

BECAUSE COMICS: COMICS LITERACY AND MULTIMODAL PEDAGOGY

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ABSTRACT

How and what we teach in the post-secondary English classroom has tremendous power, both regarding individual students and larger contexts in which they function. As post-secondary instructors, our pedagogical approach to our subjects can impact our student's abilities and experiences directly through interactions with texts, and also impact our specific institutions, our academic disciplines, and larger social structures. This project will propose what is best termed a disruptive pedagogy, founded in comics literacy, and a primary goal is to effect change in the classroom and therefore in our students' later social and professional contexts.

Increasingly, what we teach in English classrooms is moving towards a pedagogy of multimodality that reflects the contexts of our students outside of the classroom. Multimodal researchers Jennifer Rowsell and Eryn Decoste state that "To expand notions of composition, there is a need to not only introduce other modes such as visuals, sounds and interactive modes, but also develop frameworks, activities and lesson ideas to actually teach other modes of representation and expression" (246-247). Yet, as they mention, this isn't always easy or even possible. But an additional issue is that multimodality can elide the discussion of narrative, one of the key affordances of the English classroom. Further, much emphasis in multimodal pedagogies is on technology, which access to the needed technology is not universal. Focusing education tactics in the context of internet enabled classrooms will necessarily leave some populations behind

To address these two issues, this project works to propose a multimodal pedagogy that uses comics as an ideal narrative multimodal medium. By fitting comics into the framework of multimodal education in post-secondary classrooms, this dissertation demonstrates the potential of the medium. Therefore, the focus of this project is on building a multimodal pedagogy for

comics. By focusing on the methods by which comics create, this dissertation proposes a formalized way to use them as a foundation of a pedagogy that builds student's multimodal literacy. A standard for deploying these texts has yet to calcify, meaning that current research can impact multimodal teaching substantially in the future.

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CHAPTER 1: COMICS STUDIES AND COMICS IN THE CLASSROOM

How and what we teach in the post-secondary English classroom has tremendous power, both regarding individual students and larger contexts in which they function. As post-secondary instructors, our pedagogical approach to our subjects can impact our student's abilities and experiences directly through interactions with texts, and also impact our specific institutions, our academic disciplines, and larger social structures. This project will propose what is best termed a disruptive pedagogy, founded in comics¹ literacy, and a primary goal is to effect change in the classroom and therefore in our students' later social and professional contexts.

Increasingly, what we teach in English classrooms is moving towards a pedagogy of multimodality that reflects the contexts of our students outside of the classroom. Gabriel Sealey-Morris argues that multimodal literacy is essential for intellectual survival in contemporary culture (46), as very few, if any, of our students interact only with texts that are of a single genre or mode. Instead, they are more often reading texts that incorporate a variety of communicative modes such as images, sound, video, and so on, and methods of instruction should continue to adapt to that external reality. Multimodal researchers Jennifer Rowsell and Eryn Decoste state that "To expand notions of composition, there is a need to not only introduce other modes such as visuals, sounds and interactive modes, but also develop frameworks, activities and lesson ideas to actually teach other modes of representation and expression" (246-247). Yet, as Rowsell and Decoste mention regarding their unsuccessful attempt to bring critique of sound/music into a classroom (254), this isn't always easy or even possible. But an additional issue is that multimodality's emphasis on mode-switching, production, and technology often (though not

¹ Throughout this dissertation, the general phrase "comic" will be used to refer to the artistic medium which primarily functions through the usage of panels containing images and text, rendered in sequence across a designed page layout. It includes, but is not limited to, American comic books, Comix, graphic novels, Franco-Belgian *Bande Desinees*, Japanese and Chinese *manga*, and newspaper comic strips. Additionally, the academic discipline focused on this medium is referred to throughout as "comics studies".

always) can elide the discussion of narrative, one of the key affordances of the English classroom. This deemphasis on engagement with narrative leaves students at a lack when addressing the discursal and ethical complexities that engagement with narrative texts often allows outside of the classroom (see literary theorist Wayne Booth's essential article "The Ethics of Teaching Literature"). Oftentimes that fundamental is replaced with an emphasis on design, but in discussion that is rarely mentioned along with usage of narrative (see Rowsell and Decoste, Edwards-Groves, Rowsell and Walsh). Further, much emphasis in multimodal pedagogies is on modes separated by technology: text, video, recorded audio, web design, and so on, but that creates two additional issues. First and foremost, access to the technology that provides most of these capabilities, the internet, is not universal. The Census Bureau shows that the digital divide, or the disparity of access to information technology between socioeconomic groups, is alive and well, at least in the US (Martin, 2018). Focusing education tactics in the context of internet enabled classrooms will necessarily leave some populations behind, and not fulfill what multimodal researcher Carey Jewitt refers to as the "ideological purposes of the design of new egalitarian and cosmopolitan social futures" (245) that multimodal education strives for.

To address these two issues, elision of narrative-focused pedagogy and insufficient focus on inequities of technological access, this project works to propose a multimodal pedagogy that addresses those issues by using comics as an ideal narrative multimodal medium. By fitting comics into the framework of multimodal education in post-secondary classrooms, this dissertation demonstrates the versatility and potential of the medium. Therefore, the focus of this project is on building a multimodal pedagogy for comics. By focusing on the methods by which comics create meaning between and through the modes they deploy, this dissertation proposes a

formalized way to use them as a foundation of a pedagogy that builds student's multimodal literacy. A praxis for deploying these artifacts on the terms of their own medium in the classroom has yet to calcify, meaning that current research on the versatile and powerful medium of comics can impact multimodal teaching substantially in the future.

Granted, comics are at this point common features on university syllabi, but as with any medium comics have undergone their own stratification, with some being viewed as highbrow literature and the rest largely being viewed as disposable entertainment for kids and teens. While academic and critical study focused on the small sub-genre of comics known as graphic novels continues to grow, the majority of that artform has not received similar attention, nor earned the cultural capital that is provided by being the subject of rigorous academic work. There is a common argument, especially within the rapidly growing academic field of comics studies, that graphic novels have become the field's sole focus of attention because they are inherently superior to the mainstream comic books that readers are most familiar with. This project will however demonstrate ways in which that viewpoint does a disservice to those who research, study, and learn with comics, and ultimately does harm to the subjects that comics studies hopes to legitimize. Furthermore, this extends to a devaluation of the literacies that are afforded by pedagogies focused on the comics medium. This project's proposed pedagogy will undo the textual elitism that underpins the graphic novel/comic book divide. By redistributing academic and critical attention to include mainstream comics, as what's chosen to receive said attention is a function of what's being taught in the post-secondary classroom, the elitism that elides a substantial portion of the medium in regard to usage in the classroom and necessary critical work can be productively dismantled.

Therefore, in regard to comics specifically, I argue the following: First, mainstream comics and graphic novels have value as pedagogical subjects and as artifacts for academic study. Second, the value of a text lies in its power as a resource; what matters is what a text can do for a reader (or a teacher), and the specifics of the text such as the genre are not necessarily determiners of its importance or value. Third, because of this, the approaches to narrative that comics take means they can relate to readers in unique ways. This is especially in regard to the necessity of readers to, in the terms of the Marion Perret's terms, "become co-creators of the story's meaning" (136), owing to the structure of a comic's narrative and the gaps between comic's panels. As a cheap, printed multimodal medium, comics provide readers with affordances that are lacking elsewhere, such as providing direct illustrations of the impact of employing multiple modes of meaning in a single text on a printed page, visible to analysis in its entirety all at once. Because of that, the medium is a latent opportunity for founding a pedagogical approach based on a critical multimodal literacy based in comics, waiting to be exploited. Fourth, by teaching comics we further the goals of teaching texts in new, inadequately explored ways, in this case especially related to how comics fulfill the goals of multimodal literacies, a gap in research that this project will help to fill.

This project is a critical approach to analyzing the medium as a whole, based on what comics are and what comics do. With this approach in mind, it will become clearer how comics relay narratives through their multimodal messaging; based on that understanding a teacher can better analyze exactly what certain texts can do for learners. This is helpful to explain as the state of comics as teaching tools is not as strong as it may initially appear, especially when educators wish to move beyond the viewpoint of the medium as an immature literature or a new way to approach non-fiction novels. The 2009 collection *Teaching the Graphic Novel* was an important

step towards using comics in the classroom, and since that time several other volumes have been published (notable standouts are 2012's *Teaching Comics and Graphic Narratives: Essays on Theory, Strategy, and Practice* and 2017's *Wham! Teaching with Graphic Novels Across the Curriculum*). There are resources for teachers who want to incorporate comics into their classes, both textual ones and in the form of educational organizations (such as the Denver-based Pop Culture Classroom, that provides free teaching tools and comics on loan to K-12 teachers). However, it has become increasingly clear that, while there are various texts written on how to read and analyze comics from an instructor's point of view, there is a gap when it comes to teaching students how to read them and on what terms to do so.

What's Wrong With How We Teach Comics

The majority of the texts that focus on teaching comics center on the subjects, politics, and narratives that are conveyed in this medium, while what is missing is a focus on how comics are achieving their unique conveyance. The assumption is usually that students are either already expert readers of the medium or can easily adapt previous reading strategies to the medium. That is mostly untrue, and, as composition theorist Kathryn Comer states, "contradicts common scholarly assumptions about young people's previous engagement with the medium" (78). Engagement with the medium in a more than casual way is not common. But more importantly the unspoken aspect of that assumption is one of the most common and most damaging stereotypes commonly applied to comics: that they are simpler to read and understand than print novels because of their combination of visual/artistic and textual information. But, as one who has made the mistake of following this assumption, I have found that students may need as much training in ways of reading comics such as *Jimmy Corrigan* or *Arkham Asylum* as they may need

if were they reading novels such as *Ulysses* or *House of Leaves*. As such, a formal methodology of teaching comics is necessary to further the field of study as a whole.

Part of what has hampered the development of a strong method is the field of comics studies. Comics have managed to establish some cultural legitimacy in the United States, both as educational resources and as the foundation of a distinct academic discipline. But despite that, or more likely because of that, the primary issues confronting the field are no longer arguing for legitimacy of the medium. Instead, what has become a central problematic is the general distaste and distrust for the majority of the medium within comics studies itself. While most comics sold and read in the United States are released by one of the three major publishers (Marvel, DC, and Image) and are likewise part of the superhero genre that those three companies favor, most of the comics being studied in post-secondary education are from the sub-genre of graphic novels. In “Pedagogy with Online Tools,” the comics scholar Bart Beaty demonstrates the “the strong bias towards the self-contained, author-driven graphic novel” (58). His research in the Open Syllabus Project, a repository of syllabus in the United States shows that, of the ten most assigned texts in the medium, only three (*The Dark Knight Returns*, *Watchmen*, and *The Sandman* series) are in the superhero tradition, and both *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* actively deconstruct and criticize the genre of that they are ostensibly a part. The comics scholar Dale Jacobs notes that “comics such as *Maus*, *Fun Home*, and *Persepolis* are regularly included in literature classes” (“Text, Object, Transaction” 24), graphic novels all. Nick Sousanis and Frederick Køhlert, comics scholars both, argue that “preference for text-heavy and ‘literary’ comics seems to have been reproduced in comics studies” (238), a tendency that glosses over the genres that rely largely on action-oriented visuals. Despite the dominance of the superhero genre from a publishing standpoint, it rarely receives sustained critical attention. This creates a dissonance

between what is being studied academically and between both what is being primarily produced and what readers may have come across beforehand. This tendency to focus on comics from specific sub-genres alienates the academic discourse surrounding comics from the medium even further.

In response to the tendency to focus on a very small sample of the comics medium, especially as the move towards multimodal teaching becomes more pronounced, what follows makes the argument that no one genre of comic is more deserving of critical or academic attention. The dismissal in the academic sphere of the majority of comics is dangerous for the field and also does a disservice to students as culturally we shift towards more and more visual communications. But to preface the discussion on that, it is necessary to address the institutional justification for using comics in general, and why perhaps they haven't been included more frequently to date.

There are fundamental issues in the way comics, even graphic novels, are represented in the university context. The first issue is what Christine Ferguson describes in her chapter in the collection *Teaching The Graphic Novel* as “The hostile and patronizing attitudes toward popular graphic novels that one sometimes encounters in the academy” (201), that is the most widespread. As an unabashedly popular art form, comics often receive much the same dismissal as other mediums such as video games. Antipathy towards comics in general though seems to be founded on deeper, fundamental ideas regarding the arts and aesthetics. Thierry Groensteen, a comics historian/critic, notes that there is an “ideology of purity that has dominated the West’s approach to aesthetics since Lessing” (42), the influential 18th century German philosopher. This ideology of purity privileges the idea of the rigid partitioning of the Arts, especially those that have different functional methods, such as painting and literature. David Carrier, a cultural critic

and early advocate for comics studies, describes the aesthetic conflict inherent in comics by noting that “painting” is “an art of space” and “literature” is “an art of time” (62), so western artistic ideals would posit their inability to meet in an artistic way. Further, according to Lessing’s ideals, artistry is evident in the quality with which an artist examines a single art form, experimenting with its properties, and discovering what it is capable of. The intersection with other arts would be considered a pollution of that experimental depth. Or as Jesper Neilsen and Søren Wichmann explain “this separation (of text and image) resulted in a conception of ‘high’ art as comprising either ‘pure’ texts or ‘pure’ images, whereas the combination of the two was regard as inferior and best suited for advertising, entertainment, and types of ‘low’ art ” (62). Comics, of course, combine the two forms and, as the comics critic Charles Hatfield puts it, “flout ideas of formal purity” (22), and at the same time become conflated with that realm of supposed “low” art in which forms mix and interact with one another.

Therefore, a large part of the enmity towards the medium would seem to be based on its relation to things rarely discussed as art, largely in part because it fails to conform to the standard of privileging one artistic medium. This relationship with low art tends to alienate texts in general from classrooms and discussion in post-secondary education, as there are cultural dictums regarding what types of texts are worth studying in the classroom. In *Distinction*, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu notes that there is a partitioning of artistic tastes into “Legitimate, middle-brow, and popular” (16), each related to specific social classes, with the “legitimate” being closely tied to those with significant educational/cultural capital; that is, the upper classes. Additionally, one of the primary ways to gain or to have said capital is through knowledge and “taste” (170, among many others) regarding cultural artifacts. Educational institutions primarily function, in Bourdieu’s terms, as transmitters of capital by knowledge of legitimate tastes, that

artistically is founded in Lessing's ideology of purity. Comics, therefore, not only trouble that ideology on its own, but also undermine the tacit goal of higher education, that of transmitting ideas of "legitimate" taste. With their dual-track consumption, through words and art, comics are clear examples of "popular" tastes, or as Bourdieu terms them "not-yet legitimate culture" (370). While many may harbor semantic richness and narrative complexity on par with any other narratives, as Joseph Witek, a comics pedagogy researcher, argues in his own discussion of the value of comics, "panegyrics to the semiotic complexity of *Krazy Kat* or the moral profundities of *Maus* are likely to leave hostile administrators or colleagues unmoved" (219).

The second issue facing comics studies is perhaps more frustrating and also more likely to undermine the long-term success of comics being culturally accepted as an artistic medium. Resistance in university classrooms to the medium is neither unexpected nor entirely new. Similar charges of "low"-ness were brought against television and film (Bourdieu 370), and the latter at least has achieved substantial academic legitimization. Critical work that consistently and cogently argues for the artistic value of comics will eventually be heard, as has been the case with other new mediums. However, a major hindrance to comics being accepted as an artistic medium is rooted within the medium of comics itself, and largely springs from creators, fans, and critics working to gain that exact cultural legitimization.

