. Finally we propose an integrated approach in order to give a more complete analysis of the dialectic relationship between the image and the "rest."

In "Four Conceptions of the Page," probably the most important theoretical contribution to the discussion on page layout in comics and graphic novels, Benoît Peeters rejects any purely formalist analysis of the division of the page, articulating a taxonomy based on the various relationships between two basic elements: narrative (the graphic novel as storytelling device) and composition (the graphic novel as a device for the production of images, visual patterns, and spatial forms). For Peeters, either form can be dominant (at the automatic expense of the other: the more we follow the story, the less we notice the visual components of the panels and vice versa), and the connection between narrative and composition can be either autonomous (in that case, there is no direct interaction between both dimensions) or interdependent (in that case, both dimensions will influence each other). Thanks to these elementary principles, Peeters can then distinguish between four modes of panel utilization:

	Narrative/ Composition: Autonomy	Narrative/ Composition: Interdependence
Narrative: dominant	*Conventional use*	*Rhetorical use*
Composition: dominant	*Decorative use*	*Productive use*

But what is meant by these modes, which have the double advantage of being both very simple (and the simpler a system and its components, the more elegant and user-friendly it is) and universal (in principle all possible kinds of panels and page utilizations fall into one of these four modes)? The *conventional* mode (which may also be called the "regular" mode) is based upon the systematic repetition of the same structure and

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form of tiers and panels, independent of any content, style, or author; the same panel or the same tier is repeated over and over again, tier after tier, page after page, book after book. This system has no visual or pictorial ambition; storytelling is the dominating mode, and since the grid (for all conventional types are variations on this figure) always preexists any possible content, the relationship between the two dimensions is one of independence. In such a conventional mode, the panels are not necessarily always the same (for instance, a tier may be composed of one larger and three smaller panels), but what counts is the fact that the tier structure (in the newspaper strips) or the page structure (in Sunday strips, magazines, albums, and books when the basic unit is no longer the tier but the page) remains always the same. Examples of this are numerous: most pages of *Watchmen*, various short stories of Adrian Tomine's *Sleepwalk*, and most pages in abstract comics often have a strong preference for the gridlike character of this layout type. As Peeters observes, it would be a mistake to believe that this model is typically "primitive," in the two senses of the words. First, it does not belong exclusively to the early years of comics, but is used in all periods of the medium (the graphic novel, for instance, proves extremely sympathetic to this form). Second, regularity does not mean lack of sophistication, as is well known by all readers of *Watchmen*, which sticks closely to this model. An appealing example is also given by Simon Grennan's adaptation of Anthony Trollope's *John Caldigate* (1879), a work-in-progress that is to be published on the occasion of the 2015 Trollope bicentenary. Aiming at drawing the reader into an experience of the nineteenth century, the graphic novelist has adopted a number of narrative rules that cleverly match his decision to adopt a conventional page layout, with a simple grid composed of three identical tiers, each of them aligning two identical images. What may seem at first sight a rather uneventful decision becomes dramatically meaningful and efficient once linked with the key narrative rules of the book, which show only a very limited range of distances between viewer and scene, while only representing whole actions, not divisions of actions, and following throughout the whole adaptation a waltzlike rhythm in its narrative kernels. Thus the narrative motivation of the elementary grid appears very

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powerful. The recurring six-image page layout helps install a three-time rhythm. It enhances the representation of a whole action (each sequence of six panels coincides with a separate part of the overall story). This perfect match of page structure and repetition of distance between reader and character makes it possible for the former to become part of the represented world of the latter, reinforcing the readerly involvement in the story world. The reader of this graphic novel adaptation feels that there is "room" for him or for her in the development of the story (the reader can become a kind of silently present witness), and he or she also realizes that there is time to find his or her place in this world (the repetition of a number of narrative and visual features guarantees that the reader, during the act of reading, is really invited to join the fictional universe of the characters). (See Illustration 5.a.)

The second mode, the *decorative* use of the page, emphasizes the visual properties of the layout, independent of any given content. The artist creates first a new and idiosyncratic page organization that is then filled in with content. The narrator is in the first place someone who treats the page as a painterly canvas, and the ideal decorative use of the panel structure implies the desire to modify the visual composition in each new page. Well-known examples of this include *The Plot Thickens* (1980) by Bill Griffith, in which each new row shrinks (vertically) while adding a supplementary panel. Just as with the conventional mode, decorative panel structures can be found in all periods; comics historians will not hesitate in reminding us of the decorative use of the page in Outcault's *Hogan's Alley*, the forerunner of what is considered the first newspaper strip with a real impact on the field, *The Yellow Kid*. It should, however, not come as a surprise that this is certainly *not* the most frequently used format in the graphic novel, given precisely the dominant position of narrative in this form of drawn literature (when the graphic novel experiments with forms of abstraction when treating

Opposite page: 5.a. A match of three-time rhythm and six-panel grid: sample page from Simon Grennan's adaptation of A. Trollope's novel *John Caldigate*, to be published with Jonathan Cape in 2015. Used by kind permission of the artist.

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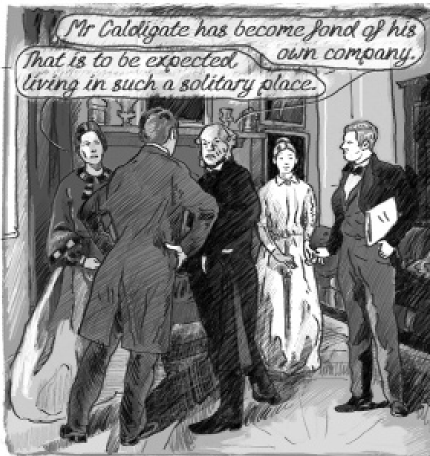

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narrative content and related issues, as we study in Chapter 6, the situation changes dramatically).

