INVENTING COMICS

SCOTT McCLOUD'S DEFINITION OF COMICS

AN ESSAY BY DYLAN HORROCKS

Foreword

The following is a response to Scott McCloud's groundbreaking book *Understanding Comics: the Invisible Art* (Kitchen Sink, 1993).

It grew out of an essay called 'Logophobia' which I began writing in 1995 after Jeff Levine asked me to contribute a regular column to his marvellous magazine *Destroy All Comics.* In the end my column turned into something a little less ambitious, but 'Logophobia' continued to percolate. Then Bart Beaty invited me to contribute to a special issue of *The Comics Journal* in which a group of academics, critics and cartoonists would respond to *Understanding Comics* and I took the opportunity to take out my unfinished essay and try again. Bart's plan was for each writer to tackle one chapter of Scott's book; I chose Chapter One. Well, I missed the *Journal's* deadline (by the third full draft, the essay had stretched to twice the word limit and was still in need of reworking), but the editor kindly promised to publish it in a later issue. And so the 9000-word monster eventually appeared in *The Comics Journal* #234 (June 2001).

Lots of people helped with this essay, including Bart Beatty, Jeff Levine and Anne Elizabeth Moore (all of whom had a hand in commissioning or publishing it) and Brad! Brooks (who put me on to Scott's book in the first place). I also gained a lot from numerous conversations with Terry Fleming, Roger Horrocks, James Kochalka, Tom Hart, Tim Kidd, Sophie MacMillan, Tim Bollinger, Lars Cawley, the Comix@ and Comix-scholars lists and too many others to mention.

I'd also like to acknowledge Samuel R. Delaney, whose essay on *Understanding Comics* ('The Politics of Paraliterary Criticism,' *New York Review of Science Fiction,* issues 98-100, October-December 1996; Vol. 9, No. 2-4) showed me the best way to lay out an essay about comics: when you quote from a comic, simply reproduce the panels within the body of the text, just as you would when quoting from a text-only work. It seems obvious, but it's so rarely done; such pictorial quotations tend to be treated as *illustrations* and placed off to the side or wherever they'll fit. I'm very grateful to Gene Kannenberg for introducing me to Delaney's fascinating essay.

But the greatest debt, of course, is owed to Scott McCloud himself, for writing and drawing his wonderful book in the first place and for being so gracious and enthusiastic about my clumsy attempt to dissect it.

Inventing Comics:

Scott McCloud's Definition of Comics.

by Dylan Horrocks

> 'Theory is contested territory.'
>
> Thomas McLaughlin, in *Critical Terms for Literary Study,* edited by Frank Lentricchia & Thomas McLaughlin.

Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* is a powerful piece of polemic. It is also a work of theory - arguably the most important book of comics theory published in English so far. But Scott makes no attempt to hide the fact that he's a man on a mission. He has an agenda, and he pursues it with all the weapons in his rhetorical toolkit. He is persuasive and inspiring. Of course, all theory is to some extent polemic; theory is about persuading others to think about things in a certain way: a struggle between *different ways of talking*.

Most discussion of *Understanding Comics*, however, has ignored this polemical dimension entirely, treating McCloud's work as simple, disinterested scientific argument. I suspect this is because most of us who have read it share Scott's agenda. When you're preaching to the converted, it's easy to convince them that you're speaking the Truth - rationally rather than rhetorically.

Nevertheless, *Understanding Comics* has become something of a manifesto for many in the comics community. It constructs a way of talking about comics that affirms and supports our longing for critical respectability and seems to offer an escape from the cultural ghetto.

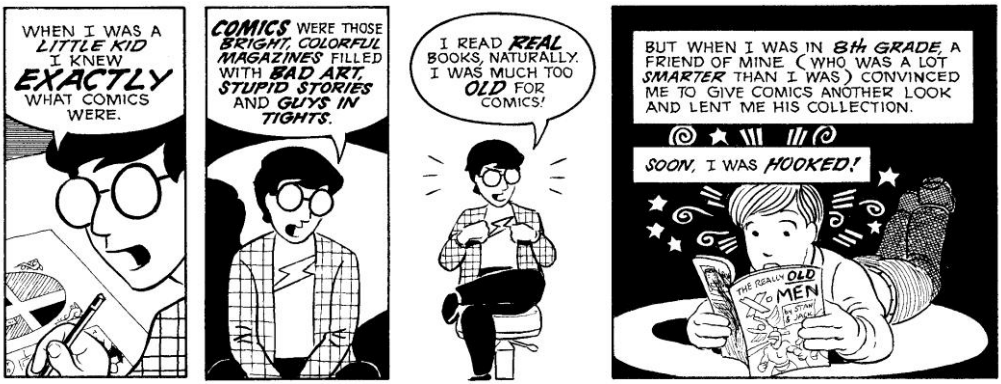
Crucial to that 'way of talking about comics' is Scott's definition of the 'form.' In a sense he uses this definition to establish the limits of the territory which he will go on to explore - and claim - on behalf of the comics community. But like any definition, it is necessarily an expression of certain values and assumptions. By saying, 'This *is* comics,' Scott is really saying: 'This is what comics *should* be; it is what we should value most about them.' On the other hand, he's also saying what comics should *not* be, and, by implication, what we should value *less* about them.

Let's take a closer look at that definition, then, and see what it reveals about McCloud's agenda, and what he (and his constituency within the comics community) value most, and least, about comics.

‘Setting the Record Straight’

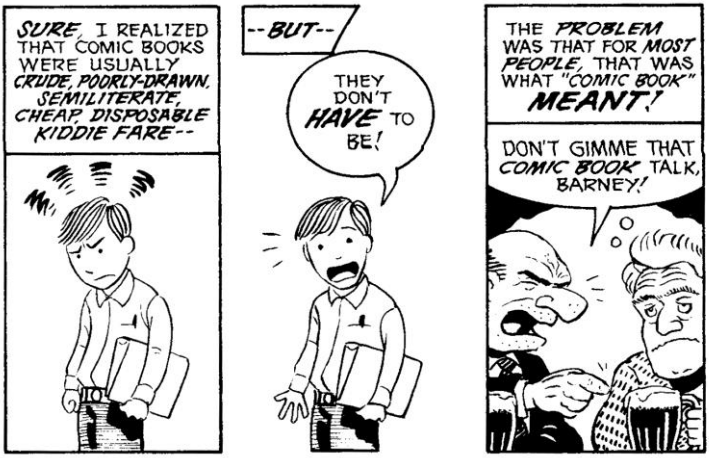
This, the title of *Understanding Comics’* first chapter, sums up how Scott sees his mission. He is out to shatter the ‘stereotypes’ that keep most people from appreciating the unique magic of comics.

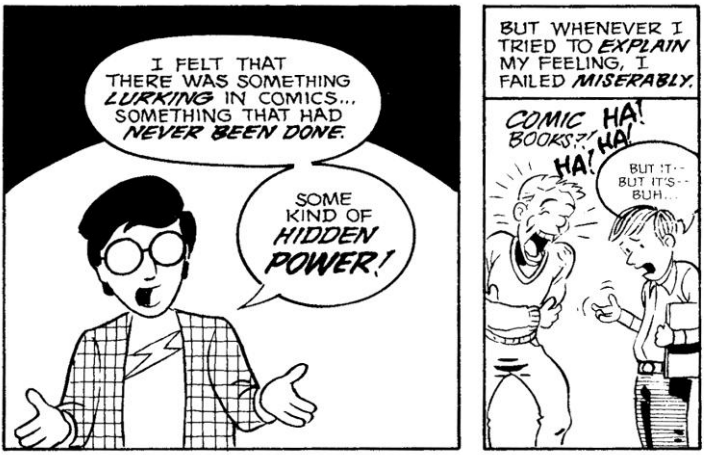
He begins by telling an origin story, the story of his own conversion to the comics cause:



pg.2, panels 2-5

Before long, Scott was obsessed with comics and had set out to become a comics artist. But it wasn’t the bad art, stupid stories and guys in tights that had changed his life. . .





pg.3, panels 2-6

So there it is. The problem with comics isn't that they are crude, poorly drawn, semiliterate, cheap, and disposable kiddie fare (although most of them are). The real problem is that people think that's *all* they are. But never fear - Scott has come up with a solution:

pg.3, panels 7-9

Here's how Scott's strategy works.

Erasing History

The problem with comics is that people associate them not with what they *could* be, but with what they *have* been - i.e. their history. So McCloud must first find a way to get rid of that history, which he does by employing a handy old dichotomy: form vs. content.

pg.5, last panel

McCloud shows just how useful this dichotomy can be in the following - crucial - page, which is worth showing in full. McCloud dramatizes a common metaphor ('form as vessel'):[1]

[1] Note here that Scott equates "the artform" with "the medium," which obscures the fact that 'medium' is used in two different ways. It is often used to refer to the physical materials or tools from which an artwork is made: film, video, paint, ink, paper. But it is also sometimes used in the sense Scott uses it here: to refer to an 'artform' such as movies, painting, poetry, etc. According to the former use, the *medium* of comics could be said to be 'ink on paper' (or, if Scott has his way, 'pixels on a screen'). But 'comics' are just one use to which that medium can be put; 'comics,' then, could only be called a medium in the second sense of an 'artform,' rather than a 'physical medium.'