As succinctly as possible, the second issue facing comics is that there is a viewpoint among those who consider the medium worthy of study that only the high-brow graphic novel sub-genre, represented by such comics as Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, and most of all Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, is worth our student's time, and our time as instructors. This of course would mean that the majority of the medium, which are published as comic books, is to be avoided. The comic book form took shape following the May 1938 release

of *Action Comics #1*, featuring the first appearance of Superman. This format has largely dominated the medium of comics since. But in the 1960s, underground “comix” began to appear that often featured adult themes and more experimental narratives than the mainstream comics, that were, at the time, largely hampered by self-imposed censorship. In 1964, artist Richard Kyle “first use(d) the phrase ‘graphic novel’” to refer to some of these independent comix (Baetens 69), and the industry found itself with a new term that soon carried greater cultural cache. The tendency to use this term to designate certain comics as more “literary” was most importantly demonstrated by Will Eisner, the most influential American comic artist. He stated that, during his efforts to get his revolutionary comic *A Contract With God* published, “In a futile effort to entice the patronage of a mainstream publisher, I called it a ‘graphic novel’” (Eisner). This impulse, to use the more “literary” term as opposed to “comic” has since been prevalent, especially among those artists who are looking to distance themselves from mainstream, superhero led titles (fig. 1).



Figure 1. Left: Man screams at God. From: Eisner, Will. *A Contract with God*. DC Comics, 1978. Right: Superman fights a swamp monster. From: Pasko, Martin et al. “How to Make a Marshland Monster!” *Superman* #319, Jan. 1978, DC Comics. The difference in both theme and representation between the two was dramatic.

As such, the comics medium as it exists in America is now often presented as having two distinct forms. The first is the long-form, multi-issue, multi-creator “comic book,” usually featuring superheroes or other sci-fi and fantasy themes. The second is the “graphic novel,” a single-issue (usually called “one-shot”) volume, usually with a single creator, that usually deals with more complex, adult, and thematically rich topics. Already there is substantial aesthetic judgement just in that definition, but there is a further split in regard to artistic credibility as well.

Jan Baetens, a Belgian comic artist and theorist, states that “The one-shot approach allows graphic novels to be distinguished from what many see as a classic means of selling out to the commercial demands of the ‘culture industry,’ that converts an idea or a character into an endless repeated series” (14). Baetens argues that, due to the publishing structure that is present in the comic industry, artistic integrity is largely only present in the graphic novel medium, that allows, importantly “at least some level of self-knowing ‘play with a purpose’ of the traditional comic book form” (19). That freedom separates it from the staid format of the mainstream publishers such as Marvel, DC, and Image. However, the arguments against mainstream comics here are largely quite weak.

One of the primary arguments against mainstream comics is that they are formally dull. Compared to the work of graphic novelists such as Chris Ware (author of *Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid in the World*) or Alison Bechdel (best known for her novel *Fun Home*), the likes of Jim Lee (famous for his work on various *Batman* titles) and Jim Steranko (Famous for his work on *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* and *Captain America*) are artistically workmanlike, lacking inventiveness. However, many mainstream comics feature work that is formally experimental in the extreme (such as the work in Dave McKean’s *Arkham Asylum*, or the opening sequence of *Amazing Spider-Man #33*, by Stan Lee and Steve Ditko), and many graphic novels (such as Doucet’s *My New York Diary* and Lynda Barry’s work) make little to no movement outside traditional comic formats or storytelling modes.

While mainstream comics are more subject to editorial oversight than the work of most people who prefer the term graphic novelist, these mainstream comic houses themselves produced two of the early graphic novels that launched the form’s (semi-) mainstream literary success. *Watchmen*, by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, and *The Dark Knight Returns*, by Frank

Miller and Klaus Jonson, that formed the basis of the graphic novel as a medium in terms of both themes and production, each came out of DC, the second largest of the comics publishers.

Granted, graphic novelists, especially now that there is substantial interest in the genre, do have greater freedom than those working under the auspices of a major publisher. But graphic novels are still books, and still need publishers, editors, and printers, and when the impact of the aforementioned culture industry are still deployed, the impact on the final products' artistic integrity, in a comparison to mainstream comics and self-published novels, is at most a difference of degree, not kind. As Bourdieu noted in *Distinction*, "There is no way out of the game of culture" (12). In regard to the growth of literary culture as it works to incorporate or understand comics, this schism impacts the acceptance and overall quality of the medium severely. It will depend on what continues to be taught in universities, and therefore that comics become viewed as legitimate works.

What's Wrong With Comics Studies

The majority of the texts cited in this project, in one way or another, detail or exemplify how criticism fails to take comics as seriously as it should. The irony of course is that many of these same texts strive to bring legitimacy to the medium while at the same time denigrating large portions of it and trying to put distance between the majority of comics and the current comics canon. As Ramzi Fawaz, author of *The New Mutants* and numerous works of comics criticism, puts it, "Literary studies has granted scholarly respect only to a highly curated short list of comics because of their perceived erudition and self-awareness (Bechdel's *Fun Home*), their 'seriousness' or attention to historically complex realities (Spiegelman's *Maus* and Sacco's comics journalism), or their self-consciously experimental form (Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan*)" (589). This may be for various reasons, not the least of which is that there still isn't a solid

understanding, including for avid readers and creators themselves, of what a comic is or is not. However, the medium's lack of a specific definition is a seriously flawed basis for denying comics critical legitimacy. Charles Hatfield convincingly argues in "Defining Comics in the Classroom" that "The search for airtight definition is counterproductive...insisting on an exclusive...definition sends the unintended message that comics must be 'substantially less complex and vital than any of the literary genres'" (21). Evincing "an informed skepticism about definitions in general" (20), Hatfield takes the viewpoint that criticism doesn't need to wait to define what something is in order to critique it.

However, returning to Fawaz, the fact that literary studies has granted legitimacy to even a handful of comics is remarkable; regardless of a solid critical methodology, comics rely enough on narrative and cartooning that we have ways to critique them in part. More remarkable still is the venue in which his article was published, a special issue of the *PMLA* dedicated to praise, critique, and responses to *Why Comics? From the Underground to Everywhere*, a landmark work of academic criticism by comics scholar Hillary Chute. Works of criticism on the medium are rare and are even more rarely the source of legitimate critique, but Chute's is, and is being accepted as, a foundational work in the field of comics studies, one of the first in the (hopefully) burgeoning field of comics criticism that brings the medium more academic cache and mainstream success. And there are other signs of the medium gaining cultural capital. The 2009 collection *Teaching the Graphic Novel* was published by the Modern Language Association. Special sessions at academic conferences, devoted to comics and graphic novels, are now commonplace. A dedicated Comics Studies Society held its first conference in 2018, and those are set to continue annually. Of course, large conventions such as the San Diego Comic-Con have long running attendant academic conferences. The texts mentioned by Fawaz, and a

few others, are frequent fixtures in both general education and major English courses at the university level in the United States.

At first glance, it appears that concerns about the state of comics studies may be unfounded, that in large part the misrepresentations and dismissal by the majority of readers, critics, and teachers has more to do with the inherent conservative bent of publishing and reading habits than any serious misunderstanding of comics. It is, after all, one of the youngest arts. It was only in 1986, with the publication of three of the foundational works of the medium (*Maus I*, *Watchmen*, and *The Dark Knight Returns*), that the form started to gain the attention of the mainstream reading public. Of course, comics aimed at telling literary stories predated this, such as *A Contract with God*, but the three created a critical mass that demanded attention. When the collected edition of *Maus* was awarded a special Pulitzer Prize in 1992, it signaled a legitimization of the text, and its medium, to a certain extent. Since then the public awareness and acceptance has expanded. Chute's text then is punctuation on a period of expansion, legitimization, and cautious acceptance, and the hope is that each of those will continue as more books like hers, and more comics as well, are published.

But the idea of the graphic novel, specifically in opposition to comics, remains something beyond just a publishing convenience. When Richard Kyle coined the term, and particularly after the publication of Will Eisner's *A Contract with God*, the phrase gained traction as a signifier that the text designated as such was a more serious work than the superhero comics that dominate the medium to this day. In "Comics as Literature," the philosopher Aaron Meskin states that "It is plausible that warranted critical evaluation of works of art depends on their proper categorization" (222), that has led to the schism in the views of "graphic novels" and comics as a whole. In "The Graphic Novel's Dilemma: Debating a Genre's Search for Respect,"

Armando Montes, the director of the comics convention *Salón del Comic* in Guadalajara, MX, stated, “We want people to know that the comic is not just about superheroes, and that is what is going to set us apart from other exhibitions of this genre” (qtd. in Critchley). This narrowing of focus and acceptability, to that which stands as counterexamples to the majority of the medium, further marginalizes comics that do conform to the standards of the medium, and that do contain elements of the fantastic, and most importantly, regardless of any merit those texts may actually contain. Chute’s view abounds; what is keeping comics from being held in high esteem is purportedly the superhero genre (instead of unwarranted outside perspectives on the value of the art-form). Kristin Fletcher-Spear, Meredith Jenson-Benjamin, and Teresa Copeland, comics researchers and librarians, state “but it is important to remember that not all graphic novels are about superheroes” (“The Truth about Graphic Novels: A Format, Not a Genre” 38), as if to remind readers that though much of the medium shouldn’t be considered, the exceptions should be taken seriously.

Meskin addresses this as well: “The reader may have noted that I have said little in defense of superhero comics to this point. That is no accident. I do not believe that mainstream superhero comics typically possess much in the way of substantive literary value,” he states, and continues on to say “I suspect it is...superhero comics that underwrites much across-the-board skepticism about the art of comics. But this is a misguided skepticism. For although it may be the case that the best-known comics in English fall into these categories, there are a very large number of comics that do not” (both 222). This, though attempting to create space for comics that contain artistic merit, again attempts to erase the majority of the medium that importantly is also the aspect of the form that a majority of readers would recognize. Most consumers are familiar with the likes of Bob Kane and Stan Lee (or at least their respective creations, Batman

and Spider-Man) but far fewer would recognize the creators of popular graphic novels by name, such as Craig Thompson, Marjorie Liu, Alison Bechdel, and Chris Ware. This emphasis on the exceptions creates a strategic rhetoric by which only some works of the medium can be accepted as worthy of criticism and study. Examples such as Bechdel's *Fun Home*, Thompson's *Blankets*, and Spiegelman's *Maus*, are absorbed into the literary establishment while simultaneously further marginalizing the rest.

Therefore, the main conversation in comics studies has changed, from *Why Comics?* to "Why these specific comics?" While it is rarely directly discussed, a possible reason for comics' exclusion from legitimacy is often implicit in academic works on comics. Critique often revolves around how well an artifact achieves the aim of its medium and genre, and in relation to its short history, a critical apparatus for comics isn't always readily available. Is an example judged on the quality of the artwork? The narrative? The dialogue? The interaction of the three? In "Is a Picture Worth a Thousand Words," comics researcher Michael Pagliaro attempts to provide such a tool, as a way to determine the literary/artistic merit of a "graphic novel." Pagliaro constructs his apparatus negatively, beginning with comics that *are* highly regarded and then attempting to draw general conclusions about what they do, and to use those actions or moves as a basis for determining literary merit. The obvious flaw here though is that comics is far broader than just graphic novels, and those that are highly regarded represent only a small cross-section of the genres in which comics can potentially work. Instead, what Pagliaro unintentionally emphasizes is a major reason that many highly regarded comics have been so well received: they are similar thematically and structurally to works that many scholars are already familiar with and respect.

This leads to the situation that Fawaz is addressing when he makes the assertion that only a very short list of comics (*Fun Home*, *Maus*, *Jimmy Corrigan*, and the works of Joe Sacco)

and ones very much like them are granted any “scholarly respect” (589). While this is somewhat inaccurate, it may be more hyperbole than distortion; the actual list of commonly studied comics is not significantly lengthier. Gene Yang’s *American-Born Chinese*, Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons *Watchmen*, Will Eisner’s *A Contract with God*, Daniel Clowes’ *Ghost World*, George Herriman’s *Krazy Kat*, and various texts by Seth, R. Crumb, Neil Gaiman, and Lynda Barry complete the entire list of common texts used for critique. Despite the thousands of comics available, the texts one has a high likelihood of encountering in any book on American comics, or taking any non-specialized course on them, numbers about a dozen.

In “A Nice Neighborhood,” comics scholar Jared Gardner critiques the exclusivity of the subjects of comics studies, noting that “The neighborhood where (Hillary) Chute (and most of comics studies) lives is reserved for the alternative, independent, and art comics that rose to cultural prominence with the successful marketing of the graphic novel” (596), while largely eliding the vast majority of the medium. In their collection *With Great Power Comes Great Pedagogy*, Susan E. Kirtley, Antero Garcia, and Peter E. Carlson further argue that “the majority of what Hillary Chute has called ‘today’s contemporary canon’ (14) is composed of auteurs creating ‘literary’ or ‘art house’ comics, largely ignoring the more mainstream publications,” (5) that they refer to as “a myopic vision we hope to see expanded in the future” (5)

Gardner’s metaphor of a gated neighborhood is especially apt, as mainstream comics are often created for mass audiences, as opposed to those in the “neighborhood” that are often created as more high-brow literature and marketed to those that are frequent consumers of such texts. However, while comics that are marketed as graphic novels are often granted access to the neighborhood and receive critique and cultural capital, others are pushed further from legitimacy.

Hillary Chute argues against this; her argument briefly summarized is that just because people keep writing about *Maus* doesn't mean that other texts won't be written about. Ideally, that would be true, but in a field as self-conscious as comics studies and as afflicted with "anxious throat clearing about how to define its object" (Hatfield 19), the preponderance of scholarship focusing on a select few texts rapidly leads to canonization, ossification, stagnation, and conservatism regarding our subjects—exactly the kind of un-democratic situations that comics scholars claim to want to undo.

The reason behind the formation of this "neighborhood" is open to debate, but comics and cultural critic Andrew Hoberek offers a theory. "Canons," even the barely formed comics canon, "are not simply neutral lists but aggregated examples of a shared, if not always explicit, aesthetic theory" (616). This aesthetic theory, though still in formation, is largely based on the *auteur* theory that drove film studies in the 1950s until the present, that suggests that works of art are better when they are the product of a single artist and when they are created largely without consideration of the marketplace in which they will be sold. That theory was based, in genre theorist Daniel Chandler's terms, on "the Romantic ideology of the primacy of authorial 'originality' and 'vision', emphasizing individual style and artistic 'self-expression'" (5). Film studies then, as comics studies is doing now, attempted to situate the burgeoning artistic consciousness of and about a medium in the context of 19th-century literature, primarily as a move to echo some of the aspects of already-legitimized art works. Therefore, the majority of works that are common subjects of critique are almost always single-issue comics, that are the product of one person who acts as both artist and writer (though some space is made for works that employ one artist and one author). Additionally, they are largely non-fiction, and are works that focus on the author's own experiences or subjectivities, and rarely work in the contexts of

larger ongoing stories as most comics do. Works such as these are then usually the ones marketed as “graphic novels” or “graphic narratives” to grant them a more literary status and to put them in opposition directly to the familiar comic books of Marvel and DC. Baetens phrases is thus: “The difference between comic books and graphic novels is *often* but not always the difference between the collective...way of working in the cultural industry...on the one hand, and the personal and subjective mode of the individual artist who manages to pervade all possible aspects of his/her creation, on the other hand” (18). In other words, the “neighborhood” is made up of texts that offer their readers a single (or at most dual) creative vision, as opposed to the collective that is usually behind a given mainstream work.

The main tension in the field then has moved from striving for initial access into the academy to now deciding what will be its main subjects of study and instruction. Hoberek argues that this question implicitly is asking what comics studies wants to be and why; “Now that it (comics studies) has achieved a modicum of respect...the task is somewhat different: to learn to treat the mainstream as more than just grist for great artists’ mills” (618). Hoberek, however, is solidly in the minority in his viewpoints. In regard to that “grist,” Chute states that “the historical definition of cartoon (that is more closely aligned with mainstream comics) continues to resonate with authors who embrace the mass reproduction of comics—the aspect of the form that keeps comics from being considered “fine art” (*Comics as Literature* 454), arguing that the historical characteristics of comics have hindered the medium’s acceptance. The further the academic study thereof distances itself from the roots of comics, the argument goes, the more likely it is to be accepted along the likes of film and literature. In that, Chute echoes a number of other comics scholars that advocate for the sub-genre of texts that are referred to by the terms “graphic novel”

or “graphic narrative” (see Meskin, Fletcher-Spear et al., Baetens). Rhetorically, that phrase itself is used to sunder the popular and auteur-led sectors of the medium.