The third mode, the *rhetorical* use of the panel/page structure, is the most widespread. As Peeters notes: "The panel and the page are no longer autonomous elements; they are subordinated to a narrative which their primary function is to serve. The size of the images, their distribution, the general pace of the page, all must come to support the narration." Here, it is the narrative that preexists and that informs, selects, and shapes the panel and page structure that helps best convey the narrative meaning of the work. Examples are numerous. Thus, one can turn to Julie Doucet's *My New York Diary*, where the small departures from the underlying grid system give a maximal impact to the variations in panel size, or Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, where a comparable mechanism of small but meaningful variations on a basic pattern is followed throughout the whole work.

As equally observed by Peeters, the rhetorical use of page layout does not concern only the size and form of the panels. No less important is the place of the panels on the page, or even on the double page (in the case of a cliffhanger, for instance, a traditional, if not overused, aspect of multipage visual storytelling is the difference between left and right, which is crucial: certain effects can be destroyed if the cliffhanger is placed at the bottom right of the left page). This importance of place, which is a compositional element, indicates how relative the dominant position of the narrative always remains, even in works where storytelling is definitely the leading dimension. We might add briefly that for students working on graphic novels, this approach – and the thinking that lies behind it – represents almost a natural way into achieving a critical reading. This is because it allows one to write about content and form and to map a relationship between the two. For example, although going beyond page layouts as a formal issue, this is essentially the way that one of us explored the work Yvan Alagbé in a recent essay for *Yale French Studies*.[9] Of course, that is not to say that all graphic novels are open to this approach, but it is a very good starting point since it connects narrative with form.

The fourth and last mode, the *productive* use of panel structure and page layout, is not only dominant (as in the decorative mode), but it even

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produces the story itself. As Peeters suggests: "[I]t is the organization of the page which seems to dictate the narrative. A particular arrangement generates a piece of narration." It is, in other words, as if the form of the page structure helped the author invent a story that appears to be the consequence of a preexistent formal structure. Since this type may be less familiar to the reader, we will not just quote some examples but also give a brief analysis of a famous occurrence, namely the cover of *In the Shadow of No Towers*. (See Illustration 5.b.)

An illustrated cover normally includes two elements: an image (which can be full page) and a certain number of written or printed paratextual units, most often horizontally reproduced (the paratext, as later examples will specify in more detail, refers to the written and visual elements that present and accompany a work on the cover of a book and its first and last pages). Spiegelman does not break these rules, he transforms them, first by reducing the image to a gigantic but barely visible black on black image (the two towers are more haptically than optically present: they become palpable through the partial plastification of the cover, which leaves the background unplastified), and second by not compensating the quasi-absence of the image in this unusually large book with the help of a more prominently visible paratext (the title of the book and the name of the author, both in white, are dwarfed by the rest of the page). The great tension between black and white, great and small, vertical and horizontal, constructs a third element, the central box with color in the upper center of the page. This element has a typically intermedial status, for it combines elements of image and text: the former determines its iconic content, while the latter suggests that the sequencing of the small characters can be the structural equivalent of the letters of a word, or the words of a sentence. Whatever the interpretation of this intermediate solution may be (image or text), it is for many obvious reasons the central element of the composition, and it is on this fragment that analysis must concentrate.[10]

The horizontal presentation of the color image, stressed by its frame as well as by the sequencing of its components, is a layout element that can be endowed with a productive meaning, in the sense of Benoît Peeters, for it brings to life an alternative vision of the basic iconic

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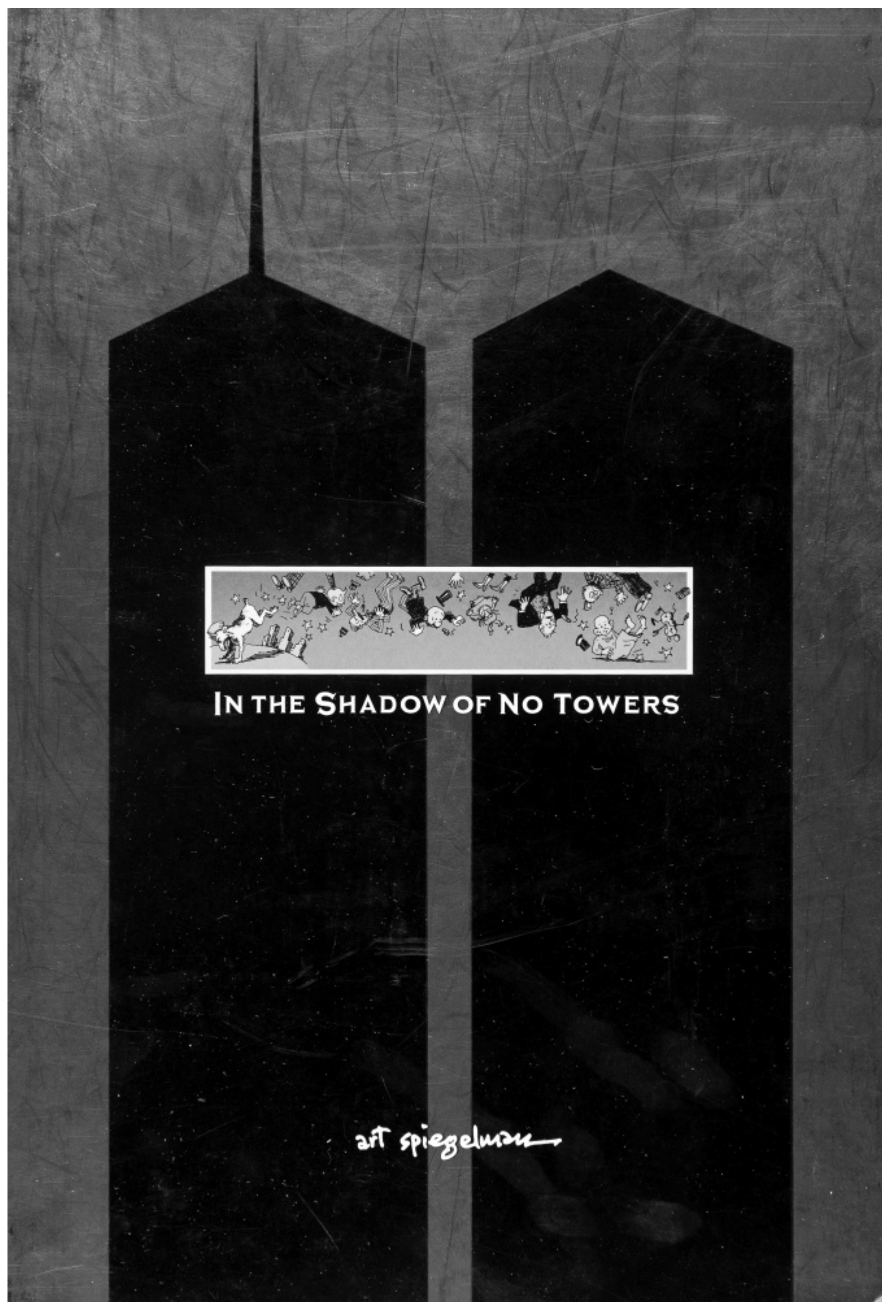