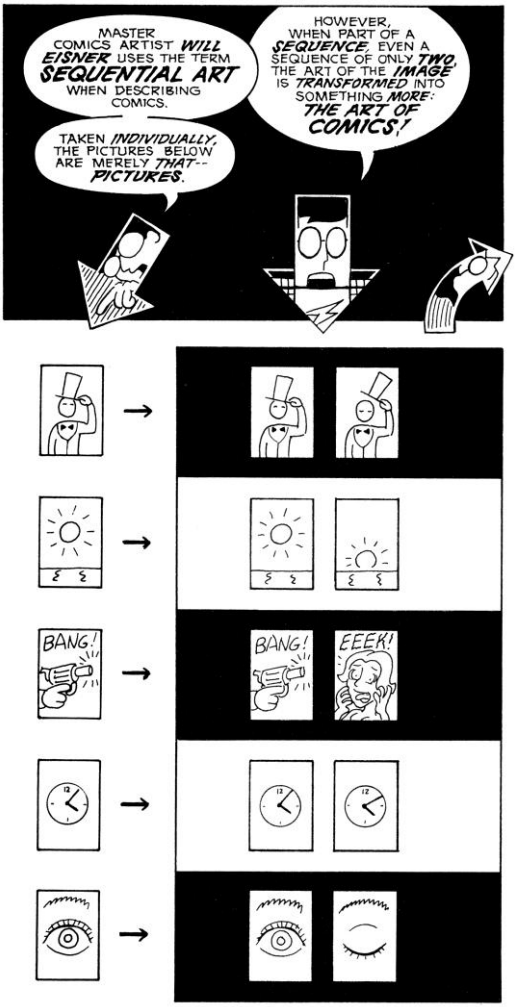
That Scott may be confusing these different uses of the term is suggested in the next panel, when he includes as 'media' both 'video' and 'film' (which are certainly 'media' in the first - 'physical' - sense, but which would usually be lumped together as 'moving pictures' under the 'artform' sense). All the other 'media' he identifies - including comics - are only 'media' in the 'artform' sense. The significance of this will hopefully become clearer below, when I take a closer look at the 'form-as-vessel' metaphor.

*EISNER'S OWN *COMICS AND SEQUENTIAL ART* BEING A HAPPY EXCEPTION.

pg.6

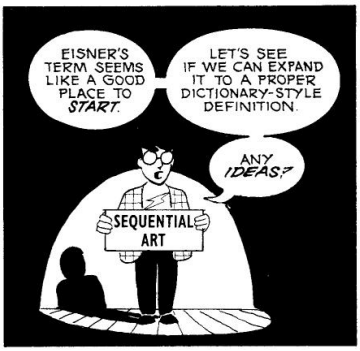
Scott demonstrates perfectly what makes this dichotomy (and metaphor) so useful. Even if most comics make you want to puke, he suggests, you can still admire the *'form'* of comics. In one fell swoop he has removed all other considerations - genre, style, publishing formats; in short, the whole embarrassing *history* of comics - and focused our attention on their pure, shiny *form*. Which, as you can see, is an equal sister to such respected media as the written word, music and visual art.

This 'form,' then, is what Scott will define. In fact, he's already defined it - back on page 5:

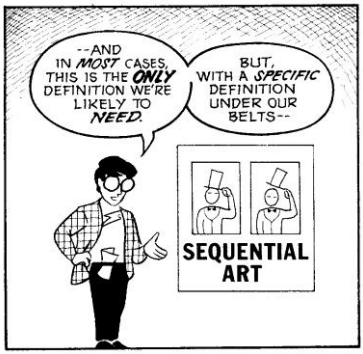


pg.5

So there it is - Scott has found his 'Art of Comics.' Eisner's 'Sequential Art' is where Scott's search for a definition begins and ends:



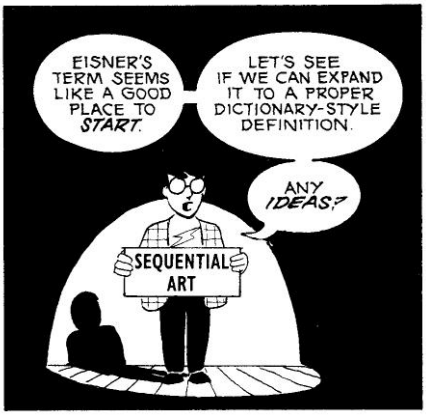
pg.7, panel 1



pg.9, panel 7

'Sequential Art' is a useful definition for Scott because the 'hidden power' - or 'invisible art' - that he most wants to draw our attention to is 'closure.' For Scott, 'closure' allows pictures to transcend the traditional limitations of the single image, becoming *narrative*. It is this process that Scott values most about comics. How appropriate, then, to elevate it to *definitive* status.

Nowhere in *Understanding Comics* does Scott attempt to justify why 'Sequential Art' should be seen as the one definitive element in comics to the exclusion of all others: the combination of words and pictures, the use of certain conventions (eg. speech balloons, panel borders), particular formats, styles, genres, etc. Take another look at how Scott begins to construct his own 'proper' definition:

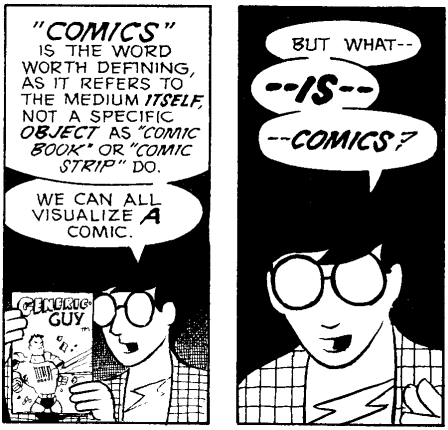


pg.7, panel 1 (again)

'...Seems like a good place to start?' That's it? That's the best argument he can come up with for why *this* is the definitive aspect of comics?

Basically, yes. The reason Scott bases his definition on Eisner's is that he *likes* it. The reason he likes it is that it is useful: it highlights the things he values most about comics. He doesn't try to convince us that his definition is more 'correct' than any other, nor that it most accurately describes what people usually mean when they use the word 'comics.' Instead he persuades us of its usefulness. He seduces us with its beauty.[2]

But Scott also uses an extremely clever bit of rhetorical sleight-of-hand to slip his definition into our mental dictionaries. It takes him just two panels:

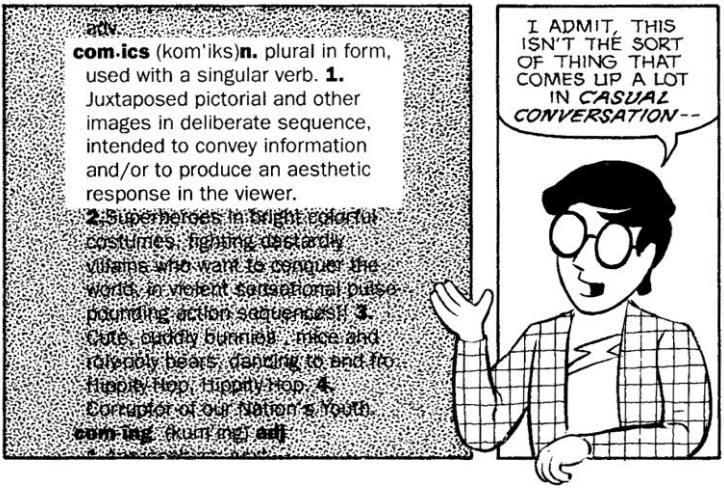


pg.4, panels 3-4

This is how it works. Eisner identified his 'art of comics' with the term 'Sequential Art.' Scott takes this same concept, rewrites it as a dictionary-style definition and renames it 'Comics.' *That's* the really clever part. Essentially, he has taken *one* term - or concept - (Eisner's 'sequential art') and grafted it on to the old word 'comics.' Same old word - new meaning. The only clue that the old word has been

[2] Scott does argue that 'sequential art' is a phenomenon occurring in comics which is "neutral on matters of style, quality or subject matter." But he doesn't try to suggest that it is the *only* such phenomenon, nor that it is unique to comics. Once he has established his definition in his minds, of course, it will become possible for him to argue both such things - in a circular argument (for example: 'Sequential art' is unique to comics *because* all works that contain 'Sequential art' are comics).

replaced is that line 'plural in form, used with a singular verb' (which, I guess, indicates that 'comics' is short for '*The Art of* Comics):'[3]



Pg.9, panels 5-6

Pretty clever, eh? It's kind of like a rhetorical *Invasion of the Body-Snatchers* - you take a newly invented term, but instead of coining a neologism, you make it outwardly resemble the old term you want to replace. The new meaning colonizes the old word, like a virus. Actually, Scott has humorously dramatized this strategy in the same panel by continuing his dictionary entry with three alternative definitions. The zipatone that highlights Scott's new definition all but obscures the older, less desirable ones:

> '2. Superheroes in bright, colorful costumes, fighting dastardly villains who want to conquer the world, in violent sensational pulse-pounding action sequences! 3. Cute, cuddly bunnies, mice and rolypoly bears, dancing to and fro, Hippity Hop, Hippity Hop. 4. Corruptor of our Nation's Youth.'