But David Carrier notes that “comics include inventiveness, originality, and consistency. The best comics really are great artworks-great by the intrinsic standards of that art form” (95). Notably, there is no mention of what *type* of comic here. By extension, the argument then would be that, similar to prose literature, there are exceptional examples of storytelling in any type of comic, regardless of the theme, genre, or production methods. Comics remain, with those very few exceptions, non-canonical works in post-secondary education, but if the definition of which comics are legitimate by the terms of their medium is expanded, then an entire art form can open up as potential tools for teaching and criticism, an art form that is expanding rapidly on top of its already substantial history.

There are arguments that actively trouble this graphic narrative/comic book binary within comics studies, even if often they are latent in works on other topics. While his *The Graphic Novel: An Introduction* time and again argues that there are qualitative differences between the two, Jan Baetens also notes that “The split between the elite culture of the graphic novel and the numerous constraints but also opportunities of popular culture (of which comics books are an artifact) may prove to be a dangerous evolution for the former,” and that “It may not be a smart move for the graphic novel to run away from its commercial and industrial roots” (both 18). While he argues the production strategies of graphic novels allow them to be largely free of the culture industry (14), he also finds merit in some of the arguments of Charles Hatfield who “fears the elitist excesses and dead ends that may arise from the abandonment of the popular world of the comics” (19). Baetens manages to explain that what primarily drives the competing perception of different types of comics are the views relating to how they are produced: one, by a

lone artist free from the influences of the marketplace, the other by a team of hired writers, illustrators, inkers, and colorists, ostensibly under the command of a head writer but more accurately working under the auspices of a corporation (in these cases, either Disney or Warner Bros., the respective owners of Marvel and DC). But as Hoberek points out, neither comics nor graphic novels “exist outside the capitalist economy” but “they partake of and help propagate a fantasy of doing so” (617). Baetens also argues that “the economic constraints of the popular market can be important triggers for invention and creativity” (19), and therefore that mainstream comics can be sources for innovative and aesthetically powerful works (see Hoberek’s discussion of Jack Kirby). Finally, Baetens also states that “Storytelling cannot be separated from its inherent materiality” (164), and comics are no exception. The inherent material conditions of publishing reveal the schism then to be a myth, as the differences between the conditions of production are of degree, not kind.

Yet Baeten’s view is also in the minority, and in large part the split within the field mirrors traditional divisions between high and low cultures owing to the subject matter each genre primarily focuses on. But that aspect of the schism is one that university instructors are uniquely suited to undo. The tension in comics studies is dangerous for the field, as while we debate what we should be reading, literary and writing studies continues on without the benefit of an expanded view of literacy, literariness (to use Robert Scholes’ term), and reading in general. As Hoberek argues it, “The goal of studying comics, perhaps especially for those of us who come to this work with training as literary critics, is not simply to expand our list of worthwhile things to read but to continuously and actively deranging-in the interest of revising-our aesthetic standards. Here, then, it is perhaps the least literary comics that most demand our attention” (618). In essence, Hoberek is arguing that our job is to consistently trouble our own

views of what makes something aesthetically valuable, and mainstream comics provide a rich ground to examine our own subjectivities. Fawaz, though, sidesteps the majority of the issue of essentially what comics should be canonized and instead provides a more practical approach to comics study, when he states “The demand that scholars must ceaselessly prove or legitimize comic’s literary merit is an intellectually bankrupt project...it...distracts us from the more pressing question of what we can learn-about reading, form, print culture, representation, and fantasy-from a medium organized by the unfolding of sequential visual narrative and by what interpretive skills it demands” (593).

Fawaz then is arguing not that we should be looking at comics purely aesthetically, but that we must also consider what value they have directly for us as readers, writers, and teachers. This though requires instructors to learn not just what comics are saying, but also how they are encoding and conveying their meanings. There are several texts available that provide especially useful examinations of what comics do. Comic artist and theorist Scott McCloud’s 1993 *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* was a groundbreaking text in describing the methods of a comics narrative, written from the perspective of a comic artist. Comics scholar Barbara Postema’s *Narrative Structure in Comics: Making Sense of Fragments* provides a detailed method on how most comics braid together a narrative from the discrete moments of the story portrayed in each panel, approaching the medium largely from a narratological perspective. Thierry Groensteen’s *The System of Comics* reflects the much more privileged position comics are given in French criticism as he approaches the medium from the perspective of an art historian or semiotician, reducing the medium to component parts (a process called “the breakdown”) and examining the form of each in as much detail as the subject can withstand. Each provides differing views on what comics are and what they do, but each makes essentially

the same argument: the value of comics lies largely in how it tells stories, not the narratives themselves, and therefore the medium itself is indeed a legitimate art form. As Hillary Chute puts it, “comics can be about anything” (*Why Comics?* 2), which means that what we need to be talking about, and teaching, isn’t specific stories, but the methods used to tell stories, and how the medium conveys information and ideas. But the question remains, how do we teach comics as comics, at not as just a combination of visual art and print literature? For, as is discussed later, the artwork and text in comics are trying to achieve very different aims than when those modes are deployed on their own.

The texts mentioned provide a blueprint for understanding how this art form functions. But teaching them requires a broader understanding of the medium as a sponsor of literacy. McCloud discusses in great detail aspects such as the gutter (or the blank space between comics panels) and how icons function as tools to draw readers into the narrative. Groensteen provides a detailed account of how what he terms “the multiframe” (the layout of the pages of a comic) is the primary rhetorical tool of a comic. Postema examines how the fragmented narrative of comics not only creates thematic unity but also creates an implied reader that in turn becomes a co-narrator owing to the participatory nature of the medium. But importantly for the purposes of this project, none provide contextualization of comics as multimodal texts. That trait of the medium is of vital importance, as it provides a practical justification for bringing comics into ongoing conversations about how to teach literacies that address the various methods of consumption and production that students employ with texts.

By borrowing Fawaz’ standpoint on comics, based on the use value of the medium, it becomes easier to describe a method by which to integrate comics into a system that grants them the legitimacy the discipline is working for without needing to constantly argue for its “literary

merit.” Comics are inherently multimodal texts, and as such can be deployed to encourage critical literacies that are representative of students’ real experiences with texts outside classes.

CHAPTER 2: COMICS AND THE SPONSORSHIP OF MULTIMODAL LITERACY

The key characteristic of comics as a foundation for multimodal teaching is their juxtaposition of visual meanings and written language. Between the text and the representations of several other modes there is an ongoing conversation, each mode impacting the other. Each mode works to suture the meaning of the others into specific interpretations as French semiotician Roland Barthes described in “Rhetoric of the Image” (197). But the multiplicity of meanings that occurs when a sequence of panels is read, each with various possible meanings, renders the task of suturing nearly impossible. Comics readers may focus specifically on the text, or the visuals, in order to keep reading somewhat less complex. But the meaning of each of those modes is there to be interpreted, and one mode may suddenly impact all the others so that what a reader was ignoring suddenly becomes the primary driver of a narrative. In other words, What makes comics a unique multimodal narrative format for teaching is also what makes them comics. These narratives contained within a comic are useful in the classroom not necessarily because of what they are saying, but rather how they say it (but not losing sight of the importance that they are in fact saying something). In order to exploit this medium, a primary goal of this course is to put students on the pathway to gaining comics literacy. Comics literacy is, in short, understanding the methods by which the medium adopts, synthesizes and deploys discourses, being able to analyze how other people are doing that through the medium, and creating your own discourse through engagement with the process of composing in comics. It is necessary to also understand this as a part of multimodal literacy.

Instruction in multimodal literacy is especially necessary now as there is a fundamental shift occurring in response to “the broad move from the now centuries long dominance of writing to the new dominance of the image” (Jewitt 241) in what is valuable for students outside the

post-secondary classroom. More important than knowledge of certain texts is knowledge of certain techniques and methods of interaction, to parallel the core ideas regarding our relationship to information— from possession to access. In sum, what students need from instructors is to learn *how?* Instead of *what?* That *what* was a canon of knowledge, largely founded on canonical western texts. Much of the practical value provided by reading and writing about literature comes from this tradition. Yet, that value is equally found in other texts and other mediums, ones that further students in learning how to relate to various information.

Comics provide a foundation for teaching the methodologies that place students in a productive relationship with information they need in their day to day lives. They provide access to the type of ethical and socializing education that other mediums do as well (and this is true of comics regardless of the genre they are operating within, be it memoir, the superhero genre, or any other). Each genre builds meaning across modes, in ways that can encourage students to approach narratives and information in general as multimodal artifacts that encourage decoding and encoding of meaning across various modes of communication, with each mode informing on, suturing, and synthesizing with the others. Perhaps more so than any other printed medium, comics represent the conversation that occurs among different parts of the same text, among texts, and the methods by which meaning is encoded within texts across modes.

The pedagogical value of comics in a multimodal classroom has impact on the field of comics studies as well. As a medium, they are most likely now a permanent fixture in post-secondary English departments. But the toxic discourse within the field surrounding the choices of which texts to teach may continue to hamper the field's ongoing academic acceptance and the development of actionable pedagogical techniques for the medium. Comics studies "is always coming but never quite arriving" (Kirtley et al. 4), in large part due to the fact that "questions of

canonicity remain at the forefront in terms of both research and teaching” (Jacobs, “Text, Object, Transaction” 28), as opposed to discussing what can be done with the medium as primary texts. But by changing the conversation by demonstrating the intrinsic value of the medium for teaching literacies, by focusing on what the medium does as opposed to how it resembles other mediums, instructors can present an argument for the adoption of the medium as a sponsor for multimodal literacy. This is in contrast to much of the current criticism in comics studies that makes the argument for canonizing specific texts based on qualities that distance them from mainstream superhero comics. This textual elitism is grounded again in comics studies’ self-conscious search for academic justification, pursued via the means of ignoring the majority of its field of study. However, judged as tools for meeting the actual stated goals of a literature, writing, or literacy classroom, comics of all kinds are viable source texts.

Therefore, this pedagogy is arguing for an increased awareness of the affordances of comics as multimodal texts and will strive to provide a working understanding of comics literacy. Multimodal literacy, as a part of which comics literacy is most easily conceptualized, describes a competency that allows a person to apply fundamental literacy skills across modes. It is a set of skills that allows learners to analyze, engage with, and produce discourse across various modes of communication. This stands in contrast, according to multimodal researchers Patricia Thibaut and Jen Scott Curwood, “with the traditional literacy model defined by the correct use of formal language as prescribed by the high cultural text of the literary canon” (49). Comics however provide a way to avoid this collapse of literacy into a single expected form, that Rowsell and literacy scholar Maureen Walsh note by stating “Thinking about literacy as a universalized, autonomous entity undermines its diversity and multiple uses and understandings” (55). Literacy isn’t just one thing, and what is traditionally advocated in post-secondary

education is more accurately described as one type of literacy. Jewitt argues that “Rethinking literacy beyond language can support teachers, curriculum, and educational policy in the work of connecting the school, children, young people, and the demands of the contemporary communicational landscape” (263), and the most effective way to perform this re-thinking is by emphasizing that literacy is a broader field than the reading of words and the writing of other words. Multimodal literacy researchers Chen-Wen Huang and Arlene Archer state that “Academic literacies in the twenty-first century entails being able to navigate multiplicity, to critique representations in multiple modes, genres, and media and to use a range of technologies in composing texts” (70), arguing for the expansion of the conception of literacy in academics. As visual modes of communication are more important in student’s environments than ever, the pedagogical focus on written language raises concerns about literacy instruction in the university context.

Huang and Archer’s argument stands in contrast to the traditional frameworks that literacy scholar Shane Wood argues “rely on the teaching of composition through a singular mode—specifically the alphabetic text” (244). This emphasis on a single mode furthers the ideology grounded in formalized schooling that composition scholar Jody Shipka states “often suggest that one cannot know, or it follows, be known, except through the abstractions of certain varieties of written language” (250). The traditional framework then has led to a seeming standardization of what literacy means, grounded firmly in an emphasis on written texts as the cornerstone of academic discourse (see Shipka 250).

However, print texts aren’t the only way discourse is transmitted. “Multimodal compositions, in particular, are everywhere” (Wood 251), as the incorporation of various modes into a text or composition means that it is using, and becoming a part of, multiple discourses. The

composition scholar Anne Frances Wysocki states that “designs of words and pictures...come with attached discourses” (26), and when a text employs them it’s also re-dispatching those discourses. In other words, multimodal compositions are engaging in multiple discourses at once; not only the ones created by their specific composition, but also the discourses attendant to the components they are employing. Choices of what modes of meaning to use, and how those modes are deployed, are themselves discursual acts. Therefore, learners need to know how these discourses are being deployed and how to create and engage with them themselves. Wood argues that “Multimodal pedagogy asserts that other modes can provide practice in the same skills traditional approaches afford: analysis, synthesis, and research” (251). Additionally, digital composition researcher Stacie Covington argues that “multimodal essays also encourage students to be critical consumers of the digital texts that they encounter on a daily basis” (88). Therefore understanding how to engage with, analyze, and compose multimodal discourses has become a fundamental skill.

Kirtley et al. focus specifically on the image mode of communication, not only due to their focus on comics but more broadly in response to new imagistic norms of discourse that Jewitt previously noted. The introduction to their collection *With Great Power Comes Great Pedagogy* argues that “In order to fully participate and, ultimately, to transform the world, our students must be able to name it, and today, to name our culture is to acknowledge the importance of the image” (6), and as the communication landscape outside of our classrooms is increasingly image-focused it becomes essential for instructors from purely practical standpoints to instruct students in how to create meaning between and across modes or channels of meaning.

Comics aren’t the only available texts that can sponsor a type multimodal literacy, but they are one of the simplest to physically acquire, and also offer a type of semantic density that is

rare on the printed page. Comics are especially valuable as texts that can directly trouble the monolithic status of print literacy in classrooms. As multimodal texts that still exist on the printed page, comics trouble the text/multimodal divide, that, all too frequently, is conflated with differences between print text and digital mediums and modes. However, comics can be an essential tool in broadening the conception of literacy as a whole, as “working with comics can expand our own and our students’ definitions and practices of reading” (Comer 76). Expanding what we mean as literacy reinforces the viewpoint that other multimodal mediums can be used as suitable texts for reading and engagement with discourses. In short, bringing comics into the classroom can, through their nature as multimodal texts, greatly enhance students literacies and empower them to analyze and critique discourses that are being directed at them in the world while producing their own (see Sealey-Morris 47).

The breakdown of a comic’s discourse into specific modes of meaning is a vital part of understanding how the medium can function as a literacy sponsor and how one can employ it in a classroom, and therefore specific description of “mode” is important especially in regard to comics literacy. The term mode “describe(s) culturally and socially shaped resources for representation and communication” (Huang and Archer 66). Literacy researchers Ashley K. Dallacqua, Mindi Rhoades, and Sara Kersten Parrish succinctly state that these “are the components and conventions of representing, expressing, and communicating meaning within any media or genre, such as sound, color, tone, music, and texture” (“Using Shaun Tan’s Work to Foster Multiliteracies in 21st-Century Classrooms” 209) that take specific forms often depending on what meaning is being conveyed. But of most import here, mode “is the material form that is necessary to realize meaning in text” (Huang and Archer 65). Mode is the specific physical manifestation of meaning that can be interpreted by receivers of said meaning. In the

case of comics, mode refers to the materiality of line, color, and paper that synthesizes to convey meaning to readers in abstract ways. Multimodal literacy then is a literacy that encompasses several modes, often focused on the five modes (linguistic, visual, spatial, gestural, and auditory) that multimodal literacy researcher Kimberly Lenters states “are recognized as important channels of communication” (“Multimodal Becoming: Literacy in and Beyond the Classroom” 45), focusing on the meaning that is made by modes discretely and in the synthesis or tension between two or more of them.