5.b. Spiegelman's cover is one example of the "productive" page: an aesthetic that creates narration. Book cover, copyright © 2004 by Pantheon Books, an imprint of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Random House LLC; from *In The Shadow of No Towers* by Art Spiegelman. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, an imprint of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

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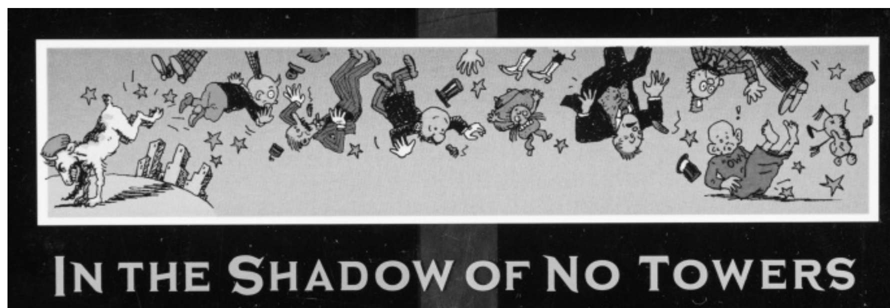

5.b. (*continued*)

figure behind the whole scene. First, the clash between extremes (black and white, horizontal and vertical, reality and representation) engenders a leap into what may appear the absolute opposite of the 9/11 attacks: no facts, but fiction, and no Great Tragedy, but "low" pop culture fun and entertainment in full color. Second, the reduced scale of the image helps bring about the creative tension between small and great: the little space that is available is not taken by one big figure, but by a string of minuscule comics characters, who are then seemingly blown away into outer space. Third, the idea of collapsing, of tumbling down, generates the opposite vision of falling down, as a kind of horizontal translation: the parade of comics characters that is blasted away by the donkey on the left (a sardonic hybridization of the Democrat donkey, the symbol of one of the two leading parties in the United States, and an Arab-looking figure that stands for Osama Bin Laden[11]) does not fall downwards, but laterally. Fourth, instead of having one person falling (and how not to be reminded of the tragic icon of the fallen angel/falling man that has been used and reused countless times after 9/11?), Spiegelman's image displays a procession or parade in which each character represents one of the successive moments of one continuous movement; the effect of such a treatment tends to minimize the impact of the fall, since there is no character who really falls from the beginning till the end – an attenuation of the tragic events that the book will link partly to the healing aspects of the medium itself, namely the newspaper cartoons that constituted, if not created, a feeling of permanence and continuity in the wake of the terror attack.[12] Finally, the manipulation of the cover elements appears

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also as an announcement of the material transformation that the inside of the book will reveal to us: in order to read the second part of the book, we will have to turn it, not upside down, but 90 degrees, and this "revolution" (in the etymological sense of the word) is the logical marker of a world in which the difference between horizontality and verticality, between walking and falling, is no longer assured. In all these ways the layout of the cover encourages the reader to read the work through its visual properties, the aesthetics taking on a narrative power.

Another example of productive page layout is given by *Nogegon*,[13] the dystopian reflection on the perfect universe by François and Luc Schuiten, the former the usual partner of writer Benoît Peeters,[14] the latter an eco-critical architect and occasional graphic novelist himself. The word "Nogegon" is a palindrome, meaning that it can be read backwards as well as forwards, and as such it is the perfect symbol of the planet and the political system to which it refers: a world totally dominated by the symmetry principle, with no room whatsoever for what disrupts that kind of preestablished harmony (Illustrations 5.c and 5.d). *Nogegon* is the story of someone who rebels against that rule, preferring surprise and creativity to the cold and sterile beauty of absolute duplication. The productive page layout of the book is in (instable) harmony with the law of the universe that it foregrounds. Thus, each page is mirrored by another symmetrical page, and the same applies to the drawings within the frames. Since the layout is not decorative but productive, the content of the book – that is, the actions, positions, attitudes, and gestures of the characters as well as the visual characteristics of setting and backdrop – are elaborated in such a way that they follow the general rule of symmetrical reflection: if, for instance, on a given page we find a character descending a staircase, we will see the same character reappear on the symmetrical page going up a similar staircase, and so on. However, the repetition is never complete or mechanical, and it is in the small gaps and mismatches between the repeated panels and pages that Luc and François Schuiten suggest a visual equivalent of what happens at story level, where the heroine of *Nogegon* decides one day to no longer embrace the official ideal of the beautiful yet frightening symmetrical life.

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The productive use is not the monopoly of avant-garde artists, although it cannot be denied that this mode seems to have, contrary to the rhetorical mode that dominates in classic visual storytelling, some family resemblance with a kind of storytelling that aims at questioning the stuck and uneventful domination of narrative and opening new ways of working with medium-specificity. Despite that, the productive use remains quite rare, at least in works that succeed in finding their way to a larger audience. The history of comics is strewn with examples of artists having used the medium in a tremendously productive way, without managing to survive in the market,[15] and to a certain extent the same might be true of the graphic novel, where examples of productive page layouts remain relatively rare – or rarely noticed – perhaps due to the concentration of this kind of layout in more avant-garde work such as Art Spiegelman's *Breakdowns* (see, for instance, the short story "A Day at the Races").