From now on, if Scott's tactic works, whenever we talk about 'comics' we will really be talking about 'sequential art.' This is the trick at the heart of Scott's manifesto. It is polemic at its finest - making 'the way I *want* things to be' appear as 'the way things *are*.' This is how an ideology colonizes our vocabulary, until its agenda is invisible and we unwittingly see the world according to its terms.

[3] The singular verb also symbolically unifies the often factionalised comics community - particularly the two camps of 'comic books' and 'comic strips.'

To Build a Nation

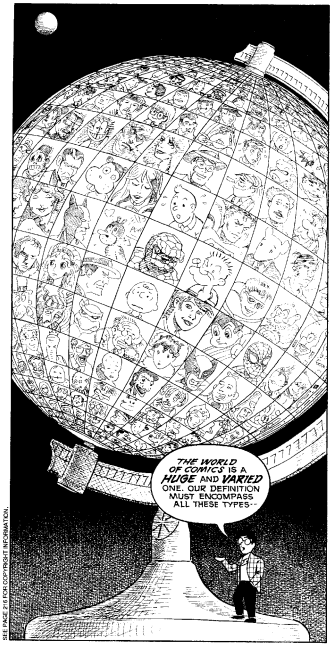
> ‘Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist.’
>
> Ernst Gellner, *Thought & Change*.

> ‘In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined.’
>
> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

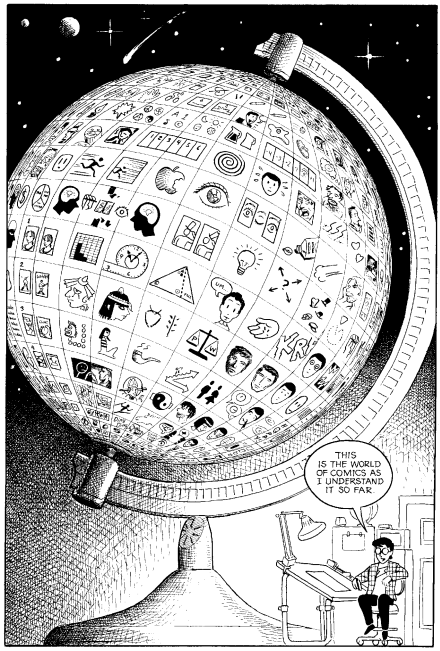
When Scott spoke at the 1998 Small Press Expo, he called the convention ‘a gathering of the tribes.’ Indeed, while comics have been becoming less and less a mass medium since the 1950s, they do seem to have become more like a community. Like any community, we have our shared history, mythology and culture - or rather, several related cultures and subcultures. For most of their history, these comics tribes have been ignored by the wider world, scratching out a nomadic living at the margins of the arts. But now, after decades (or centuries, depending on which version of history you subscribe to) of poverty and prejudice, comics are at last asserting themselves. Visionaries have arisen, determined to unite these feuding, demoralized tribes into a single powerful nation, ready to escape the ghettoes and stake a claim among the Great Nations of the art world.

Scott is perhaps the most eloquent of these visionaries.[4] And if *Understanding Comics* is his manifesto, it is also a map of our ‘homeland’ and its place in the world - an attempt to claim territory in the contested spaces of history, theory, art criticism, communication, etc. It’s appropriate, then, that *Understanding Comics* is full of geographical metaphors (both verbal and visual): globes, territories, map-like grids, spaces being traversed . . .

[4] In *Reinventing Comics* (Paradox Press, 2000), Scott’s follow-up to *Understanding Comics,* he reinforces this nation-building metaphor. For example, see page 7, panel 7 (which shows Scott sitting on a flagpole - which bears a ‘comics’ flag - describing himself as a "comics loyalist") or page 19, panel 3 (in which he refers to comics being ‘relegated to *minority status*...’).

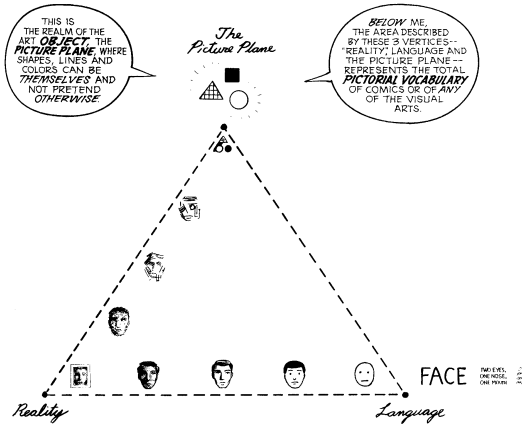


pg.4, panel 1

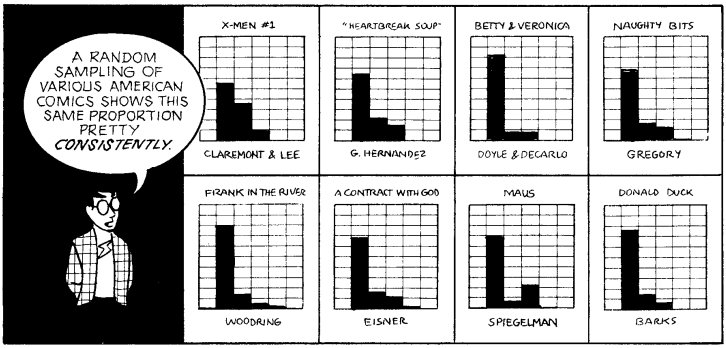


pg.214

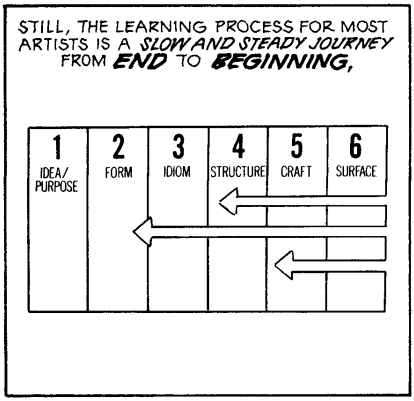
Scott illustrates his ideas by constructing a series of diagrams - or charts - on which he can 'map' similarities and differences as spatial relationships:



pg.51, panel 1



pg.75, last panel



pg.183, panel 2

His textual vocabulary, too, is often built on these geographical metaphors (italics are mine):

> 'If we incorporate language and other icons into the *chart*, we can begin to build a comprehensive *map - of the universe called comics*.' (pg.51)

> 'No schools of art are *banished* by our definition, no philosophies, no movements, no ways of seeing are *out of bounds!'* (pg.22)

> 'All the things we experience in life can be separated into two *realms*, the realm of the concept - and the realm of the sense.' (pg.39)

> ‘Since cartoons already exist as concepts for the reader, they tend to flow easily through the conceptual *territory* between panels. . . . But realistic images have a bumpier ride. Theirs is a primarily visual existence which doesn’t pass easily into the realm of ideas.’ (pg.90-91)
>
> ‘The work of Dadaists, Futurists and various individual artists of the modern era breached the *frontier* between appearance and meaning!’(pg.148)

Little wonder, then, that the one ornament sitting amidst the clutter of tools and paper that is McCloud’s studio should be a globe (see pg.2 and following).[5]

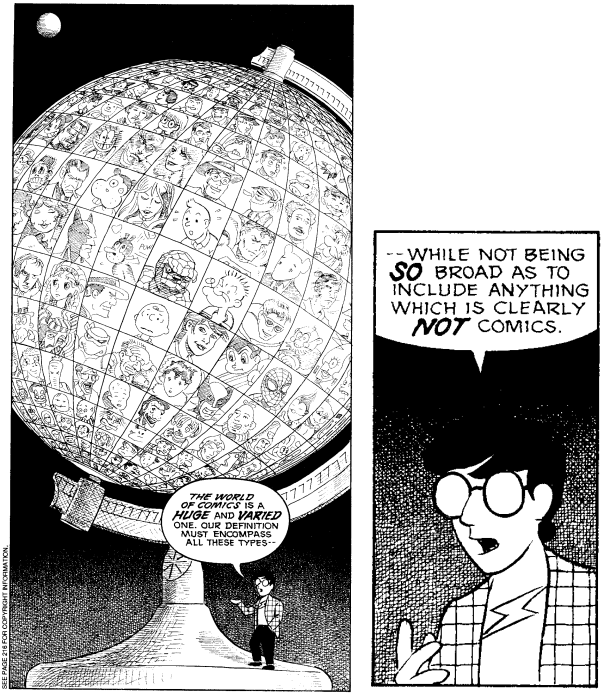
Mapping the Territory

> ‘...[T]he etymology of ‘terminology’ designates it as the study of boundaries. A ‘term’ is a boundary line, a line of demarcation. It defines a field in which work can be done, within the limits of the term. But, like all boundaries, even those meticulously surveyed, terms are social and arbitrary, not natural and inevitable. What divides my property from my neighbor’s is not a natural boundary but a social system within which certain functions of property prevail. It is important to remember that terms function in the same way. They limit and regulate our reading practices. But they do not do so by divine fiat. Their limits can be brought to consciousness, their regulations can be overcome. . . . It is not the job of this text to regulate those boundaries more carefully. Rather these essays attempt to denaturalize the limits that our critical system imposes.’
>
> Thomas McLaughlin, in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, edited by Frank Lentricchia & Thomas McLaughlin.