As comics by their nature deploy multiple modes of meaning at once, learners can best approach comics literacy as a type of multimodal literacy. Comics are much more than pictures and words in juxtaposed spaces; every choice of how a comic is designed carries rhetorical weight often best examined through usage of how multiple modes are used (or consciously not used) and the meaning that is made in the interaction between modes. Comics literacy is being able to not just read them, but to be able to analyze, engage with, and produce discourse in the medium of comics. Central to this pedagogy is composition scholar Molly Scanlon’s idea of texts as “entities that do things” (114) that via rhetorical means can act as impactful discourses in the public sphere (see Gries 28). Wysocki argues that there are pre-existing discourses attached to words and images that are used in multimodal discourses. Therefore, learners must be aware that engaging with or producing multimodal texts that employ both is engaging with those discourses. Further, learners must understand how they are being used and the methods by which to deploy them for their own ends. Comics literacy is a skill set by which a person can understand and use the rhetorical contexts of the words and images that comics employ to engage in and alter ongoing public discourses that comics and other texts are a part of. Furthermore, literacy in the medium incorporates a competency in analyzing and using the

interaction between mediums for active rhetorical ends. Comics, like all texts, do things in and through discourse; understanding the “what” and “how” comics do this is necessary to describe. A critical competency in understanding how comics create and transmit discourses is fundamental to know what is being said therein; therefore, a great deal of focus is on how comics present and manipulate discourses through the five major communication channels Lentes describes (645).

Breaking Down Comics

Dale Jacobs, in *More Than Words: Comics as a Means of Teaching Multiple Literacies*, gives what is perhaps the most expansive approach to teaching comics literacy that is available to, for example, an instructor who is just beginning to teach this medium. Through a brief analysis of Ted Naifeh’s *Polly and the Pirates*, Jacobs lays down the bare structure of approaching comics as a multimodal, design-based medium. By approaching comics as multimodal texts instead of illustrated novels, he situates the analysis and teaching of them within the pedagogical framework of the New London Group, an influential group of researchers that encouraged the adoption of multiliteracy pedagogies in order to make classrooms more inclusive and better prepare students for engagement with a globalized, information technology-centered economy. Jacobs defines this multimodality as the act of discerning meaning in “Linguistic Meaning, Visual Meaning, Audio Meaning, Gestural Meaning, Spatial Meaning, and the Multimodal patterns of meaning that relate the first five modes” (Jacobs, 2007, 184). Using those concepts as a foundation, Jacobs then begins the breakdown of two pages of the comic, discussing how it uses each. Assuming that his audience of largely composition and literature scholars who are relatively comfortable discussing how meaning is transmitted through linguistic means, Jacobs instead focuses on visual aspects of the comic and:

such things as the use of line and white space, shading, perspective, distance, depth of field, and composition. The gestural refers to facial expressions and body posture, while the spatial refers to the meanings of environmental and architectural space, that in the case of comics, can be conceived as the layout on panels on the page and the relation between these panels through use of gutter space. (22)

He then continues on to detail methods by which the comic's "gestural and visual design indicate who is the center of the story" (23) through means of framing the character in the establishing panels, and how the framing on a ship works to "establish the relationship of the woman to the ship and to the story" (23). Through the convenience of gestural meaning and the implicit need of reader interaction in comics, a character offering another character a book becomes a "gesture...of offering this story up to us" (23) the readers (an especially powerful aspect of gestural meaning in comics is how often it is directed at the reader, that is returned to in Part 4). A further discussion of three characters focuses on the comics use of panel architecture to convey semantic meaning as "an un-bordered panel again indicates" the title character's "momentary detachment from their surroundings" (24).

The method Jacobs employs in truth seems like a common-sense approach to analysis. Yet it is unusual in that it is essentially performing a close reading on the formal aspects of the both the narrative of the comic and how the narrative and panel form work together. While this isn't entirely new (see McCloud's *Understanding Comics* or Eisner's *Comics & Sequential Art*) Jacobs contributes to defining and deploying comics literacy by approaching the medium in the context of multimodal pedagogies; by doing so he has embedded this discussion of how to teach comics in an ongoing evolution of the writing and literature classrooms. As many recognize the

utility of providing students with opportunities for engagement with texts and types of writing that more closely mirror their day-to-day environments, comics seem a practical choice. By finding a method that exploits comics' unique opportunities in the context of the conversations regarding how to create a multimodal pedagogy, the technique that Jacobs demonstrates provides not only an easy way to incorporate the medium but a direct argument as to why comics should be a primary resource in this type of teaching.

The multimodal criticism Jacobs proposes approaches comics with many of the techniques used for drama or mime (see Patrice Pavis' "The Discourse of (the) Mime"), as a series of staged moments in that every aspect is constructed with meaning in mind. This includes the layout within the panels, the expressions and body positioning of characters, the font of the text, etc., and also approaches all the aspects of a comic as differing aspects of an image. This collapse of the medium, into narrative images, has the added effect of somewhat alienating comics from the tools that are most often used to critique, analyze, and categorize comics (tools that are borrowed from literary studies), the application of which has driven much of the schism between graphic novels and other genres. The frameworks of literary analysis are reasonably suited to some graphic novels; certainly, much more so than texts from other genres. But literary analysis focuses on meaning conveyed via print text. It is not a critical approach designed for application to other sources of meaning such as visual information, and its application does raise the question of if these analytical techniques are actually suited to multimodal texts.

The primary difference between reading a printed text and an image, the two main components of comics, is their existence in time. A printed text occurs across a span of time, while the reader goes from one word or another element to the next. In a painting, as art critic John Berger argues in *Ways of Seeing*, "all its elements are there to be seen simultaneously" (26).

The experience is categorically different, as while a spectator may focus on different parts of a painting or other visual art at different times, it is displayed in its entirety in one moment. Berger further states that “The meaning of an image is changed according to what one sees immediately beside it or what comes immediately after it” (29), and while he was referring primarily to the context in that one experiences a painting, that change is compounded when the surrounding images are other images that are in some way meant to be thematically linked to one another. In comics, each image in each panel is a separate image of analysis, but “The comics panel is fragmentary and caught in a system of proliferation; it never makes up the totality of the utterance but can and must be understood as a component in a larger apparatus” (Groensteen 5). An image is rarely, if ever, a full semantic utterance in a comic.

This line of thought leads to the basic question of how one looks at comics as comics, and not as a hybrid form of other mediums (usually literature and visual arts). Literary criticism has largely failed to address the medium as its own medium, instead approaching it as an undeveloped form of literature. Critique from that background tends to focus specifically on the narrative aspects of comics. Critique centered on comics as a visual art has likewise been only somewhat productive. As a medium that employs images as a method of narration, as well as artistic expression, it is categorically different from other visual arts in which images are utterances unto themselves. Instead, comics are a narrative form whose utterances take place over time as represented by numerous images (see Groensteen, McCloud, and especially Postema for further discussion). Not all the elements are there to be seen simultaneously. This mismatch between the fundamentals of comics and either set of analytical tools usually applied to them further informs on the need to approach them differently.

These existing analytical traditions, often still working in the history of Lessing's insistence on artistic purity, fail to account for much of the meaning in a comic. An approach that integrates more than one mode of meaning, and that incorporates an understanding of the meaning made by the shift between modes, is necessary. In regard to a multimodal approach to comics, Jacobs provides a starting point, though there are aspects of the medium that must be addressed more fully. While he discusses with great depth what occurs within panels, Jacobs pays less attention to what occurs around and outside them, and the unique rhetorical opportunities comics can exploit. A primary concept for analyzing comics is the gutter, or the space between panels that the reader must fill in for themselves narratively. Jacobs includes that concept, but otherwise fails to adequately address the importance of intrapanel spaces. The concept of iconic solidarity, how readers recognize repeating images in comics as being the same thing represented at different times, is also absent. In essence, this approach elides the concept that what makes comics work is their existence as sequences of panels in a larger context, instead of just squares on a page with artwork in them next to other squares with more artwork in them. Jacobs' approach emphasizes more than ever that our methodologies for critiquing this medium are sorely inadequate, and furthermore that critique, as the major focus in comics studies, is failing to address much of what the medium is capable of providing.

By inserting the teaching of the medium into contemporary conversations about multimodal pedagogies, Jacobs does provide a pre-existing institutional framework in which to insert the teaching of comics. As described above, he argues throughout "More than Words" and "Marveling at 'The Man Called Nova'" precisely how comics can fit into a critically informed and theoretically rigorous multimodal classroom. However, Jacobs very focused approach to comics analysis does not address a key aspect of the medium in regard to its usage in sponsoring

multimodal literacy. Jacobs focuses primarily on what occurs inside each panel, sometimes in sequence with what occurs in other panels. On the occasions consideration of the structure of the panels is included, it is done so in a manner which reflects back onto the specific panels under discussion. (see “More Than Words” for the discussion of panel boundaries and their impact on how readers interpret the artwork in a panel.) But the proposal this dissertation makes is that the structure of each page is also a major mode of meaning in these multimodal texts, and that narratively and thematically the discourse of a panel often reaches to panels beyond the adjacent ones. The structure of the page itself the primary rhetorical device of the comics medium, and a mode of meaning that should be foregrounded in any multimodal theory of comics, not addressed as primarily an afterthought. Through the rhetorical affordances of the layout of pages themselves, other characteristics of comics such as iconic solidarity, narrative braiding, and the gutters are allowed to function. Eliding this aspect comics fails to adequately engage with the medium on its own terms.

But Jacobs is beginning what comics studies needs: the creation of a new pedagogical paradigm. The texts themselves are still largely taught within the framework of literary studies, and more rarely as visual arts, but a critically informed teaching method that centers on them as inherently multimodal narrative texts is largely absent. This is in part because ““The history of comics in both Britain and America is a history of nervousness about their cultural position”” and that ““Comics have thought of themselves as second-class citizens”” (Baetens 202). Comics studies itself is remarkably self-conscious, and therefore has relied on older, more accepted methodologies for working with its source texts. While those methods have worked to a certain degree, and certainly jumpstarted the field, comics still are largely lacking their own critical methodologies. Instead they are approached as a “minor-literature,” as comics scholar Erin La

Cour suggests, or as comics artist Art Spiegelman puts it, as “the hunchbacked, half-witted, bastard dwarf step-child of the graphic arts” (qtd. in Goldstein 259). Media scholar Julia Round states succinctly that “We are so often restricted to analyzing comics using terminology taken from literary criticism or visual media” (316), and the field is lacking a vocabulary to adequately refer to itself. A pedagogical paradigm focused on this medium should instead start with the actual subjects of study, talking about what they do, how they do it, and why, in the terms of the discipline itself.

A Comics Perspective on Multimodal Instruction

An advantage of multimodal instruction from the viewpoint of comics instruction is that it can incorporate a variety of mediums, modes, and methods into one classroom, each working to reach the same ends. Furthermore, it provides a critical awareness of how meaning is made in different modes, and in the rhetorical space between them when multiple modes are deployed by a single text. According to Bowen and Whithaus, “understanding the interactions and relationships between different expressive modes is integral to understanding the composing processes and enabling students to develop their own writing techniques fully” (7). Teaching across modes is not only advantageous for students, but vital if instructors want them to understand how one produces effective discourse on one’s own.

Kathryn Comer’s “Illustrating Praxis” provides an excellent example of how students can demonstrate an understanding of how different modes relate and interact in a comics context. As she describes a graphic memoir assignment she used in a course, Comer discusses two specific student memoirs, each of which demonstrated the importance of discourse across modes (and how composing across modes was a powerful tool for instruction.) One student chose the narrative she did as she felt the comics medium “would allow her to communicate something she

found difficult to verbalize” (92), which was a traumatic childhood event. The student, “Kayan”, chose an interesting technique of integrating drawn visuals and photographs (as a way to represent the events as best as she could,) and demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of how readers would interpret her text as evinced by her decision to portray herself at a younger age through contemporary photographs, calling attention to the constructed nature of the discourse that was being conveyed. Furthermore, this technique of integrating photos heightened verisimilitude, especially in a memoir. But most importantly, the memoir as a whole, which panel by panel is quite disjointed, demonstrates a competency in engaging various expressive modes of communication in order to produce a cohesive discourse.

Kayan’s graphic memoir goes back and forth between drawn images and photographs, integrating written text throughout, and while often very ambiguous in meaning in regard to each panel, or even narratively as a whole, it becomes a cohesive discourse by engaging readers due to its shifting representations and divergent application of modes. Its complex nature engages readers and forces them to participate in the discourse (as comics do through a variety of techniques) and braid seemingly unrelated modes into a cohesive narrative discourse. Kayan’s memoir was an unusually sophisticated multimodal composition and demonstrates some of the opportunities for composition that a movement towards multimodal techniques can provide—the memoir would not be nearly as impactful, or perhaps not even possible, in strictly written language.

In regard to further affordances of multimodality in the classroom, Huang and Archer argue that “A move towards a multimodal approach to academic literacies offers students the opportunity to experiment with a range of genres for presenting academic argument” (67). By expanding our definition of what are acceptable modes for engaging in academic work, and for

what can be employed as academic texts, multimodal approaches provide students with a broadened range of approaches for engaging with and creating discourses in the classroom, furthering learners' grasp of how various medium and modes are deployed. Multimodal literacy scholars Tracy Bowen and Carl Whithaus state that "understandings of genre and media can be used in classrooms to help facilitate students' development as writers able to work across modes and across genres" (3). While they seem to be referring to instructing students in the usage of multiple genres across the timeline of a course, an instructor could focus on comics as a medium that is inherently multimodal and therefore encourage students to analyze and create multimodal discourse in the classroom. As the medium engages with several modes of meaning, it therefore engages multiple forms of discourse, both in terms of analysis and production. Along with encouraging students to work across modes, "The multimodal writing process considers text generating or construction as a dynamic discursive process encompassing recursive movement between its phases" (62), meaning that a cross-modal approach facilitates students' abilities to revise, redraft, and reconsider their own work. Furthermore, comics may provide a dramatic and productive example of the extent that different modes can be intertwined in the meaning of the text. Comics scholar Robert Harvey states that "Words and pictures blend to achieve a meaning that neither conveys alone without the other" (76) in comics, that, while true, is simplifying it somewhat, though it's representative of general views on the medium. The pictures aren't just one mode of meaning, but instead incorporate those several discussed above. Jacobs argues that "it is impossible to make full sense of the words on the page in isolation from the audio, visual, gestural, and spatial" ("More Than Words" 22) and every mode of meaning directly impacts the meanings available to a reader in a comic. Especially important for the classroom is that the

interaction among each mode in a comic is readily on display for students, providing a semantically dense opportunity for analyzing discourses.

One of the best examples of this function of comics is one in which it is consciously ignored, as it highlights what readers are missing when the connection between modes of meaning in a comic is severed. In a segment for the podcast *This American Life*, the artist Chris Ware provided a comic for their website as an illustration for his interview. It consisted of a, or two, story(ies), depending on how you interpret the text (fig. 2). While the images of the comic tell the narrative of a superhero saving a woman from a villain with inscrutable motivations, the text tells an entirely separate story concerning Ware's relationship to race through his grandfather, father, and best friend. Each narrative functions on its own, at least in broad strokes. But the relationship between the two is entirely opaque, and the juxtapositioning confuses both. In doing so, Ware underscores the power of the assumed connection in that its lack undermines two independent narratives simply because they are displayed in the constructs of the comics medium. The expectation is that the modes will complement and enrich each other. But when there is no logical or thematic connection between modes in a comic, even if each mode is successfully conveying a narrative on their own as is the case here, none of them make sense on the page. In broader terms regarding the medium, comics provide a practical example of the conversation that must be going on between modes of meaning in order for any of them in a multimodal text to reach their potential in conveying discourse.



Figure 2. Mismatched artwork and text. From: Ware, Chris. “Illustrations: Comic by Chris Ware.” *This American Life*.

But there is limited work in comics studies on explaining just what it is that Ware’s example is disrupting (see Gene Kannenberg, Jr.’s “The Comics of Chris Ware” for one of the few analyses thereof), despite it being the fundamental conceit of comics. The visually conveyed mediums and the linguistic text are meant to work together. Yet an explanation as to why Ware’s comic, as presented, makes less sense than either of the two narratives it’s conveying would make separately, is a characteristic of comics that’s rarely discussed and requires a critical understanding of that fundamental conceit. Because as with any multimodal media, comics are

greater than the sum of their parts. In order to bring comics literacy instruction in general into line with the multimodal ways in which meanings are more frequently being constructed, which by and large account for the interdependence of meaning on display in most comics, new pedagogies need to be employed. Rowsell and Decoste note that “To expand notions of composition, there is a need to not only introduce other modes such as visuals, sounds and interactive modes, but also develop frameworks, activities and lesson ideas to actually teach other modes of representation and expression” (246-247). This is happening, certainly. But comics are a medium that thrive on multimodal interpretation and with classroom strategies that approach them in this context, so their elision from much of the conversation regarding this move towards multiple literacies is an unfortunate oversight. However, according to comics scholars Joyce Goggin and Dan Hassler-Forest, pedagogies rarely reach into “the proverbial cultural ghetto to which the comics medium has been traditionally relegated” for teaching materials (1), leaving a wealth of potential teaching materials unused.