Peeters's article, first published in French in 1983 (the moment when comics theory had trouble in finding a second wind, after the first attempts to found a semiotically and very formally inspired scholarly theory of comics), gradually has become one of the most influential and important in the field. The author, who had always stressed the necessity of using his system in an open and nondoctrinarian way, has updated and nuanced it in many ways (it is the latest version that is now available in English), and it may be useful to remember some of Peeters's own caveats. First, it should be noted that the four categories are not always mutually exclusive: if, in most cases, it is clear whether a certain panel structure belongs to one of the four modes, in other cases, it is perfectly possible that it obeys or illustrates more than just one. A good example is *Watchmen*, more specifically the famous chapter V ("Fearful Symmetries"), which ought to be read in at least two perspectives. On the one hand, Gibbons and Moore stretch to its limits the classic conventional or regular use of the page; on the other hand, this chapter, which is based on the multiplication of mirror effects made possible by the checkerboard use of the 3 x 3 basic grid of the page as well as by the mirror effects between the left and right page (and, at an even larger level, between the various pages of the chapter), is also an example of the

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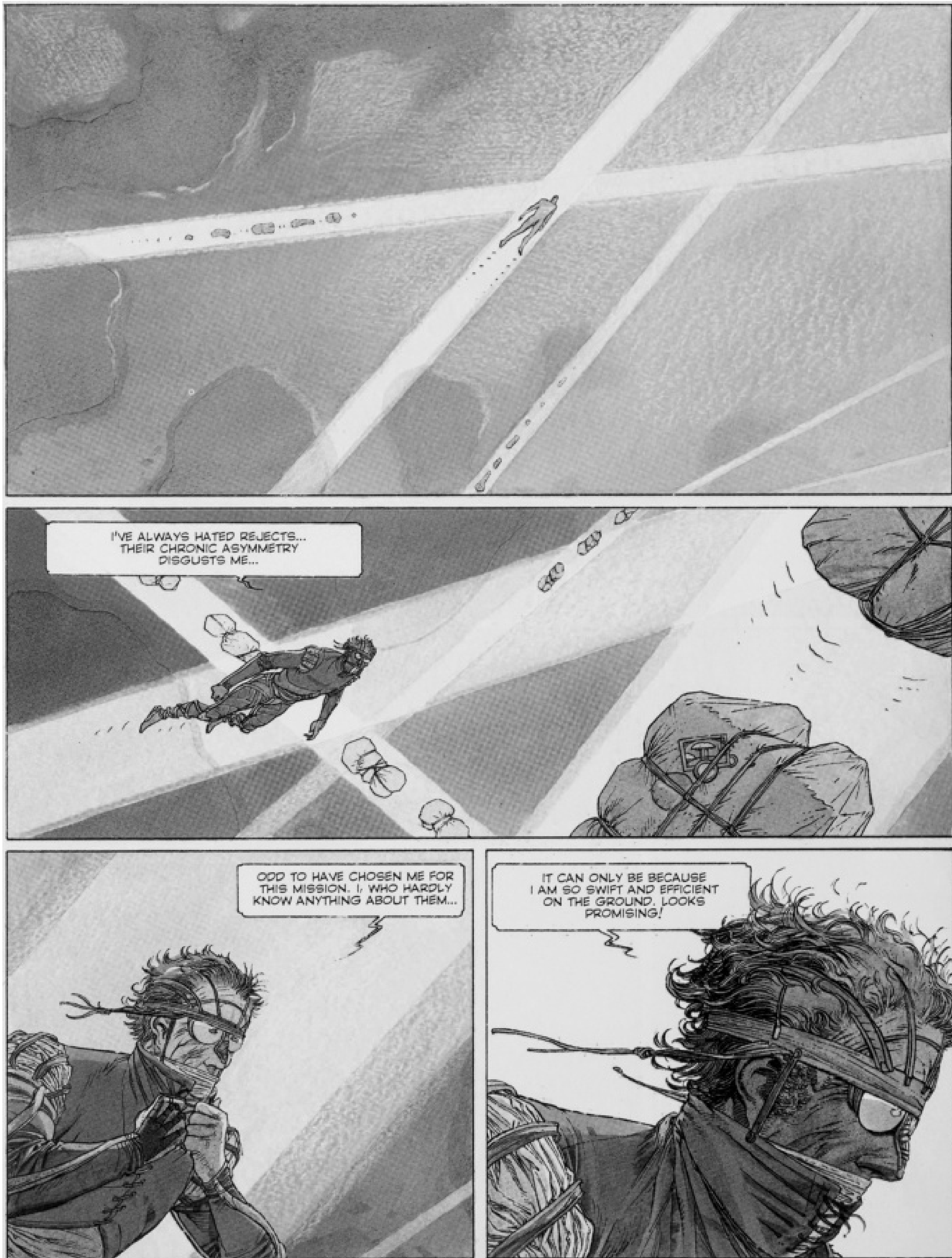

5.c and 5.d. An example of visual palindrome: the opening and closing pages of Luc and François Schuiten, *Nogegon* (London: Humanoïdes Publ., 2001; original French publication 1990). Used by kind permission of the artists.