[5] Again, *Reinventing Comics* returns to these geographical metaphors (as well as reinforcing Scott’s point that ‘space’ is central to the nature of comics). For example, see page 19, panel 7 (‘The best way to understand the nature of our environment is to *return* to it from as many vantage points as possible - - *triangulating* its shape from *without’)* or page 53, panel 7 (‘The *"fine art"* of comics is an equally *unexplored continent* of *possibilities.’).* Diagrams and globes abound throughout, of course.

pg.3, panels 7-9

Scott's definition (or map), then, is an attempt to free comics from the restrictive ghetto to which previous definitions/maps have confined them. Here he seems to suggest that our liberation from that ghetto will leave us completely free, with a whole universe to explore and enjoy. This is a suggestion he will repeat elsewhere, but here it is immediately undermined:



pg.4, panels 1-2

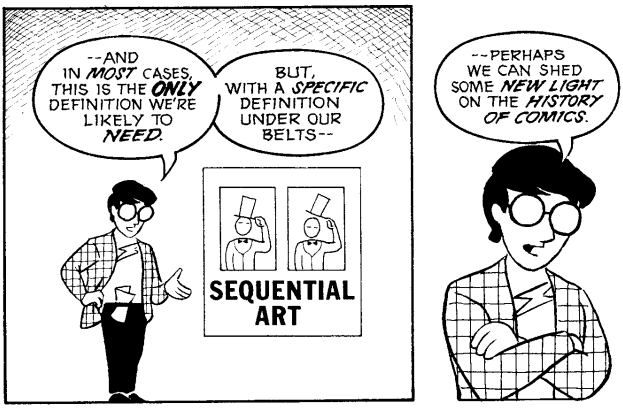
In fact, what Scott seeks is not the eradication of borders altogether; on the contrary, he simply wants to expand our own borders - to claim more space. He begins by announcing where he will locate the comics homeland, by recalling Will Eisner's definition of comics as 'Sequential Art.' The 'form vs. content' metaphor is invoked as a justification: previous maps of comics, he argues, have been based on 'style, quality or subject matter.' Not surprisingly, these maps have confined comics to a few small plots of poor land. Defining our territory by 'form,' however, should produce quite a different map - especially with 'Sequential Art' as its determining factor.

Next he goes on to 'expand [Sequential Art] to a proper dictionary-style definition.' He does this by progressively excluding various things which are (in his opinion) 'clearly not comics:' animation, text-only works, single-panel cartoons. Having mapped out his borders, Scott then turns to survey the territory he has claimed.[6]

Earlier, Scott symbolically erased the history of comics, by emptying the jug (or form) of its vile contents (genres, styles, subject matter, themes, etc). But now he returns to the field of history, armed with his new definition/map:

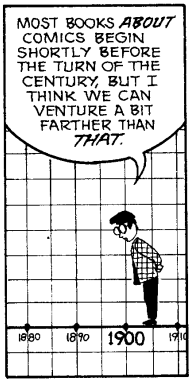
[6] *Reinventing Comics* continues Scott's project of expanding the comics nation's territory, although this time Scott concentrates less on cartographic sleight of hand and more on urging the comics community to get out there and extend the frontiers on the ground. Particularly interesting is the sequence on page 22, panels 2 - 4, in which Scott spells out the distinction between a 'nomadic' project and an 'expansionist' one: ('...this is only a problem if we see comics as a single *indivisible entity* - - unable to move to a *new* territory without first *abandoning* its *present* one. I think the challenge for comics in the 21st century is not to move "forward" as so many would have it. The challenge is to grow outward!'). This expansionist vs. nomadic message is also the point of page 18, panel 7 ('To reach its *full potential*, both as an *art form* and as a *market*, comics must *expand* its *territory,* plunging into many areas at once and not losing sight of *past gains* as it chases *present goals.')*.

Equally interesting is page 231, panel 7, in which Scott argues that on the internet - with its 'infinite canvas' (or territory) - 'comics will have found its *native soil* at last.'

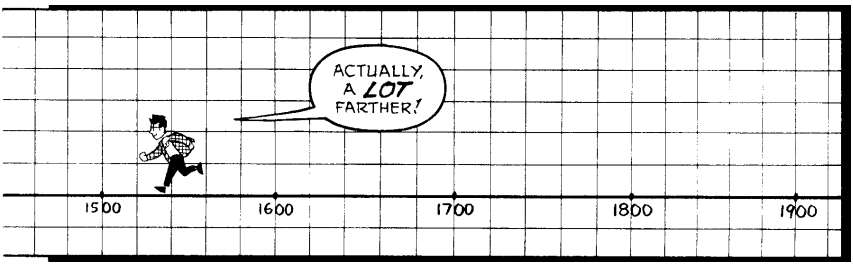


pg.9, panels 7-8

And look how much new territory has opened up:



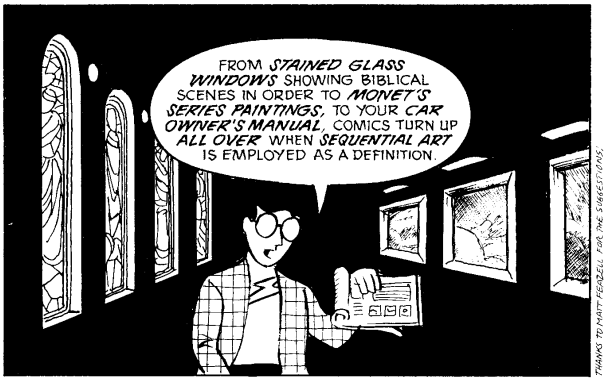
pg.9, panel 9 & pg.10, panel 1



Having demonstrated how that territory now stretches back into the mists of time, he now starts 'reclaiming' cultural artefacts that have been 'annexed' by other artforms: medieval broadsheets; Hogarth's narrative sequences; Rodolphe

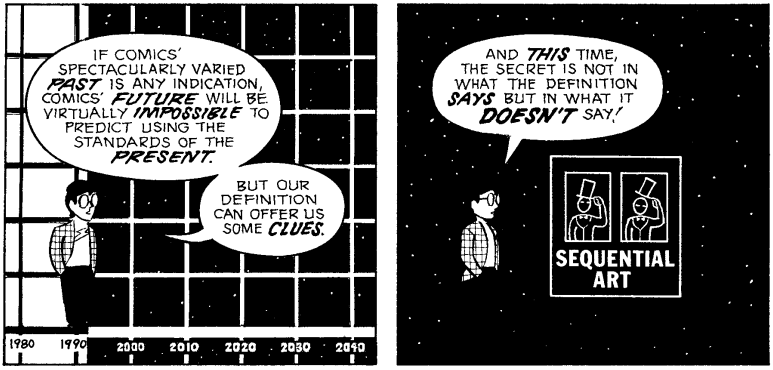
Toppfer's picture stories; 'wordless novels' by Lynd Ward, Frans Masereel and Max Ernst; picture books by Maurice Sendak, Edward Gorey, Raymond Briggs and more.