Combining Comics and Multimodal Pedagogy

Though there is some research available on the overlap between the comics studies and multimodal pedagogy (see especially Sealey-Morris, Scanlon, and Sousanis), multimodality seems to be focusing on instruction techniques using the web and other screen-mediated experiences. Multimodal literacy researchers Lynde Tan, Katina Zammit, Jacqueline D’warte, and Anne Gearside couch their discussion of the need to revamp multimodal assessment in terms of digital compositions (108). Thibaut and Curwood argue that “In the currently shifting digital age, students need to learn to navigate alphabetic print texts as well as multimodal representations” (49), implying an assumed connection between multimodality and digital representations, that they warn against by stating that “multiliteracies limit the multiple aspects

of literacies when the term becomes synonymous with digital technologies” (49). And Scanlon also notes the heavy preference among multimodal research for digital mediums (105), despite their being a wealth of accessible multimodal texts that don’t require digital access.

Comics studies, on the other hand, is more focused on self-consciously arguing for its own aesthetic value without much investigation into the medium’s usefulness as a form of literacy. What has become the major text in the field, Hillary Chute’s *Why Comics?*, presents a detailed, convincing argument for the medium as a mature, powerful art form, but doesn’t address in depth methods of deployment in the classroom. Other foundational texts, such as Postema’s *Making Sense of Fragments*, Groensteen’s *The System of Comics*, Eisner’s *Sequential Art* and McCloud’s series *Understanding Comics*, *Reinventing Comics*, and *Making Comics* overwhelmingly address formal aspects of the medium from the perspective of makers. While teachers can adapt these on their own for learners, there is a lack when discussing the medium as a sponsor of literacy. Since *Why Comics?* this has changed somewhat, as evinced by recent collections such as the 2018 *Teaching Graphic Novels in the English Classroom* and the 2020 *With Great Power Comes Great Pedagogy*, but these fields still rarely overlap considering the self-evident nature of comics as a multimodal medium. The disconnect perpetuates the failure to understand comics as multilayered texts, that require a complex literacy distinct from that of literature, visual arts, or web-based texts. Semantically dense and rhetorically adaptable, approaching comics from a multimodal theoretical grounding offers an opportunity to instruct students in a critical interpretive and productive practice that can disrupt genre and medium expectations of what should appear in the classroom and what texts have value. Perhaps this mutual oversight then is based in the lack of situating comics in terms of what writing and literature courses are meant to be doing by using multimodal pedagogies.

In “From Analysis to Design,” composition researcher Diana George addresses how visual literacy (a key component of comics literacy) is often taught, observing that more often than not it is only given cursory acknowledgement in writing courses. “Current discussions of visual communication and writing instruction have only tapped the surface of possibilities for the role of visual communication in the composition class” (George 767), and therefore instructors are failing to provide students with competencies that they have few other means to acquire. While visual literacy increasingly is being recognized as the vital skill it is, common approaches to teaching literacy in general still privilege written communications, even on the occasions they recognize the visual. As George puts it, “rarely does the call (to teach visual literacy as well as written) acknowledge the visual as much more than attendant to the verbal” (767). When attention is paid to visual modes of meaning, they are generally treated as an add-on, or as explanatory aids to *real* communication; verbal and written modes of meaning are often treated as if they are the sole purveyors of this.

Likely this stems from “culture at large” that “insists on the priority of word over image” (Sealey-Morris 35). That viewpoint is especially damaging as Kirtley et al. argue that “It is clear that our students are increasingly immersed in an image-based culture, and visual literacy is key to communicating in contemporary society” (6), and yet “they still infrequently examine these kinds of (visual) texts in classroom settings with academic tools and rigor” (Dallacqua 214). As such, learners are being subject to visual discourses constantly, and yet have few of the tools needed to engage with them productively, or to create their own discourses in response. Comics, however, “can encourage visual literacy and multimodal thinking for students” (Kirtley et al. 5), and act as accessible, efficient sponsors of visual literacy and multimodal competencies.

In short, emphasis on written-only or written-first communication is not congruent with the lived experience of many students (or instructors). There is a growing recognition of this mismatch, and “the New London Group adds to the older model of media study the notion of design as a way of understanding literacy acquisition” (George 771), that has led to teaching that incorporates multiple modes of meaning. In “Multimodality and Literacy in School Classrooms,” Jewitt argues that “rethinking literacy beyond language can support teachers, curriculum, and educational policy in the work of connecting the school...and the demands of the contemporary communicational landscape” (263), and moving beyond language specifically means moving into other modes of meaning transmission: images, non-linguistic sound, gestures, and so on. Multimodal literacy then is a primary goal of contemporary literacy instruction. “Multimodal research prompts us to account for more modes in texts and acknowledge that modes introduce new forms of thinking and learning” (Jewitt 248), and new forms of thinking and learning are necessary for literacy instruction to adapt to an information environment that is shifting in fundamental ways. Older ideas of literacy don’t mesh with the expectations, personal, professional, and social, that our students must meet, and as we undergo the shift in cultural emphasis from word to image as primary carriers of meaning, failure to incorporate this into classrooms will leave students at a serious disadvantage. “We live in a mediated environment where media literacy is a crucial life skill” (Rowell and Decoste 250) and therefore instruction must match this real-world context.

Despite the necessary nature of teaching across multiple modes of literacy, “the key idea remains that the visual is subservient to the written” (Jacobs, “More Than Words” 20). British semiotician Gunther Kress, in “Multimodality: Challenges to Thinking About Language,” asks, in regard to teaching visual literacy specifically, are “images there merely to entice the reader, to

decorate, to please? Or do images now have full communicational roles? If so, are they merely doubling up what language does already, are they doing complementary things, or do they take on tasks that were not and perhaps cannot be performed by language?" (337). Comics as a medium is one of the strongest examples of what images can do that is either impossible or wildly inefficient in written language. It can therefore act as a sponsor of multimodal literacy when presented through a critically informed approach that creates an actionable synthesis between standing theories in comics studies and multimodal pedagogy.

In the most direct terms, as historian Bryan Vizzini notes, "If they (students) are provided with a work that is visual as well as textual, they can read and think far more critically than when the work is strictly textual" (241). For learners using comics, "the combination of textual and visual elements has the ability to unlock both new ideas and creative responses to old problems" (Sousanis 92), the type of critical and creative work that multimodal literacy is designed to encourage. Tan et al. state that "enhancing students' meta-semiotic awareness is the key thrust in multimodal literacies" (104), and in order to productively begin to engage with comics, a learner has to have a working grasp of the systems of text, visuals, and rhetorical devices such as panels that the medium employs (see part 4). And beyond learning the specific semiotic systems by which comics function, the medium makes manifest the interplay of diverse channels of meaning that are present in everyday life. Much daily communication, whether it be with other people or with texts in almost any environment, functions along the same major channels of meaning that comics explicitly employ. By making explicit what is often implicit in other textual forms, comics can demonstrate the various semiotic systems that are often at play in other mediums. In short, comics are a medium that productively demonstrates "the interplay of meaning-making systems (alphabetic, oral, visual, etc.) that teachers and students should strive to study and

produce” (Sealey-Morris 38). Enhancing visual literacy is one of the major advantages of an expanding view of what should be taught in classrooms that previously focused specifically on writing. Jessica Knight argues that “In this digital age where visual and textual literacy are increasingly interconnected, students are eager and able to engage with the image-text interaction in a highly sophisticated manner; and teaching them to do so critically is ever more crucial” (96). Comics then provide an opportunity to give students instruction in a form of literacy they are interested in and that is practical and necessary for their continued engagement with the various discourses in the environment around them.

The teaching of design, intrinsic in multimodal instruction, must be addressed specifically as well. Jewitt argues that the “Key to multimodal perspectives on literacy is the basic assumption that meanings are made (as well as distributed, interpreted, and remade) through many representational and communicational resources, of which language is but one” (246). These resources are as varied as images, sounds, gestures, fonts, colors, the choice of medium itself, and so on. The process then by which creators select, form, and manipulate various “representational and communicational resources” (Jewitt 246) is what is referred to as the design process in this context, and the skills that allow readers to interpret said texts is multimodal literacy. Multimodal literacy requires competence across many modes of communication as well as understanding the interactions among various modes of meaning. Comics effectively demonstrate that meaning is not only made in various modes, but also in the intersection of and tension between them.

Comics are an effective, accessible means to teaching the reading of multimodal texts. But literacy also needs to incorporate the production of texts. In this case, one of the primary ways to train multimodal competencies is to instruct students in the designing of their own

multimodal texts. Referring back to Comer's student Kayan ("Illustrating Praxis"), her memoir exemplified much of the competencies that multimodal education strives to convey. Most notably, it incorporated not just written language and visual modes, but took advantage of the rhetorical situation of the memoir to employ the added veracity of photographic representations. This was demonstrating a sophisticated understanding of multimodal rhetoric that would be difficult to show without actual creating the multimodal text. This doesn't necessarily mean students should be required to write and design their own comics (though that is recommended below). But rather, comics can be used as source for demonstrating the way multimodality can be broken down into distinct tracks of meaning, engaged with, and produced in that manner, and therefore provide students with a more precise understanding of the methods by which they themselves can relate meaning through modes besides written language. That breakdown process is the method where each mode of meaning in a comic is analyzed discretely and in conversation with others (that is described in detail in Chapter 4). What is being said by the visual artwork? What does the text mean in the context of that artwork? Why are the panels of the page arranged as they are, and how does that impact the text and artwork? And so on. The medium is a prime example of the necessity of understanding the interaction of modes, and not just the modes themselves, in order to grasp the overall meaning of a text. Comics represent an exemplar regarding the type of modes and mediums that must be employed in order to achieve functional literacy in a multimodal environment.

Producing comics is a method for teaching composition that may be daunting for instructors and learners, especially if both parties are unfamiliar with the medium. But it is important to recognize that they provide a valuable resource for instruction due to their multimodal nature, certainly, but also due to their physical nature as well. While many

multimodal texts require the use of a device, comics do not. They are relatively cheap as well; as the emphasis of technologically mediated modes of literacy increases, the digital divide does so as well, creating a new form of literacy that students without access to appropriate tech may not be learning. Comics on the other hand are “one of the most accessible forms of multimodal text (insofar as no computing, audio, or video expertise is necessary)” (Sealey-Morris 31) and provide access to a range of design competencies, with less substantial costs to students or schools. Comics as a multimodal medium also are unique in that their consumption is controlled to a great degree by the reader; they can be read at a student’s pace, in a time and place of their choosing (if workable within the confines of a course) without needing access to a computer or the internet. As an accessible source of texts sitting at the interstice of narrative and multimodalities, comics as a medium are a valuable foundation in a classroom. But the question of how to teach these texts is also important for the comics studies specifically. It becomes necessary to consider what texts should be taught, especially if instructors wish to venture into the realm of more mainstream publications that have been largely delegitimized as anything of value, both within comics studies and without. In short, how do you pick a comic with potential in the classroom?

This project envisions these classroom methods being deployed in areas that focus on the study of discourses, primarily in the humanities. While generally the study of comics takes place within literature courses, there is no legitimate reason why they need to be cloistered there. Rhetoric is in large part the study of discourse, both its usages and impacts on its subjects. As Barthes notes, both visual and written discourses are comprised of “language-objects” (*Mythologies* 114), and based on that it becomes possible to discuss them both as rhetorical

devices. Comics then are a channel through which multiple discourses are encountered, via avenues of visual art, text, and narrative sequence.

Their use can extend beyond that, as well. There are issues in current multimodal approaches to teaching writing, mentioned previously, that comics can help to ameliorate while providing new opportunities. While they may not be a medium that is as often encountered in day-to-day personal or professional contexts outside of the classroom, they can provide access to the broader skills that multimodal educating brings to students. Rowsell and Decoste argue that “multimodal research prompts us to account for more modes in texts and acknowledge that modes introduce new forms of thinking and learning” (248), providing students with broader arrays of critical resources and approaches with which to approach problems throughout school and afterwards. As a direct synthesis of two of the most common modes of communication, visual representations and text, comics would seem to be an ideal resource. Arlene Archer states that “Metalanguages across modes entail systematic technical knowledge of the ways semiotic resources are deployed in meaning-making” (212), implying that a key end of this type of classroom isn’t familiarity with specific modes of communication (such as words, images, or sounds,) but rather engaging students with the codes that facilitate meaning across modes. The overarching goal is to familiarize students with how concepts are being redeployed across modes and mediums, and how the method of expression in regard to specific modes impacts the deeper rhetorics of meaning.

Previously it was noted that the focus of multimodal pedagogies leans more towards design than narrative. As reading, teaching, and engaging with narrative texts is often a foundation on which to draw for writing skills, that would seem to be an obvious lack in the writing classes that employ this approach (See Patricia Buckler’s “Combining Personal and

Textual Experience”, John Guillory’s *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Foundation*, Bowen and Whithaus’ “What Else is Possible”). But as Rowsell and Decoste note “To write today is to design elements on a page to reflect messages, values, beliefs and opinions” (248), reflecting the reality of what student’s out-of-school writing will most likely be like. The similarities between the traditional texts of an English education and what is written afterwards has indeed waned. As it stands now, “Writing should deal with design. Writing ought to be creative and innovative. Yet, most of the time writing...remains a(n) essay on a canonical text” (Rowsell and Decoste, 258), and comics do closely resemble the collaboration of design elements on a page that is being called for as writing resources. In the end, this leads to production of information in comic form as a key aspect of a multimodal writing class, providing students with practice in metalanguage deployment and elements of layout and design. As multimodal scholar Christine Joy Edwards-Groves notes “much of what we regard as creativity happens as students move across modes” (51), meaning that engaging with this medium of mixed modes provides ample opportunities for creative design, analysis, and problem solving in the classroom. Sousanis argues that “the combination of textual and visual elements has the ability to unlock both new ideas and creative responses to old problems” (92), and in a course focused on comics composition, he provided ample opportunity for students to engage with the combination of text and visuals, and their own creativity, as they worked across modes.

One student in particular provided an illustrative experience when engaging with, and in this case composing a memoir with, the comics medium. “Kyleigh”, a strong writer but newcomer to composing comics, noted that “drawing pictures that represented my story actually forced me to manipulate my language” (94). Initially hesitant, Kyleigh noted that “I was really nervous about my comic because I am a perfectionist and I do not feel like I am a particularly

good artist” (94). Through the experience of composing across modes, however, she noted that she “finally realized that that’s one of the benefits of comics—it does not have to be hyper-realistic to be a successful story” (94). As Sousanis notes in response to her experience, “no matter their skill level or prior experience drawing, the act of making affords deep insights” (95), especially in regard to how the modes in use are successfully deployed, perhaps in unique or unexpected ways. What was especially impactful for Kyleigh was engaging with visual modes of making meaning, about which Kyleigh noted that “drawing my experiences forces me to reflect on how the physical images of my memories influences the way I think and act” (95), an insight that would likely not have come about without being required to engage with visual forms of composition. Creating comics granted Kyleigh a new method of creatively engaging with her compositions, and it is unlikely that her experience is unique. Creating multimodal texts, a cornerstone of multimodal literacy, granted Kyleigh access to composition resources she was unaware of her ability to employ.

In summation, instructing learners in “multimodal literacy is essential for intellectual survival in contemporary culture” (Sealey-Morris 46). And as “they combine words and images with gestural, spatial, and even audio modes into a truly multimodal experience” (Comer 76), comics are undoubtedly a multimodal medium. Further, they provide some advantages over other multimodal mediums in regard to their use in the classroom as tools for instruction. As they are, in general, a narrative medium, comics can successfully incorporate the affordances of narrative that is often a key component of courses employing traditional print literature. Secondly, comics not only incorporate elements of design, a crucial skill in multimodal literacy, they self-consciously draw attention to how they are designed through panel layouts and intrapanel representations. As a medium they very easily provide the foundation for discussing how and

why design choices are made. Also, the necessities for the construction of a comic is an advantage as well. While one can approach the medium with as much technical complexity as one would like, all that is necessary is a writing utensil and paper; in that regard it is one of the most egalitarian methods of instructing in design.