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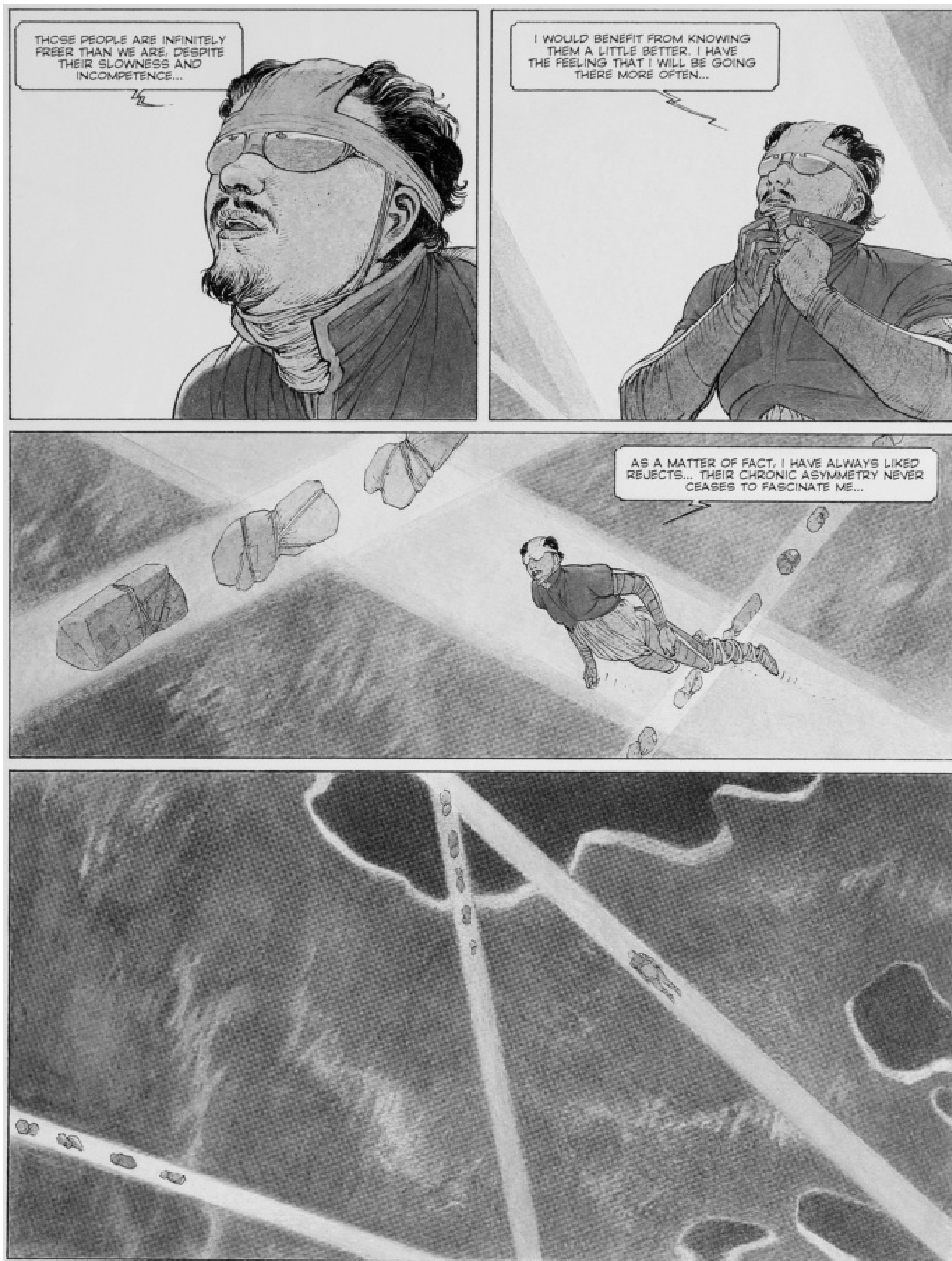

5.c and 5.d. (*continued*)

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productive use of panel division and page organization, since in many cases the narrative content is unmistakably the diegetic interpretation of the underlying formal grid.[16]

It is also noteworthy that Peeters refuses any reading of his system in terms of value judgment. For him, the conventional use of the page layout is no less valuable than the apparently more exciting cases of productive use. The latter can degenerate into a formula as well, whereas the former is perfectly capable of being a springboard for hugely original and daring experiments, as the *Watchmen* example again shows, as do many other cases from the graphic novel domain. Just as it is not possible to link panel structure and page layout to specific forms of the host medium (one finds examples of all types in newspaper strips, Sunday strips, and albums or books) or to a certain period of the medium's history (as shown by the presence of all Peeters's types since the early years of comics, as well as since the emergence of the graphic novel), it is not advisable to interpret the modes of the taxonomy in terms of inherent virtues or shortcomings. Peeters also admits that in several cases it is not always easy to distinguish between certain uses. For example, regular grids may have a productive utilization, as in Peeters's own graphic novel *Fever in Urbicand* (1985), where the central motif of the cube and the subsequent storyline on modern urbanism are clearly derived from the 3 x 2 grid layout. Obviously, the borderlines between rhetorical and productive works can be blurred and open to multiple interpretations.

Moreover, Peeters has not ceased repeating that his method, although universal for all works that have clearly marked panel structures, does not cover the whole field of possible relationships between narrative and composition. Thus he has acknowledged the specific, yet not therefore exceptional, position of authors and works that tend to avoid clearly defined or clearly edged panels, which leads them to do away with the borders between their frames. In certain cases, such a decision may add to the efficiency of a certain type (and this is how Peeters tends to read Will Eisner's use of the borderless panels in many of his graphic novels).[17] In other cases, it may blur the boundaries between types and produce a stronger reader involvement in the deciphering of the type or types

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used by the artist, clearing the ground for a polyphonic reading of the page layout (this is probably what happens in more experimental, if not abstract, graphic novels in which the reader does have to find his or her own way, as parodied in some of Art Spiegelman's *Breakdowns*, where the use of arrows to indicate the reading path to be followed from one panel to another is clearly in mock conflict with the necessity of combining various reading paths within the same page). Moreover, Peeters underscores as well the growing importance of the "third dimension" in layout questions. With the transition from comics to graphic novels, the importance of the book as a host medium and the systematic and innovative occupation of both its paratext[18] as well as the transformation of the work into a sculpted object (i.e., no longer as the gluing or stitching together of pages, but as a 3-D object with its own density and characteristics) are features that have come strongly to the fore, most exemplarily in the work of Chris Ware, to whom Peeters has devoted various essays and a book.[19]