Lastly, he erases comics' marginal status by repositioning them as a central and pervasive method of communication:



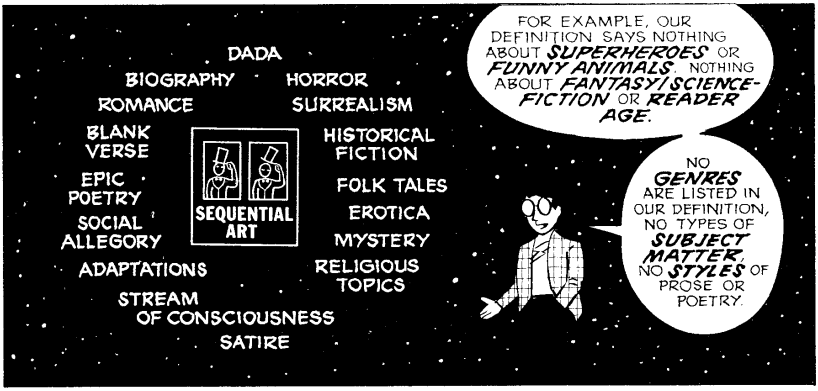
pg.20, panel 3

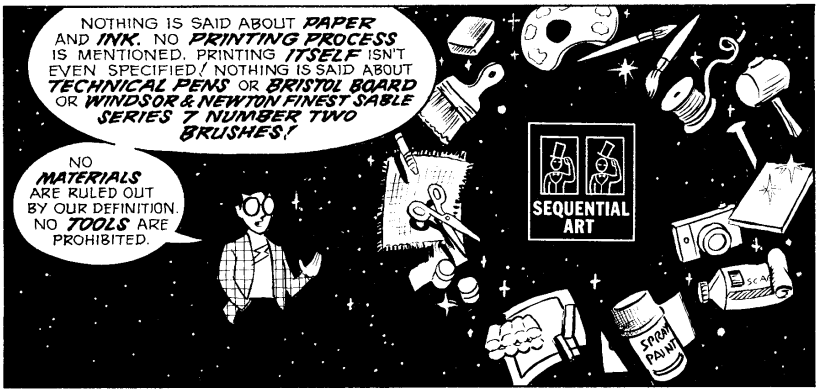
All of which is very inspiring and great for the comics community's self-respect. It's rather like the revisionist histories of other marginalized communities such as African Americans or gays and lesbians, which reclaim famous people from history and seek to assert for them a central role in the historical landscape. And as with these histories, Scott's is ultimately concerned less with the past than with the future....[7]

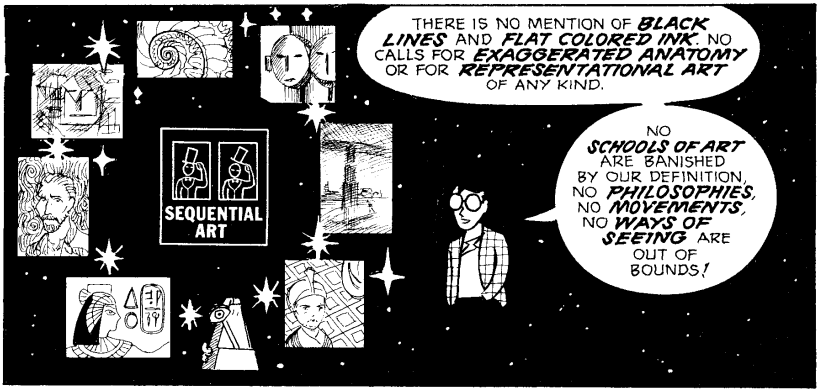


pg.21, panel 7-8

[7] See Reinventing Comics page 8, panel 1: 'Even as a *kid,* I was more interested in *comics' future* than its past or *present.'*


DADA
BIOGRAPHY
HORROR
ROMANCE
SURREALISM
BLANK VERSE
HISTORICAL FICTION
EPIC POETRY
FOLK TALES
SOCIAL ALLEGORY
EROTICA
MYSTERY
ADAPTATIONS
RELIGIOUS TOPICS
STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS
SATIRE
SEQUENTIAL ART
FOR EXAMPLE, OUR DEFINITION SAYS NOTHING ABOUT SUPERHEROES OR FUNNY ANIMALS. NOTHING ABOUT FANTASY/SCIENCE-FICTION OR READER AGE.
NO GENRES ARE LISTED IN OUR DEFINITION, NO TYPES OF SUBJECT MATTER, NO STYLES OF PROSE OR POETRY.


NOTHING IS SAID ABOUT PAPER AND INK. NO PRINTING PROCESS IS MENTIONED. PRINTING ITSELF ISN'T EVEN SPECIFIED! NOTHING IS SAID ABOUT TECHNICAL PENS OR BRISTOL BOARD OR WINDSOR & NEWTON FINEST SABLE SERIES 7 NUMBER TWO BRUSHES!
NO MATERIALS ARE RULED OUT BY OUR DEFINITION. NO TOOLS ARE PROHIBITED.
SEQUENTIAL ART
SCAN
SPRAY PAINT


THERE IS NO MENTION OF BLACK LINES AND FLAT COLORED INK. NO CALLS FOR EXAGGERATED ANATOMY OR FOR REPRESENTATIONAL ART OF ANY KIND.
NO SCHOOLS OF ART ARE BANISHED BY OUR DEFINITION. NO PHILOSOPHIES, NO MOVEMENTS, NO WAYS OF SEEING ARE OUT OF BOUNDS!
SEQUENTIAL ART

pg.22

The great thing about Scott's definition is its inclusiveness. It invites cartoonists to break out of the traditional styles, genres, obsessions and techniques of comics: to push the limits of what can be done with the form. Yet this inspiring rhetoric (and the following page's visual metaphor, suggesting an infinite universe of 'possible comics worlds') obscures the fact that Scott's definition does indeed create new boundaries of its own. He has already apologized for 'closing the door' on single-panel cartoons. Another border will soon become even more troublesome for Scott when R. C. Harvey raises the question of children's picture books during an interview in *The Comics Journal*, as we shall see.

The Definition as Metaphor

> 'The very systematicity that allows us to comprehend one aspect of a concept in terms of another (e.g., comprehending an aspect of arguing in terms of battle) will necessarily hide other aspects of the concept.... For example, in the midst of a heated argument, when we are intent on attacking our opponent's position and defending our own, we may lose sight of the cooperative aspects of arguing....'
>
> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*.

As Lakoff and Johnson argue, metaphorical concepts both reveal and determine how we conceive of and experience phenomena, or, to put it another way, how we *construct* experiences. They highlight some values and hide others. Scott's definition of comics, like any definition, is itself a metaphorical system, built in turn upon other related metaphors. Let's take a look at how some of these metaphors serve to reinforce and suppress particular values about what comics are or should be.

'A Comic is a Sequence of Pictures'

At the heart of McCloud's definition of comics is the idea that: 'a comic is a sequence of pictures.' As a metaphor, this 'way of describing comics' serves to highlight some elements at the expense of others, for example:

- Comics are a cultural idiom
- Comics are a publishing genre
- Comics are a set of narrative conventions
- Comics are a kind of writing that uses words and pictures
- Comics are a literary genre
- Comics are texts

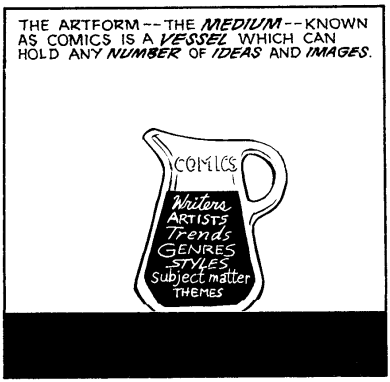
One value it highlights, on the other hand, is the belief that 'comics are a visual medium.' This is an example of how a metaphorical system such as Scott's definition is more than simply a descriptive model; it is also necessarily *prescriptive.* By reinforcing some values and suppressing others, it can influence the way we read and create comics, discouraging experimentation in some directions and imposing particular narrative structures and idioms.

Why, for example, do we criticize a comic for 'describing' key dramatic events with words rather than 'showing' them with pictures? Such a criticism comes from certain expectations we have of comics that in turn come from the (often unconscious) assumption that 'comics are a visual medium.' It implies that pictures should *dominate* words in comics; narrative should be pictorial, not textual.

Cartoonists and readers are informed by such underlying assumptions when they decide how to construct a narrative or decide whether a particular comic is successful. When someone responds to the text-dominated sections in *Cerebus* by saying 'if I want to read a novel, I'll read a novel,' they are expressing the belief that there really is a border between comics and novels and that the creators of both should stay as far away from that border as possible. Again - an underlying metaphorical structure and set of values.

To see how that set of values operates, let's take another look at another metaphorical system used in *Understanding Comics*.

'Form is a Vessel'



pg.6, panel 1

McCloud uses the form as vessel metaphor primarily to suppress the perception of comics as 'a cultural idiom' (ie. a collection of cultural conventions, styles, genres, publishing formats etc). It allows him to separate comics from their

'content' - or history - which, as we have seen, is a primary cause of their 'ghettoisation.' But it also allows him to select one element of comics ('Sequential Art') and to identify it as the 'form.' It becomes the *essential* element (the 'vessel'), and all others are merely *contingent* (things which we have the option of putting into the vessel).