Beyond the physical affordances of the medium, there are rhetorical ones as well. Wood notes that “multimodal pedagogy continually emphasizes process by asking students to become aware of the rhetorical choices they make through the creation of multimodal project” (246), and comics provide a vivid, deliberate example of when these choices occur and the impact they have on the process. Since every mode of meaning in a comic is interdependent on the others, composition of a comic clearly can demonstrate for students how choices made (for example, even something as seemingly innocuous as number of panels in a comic) can greatly impact the work they do later on in the process (in this case, how to choose what goes in the pre-selected number of panels. See McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* for several discussion on the impact just this one choice can have). Each rhetorical choice can have even greater impact than just how their composition will be completed. As Wysocki notes, elements that are being brought into a comic always already come with attached discourses (for example, many of the symbols employed in the Holocaust memoir *Maus* had long historical discourses attached to them well before the artist Art Spiegelman employed them). Students must be aware, or made aware, of these discourses and make deliberate choices about what they want to be conveying compositions they create. But a major affordance of the medium is the synthesis that it creates between all the modes employed and therefore, potentially, multiple discourses. Because comics are the product of a string of rhetorical choices engaging various modes and discourse, their potential semantic impact is therefore multiplied (Wood 246). Through the synthesis of multiple

discourses then, “the most advantageous affordance of comics becomes the cognitive efficiency for readers” (Scanlon 115), and comics offer this semantic efficiency in an accessible package for students and instructors.

As comics provides access to an understanding of multiplicities of discourse in an accessible way, comics literacy is an advantageous method for achieving multimodal literacy. But comics should not only be integrated into discussions on multimodal pedagogies for their own sake, but also because they offer the field itself a valuable contribution to ongoing discussions therein, especially in regard to how instructors should be approaching assessment of multimodal texts.

CHAPTER 3: COMICS, DISCOURSE, AND MULTIMODAL ASSESSMENT

This project is arguing for the inclusion of comics literacy in multimodal pedagogies on the grounds of its inherently multimodal nature, and the use value of having an easily available medium that clearly demonstrates the synthesis of modal meaning into larger discourses than can be engaged in when employing single modes of communication. This discussion has primarily been from the point of view of comics studies, however, and how that field can exploit the institutional framework of multimodal pedagogies as a method for engaging learners in a specific type of multimodal learning and discourse. Ongoing conversations in multimodal pedagogies though deserve more attention, especially as some of the ongoing discussions in the field are centering on the area of assessment and the difficulty of assessing multimodal work in institutions that still largely rely on methods that are founded on, and cater to, student work produced under frameworks of literacy that may not reflect current communicative needs.

The current tension regarding assessment in multimodal instruction is understandable. Substantial research underscores the value in engaging with and producing multimodal texts regardless of the final product (see Huang and Archer, Wood, Tan), much as foundational composition theorists such as Janet Emig, Donald Murray, and Peter Elbow demonstrated the value of the text writing process. Among others, Emig's "Writing as a Mode of Learning", Elbow's *Writing With Power*, and Murray's "Teaching Writing as a Process Not Product" began a revolutionary shift in the way writing was understood and altered how it was talked about, taught, and assessed. Writing came to be viewed as part of an ongoing process as opposed to the production of a finalized project. The process theory of composition itself seems to adapt, in theory, to multimodal pedagogies. Assessment based on the processes gone through during multimodal composing would then be appropriate. But just how this is accomplished is

somewhat undefined, when multimodality encompasses many modes, mediums, and processes involved in creation or analysis. The multiplicity inherent in multimodality greatly complicates the tasks of consistent, equitable assessment. The issues of consistency and equity are especially important as multimodal pedagogy is inherently designed to be something that “pushes against traditional frameworks” (Wood 245), that “operate... catering to academic expectations through reaffirming ideologies of a linguistic standard purposed for an academic audience” (Wood 244-245). Because of those traditional frameworks, instructors are often working under what multimodal literacy researchers Susan Sandretto and Jane Tilson call “the spectre of accountability” (228), and students are being instructed in context where instructors lack sufficient agency to incorporate multimodal texts and instruction as they see fit (Tan et al. 101). The issue of multimodal assessment however is one that an emphasis on comics and comics literacy may help to solve.

As argued through Chapters 1 and 2, the advantages of multimodal literacies for learners are many, especially as our personal, professional, and academic environments continue to adopt more and more modes of discourse. How well learners are able to produce said modes of discourse though is something that is difficult to assess. Especially in regard to digital multimodal composition, learners are coming into the classroom with a wide range of competencies. Some students may be tech savvy across modes of communication, various platforms, and on- and off-line. In fact, multimodal researchers Josephine Ryan, Anne Scott, and Maureen Walsh argue that many times students are far beyond their instructors in digital competencies (“Pedagogy in the Multimodal Classroom”). Other students may well be digital natives but have only passing literacy in regard to analyzing or producing discourses deployed via multimodal means. Some have little experience with digital learning or discourses, and even

less with digital modes of composition. Exacerbated by the digital divide in the US and abroad, multimodal competencies, even in US institutes of higher education, exist across a broad spectrum in students, and this presents a difficult challenge in assessment that is focused on an end product (see Tan et al. 101).

Comics stand as an interesting example of assessing a multimodal text. Despite all of the difficulties regarding multimodal assessment, there is substantial conversation around what comics are “good” or “not good”. This is the primary ongoing discussion in the discipline. The conversation isn’t whether or not certain texts such as *Maus* or *Persepolis* are “good”; that seems to be widely understood at this point. The conversation is if all genres (such as non-fiction memoir, superhero, crime, horror, etc.) can also produce “good” comics, but central to that is that few if any scholars are seriously arguing against the quality of Spiegelman or Satrapi’s work. In order to reach that conclusion, in order to decide that some texts are “good”, then there must have been an act of collective judgement about these texts. By academics and others alike, there are multimodal texts that, for various reasons, have been assessed with substantial co-reliability. The point is that these are multimodal texts that, while there seems to be substantial confusion about the medium in which they operate, readers feel able to evaluate.

This act of judgement of comics is especially interesting when we look at the group of comics that are often included in these conversations. Returning to Michael Pagliaro’s “Is a Picture Worth a Thousand Words?”, in which he attempted to draw generalizable conclusions about what makes a good graphic novel, an important contribution is that it underscores just how different many of the well regarded comics are in terms of their employment of their various modes. For example, Lynda Barry’s *One! Hundred! Demons!* Is exceptional, though it employs artwork far less complex, detailed, or expressive compared to Charles Burns *Black Hole*. While

relatively grounded for the superhero genre, Klaus Janson and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* is a far cry from the sometimes-bleak realism and authenticity of *Fun Home*. And perhaps the greatest outlier, Katsuhito Otomo and Kon Satoshi's *Akira*, is an example of a comics tradition that barely resembles those in the US, UK, or Europe (see McCloud's *Understanding Comics* for the variety of manners in that manga differs significantly from western comics), and yet somehow we are still able to assess what it is trying to perform.

In short, comics that are highly regarded vary widely across how every single mode is used (see also *American Splendor*, that employs the visual modes differently in every issue, *XKCD*, that strips the visual mode down to stick figures and props while still managing to convey its purpose expertly (fig. 3), and especially *Here*, that ignores all modes of meaning comics usually use besides the spatial and visual). Of equal importance, there are often questionable comics that employ some or many of the modes exceptionally (but any specific suggestions here may be too laden with value judgements). So, what then makes them extraordinary? Comics, like other multimodal texts, can't adequately be assessed on how well or poorly they employ a single mode, as the mastery of a single method of meaning-making is not the primary goal. Instead, the goal is to use the various modes available in the medium to create and engage in discourse. Multimodal literacy is the ability to analyze and participate in ongoing processes of creation, discussion, rejection, and acceptance of knowledge, cultures, and ideologies through the usage of two or more modes of meaning. The method by which a comic is often judged is by how well it functions in its entirety as a discursal text. Certain texts, for example *Maus*, are especially impactful in creating an ongoing ideological conversation, rooted in how well the comic accomplishes its goals in conjunction with how efficiently it has created an effective discourse regarding its subjects and themes. In short, certain comics are assessed as

“good” because they accomplished what the text is trying to accomplish and did so in a manner that engaged the subjectivities of others as well.

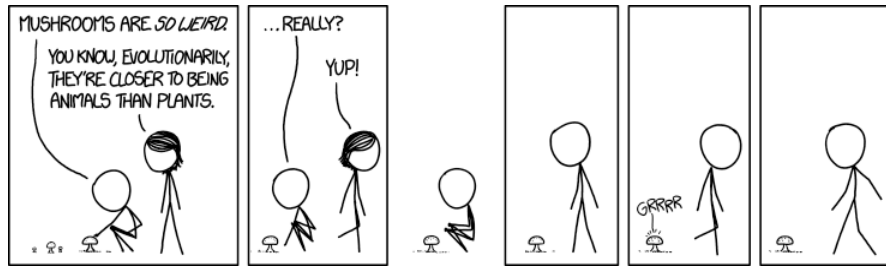


Figure 3. *XKCD* 1749. *XKCD* often demonstrates the potential of simplistic artwork From: Munroe, Randall. “Mushrooms.” *XKCD*. <http://www.xkcd.com>.

A strong example of this evaluative viewpoint is Grant Morrison and Dave McKean’s Batman comic *Arkham Asylum*, that is analyzed in depth later. Though one of the most highly regarded texts in the comics medium, from most standpoints, the comic is almost nonsense. It neither stands on its own narratively nor engages with the history of the main characters substantially. The artwork seems to be consciously fighting interpretation. A major subplot is a detailed backstory of a character of minor importance that is grotesque and off-putting in the extreme. It follows few of the rules of narratives in general or comics specifically. However, as a text, it goes to great pains to demonstrate that meeting any of these usual goals are not its aim. It is designed specifically to disorient and disrupt its readers emotionally, as a way to, among other things, help the reader to share the protagonist’s subjectivities as he slowly loses his grip on reality. In this sense, the text accomplishes its goals effectively. Though it fails to provide much of a clear narrative by means of image, as comics are generally expected to do, it is still an exceptional example of the medium.

It is important to recognize that what is truthfully being discussed is not the artistic quality of a text. As Beaty phrases it, “proponents argue that works commonly held to be ‘the best’ have contributed to the triumph of enlightenment values” (60), that are not necessarily

those that should be being pursued uncritically. Instead, texts should more be assessed on whether, for lack of a better term, they get the work done. This goes back to Scanlon's conception of texts as "entities that do things" (114), and some texts do more things. In this case, are learner's texts using multiple modes to meet the goals of the text? This is the key questions that should be addressed in multimodal assessment, and there are distinct ways to determine what comics are doing.

Evaluating compositions in comics can then be a test case for how to assess other multimodal modes that may wander even further from what instructors are comfortable assessing and learners are comfortable being assessed on. Comics are a product that can be assessed within the confines of an institution, to a certain extent. Most everyone has at least seen a *Peanuts* and has some idea of how the medium tells a story, even if literacy in the medium rarely goes beyond recognizing basic narrative elements. But still there is a great deal of anxiety about how to evaluate student work in this medium, and perhaps equal anxiety for students in regard to composing in it. This is especially in regard to the visual aspects of comics, where students frequently share that they don't feel like they can draw well enough to produce something that fairly represents their ideas. Comer notes that, for her students, "most nerves revolved around insecurity over their visual literacies; while visual analysis had felt somewhat familiar, visual composition was a fresh challenge for many" (82). But once again, comics are more than just their artwork.

Tan et al. provide a necessary starting point for how to assess comics in a multimodal context, a method that importantly is generalizable to other mediums. Their proposal for evaluation, that instructors are encouraged to focus on, is "the cohesive relationship between modalities" (Tan et al. 104), that can be judged by "similarity, proximity and continuity" that

allows readers “to comprehend the creator’s intended meaning” (Tan et al. 104). Notably this has nothing to do with if the comic is drawn well. Instead it asks assessors to evaluate how well each mode functions in concert with the others and if there is recognizable synthesis of meaning, emphasizing the impact the produced discourse has on a reader.

As it is demonstrated above, comics literacy falls under the umbrella of multimodal literacy. This is an important clarification as, while comics are being left out of the conversations in this field less and less, they are still rarely central. But the medium has much to offer discussions of multimodal pedagogy, especially in assessment. Along with the conception of evaluating the relationship between modes and potential synthesis, two other closely related assessment possibilities also mesh well with the comics medium: labor- and process-based grading.

In regard to process, Wood argues that “Multimodal pedagogy continually emphasizes process by asking students to become aware of the rhetorical choices they make through the creation of multimodal projects” (246), as “the combination of different semiotic modes magnifies these choices in multimodal pedagogy” (Wood 246). The process learners go through in composing multimodal texts underscores for them the impact each choice makes on texts as a whole, and therefore also emphasizes both the number of deliberate choices others make in composing texts, and the discursal purpose each of those choices may have. Engaging with the process of creating multimodal texts, in other words, demonstrates that multimodal texts that exist out in the world are deliberately created for a purpose, and are not neutral parts of the environment. When learners understand that the choices they are making, and why they are making them, impacts the texts they produce, it’s a simple logical step to grasp that other creators are making those same choices. Composing multimodal texts shows the importance the

choices made throughout the process of creation and the impact that has on texts as objects of discourse and for the future readers thereof.

Further, “As students read and compose multimodal texts such as graphic novels, films, cartoons, and web sites, they learn to work in sophisticated ways with multiple resources for meaning making...they learn to decode and encode information, their comprehension of often complex ideas is aided by the use of multiple sign systems” (Lenters 645). Engaging with, analyzing, and composing multimodal texts will help learners to understand the wide variety of communicative resources they have at their disposal, especially when they aren’t focusing on a single mode of literacy or composition. Multimodal texts are often deploying and subjecting readers to several discourses (that returns to Wysocki’s concept of instances of various modes always already being caught up in discourse), but by working directly with how modes interact and synthesize, learners can assess what they are being subjected to critically and respond in kind. As Sealey-Morris notes that since “the juxtaposition of codes requires mental negotiations” that imitates the psychological processes that one goes through in order to interpret communication in general, “reading comics well requires work that closely resembles the work of interpreting real life”. Or in other words, comics provide a groundwork for the interpretation of our general communicative environments.

The comics composition process grants each of these affordances. Learners are decoding and encoding several modes of meaning-making in a single text. They clearly demonstrate how those same modes can complement and synthesize with one another. But perhaps of special note is the material aspect of composition that comics employ. Much traditional composition, such as what I’m doing now, occurs on a keyboard. Correcting a mistake or reorganizing large sections of text takes a few keystrokes. Choices are easily reversed. The process of comics composition

however is more deliberate (in truth because many of the rhetorical choices that need to be made about a text are preselected when writing a print text for an academic audience). Everything from panel number, size, and spacing, color palette, to choices that may seem more obvious like genre or theme have to be selected and have its impact on the overall discourse of the text considered.

The number of choices to be made, and the chain reaction each can have on a text, can be daunting for a learner. Substantial anxiety can arise as they consider what happens if they make the “wrong” choice that negatively impacts cohesion between modes or discourses that their text can have. This is compounded by the fact that many learners haven’t attempted to create (or maybe even read) comics in the past, which means they will not only be having to create a text but also learn the skills intrinsic to creation in the medium. Returning to Comer’s “Illustrating Praxis,” the other of the two student compositions is especially illuminating here. A student, referred to as “Axel”, states that he is not much of an artist and is “afraid that people will discredit my work because of the terrible artistic quality” (83). While also reflecting the substantial anxiety that often comes with students having to share work they aren’t used to creating, Axel seems more concerned throughout that his simplistic artistry will impact the discourse which he is trying to create—that people won’t care about what he has to say due to his use of stick figures as the primary carrier of visual information. Axel is worried that the rhetorical choice, predetermined by his own abilities, of how to present visual information in his composition would institute a series of reactions for a reader. If one mode is not necessarily conveying discourse the way a writer or artist desires, it can impact how each other interconnected mode is approached, and this is especially common when students are attempting to compose visual texts. Axel himself noted that he felt some “anxiety...because I am a terrible artist,” and Comer noted in general that, for her students, “most nerves revolved around

insecurity over their visual literacies” (82). The root of this anxiety is generally a fear of failure, in being assessed as inadequate, a primary obstacle for multimodal literacy instruction to overcome.