Finally, it should be repeated that Peeters does not pay particular attention to an issue that is a "must" in most other page layout theories, but whose significance may be a little overstressed: the gaps between images and the transitions from one panel to another. A lot has been written on the role of the gutter (in more technical terms, the "intericonic space" between panels), and the exceptional place that the gutter occupies in graphic novel theory and criticism is symptomatic of an aspect of the medium's specificity.[20] Of course, the very fact that so many authors devote so much space to the gutter in their discussions of the graphic novel's visual language cannot be set aside as a detail. At the same time however, its importance may also have been inflated. Don't forget that most gutters go completely unnoticed, their role and meaning being no more significant than the (true or "invisible") white space or gap between two successive sentences in a literary text. Our position in this book is more cautious. On the one hand, it is necessary to stipulate that the diegetic function of the gutter can vary widely: in certain cases, it may be utterly unremarkable (in the two meanings of the words: *unnoticed* and also *not worth noticing*); in other cases, its role can be paramount (and of course, the

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same remark applies to the visual, pictorial function of the gutter, which is by all means a key aspect of page composition). It would be a mistake, however, to infer from this primary distinction that only "remarkable" gutters are structurally meaningful. It should be the concrete work, the concrete page, the concrete panel transition that signifies whether a certain treatment of the gutter fits best the needs of the sequence, the page, and the work as a whole. It is, on the one hand, not necessary at all that an essential event always takes place within two panels or that the space of the gutter is actively exploited as the virtual off-space of what is shown in the panels themselves. On the other hand, it is indeed advisable that the gutter does not merely copy or duplicate the shift that occurs between the images (or that, on the contrary, does not occur at all, if the panel's sequence presents the succession of the images as a non-event, a standstill, an eternal repetition, or a faux framing dividing a single image). If the sequence is merely a spelling out of the successive phases or moments of an action that can be foreseen easily by the logical structure or dynamism of each previous part, and if the gutter does in no sense provide some added value to such a quasi-mechanical conjugating of a given set whose elements are enumerated one after another, then the neutralization of the gutter's possibly disruptive or complicating possibilities may be seen as a real flaw (but the flaw here is that of the storytelling, not that of the gutter, whose weak use is just a symptom of weak storytelling).

A powerful example of this phenomenon can be found in Hergé's *The Secret of the Unicorn*, well known today to North American readers thanks to the Jackson-Spielberg adaptation.[21] If the first two-thirds of the volume manage to use the dialectical relationship of transition and interruption, of panel dynamism and gutter, in an outstandingly fluent and efficient way, its last third falls prey to a more mechanical use of this basic mechanism. Instead of having each time new panels that help the action move forward and gutters that stress the dynamic shift from one panel to another, the last pages of the book have various sequences that offer nothing more than successive variations on one single action or one single event (for instance, the scene of Tintin being chased by the guard dog), whereas none of the gutters even remotely suggests that something important may happen or be seen in the space between or outside the frame.

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In *System of Comics*, Thierry Groensteen, while paying a well-deserved tribute to Peeters's taxonomy, appeals to some practical interpretive difficulties raised by his system and proposes an alternative model for analyzing the layout (see pp. 97–102). He begins by asking two questions: (1) Is the layout *regular* or *irregular*? (2) Is it *discrete*[22] or *ostentatious*? He then demonstrates that both alternatives cannot be reduced to one another, since regular layouts can be quite ostentatious (as, for instance, in the checkerboard effects produced by the intertwining of chromatic series in *Watchmen*, again the usual suspect for this kind of analysis) or vice versa (given, for instance, the erosion, in terms of readerly impact, of amazing or astonishing page layouts; one can get accustomed to, say, the unusual pages of many underground comix artists or, to take a more contemporary case, an author like Lynda Barry, and the layout effects of their graphic novels may become paradoxically discrete, at least to readers self-trained in the specific poetics of these authors).

Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* offers a good testing ground for Groensteen's proposals. This graphic novel is based throughout on an elementary page grid containing three tiers that may be reduced to two layers each time the visual rhetoric of the book makes this suitable. In that case the page layout features larger images by either gathering two tiers into one large image preceded or followed by a two-panel tier or dividing this larger image vertically, still in combination with a two-panel tier. In all cases, the necessities of the content explain why the "average" panel has to be blown up (to more or less two-thirds of the image) or split in two vertical panels. Examples are abundant and can be found on almost any page of *Fun Home*, even if there is a definite shift from more-regular to less-regular layouts as one progresses through the story (yet this decreasing regularity does not imply that the use of the page layout ceases to be rhetorical). Decorative pages (227 and 230 are good examples) and strictly conventional pages (the double spread 220–221 is the exception that confirms the rule) are quasi-unknown (Illustration 5.e). As far as the productive page layout is concerned, this category does not seem directly relevant.

Overleaf: 5.e. An example of "conventional" regular gridlike page layout. Pages 220–221 from Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006), a division of Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

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The book can thus be described in Peeters's taxonomy, but it is also a good example of what Groensteen has in mind when he insists on the double notion of (ir)regularity and discreteness/ostentation. Certain page layouts may be a little difficult to interpret (can't we think, for instance, that page 208 is, despite everything, an example of a productive page layout?), but this shouldn't be a problem. More worrying may be the fact that the overall rhetorical interpretation of the page layout does not really do justice to the permanent ingeniousness of *Fun Home* in this regard. In order to see what happens in the book, one should go beyond the mere labeling of the layout types and see how they are used and varied page after page. Here Groensteen's viewpoint proves very useful. On the one hand, the feature of discreteness or lack of it brings easily to the fore that the relative discreteness of the layout in *Fun Home* is dramatically disrupted each time something crucial takes place in the story. Bechdel always displays a radical shift from regular to less-regular page layout each time she wants to stress a plot turn (this does not diminish the overall rhetorical use of the layout but demonstrates how the analysis of the rhetoric can be fine-tuned with elements that leave more room for reader response). On the other hand, the feature of regularity proves to be even more prominent when *Fun Home* introduces pivotal changes in its plot structure.