Indeed, this metaphor is part of an 'essentialist' conception of the arts, which assumes that each 'artform' is separate and distinct from every other, possessing unique qualities and abilities, as well as inherent limitations. Essentialist criticism goes on to argue that a 'good' work within any given artform is one which exploits those unique qualities and abilities and avoids the limitations. R. C. Harvey's *The Art of the Funnies* is an example of this approach, in which he argues:

> 'The thing that comics do that no other graphic art does is to weave word and picture together to achieve a narrative purpose. Comics are a blend of word and picture - not a simple coupling of the verbal and the visual, but a blend, a true mixture. . . . From the nature of the medium [therefore], we can draw up one criterion for critical evaluation: in the usual situation, in which both words and pictures are used, a measure of a comic strip's excellence is the extent to which the sense of the words is dependent on the pictures and vice versa.'

As his book moves on to examining the history of comic strips, however, Harvey is forced to make some rather asinine critical judgments, as he attempts to determine whether the words and pictures are equally balanced in individual strips.

One problem essentialists are inevitably confronted by is the undeniable fact that there are plenty of artworks which do cross the borders between the artforms. This gives the lie to the 'form as vessel' metaphor - or at least makes it clear that it *is* a metaphor, rather than an objective truth.

After all, you can't say one moment that the essential nature of comics is 'a blend, a true mixture' of word and picture, and then condemn every comic you find that fails to properly fulfil that criteria as 'bad comics,' or even '*not* comics' (as Harvey does with Hal Foster's *Prince Valiant).* Or rather you *can;* but not without demonstrating that your so-called 'essential nature' is really just a set of values about what comics *should* be.

Essentialism, then, tends to privilege conventions which apparently reflect the supposed 'essence' of the 'form,' and discourages techniques or experiments which transgress the supposed 'borders' between the forms. At its most prescriptive, essentialism expresses a longing for each medium (or form) to remain separate and a belief that when elements of one form enter another, they

somehow ‘dirty’ it, lessening its purity. It suggests that the ‘mission’ of each form is to release the potential of its unique ‘hidden power’ - to do the thing that only that form can do and that any ‘mongrelisation’ of the form reduces its power and prevents it from achieving its mission.

There are film critics, for example, who believe that because the movie is *essentially* a visual medium, its purest expression is the silent movie. Likewise there have been literary critics who despise such ‘gimmicks’ as ‘shape poems’ because poetry is essentially a verbal medium. And plenty of people believe a painting should make sense without recourse to captions, a textual gloss or even prior knowledge of its subject matter or context.

‘Form is Genre’

The ‘form as vessel’ metaphorical system, then, suppresses alternative conceptions which erode the borders between the arts, for example ‘form as genre.’

A genre is made up of a set of conventions and shared expectations between the creator and the audience. We recognize a superhero comic because it is an established ‘type,’ with such conventions as superpowers, costumes, secret identities, supervillains, superhero teams, sidekicks, etc. A superhero comic may include all or only some of these elements. It may fulfil all the reader’s expectations of the genre, or it may surprise the reader by confounding almost all of them. It may be readable as several different genres - perhaps it’s a sci-fi superhero, or a superhero-murder mystery or a soap opera about superheroes. We feel no need to definitively pin it down as belonging to one genre or the other, but are happy to identify it as belonging to several.

When an author writes a story, they don’t have to decide which genre they will use and even if they do, there’s no law saying they have to remain within its limits. Genres provide a vocabulary of elements and devices which the author may explore at will, directed only by their own and their audience’s expectations, all of which they are free to obey or ignore. In fact, those expectations can themselves become tools in the author’s toolkit.

So when ‘form’ is conceived of as ‘genre,’ distinctions such as ‘novel,’ ‘poem,’ ‘comic’ or ‘illustration’ work the same way as ‘detective story,’ ‘science fiction,’ or ‘superhero story.’ An author sets out to put ink on paper (or whatever). There is no natural law that forces them to arrange the ink one way or another - just a set of social conventions that lead us to expect a ‘novel’ to look like *this* and a ‘comic’ to look like *that*. The strength of those expectations will determine how much they effect our critical judgments when faced with works which confound them - such as Derek Jarman’s film *Blue*, which consists of a static blue screen with a

soundtrack of noise, music and speech, for the duration of the movie. Or for that matter, comics like *Prince Valiant* or *Cerebus*.

But this is not where McCloud is coming from, as he demonstrates when he tells Harvey:

> 'Sound is not definitive to motion pictures. Most film scholars see Charlie Chaplin as working in the same medium as Orson Welles. So to speak of the formal qualities of film, you have to speak to the formal qualities of the moving image. Then you can move on to talk about sound.'

For Scott, form is a vessel and each artform is distinguished from every other by an essential nature and the borders between them. There is one border to comics, however, that reveals just how arbitrary (and prescriptive) Scott's map of that vessel is.

Logophobia

> 'If any single caveat can alert map users to their unhealthy but widespread naiveté, it is that *a single map is but one of an infinitely large number of maps that might be produced for the same situation or from the same data.'*
>
> Mark Monmonier, *How to Lie with Maps*

> 'A map can organize the world according to almost any principle of order.... All classificatory grids are arbitrary. They have no necessary or absolute status. It does not matter what kind of grid is used on the map. Any system of lines or points of reference can be imposed to provide orientation, although different mappings may serve very different interests.... For those who inhabit particular mappings, they are likely to be viewed simply as reality.'
>
> Geoff King, *Mapping Reality - an Exploration of Cultural Cartographies*

The belief that 'comics are a visual medium' sits guard at one of comics' most fragile frontiers - the one between comics and illustrated texts (children's picture books and so on). In fact, in *Understanding Comics* Scott fails to define it at all. And by including a number of children's picture books (such as Maurice Sendak's *In the Night Kitchen),* he even seems to leave it wide open.

But when R. C. Harvey raises the question of this border, it soon becomes clear that this was not Scott's intention:

> 'Harvey: 'Do you think that your definition also includes children's literature - books in which there is a picture on every page and prose beneath each picture?'
>
> 'McCloud: 'not if the prose is independent of the pictures. Not if the written story could exist without any pictures and still be a continuous whole. That's how it's usually done, whereas the pictures are usually discontinuous...'
>
> 'Harvey: '[That is] the narrative is continuous and independent of the pictures. And the pictures really are illustrating some moment in the prose narrative. There's no necessary narrative strand in the pictures themselves.'
>
> 'McCloud: 'If you turn that on its head, you have comics. If the pictures, independent of the words, are telling the whole story and the words are supplementing that, then that is comics.''

This exchange is a revealing one. If we were to take his definition at face value, we would expect Scott to agree that children's picture books are indeed comics. So long as there are two pictures somewhere in a book - and so long as those pictures form a narrative, then that book is a comic by Scott's definition. After all, there are those books by Sendak, Feiffer and Gorey he includes in *Understanding Comics*. And if he's willing to include stained glass windows, photo-booth strips and Hogarth's etchings, then surely he's happy to welcome the countless literary classics that the inclusion of picture books would bring into the realm of comics.

But McCloud is not willing to concede the point. Instead he struggles to qualify his definition in such a way that it will exclude 'mere illustrated texts.' It is no longer enough that there be spatially juxtaposed pictures, nor that the reader performs closure in reading those images. *Now* the pictures must tell the *whole* story, *independent* of the words - which are only allowed to *supplement* the pictorial narrative. In effect, McCloud has added an amendment to his definition: comics must not only *contain* pictorial narrative; they must be *dominated* by it.

In the spirit of McCloud's diagrammatic models, let's imagine a spectrum going from word-only texts at one extreme to picture-only texts at the other. Where on that spectrum should we draw the border between comics and illustrated texts?

How much closure do we allow between two illustrations before we decide they contain 'continuous narrative?' How do we decide what parts of the narrative are important enough to constitute 'the whole story?' If the words tell us things the

pictures don't (such as characters' names), can the pictorial narrative be said to tell 'the whole story' without them? Or vice versa (if the pictures tell us things like the colour of the hero's shirt)?

On which side of the border would you put Art Spiegelman's *The Wild Party?* Or Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, a novel which relies on the inclusion of several photos for the continuousness of its narrative? Or Italo Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* - a novel in which a group of mute characters tell their stories by rearranging tarot cards (which are shown in the margin)? Or Tove Jansson's *Moomin* books, whose illustrations provide much of the atmosphere and poetry of the stories? If the pictures provide the reader information not included in the text (and any picture will, even if it's information some might consider unimportant), then doesn't the complete experience of the text *depend* on their inclusion?

Ultimately, any borders we may draw along that spectrum are arbitrary and depend more on what relationship we *wish* to see between words and pictures in comics than on any objectively valid criteria. Of course, this doesn't stop people from trying; one cartoonist friend of mine even argues that if words fill more than 50% of a panel, 'it ain't comics.'