Colleen Reilly and Anthony Atkins, quoted in Wood, note that “Creating digital texts often requires that students learn new skills, that simultaneously requires that they take risks and experience failure” (Wood 250); that runs counter to the orientation towards success that is widely shared in academic settings. So along with the general anxiety that comes with completing an assignment, learners in a comics literacy course would also be asked to learn the skills necessary to compose a comic, as well as how each choice that is made in regard to every facet of the text can impact every other one. It can seem daunting for students.

Køhlert and Sousanis relate some of the trepidation that students feel around comics production. They note that “our students at first expressed a great deal of skepticism regarding the idea that they would have to—gasp!—actually draw in class” which led to an “anxious first few classes” (237). And that experience is apparently widespread, as Comer also notes that in her comics composition course, students “were more confident in their ability to read than to write in multiple modes, a tension that remained throughout the course” (Comer 78). And much of this anxiety comes from the fact that students also suffer under the specter of accountability and the pressure to achieve; Wood notes that in prevailing academic ideologies “failure is a plague, it is nonnegotiable, and it symbolizes ignorance” (250) despite the fact that “a multimodal classroom says failure is necessary” (250) in that, as Colleen Reilly and Anthony Atkins argue “Creating digital (or other multimodal) texts often requires that students learn new skills, that simultaneously requires that they take risks and experience failure” (qtd. in Wood 250). Instructors then may serve learners best by creating what the technical communication scholars

Marc Santos and Megan McIntyre “environments (and assignments) in which students can learn” (4) without the looming necessity of assigning a numerical or letter grade.

Grading contracts aren't new. Composition theorists such as Asao Inoue provide substantial research on the implementation of them and how they impact learners (see his, among others, “Grading Contracts: Assessing Their Effectiveness on Different Racial Formations”). But perhaps multimodal courses are an area where their affordances are especially well deployed. In short, a grading contract informs learners that their grade is dependent on the quantity of labor they perform for the course. The more work they do, the better their grade is. This immediately begins a shift in the foundation of the course. Of most importance, especially in regard to a multimodal course, is that it removes the emphasis of traditional frameworks on products, focusing much more deliberately on process, as is often the case for composition. But more importantly for this discussion, it removes the emphasis on successfully completing a text of some sort.

One may reasonably question why the orientation towards success is being de-emphasized, but Lenters argues convincingly that “Often, text-production occurs through meandering engagements with literacy...and some would argue that it is in this space of play that truly creative or innovative texts ensue” (646), and Wood furthers this by stating “the grading contract asks students to take risks, meet or subvert genre expectations, play with style and modes, and become attuned to the decisions they make as they engage in different labor processes” (246). Neither taking risks nor an emphasis on play mesh well with frameworks that punish failure, despite Lenters' argument that the latter is the source of much innovation, and the former being a necessary aspect of learning in general. The removal of emphasis on a final grade, giving students the secure knowledge that their labor will be rewarded, allows students to

experiment with new and novel techniques without the fear of that effort being wasted in that it fails to lead to a polished final product. This applies equally well to comics as to other multimodal texts, and comics may actually be one of the easiest for which an instructor to gauge labor that has been put forth. Unlike most multimodal texts, work on comics is mostly done with paper and pencil and it is a simple matter to ask learners to share their processes behind choices made on the page.

A grading contract is of special importance in regard to a comics-centered, multimodal literacy course as it fulfills the need to move away from composition frameworks which emphasize and rely on the single compositional mode of written language. Wood argues that “the grading contract complements the multimodal classroom by answering its invitation to move away from traditional frameworks” (255), as its emphasis on labor shifts assessment away from product to process, from summative grading to valuing work done throughout the course. Jane Danielewicz and Peter Elbow argue that a major advantage of this assessment approach is that “contract grading focuses wholeheartedly on process,” (260) meaning “the writing becomes what’s at stake, not so much the grade” (255). This is a fundamental change in how student work is approached, but that is necessary when what is being done in the class is substantially different from composition performed only in written language.

The contract can also provide clarity about expectations in the course that are sometimes lacking in traditional grading frameworks and often lacking in multimodal composition. Santos and McIntyre quote one of their students who was struggling with what they felt was a lack of clear expectations in a multimodal composition course: “What makes it painful...is the connection between projects and grades. The possibility of getting a bad grade because you misinterpreted an assignment can be very nerve-wracking [sic], especially when ‘follow the

directions' is something heavily emphasized to students since elementary school" (9). Santos and McIntyre argue that putting students in situations in which they feel disoriented regarding expectations is a productive educational experience. This is especially the case in multimodal composition as the concept of composition is by their very nature expanded greatly beyond written language in these courses. So, what the contract can provide is a framework for understanding that the connection isn't between finished projects, as the students fears, and their grade, but rather between those grades and the labor they perform in the service of completing their projects. Santos and McIntyre especially work to foreground that students will have to go through uncomfortable learning processes in these courses, as they try new techniques and methods to compose multimodal texts, and that failure, in the sense of a project not being completed or not turning out as planned, is expected and acceptable. By removing the emphasis on critique of a finished product, a grading contract allows for a more impactful approach to instructing in literacy.

Furthermore, it addresses issues of assessment from the perspective of instructors. Referring to a study performed with a group who were implementing multimodal composition in their classes, Tan et al. noted that "the teachers did not assess students' multimodal texts because of the difficulty in grading group multimodal compositions." While certainly group dynamics can complicate any assessment, the critical aspect of the study was that teachers simply didn't perform assessment on the students work as there simply isn't a standard way to do so. Granted, this stands in stark contrast to letter grading systems that "replace real feedback on student writing with a one- dimensional, somewhat arbitrary symbol," in which "that symbol often is perceived by the student to stand in for how well he or she is doing" (Inoue 78). But neither the abdication of assessment and critique or the adherence to the traditional grading norms reflects

the work done in multimodal composition where students are performing a wide array of tasks, some or many of which the instructor may be unfamiliar with. Furthermore, as multimodal instruction is in no way standardized, there is no way to have reasonable expectations regarding what skills with which students are coming into the classroom. This means that not only may students be performing vastly different work, but some students may primarily be going through the process of gaining a very basic foundation in multimodal composition and literacy, while others may be exceptionally strong in engaging in discourse through multimodal means. Standardized assessment becomes less and less realistic, and to reiterate what Danielewicz and Elbow state above, the grading contract is so powerful as it focuses assessment on what processes a student has gone through and the labor they have performed.

Furthermore, this approach to assessment allows instructors to, as Santos and McIntyre put it, better assess student composition processes by “distinguishing productive failure, and allowing us to reward it, which in turn helps to dissipate student anxiety” (12). Regardless of the grading contract, I have had my own students exhibit considerable anxiety about their grades, especially when they decide to change an approach to or a topic for an assignment. But the concept of rewarding failure as suggested above, productive or not, is deeply antithetical to product-focused assessment. But if instructors do want to evince the value of the composition process, then students must be allowed opportunities to experiment with new or challenging approaches to conveying discourses. This will inevitably lead to “failure”, in the sense that perhaps a project won’t be a cohesive work or be completed. The grading contract though allows students and instructors the opportunity to reassess what it means when a project doesn’t produce a specific product, and to reinterpret that not as failure but as a productive learning experience. This legitimate embrace of failure as a productive educational opportunity is a disruption of a

foundational pedagogical ideology that, as Wood argues above, views failure as a something unconscionable, which must be avoided at all costs. This commitment to perfection has the consequence of failure being reflective of an inadequacy in student's efforts, as opposed to a chance for learning new skills. As multimodal literacy is largely a young field focused on instructing in new, dynamic, and complicated skills, it is then incumbent on pedagogy in the field to embrace failure as a natural consequence of experimentation and learning new skills.

Grading contracts do not remove accountability, however. They merely shift the emphasis on what learners are held accountable for, and what instructors must enforce. In my own experience teaching with a grading contract, students do tend to take risks, and especially are eager to work their own interests into their work. They are far more willing to bring texts or other disciplines into discussion or written work from outside the class than I have otherwise encountered. But average grades across the class rise very little. In a "grading-contract-centered course, students must self-reflect, often facing the reality of responsibility by having to answer questions about their production of labor or lack thereof" (Wood 259), and that responsibility isn't always taken. But the contract underscores who is responsible for the earned outcome in a course and removes much of the fear of failure that inhibits play, risk-taking, and chances for innovation.

In summation, comics can be used as a method of addressing some the anxiety in the literature regarding multimodal assessment. That they are multimodal texts is hopefully self-evident. Furthermore, they are a medium on the edge of academic legitimization that allows for some freedom in their application in the classroom. Strongly preferred conceptions or best practices regarding their usage in the classroom have yet to form; as not only multimodal but also interdisciplinary texts, they can be deployed in a variety of contexts (see James Kelley's

“The Uncanny Power of Comic Books”). As such, having students work in comics composition, by instructing them in a comics literacy that includes engagement with the medium through production, does provide instructors with a final product that can be assessed. It allows instructors to work with multimodal texts even under Sandretto and Tilson’s aforementioned “spectre of accountability” (228). But obviously there is a wide variety of ways comics can be successful discursal texts, that allows students and instructors freedom in regard to assessment.

Labor-based assessment is the most appropriate tactic for multimodal texts in general, especially considering the differing amount of work various students have to put in to achieve the same competency with various modes of communication. A student may come in that is already an expert with a wide range of digital competencies that their fellow learners entirely lack. But for comics, more specificity is perhaps possible as one can deploy Tan et al.’s evaluative techniques relating to “the cohesive relationship between modalities” (104) and the text’s “functional load”, two key aspects of the medium that can be engaged with regardless of student’s previously abilities in the various modes that make up a comic. One doesn’t have to be a skilled artist (and the vast majority of anxiety about comics assessment revolves around the artwork) in order to produce an efficient, impactful work of discourse in the comics medium.

CHAPTER 4: THE CRITICAL APPARATUS

An important concept that comics underscore is the malleable nature of modes. Comics are a powerful example of how a group of modes can each be represented through one, in this case the visual mode. This is especially difficult to convey to students, and even in comics studies this approach is rare, instead focusing on the medium as a blend of the linguistic and visual modes even though that distinction is erased on the printed page (See Eisner's *Sequential Art* for the most efficient discussion of this topic). Culturally, the distinction is very real. But the viewpoint does a disservice by failing to recognize that comics are purely visual, and because of that "working with comics can expand our own and our students' definitions and practices of reading" (Comer 76). Reading is generally referring to print texts. While frequently analytical frameworks may refer to reading other sources of meaning (a painting, film, a speech, etc.) in general our understanding of the means by which we encode and decode meaning, especially in an academic setting, refers to printed linguistic information. Comics though stand as an example of what else is possible, what else can be "read". And though they are far from the only medium that does this, comics usage of visual modes, that incorporate printed linguistic text, highlights that reading practices have to encompass more than just the printed word. This is especially the case in that, despite their employment of linguistic texts, comics aren't always intelligible without the purely visual modes. By sponsoring the expansion of what it means to be able to read, or to be more expansive, to be literate, "Comics align remarkably well with composition's pedagogical commitment to fostering students' multiliteracies" (Comer 76). As something less alien than perhaps other multimodal texts, comics are an excellent source from which to build other literacies as well.

A further affordance of comics is that they can “prioritize rhetorical and material awareness” (Santos and McIntyre 1), that becomes an increasingly valuable skill as students move further away from sole reliance on print text. Comics highlight the importance of the physical manifestation of a text as a partial conveyor of discourse, in that the constraints of their production are often clearly visible, especially in mainstream and older comics. Pencil lines are often visibly out of place, inking mistakes often make it to publication, and so on. The material production of comics is a discursual act. As Huang and Archer note regarding the difference between genres of comics, “Comics and graphic novels, for instance, are similar in nature, but the difference in their materiality results in different naming and perceived value of the texts” (69). Comics exemplify the discourse that is created by a text before a reader has a knowledge of the linguistic information it contains, if any. This is a way that “comics can encourage visual literacy and multimodal thinking for students” (Kirtley et al. 5), in that the analysis of a multimodal text can and should include much more than the modes that are obviously being employed.

In light of the importance of the material existence of a text, “text, object, and process all need to be taken into account as one researches and teaches” (Jacobs “Text, Object, Transaction 27). Additionally, Køhlert and Sousanis assert “that how stories are told is intrinsically bound up with their meaning” (234), and how stories are told is furthermore inextricable from the physical aspects with which a reader interacts. By being what they are, that is generally cheaply printed, supposedly disposable entertainment, comics offer an opportunity to convey to students a richer understanding of what multimodality is, that is something beyond the general understanding of digital texts that incorporate visual, textual, and sometimes aural modes of meaning making. Digital texts are a vital aspect of multimodality but incorporating a wider understanding of it and

reading in general will better train students to recognize, analyze, and produce discourses. “Such a pedagogical approach offers opportunities to enhance students’ critical engagement with literacy development while fostering a transferable rhetorical perspective” (Comer 75-76), and that perspective is that most every text has a multimodal aspect, that inherently impacts what discourses they are employing and creating. That being the case, “A multiliteracies approach, with emphasis on the multimodal aspects of multimedia texts, provides students with preparation and practice to consume, comprehend, respond to, and produce communications in our contemporary culture” (Dallacqua 214). In short, multimodal literacy is what will allow students to function in their day-to-day lives in our current cultural moment, and comics can provide a broad understanding of what multimodal discourse can appear as in the classroom and out-of-class contexts. However, this expanded understanding of multimodality to include physical manifestations of modes of meaning-making, in this case, hinges on the skill of analyzing comics as a multimodal medium.

In the field of comics studies, there is a noted lack of a concrete way to analyze comics based on what they are, that is necessary if a pedagogy focused on the medium as multimodal texts is to be successful. Rowsell and Decoste related some of their difficulties in employing modes with which they were not specifically familiar, and results seemed to be frustrating for both students and teachers (“(Re)designing Writing”). Without defined critical apparatus, teaching with or reading from an unfamiliar medium or mode is daunting and confusing. Unfortunately, most analysis of comics hinges on an understanding of the medium as something like, but distinct from, writing, painting, or film, or as a mix of words and images. The bulk of analysis then focuses on using schema that are usually applied to other art forms, as opposed to approaching comics as unique. In response, research for this project has focused on finding

analytical tools that can be productively used. While many approaches that apply to most novels don't apply well, comics do generally function through a narrative. While much of the apparatus of film studies (that is very often co-opted for comics) doesn't apply either, some of the theory that drove the French New Wave underpin specific ideas of how comics function, and most importantly how readers recognize characters, settings, and events throughout a comic text. Semiotics has provided a broad framework for understanding how not only symbols work within the medium, but also how the medium is constructed through the ambient symbols of a comic's layout. And multimodal pedagogies have provided scaffolding on which to build comics literacy in the classroom and in institutions. Integrating the above fields allows for a viable form of literacy instruction in the post-secondary classroom, founded on an understanding of the comics medium being described and analyzed on its own terms. Of special importance is providing a vocabulary and set of methods that comics can engage with without resorting to methods or terms from other mediums that bring attached discourses concerning other kinds of texts.

Words and images in comics work differently here than in traditional visual arts or even cartoons, but the general concept is the same. In Roland Barthes' "The Rhetoric of the Image," he argues text with an image works to limit the potential interpretations of the image (such as the caption on an advertisement explaining that featured item is the actual product being sold). In comics, the text does still function, in general, to act as expository/explanatory utterances to the artwork. Conversely, the images in comics often work to illustrate the text or provide a reference point for diegetic dialogue. In other words, while text does still perform the suturing function that it does in other visual/textual media, the artwork often performs the same function for the text in a comic.