The best example of this mechanism is the double page 220–221 (the failed "encounter" of father and daughter, who do not manage to acknowledge and accept their shared homosexuality). We see the two characters driving to the movie theater. During the ride, Alison's father is on the verge of making his great confession, but eventually he runs off in silence. This very poignant scene is represented with the help of an exceptional, and exceptionally conventional, gridlike page layout, with four tiers of three identical panels that directly underscore the exceptional status of this moment that will never come back. However, what is crucial as well in the twenty-four minipanels of the spread is that all of them are framed by a large black strip occupying more than the upper third of each image. At first sight, this representation is realistic: the two characters are shown during their ride to the theatre, and the black

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strip corresponds with the roof of the car. A more structural reading, however, gives a more profound and meaningful interpretation. When we turn the page, we are inside the theater watching a wide-screen film, *Coal Miner's Daughter*. Yet what matters here is not only the theme of the film ("The movie was good. It was about how Loretta Lynn makes it out of Appalachia to become a big country-western star," says Alison, the narrator, in the caption) and the lines the fictional characters of *Coal Miner's Daughter* are pronouncing: Father: "I ain't never gonna see you again." Daughter: "Yes you will, daddy."). The essential feature is the large black strip around the picture that Alison and her father, and the rest of the audience, is watching; it is the black of the unlit wall that surrounds the screen, and the reader is invited to compare the scene inside the movie theater with the scene inside the car on the previous page, where the similar black strip was rounding off the image of the characters. In retrospect, this relationship confers a touch of fictionality to the conversation between Alison and her father: the two "real" characters talking during the drive are shown the same way as the fictional characters of the film, and this similarity makes the reader no longer sure whether the conversation in the car is real or invented.

As already said, the most appealing aspect of Groensteen's discussion of Peeters is his strong insistence on the position and activity of the reader and, symmetrically, of the author. The former is crucial since the concrete interpretation of the characteristics of a given layout cannot be severed from "the subjective appreciation of the reader" (p. 101). The latter is important as well, since the reader will gear his or her interpretation to the supposed artistic decision of the author, which functions as "the motivation that is susceptible to justify the option retained by its correlation with the iconic and narrative contents" (p. 101). In other words, what Groensteen is pleading for is an approach that, although fundamentally based on the narrative/composition distinction introduced by Peeters, makes room for the interpretive input of the reader as well as for the underlying strategy of the artist. His own readings of page layout techniques and examples will therefore logically stress the heuristic virtues of a given layout (in the case of *Watchmen*, for instance, the

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symmetry principle of chapter V is defined as "the category, in sum, that allows us to think through the major themes" of the book [p. 100]), and the practice of this kind of reading is very analogous to what we have developed with some layouts and panels from *Fun Home*.

Charles Hatfield's *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* is a third, both complementary and different, major contribution to our subject. The book frames the debate in more general terms, emphasizing appropriately the position of the reader, taking as its starting point the way in which the reader makes his or her way through a work. Hatfield makes a distinction between "single image" and "image-in-series," by which he refers to the tension between "breakdown" (dividing a narrative into single images; this is what is done by the author and then proposed to the reader) and "closure" (a term coined by Scott McCloud; the reverse process of reading through such images and inferring connections between them). As Hatfield summarizes: "In fact, 'breakdown' and 'closure' are complementary terms, both describing the relationship between sequence and series: the author's task is to evoke an imagined sequence by breaking a visual series (a breakdown), whereas the reader's task is to translate the given series into a narrative sequence by achieving closure" (p. 41). After having discussed the issue of closure, in a more medium-specific way than proposed by Scott McCloud in his well-known typology of panel-to-panel transitions,[23] Hatfield then proceeds to his own description of the question, which both integrates the basic elements of Peeters's and Groensteen's insights (although not their taxonomies nor their terminology) and rethinks them in a more overtly readerly way, always keeping an eye on the possibility of reading through the work image by image (an option that is not really taken into consideration by Peeters and Groensteen, who seem to think more in terms of composition than Hatfield, whose main concern is narrative):

> Each surface organizes the images into a constellation of discrete units, or "panels." A single image within such a cluster typically functions in two ways at once: as a "moment" in an imagined sequence of events, and as a graphic element in an atemporal design. Some comic creators consciously play with

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> this design aspect, commonly called page layout, while others remain more conscious of the individual image-as-moment. Most long-form comics maintain a tug-of-war between these different functions, encouraging a near-simultaneous apprehension of the single image as both moment-in-sequence and design element.[24]

If Hatfield holds back from advocating new, detailed proposals for the formal analysis of panel structure and page layout, his way of reading is paramount for two reasons. First, it establishes the foundational position of the reader, while not forsaking the technical analysis of the graphic novel's medium-specificity. Second, just like Peeters's and Groensteen's texts, it pays well-deserved attention to the materiality of the book, a crucial element in the analysis of the graphic novel that sets it apart from the world of comics.[25]

Both Peeters's and Groensteen's taxonomies as well as Hatfield's (and others') decision to frame the question of page layout into the wider dialectics of sequence and surface are attempts to counter formalist tendencies that frequently pop up in this context (and that may have an empirical basis in the production-line technique of the comics industry, where graphic artists only fill in the empty frames of a pre-existing page layout with their drawings). In Peeters's approach, the page layout is considered in relationship with the dynamic and shifting tension between *sequentiality*, which insists on guiding the eye from one panel to the next (the dominating element here is the *story*), and *tabularity*, which reorients the moving eye to a more global approach of the page as a visual whole (the dominating element here is the *tableau*). For Groensteen, Peeters's basic opposition between story and tableau should be nuanced by elements referring also to the *readers' response*, less in the case of the opposition between regularity and irregularity, which is rather easy to describe in purely formalist terms, than in the case of the opposition between ostentation and discreteness, which inevitably entails an assessment by the reader, as well as to the overall "artistic project" (p. 99) (which, after all, is also what has to be evaluated by the reader). Hatfield, who widens the aforementioned taxonomies, helps keep a strong focus

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on the activity of the reader and his or her trajectory through the text, a useful correction to the slightly more design-oriented reading of both Peeters and Groensteen.