What interests me is why Scott (and, in my experience, most cartoonists) should feel the need for such a border in the first place. After all, Harvey's example ('books in which there is a picture on every page and prose beneath each picture') is essentially the same as the woodcut novels of Lynd Ward and Frans Masereel that Scott embraces in *Understanding Comics* - with only one difference: the 'prose beneath each picture.' But this is apparently a crucial difference. It's as if the very presence of words - *any* words - in a comic is a potential threat to its identity as a comic. To protect that identity, it is essential for the pictures to *dominate* the words. The moment the words take *control* of the narrative from the pictures, we are cast out of the realm of comics and into that of illustrated text.

It is interesting that Scott does not attempt to define this border in *Understanding Comics*. Given how hostile most cartoonists are to suggestions that comics are illustrated texts, you might think this was a border we would be constantly delineating in the clearest terms. But on the contrary, it is an area most of us seem desperate to avoid - perhaps because the border is so vague. One could easily wander too far into that foreign territory, unwittingly leaving our homeland forever.

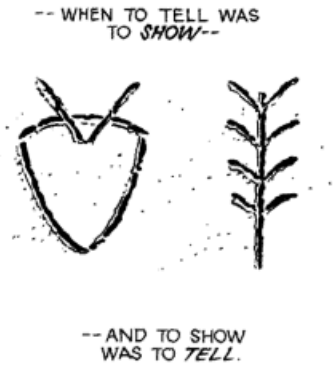
At times it almost seems the danger is one of moral contamination - as if by dabbling in text-dominated narrative, comics like *Cerebus* are somehow betraying their very nature, diluting their essence; the presence of so many words destroys the point of its very existence: 'why didn't he just do it as a novel?' As cartoonists, it seems, it's our duty to create not just great works, but works which constantly

assert their *comic-ness*. Those who mongrelize the form should not be allowed to use it at all.

This fear of textual narrative conquering the 'visual' medium of comics - a kind of logophobia - is so pervasive among cartoonists as to be almost universal.[8] But just what is the problem with words?

The Creation Myth

In Chapter Six of *Understanding Comics* ('Show and Tell') Scott discusses the relationship between words and pictures - not only in comics, but in the history of communication. He invents a kind of creation myth, in which pictures give birth to writing. Over time, words and pictures grow further and further apart from one another, until Rodolphe Topffer recognizes 'their interdependency' and brings 'the family back together at last' by inventing the modern comic. The chapter concludes with Scott expressing 'a certain vague longing for that time over 50 centuries ago -'



pg.161 panel 7

Of course, the historical accuracy of this is debatable. The relationship between words and pictures has always been more complex than Scott suggests. For one thing, he ignores the role of the spoken word, which may predate pictures and certainly predates pictograms. An alternative history, for example, might trace the development of the use of signs, showing how visual, spoken, gestural, musical,

[8] One of my more annoying party tricks is to ask a group of cartoonists "why can't you have a comic without pictures?" and then run for cover. My favourite reply is the dismissive: "Don't be stupid. A comic without pictures is a novel." I mean, that's right. A novel is a comic without pictures.

written and other languages have all grown in parallel, constantly feeding off each other. Words are coined as verbal representations of pictorial techniques, just as many pictorial devices seek to recreate rhetorical ones.

Even the great shifts in the arts that Scott outlines are spurious. During the late 1700s and early 1800s, for example, art and literary criticism were caught up in a debate about 'pictorialist poetry' and 'literary painting,' with described the general feeling that there was altogether too much mingling of the arts going on. Such critics would have been surprised to hear that 'words and pictures had drifted as far apart as possible,' as Scott suggests (pg.149).[9] After all, this was the time of William Blake's painting-poetry synthesis and the heyday of political caricature (including, in the 1780s and 1790s, a craze for political comic strips).

But this chapter isn't intended as a serious history. It's a myth; a kind of genealogy (or origin story) for comics, which goes something like this:

1. There are pictures, which are used to tell stories and show things.
2. Pictures give birth to words.
3. After a long estrangement, words are reunited with 'their parents, . . . pictures' in the form of comics.

Comics are, according to this mythology, our chance to return to an original, pure language of communication - essentially a language of pictures.

The War Between Words and Pictures

The battle to preserve the (imagined) boundaries between the arts has often been expressed as a battle between words and pictures. Words (and therefore poetry and prose) have been seen as 'essentially' narrative, because they are experienced in sequence and therefore across time. Pictures, on the other hand, are 'essentially' spatial, because they are perceived all at once, as relationships across space. Furthermore, pictures are seen as 'motivated' signs (i.e. they resemble the thing they represent) and are therefore best suited to depicting visible, concrete things. Because words are 'arbitrary' signs, however, they are able to represent things that cannot be seen.

[9] For an excellent introduction to these debates and others in the battle between words and pictures, try W. J. T. Mitchell's *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (University of Chicago Press, 1986).

Therefore, the argument usually goes, poetry should stick to telling stories and discussing ideas; poetry that dwells on visual images and scenes ('pictorialism') is bad poetry, because it is trying to do something that pictures do better. It focuses on its deficiencies rather than its strengths; in a sense, it *betrays* its own form. The same is true of pictures that try to tell stories ('narrative pictures') or convey ideas ('rhetorical pictures') rather than concerning themselves simply with scenes, places, arrangements of colour and shape - in short, with the sense of sight.

Whether or not he is aware of the long history of such debates, Scott has been informed by them when he stresses that comics are '*spatially* juxtaposed *pictorial* . . . images.' The essential element in comics is the placement of pictures in sequence - thereby solving this age-old dispute between words and pictures. This is why Scott has recently boiled his definition of comics down to 'Space = Time.'

> '...Maybe the purest example of comics that I've come up with is a picture of two squares, two boxes or panels, sitting next to each other on a blank white background. If it's not comics, it's just a picture of two squares; if it is comics, then that's a picture of one moment and then the next. That's about as far as I can reduce it. And the simplest description of that phenomenon is 'space equals time.' Representing time spatially.'
>
> (*The Comics Journal* #179)

Scott is not saying here that pictures *equal* words. His equation is about 'representing time spatially' - as opposed to textually. So in comics, pictures can convey narrative, just as words do. Comics, then, are something quite different to a 'hybrid' of words and pictures. Rather, they are a new invention in the field of picture-making, allowing the artist to depict not only space, but *time*. In Scott's view, words are irrelevant to the 'essential nature' of comics, as he explains to R. C. Harvey in the *Comics Journal:*

> '...Words and abstract images can be included [in comics] but pictorial [images] is the necessary, essential element; the others are optional. It must have pictures. It must have some visual representation of a visual phenomenon.... I see the visual component as being definitive. Without pictures, it's simply not a comic. Whereas I feel confident that there have been wordless comics.... So when talking about words and pictures together in comics, we're talking about a vital and huge subset of what's being done with the medium, but it's not hardwired to its very substance the way pictures are.'

In a sense, comics are a new language, preserving the grammar (i.e. spatial arrangement) of written language, but replacing the actual words with pictures (perhaps fulfilling Goethe's hope that Toppfer's 'picture stories' will create a

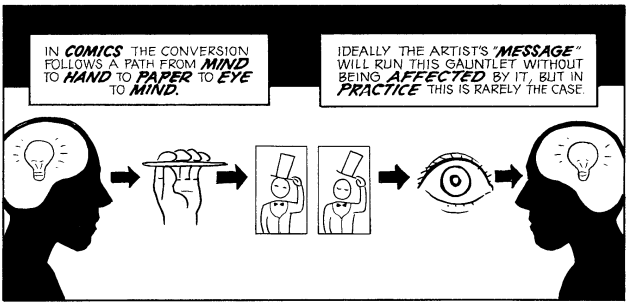
'healing universal language'). Pictures are now allowed to tell stories - to perform the job of words. In effect, to render words 'optional' - replaceable. Perhaps one reason for the current vogue for wordless comics is a desire to demonstrate that 'sequential art' can do anything text can - that with the invention of comics, pictures have finally won the war with language and replaced words altogether.

The Problem With Words

> 'Language is the key to personhood.'
>
> Carl Barks

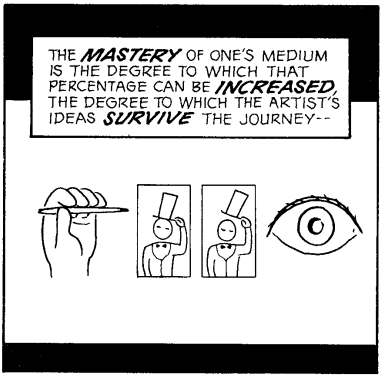
As he demonstrates in chapter nine of *Understanding Comics*, Scott perceives communication according to what Lakoff and Johnson call the 'conduit metaphor,' i.e. language as the conduit through which meaning is transmitted from the speaker to the audience. According to this conception, the challenge of discourse is to smuggle your idea (or signal) through to the listener as clearly as possible - i.e. with as little interference (noise) from the medium as possible. The medium, language, is seen as a channel - but a flawed one, which can hinder clear communication.

This 'conduit' metaphor of communication supports an essentialist view of the arts. Each medium (words, pictures, comics, etc) has inherent limitations. These limitations can contribute to 'noise.' So to improve the chances of clear communication, artists should try to exploit their medium's inherent advantages and avoid those limitations. This is how Scott puts it in *Understanding Comics*:[10]



pg.195, panel 4

[10] A controversial example of this approach is Gregory Cwiklik's essay on 'The Inherent Limitations of the Comics Form as a Narrative Medium' in *The Comics Journal* #184. It's worth noting that many of the outraged replies to his essay did not attack Cwiklik for using an essentialist theory of form, but rather for suggesting that there was anything pictorial narrative could not do.



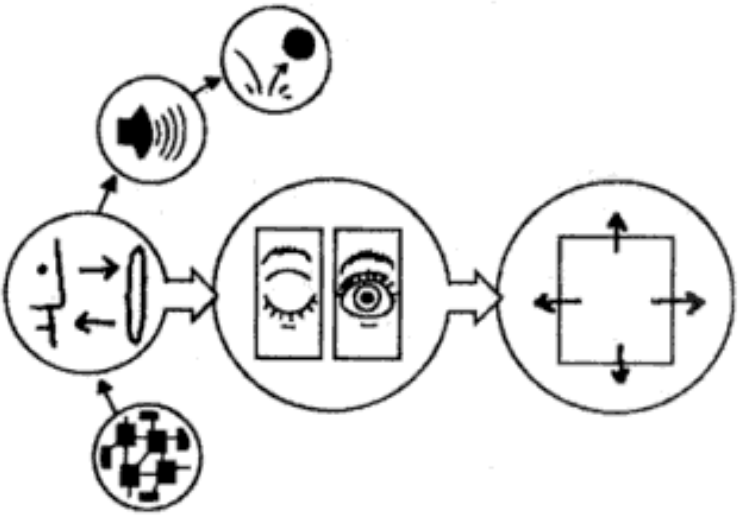
pg.196, panel 4

And this is how he describes the same problem in relation to words in that *Comics Journal* interview:

> McCloud: 'I have this very precise idea in my head. It's only when I try to get it into words that it starts to get garbled.'
>
> Harvey: 'Ahhh, I see. Here we have an indication of the generation gap between us, I perceive. The only way I can get precise about an idea is to put it into words. And yet you have a precise idea before it reaches a verbal stage.'
>
> McCloud: 'Oh yes, definitely. No, the words don't create the meaning for me, that's for sure.'
>
> Harvey: 'Interesting. A harbinger of things to come, I'm sure.... I've always said that you can't be really precise in your thought until you can convert it into words because words are more precise than the vagaries of thought.'
>
> McCloud: 'I see words more as a kind of switching yard. And you've always got to be careful that as your meaning passes through them, they don't send you onto the wrong track, or onto multiple tracks.''

In a number of recent lecture handouts, Scott seems to be exploring a possible solution: replacing words with his own invented vocabulary of pictograms, or 'sign language,' each of which represents a precise idea that he has in his head. The aim, presumably, is to avoid having to using 'tracks' whose meanings are not

entirely under Scott's control. It is an attempt to recreate that mythological original language he described in chapter six of *Understanding Comics:* a kind of writing in which all signs are *'motivated.'* Perhaps Scott hopes that 'motivated' signs are somehow more transparent in meaning.



From one of Scott McCloud's lecture handouts (as published in TheComics Journal *#179, August 1995, pg.59)*

If this is Scott's hope, however, the experiment is doomed to fail. Even these new signs will be read by different people in different ways, and never in quite the way Scott intends. All signs, whether words or pictures, exist as the frisson between a complex and shifting web of meaning and connotation - as do our thoughts.

An alternative metaphor for communication is that language (in all its forms - verbal, textual, visual, gestural) is the field in which we construct meaning. It is how we organise our experience of the world. Rather than language being merely a tool for the communication of ideas (which are somehow supposed to exist outside language), it is the very stuff of which thought, ideas and communication are all made. Language, then, is not something to fear - to struggle against in an effort to preserve the purity of our own ideas. Instead, we are all immersed in language - in a sense, we are made of it. In an act of communication, both the speaker and the audience *work with* language - with that infinitely complex field of meaning - in a way that creates meaning *socially*.

The Infinite Atlas

> 'This book's revelations about how maps *must* be white lies but may *sometimes* become real lies should provide the same sort of reassuring knowledge that allows humans to control and exploit fire and electricity.'
>
> Mark Monmonier, *How To Lie With Maps.*

Understanding Comics is one of my favourite comics. It expresses and explores the same love for comics I've always felt but, like Scott, found all but impossible to share with people outside the comics community. It argues persuasively for comics' limitless potential - that they needn't be restricted to any particular styles, formats, subject matter or media. And it inspires cartoonists to ever more ambitious creativity - to fearlessly explore uncharted territory. When I first read it, it opened up for me new ways of imagining comics. I'd always been interested in the links between comics and such things as Monet's series paintings, medieval narrative frescoes and (that old standard) the Bayeux Tapestry. But along comes Scott who brazenly takes it one step further: these *are* comics, he says. They're not just like comics, they are *actually comics*.

I found this an incredibly liberating exercise; it changed the way I looked at everything. It redrew my mental map of comics. It reminded me of what I used to say to people back in my teens: 'Sure, most comics are crap, but try and imagine a comic done by Picasso! Or James Joyce! Or... (etc).' It reminded me that I'd always intended to write an essay discussing the work of New Zealand's greatest modern painter, Colin McCahon,[11] *as comics* (I still don't know if I'll ever get around to it).

Since those days, I'd gone through a period when I immersed myself in the history of comics - learning for the first time to really love clumsy old trash like Siegel & Schuster's *Superman*, Fox's cheap and nasty pre-code titles, those crazy silver age DC comics edited by guys like Mort Weisinger and drawn by Wayne Boring and Kurt Schaffenberger et al. . . . In short, I learned to love everything people hate about comics - even Image comics.[12]

Reading *Understanding Comics* brought those two ways of loving comics together for me - in that sense it helped me to write my own book *Hicksville*. Part of me has been in a dialogue with Scott's book for the past six years - and will be for some time yet.

[11] To get an idea of what I'm on about, you can see a good selection of McCahon's work on the following website: www.mccahon.co.nz

[12] Let's just say I love them the way a parent loves their difficult teenager.

I have tackled *Understanding Comics* primarily as a work of polemic, which seeks to build a comics nation (on particular terms) because I believe there is a danger that in adopting it as a manifesto, we will forget that for all the exciting new territory it opens up, it is still only one map. Like any map, it presents only one way of reading an infinitely complex landscape, thereby suppressing other possible readings. There are some alternative readings which McCloud is clearly wanting to suppress - those dreaded 'stereotypes' that 'defined what comics could be too narrowly.' But even these maps can be useful at times - they helped guide me on my journey through the history of the industry, for example. They are, after all, the same maps that guided many of the cartoonists, publishers and readers who built that industry.

Then there are countless new maps we could start drawing for ourselves - exploring the connections between comics and literature, film, photography, graphic design, typography,[13] performance, diagrams, or (for that matter) cartography. Personally, I find it useful to keep as many maps in my pocket atlas as possible - and to wander outside their delineated borders every time I feel the scenery is getting a little stale. Borders are, after all, artificial inventions designed to control the movement of people, commodities and ideas. They have their uses, sure - but for an explorer, they are merely an irresistible invitation.

So the maps I use most often are those which allow me to go wherever my work takes me - if I can find what I need over in the realm of visual images, that's where I'll go. But that doesn't mean I'll give up my citizenship of the land of prose and poetry - I feel as much a part of that country as I do a compatriot of Breughel, Picasso, Pollock and Cartier-Bresson. Or for that matter Herriman, Crumb, Herge and Tezuka. There are times when I'll want to let words take over completely, and other times when I speak entirely with pictures. I see my job as putting things on paper (or, if Scott has his way, on computer screens). I feel no need to limit what shape those things can take.

> 'And remember: it's only lines on paper, folks!'
>
> Robert Crumb

[13] Michel Vrana once told me about a conversation he'd had with Chris Ware. Michel had been complimenting Ware on his drawing when Ware demurred: 'Oh, that's not *drawing* - that's typography.'

INVENTING COMICS:
Scott McCloud's Definition of Comics

Being a long and tedious essay examining Scott McCloud's groundbreaking and elegant book *Understanding Comics: the Invisible Art,* with passing mention made of such diverse and interesting topics as cartography, metaphor, nationalism, logophobia, comics without pictures, ideology, eighteenth century pictorialism and many other clever-sounding things.

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Please note: this essay can also be read for free via the internet at:
www.hicksville.co.nz/Inventing%20Comics.htm

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