Inside the panels

It should be possible to make further steps in the direction of a more global, integrated reading of the page layout that stresses the interaction with as many other aspects of the work as possible. In addition to their link with story logic and readers' expectations and reactions, one should try to include as well the *visual content* of the panels, which may warrant a more adequate appraisal of what is actually taking place on the page. In this regard, we propose not another model as a substitute for the analyses offered by Peeters and Groensteen but a supple and very simple set of complementary instructions aiming to establish what really matters: the revelation and critical evaluation of concrete works. In this regard, a first useful layer may be the degree of correspondence between the variations of the page layout and those of the panel content. The basic opposition here is that of permanence, stability, and repetition versus change, alteration, and transformation, but the most important feature is the dynamic character of the distinction. A given layout can be extremely "irregular" (in the terminology of Groensteen), but remain very "stable," if, for instance, the work tries to offer a new layout in each new page. In a way, this is part of Alison Bechdel's approach. Conversely, a layout can be extremely "regular," yet nonpermanent, if, for instance, the work shifts from one regular page layout to another one. A good example here is the mosaic-like composition of Daniel Clowes's *Ice Haven*, in which the transition from one character to another results in a greater or lesser change in page layout style, each style being, however, very regular and therefore immediately recognizable. The same remark applies to the panel content, which can be based on the systematic repetition of a given representation (for instance, two talking heads, repeated with minimal variations in the successive panels[26]) or rely instead on the maximization of visual differences (for instance, when the leap from one panel to another involves

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changes in as many aspects as possible: characters, setting, time, color, angle, distance, etc.; perhaps the most astute champion of such a style was the comics pioneer Herriman).

The combination of the axis stability versus instability with the distinction between page layout and panel content provides us with the following taxonomy, which can be added to the systems of Peeters and Groensteen:

- *Stable page layout + unstable panel content*. Many short stories by Ivan Brunetti represent the minimalist side of this composition; the maximalist side is well represented by Julie Doucet in *My New York Diary*. Between both, several intermediary solutions can be imagined.
- *Stable page layout + stable panel content*. This option corresponds with the "average" type in mainstream graphic novels, where regular and discrete layouts are combined with characters that are repeated panel after panel, although it cannot be denied that too systematic a repetition of the characters and the setting, as well as the theme, may generate quite uncanny effects.
- *Unstable page layout + stable panel content*. It is difficult to distinguish in absolute terms between this type and the previous ones, for how can one tell the difference between stable and unstable? Suffice it to state that there *is* a difference, and that it is up to the readers to judge whether the shifts from stability to instability that they may discover are relevant to their reading or not.
- *Unstable page layout + unstable panel content*. Examples here will be found more typically in avant-garde graphic novels, although not necessarily in the subtype of abstract graphic novels (often amazingly stable in layout terms). Some of Spiegelman's *Breakdowns* may fit into this category.

However, piling up reading grids and descriptive models should never be an aim in itself. It must have a critical and interpretive added value, helping the reader to identify, on the one hand, the relative position of

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a certain work (what is it doing in comparison with others?) and, on the other hand, its specific features (what is it doing by itself?). In other words, models are useful to the extent that they can become tools for reading and interpreting (and perhaps later on for evaluating, but this is always a very tricky matter). Also thinking through the above models with reference to a creator's entire oeuvre is important, because over time these models create expectations and norms that in later works are either replicated (for reader ease) or modified (for whatever narrative purpose, yet also to disturb a preestablished page look/content formula). Moreover, as discussed earlier in this book, artists historically are conscious of the tropes of their famous predecessors and enjoy playing with established modes, including page layout/content relationships.

The importance of a page layout taxonomy is not how it helps classify and pigeonhole certain forms and procedures, although such an operation is always instructive of the position that a certain work occupies in the field. Its major advantage, when combined with analysis of other elements of the story, is to orient the reader's attention. In that sense, its role is radically rhetorical: all page layouts make a crucial contribution to the building of story world as well as to the managing of the reading process, which is always also a reading for the plot. In short, provided we read layout and panel design in combination with the storyline and the visual representations inside (and sometimes outside) the panels, a page layout is paramount in the treatment of three basic effects: (1) foregrounding versus backgrounding: a good page layout helps distinguish between primary and secondary information, or in a mystery blurs the two by providing odd distractions or subversions; (2) establishing links beyond the mechanisms of mere panel-to-panel transition: a good page layout helps disclose the functional relationship between panels or elements that are not contiguous; and (3) speeding up or slowing down: a good page layout helps readers to strike a good balance between interest in the story (which pushes them to leap to the next panel, to turn the page, to try to finish the book as soon as possible in order to find the answer to the story's enigma) and interest in the images and the tableau (which

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invites them to abandon the narrative thread and to lose themselves in contemplation of the work).

Conclusion

In conclusion, let us stress once again some essential aspects of the layout analysis that we propose. A strictly formalist approach is insufficient. Following Meir Sternberg's "Proteus principle,"[27] we subscribe to the view that a form can have different functions and that a function can be realized through different forms. The very different uses and modes of the grid, the most rigid and least supple panel arrangement, have shown that even the most simple and elementary forms can prove extremely sophisticated. It is also paramount to emphasize the importance of the context, both internally (if one analyzes a page, for instance, one has to take into account the rest of the work as well) and externally (what are the norms, models, and constraints that are accepted in a given context?). Both elements help foreground an analysis in terms of figure/ground: the relationship image/strip/page/book is a kind of "figure" that can only appear on a contextual "ground." Simultaneously, it is crucial to underline the importance of close-reading individual works that have to be seized also in the dynamics of the reading process. Panel structure and page layout are no rigid phenomena that can be described as autonomous forms. Their appreciation emerges – and changes! – while we are reading. Finally, the analysis of panel/page layout organization should never be a goal in itself, but a means to better read the work as a whole. Criticisms of forms, patterns, and changes of panel and layout structures are intellectual devices, among others, to explore the specifics of a work, without regard to which any reading would very rapidly lose its *raison d'être*.

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