Further, comics as a medium complicate the idea of a text/image distinction. Especially in texts that heavily manipulate the font or style of text, it becomes clear that “Words and images” are “an arbitrary separation” (Eisner 13) as the text in a comic is presented as part of an image. Text’s existence as the most arbitrary of symbols, but still as visual symbols, is emphasized when placed in conjunction with other symbolic representations, meaning that it is possible to approach the images in comics as symbolic representations in their entirety; we don’t have to leave the words on the side in our discussion of the visual meanings in comics. As John Berger emphasizes, “it is not the image or symbol itself that is responsible but rather the ability of the image to call forth responses in people that are connected to their beliefs and values” (*Seeing is Believing*, 4). What is important in this criticism is what the image evokes, and what it can do with its connection to readers and other cultural symbols, not the image itself.

According to Berger in *Ways of Seeing*, the meaning of an image is changed according to what one sees immediately beside it or what comes immediately after it, and this impact is compounded when what follows and precedes an image with text is another image with text. Combined with the conception of reading comics provided by the comics theorist Tammy Horn as a pair of semantic triads (97) created by the reader, concept, and text, and reader, concept, and art, and then having those dual triads placed in the semantic chain that is the strip of panels in a comic, the task of reading a comic suddenly can be recognized as far more complicated than it initially appears. The primary entrée into teaching the medium is finding a way to make sense of the exponential growth that is possible in meaning, through the means of defining and explaining the foundational units and grammar of the art form.

Paul Gravett, a frequent contributor to *The Guardian* regarding comics, referred to them as “a freakish kind of writing,” in that the narratives contained within comics are related to

readers through means unlike any other medium. Comics largely tell their stories through gutters, or the gaps between panels, and the majority of any comic narrative isn't actually present on the page. The reader then is required to fill in what happens off the page; this ambiguity automatically activates what literary theorist Robert Scholes refers to as their "interpretive process" (22), making comics an inherently taxing form of reading. Additionally, they can also be potentially confusing, especially when the vast multiplicity of potential meanings described above comes into play, potentially multiplying with every panel. A key task in teaching comics is teaching the skill of not getting lost, and of being able to follow along with the author's/artist's intentions. Some authors/artists are able to do this without the reader's help: Alison Bechdel (*Fun Home*) and Jamie Delano (*Hellblazer*) are both standouts in this regard. Neither of those author's comics would be considered difficult to read, despite the density of Bechdel's work (visually, thematically, and textually) or the surrealism of Delano's art and composition. This is largely due to their mastery of the multiframe, the system of panels, gutters, and pages on which a comic relies in order to be a comic. Therefore, focusing on an understanding of this theoretical structure is the first step in teaching comics literacy, the first step in building a usable praxis founded on these texts.

To directly contradict David Carrier and his superb *Aesthetics of Comics*, everyone doesn't "know...enough to read a comic" (85), as the manipulation of formatting and panels often employed impacts the meaning of comics to a much greater degree than most readers would recognize. A frequent complaint regarding (especially current) comics is that they are difficult to follow. Panel layouts may be non-linear, non-sequential, un-conventional, or anti-conventional, to the extent that the narrative becomes disjointed or difficult to follow. Comics often frustrate expectations to the extent that readers lose interest and return to some other art

form, and they tend to not follow traditional narrative order, where readers expect the narrative to follow the reading conventions of their language. Instead, comics are essentially their own language with their own conventions, that rely on analysis of specific features for interpretation and therefore require instructors to define and teach the medium's own specific literacy. Below is an introduction to some of the foundational characteristics of the medium, designed to provide a working familiarity with the medium to readers/instructors who may be unfamiliar with the methods comics use to transmit meaning.

The Multiframe

The multiframe is the first, and most unique, aspect of comics under discussion. As mentioned above, it's the collective term for the blank spaces throughout a comic book, above, below, beside, behind, and between the panels. Perhaps a more expedient definition though is that it's everything but that which contains the art/text images. These spaces are the foundation of how meaning is communicated in a comic. In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud states that "In the limbo of the gutter (the spaces between comic panels), human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea" (66). The reader constructs a large portion of the narrative themselves out of the gutters, while the blank spaces at the edge of a comic page and between strips of panels are the boundaries, visually and metaphorically, of the narrative itself. The edges guide the reader on a path through the rendered narrative syntagms, while the gutters cue the interpretive skills of the reader to make the leaps between two juxtaposed and differing images. The blank space tells the reader that they must now place some sort of meaning and narrative fragment between the two panels based off of the surroundings, though ultimately no two readers will interpret that space exactly the same.

The multiframe however must be explained as more than just the page edges and gutters between panels. As important as that concept is, it is a part of a whole. Perhaps the most pedagogically efficient way to conceptualize this is like this: panels don't make up a comics page. Generally, readers consider the panels as the foundation of the page, and the gutters divide the panels. But more accurately, the page is already existing, and the panels, with their inscribed art/text images, are then laid out on the page, using the affordance it creates (that of narrative participation) in order to turn disjointed, fragmented art/text panels into a narrative. The narrative sequence then is the most important aspect of the multiframe to describe. It is the key affordance of the device, as it not only provides a space for the design aspect of panel layout (that directly impacts meaning), but it also triggers readers to expect that the juxtaposed images are telling a specific story. McCloud argues that "By creating a sequence with two or more images, we are endowing them with a single overriding identity, and forcing the viewer to consider them as a whole" (73). The framing device is the method by which individual panels become a narrative sequence interpretable by a reader, and in this case by instructors and students.

The multiframe then helps us to understand that we are reading a comic, while sequence lays out a narrative arc. Yet there are a vast number of ways that authors/artists will approach the task of rendering their story in the comics medium. This leads to the second major characteristic of the medium that needs to be taught, which is how the narrative's panel-by-panel reliance on either panel content or rhetorical influence from the frame impacts how a comic is read.

Styles of Discourse

What is under discussion here is the relationship between page layout and how that impacts meaning, which can be analyzed in terms of what the layout itself is privileging: sequentiality, aesthetics, visual rhetorics, or rhetorics of form (this approach is largely borrowed

from the critic Benoit Peters, who proposes a similar strategy in Thierry Groensteen's *The System of Comics*). The first style is common in newspaper comics, such as *Garfield*, and is also frequently used in graphic novels such as *Persepolis* (fig. 4).



Figure 4. Standard panel layout. From: Satrapi, Marjane. *Persepolis*. Pantheon, 2004.

In this style, the panels are sized and organized in a mostly uniform manner throughout the comic, in the left-to-right (in Western comics), top-to-bottom grid format that is most recognizable to readers. The narrative then is almost entirely conveyed through the artwork and text itself, though the narrative leaps required of the reader imposed by the gutters are still necessary for understanding. This is the “standard” style, and, owing to its ubiquity and effectiveness, it is the form against which others should be defined. Since this organization is often the easiest for a reader to follow and make meaning from, when there are departures from it a reader should be asking why.

The second form is exemplified by comics where the organization is used primarily for aesthetic ends, as opposed to specifically being used for narrative advancement. These are relatively rare in Western comics, but often feature multiframe layouts that specifically confound traditional left-to-right, top-to-bottom reading. As these layouts aren't used to move the story along, readers must ask what they are doing, which largely is to appeal to other systems of meaning besides linear narrative. These multiframe layouts often feature wordless images that halt the narrative, or a seemingly random ordering of panels, often to either lean heavily on comics visual strengths, or to directly question assumptions about the necessity of linear story-telling, or to give the reader choices in how they want to construct the narrative. Given the reliance on aspects of comics that are largely non-narrative, this style of layout is identified within the context of this pedagogy as "aesthetic." This is a frequent approach in manga such as *Mushi-Shi* (fig. 5), and more rarely seen in western comics such as the graphic novels *On a Sunbeam* (fig. 6) and *Here*, and later instances of the comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes*.



Figure 5. An aesthetic panel layout. From: Urushibara, Yuki. *Mushi-shi*. Kodensha, 1999-2008.



Figure 6. An aesthetic panel layout, example 2. From: Walden, Tillie. *On a Sunbeam*. First Second, 2018.

The last two are essentially the converse of one another. The “narrative” style is where the multiframe is produced in accordance with the necessities of the narrative. This is especially common in action-leaning comics, where panels and layouts change shape to often follow the movement of a character or other important actions. The impact this can have on the story is vast, changing a staid rendering of still artwork into a kinetic visual narrative. Instances of this abound in American superhero comics such as *The Amazing Spider-Man*, where many of the best artists view the multiframe as a third part, along with the images and text, of what must be shaped in order to convey the meaning of their stories. Additionally, three of the foundational works of the art form, *Maus*, *Watchmen* (fig. 7) and *A Contract with God*, favor this style of discourse while integrating others.



Figure 7. A narrative panel layout. From: Moore, Alan, et al. *Watchmen*. DC Comics, 2019.

The fourth form is especially common in the sub-genre of graphic novels, and also is frequent in the Franco-Belgian *Bande Desinee* tradition of comics. The “formal” form stands in contrast to the “narrative,” as it creates the story in the terms of the multiframe. A comic in this style would seem to be dictated by the layout of the panels, with the narrative itself, not just the artwork and images, working to fit within the confines of the specific form that the comics artist wants to employ. American artist Chris Ware (fig. 8) is especially well known for this, as his experimental layouts form equally experimental stories, with the narrative being directly influenced by the shapes, sizes, and layouts of the panels, gutters, and borders. This breakdown of layouts is vital to understanding how to approach interpretation of a comic, and because of their impact on the comic from a narrative, affective, and thematic level, I refer to them collectively moving forward as the styles of discourse. An understanding of how these are deployed across the medium will provide a starting point for analysis; form and narrative meaning are more closely tied in comics than in most artforms, yet an ongoing critical discussion thereof is one of the primary lacks in comics studies as it stands now. This makes approaching comics more difficult for instructors who are unfamiliar with the medium. Without a resource on how to analyze an artform it’s difficult to justify its usage, as it may be performing work in ways which new adopters are unaware of. A codified system to address the rhetorical forms of the medium is a necessary step to bringing it into the classroom where it can become productive.



Figure 8. A formal panel layout. From: Ware, Chris. *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*. Pantheon Books, 2017.

These four discourses are one of the primary entrées into the medium from an analytical standpoint, as they are an explication of how the primary foundation of the medium is used.

While it's tempting, and sometimes productive, to approach comics with the same set of tools for analysis as we do novels or films, when that occurs much of the impact of comics is lost as the approach largely ignores what makes them unique. But approaching them from the standpoint of comics as comics, we can begin to productively use them in our pedagogies and have a detailed approach to fostering comics literacy. Comics then can serve as the foundation of a multimodal classroom. By being exemplary tools for teaching a literacy adaptable to students' lived experiences, comics can provide students skills they need in order to gain the "visual literacy" that "is key to communicating in contemporary society" (Kirtley et al. 6)

Iconic Solidarity

A frequent issue with approaches to comics is that they either take what is inside or surrounding the panels for granted, and largely take the other as self-explanatory or only in need of cursory explanation. But while the multiframe may be the distinctive affordance of the medium, what occurs within the spaces that delineates (panels) must be discussed as having equal importance. Just as comics are unique structurally, the method by which they convey narrative occurrences is as well. Another characteristic of comics that has to be examined while teaching, and by which they function sequentially and coherently, is that of iconic solidarity (Groensteen 17). This concept essentially describes the method by which readers can understand that two separate images are in fact meant to represent the same context at two separate times (and by extension, that when there is not iconic solidarity, then we are meant to interpret the panels as representing different times or contexts). While a relatively straightforward concept, many comics consciously play with this aspect of the form to tell, or actively dismantle, their narrative, and having it be defined blatantly for students (and all readers) will provide clarity throughout their experience with the medium, and will also often provide a resource for understanding when the layout may be confusing or challenging.

Iconic solidarity is conceptually straightforward; we as readers largely understand that comics occur in sequence because the panels are juxtaposed within the multiframe, and because there is (generally internal) consistency across panels. When we see two panels depicting an identical space, for example a room, we assume the two panels are depicting the same room at two different times. We see, within those panels with two identical rooms, two renderings of a person that look similar, we assume that we are seeing two representations of the same person in the same room from two different times. This basic concept is what drives the aspect of

sequencing throughout the medium and can create other narrative affordances as well that are detailed further later in the chapter.

The Word Balloon

A further aspect of comics that is necessary for the praxis that's being built is the word balloon. These are the containers in which a majority of diegetic speech appears in a comic, and as such they are the primary method of conveying linguistic/text information. It is important to state that they are neither unique to comics, nor are they a definitive characteristic. Certainly, you can have a comic without word balloons. So perhaps the best way to describe the reasoning behind their inclusion with other aspects that are inherent in the medium is that too many comics use them prodigiously for this praxis to ignore them. From an analytical standpoint, many comics manipulate the shape, color, and relative position of word balloons regularly in order to convey additional rhetorical information to the reader. While comics scholars Charles Forceville, Tony Veale, and Kurt Feyaerts ("Balloonics") did concerted research regarding whether certain fonts and shapes have motivated meaning, their article also laid out in detail how, whether their effectiveness is arbitrary or not, the appearance of the container of the text in a comic conveys a great deal regarding the voice of the speaker, mood, character, intended volume of speech, position of the speaker in or out of the panel, and even if the speaker is a diegetic part of the narrative or not.

Granted, not all comics manipulate word balloons to a great degree. "The European comics are far more normative by comparison" (Forceville 7), as American and Japanese comics tend to be more experimental in that aspect of form. Others don't technically even use "balloons" uniformly. For example, *Doonesbury* by Gary Trudeau (fig. 9) and the various strips by Berkeley Breathed often remove the balloon outline and the opacity of the structure, instead

superimposing text over relatively empty elements of the panels (such as a wall or the sky). Even within specific comics word balloons may appear or disappear depending on very practical aspects such as the need to fit more text in a panel, or for more artistic reasons as we will discuss in detail in regard to the comic *Arkham Asylum*. So, though balloons are not a defining characteristic of comics, they are a vital tool by which much of the semantic richness of a comic is often conveyed, and therefore a construct that must be analyzed to understand in full what a specific comic is doing.



Figure 9. Transparent word balloons. From: Trudeau, Garry. “August 7, 2013”. *Doonesbury*. Universal Press Syndicate, 1970-.

Intrapanel Multimodal Analysis and the Channels of Meaning

So far, these tools would allow an instructor to talk about how comics function but lack a way to discuss for what purpose the comic is utilizing one of the above characteristics. None of them directly addresses how a reader is to analyze what is occurring in the narrative of a comic. What’s been defined are major formal aspects of the medium, but not necessarily how that form impacts the semantic information conveyed by the form. In short, what’s missing is how to analyze what a comic is about. This is the area that much current scholarship focuses on (see, among others, Hillary Chute’s *Why Comics?*, Jan Baeten’s *The Graphic Novel: An Introduction*, and Barbara Postema’s *Narrative Structure in Comics*). But it bears discussion here, as, while scholarship in comics studies does largely focus on the image/text approach that the medium

employs, rarely is the analysis based on or around comics situated in an explicitly multimodal pedagogy. This is an important oversight to address as a working post-secondary pedagogy for comics in general could confer a great deal of the textual legitimacy that the medium is consistently striving for by directly arguing against the textual elitism that has hampered the development of the medium and its attendant academic disciplines.

In “Marveling at The Man Called Nova: Comics as Sponsors of Multimodal Literacy,” Dale Jacobs does approach the medium from this context, and defines the major pathways of meaning that are utilized by comics, more succinctly than it is usually done elsewhere, as “Linguistic Meaning, Visual Meaning, Audio Meaning, Gestural Meaning, Spatial Meaning, and the Multimodal patterns of meaning that relate the first five modes” (184). The Linguistic and Visual channels of meaning are most often discussed in comics studies, largely as it’s along those lines that comics most resemble something else that is more often studied (the Linguistic channel is shared with Literature, the Visual with various Visual Arts, and the combination is shared with Film). They won’t need further explicit explication here. But often the rest of the information that is being conveyed more or less lays dormant in analysis, that ignores how comics communicate via representations of auditory sound besides dialogue and narration, gestural representations, and representations of space within panels. Each of these require some explanation of their own.

The Auditory Channel of Meaning

The auditory channel is used whenever sound is represented by some method, often, but not always, separate from text. The easiest examples are sound effects, that are ostensibly motivated representations of sound in the diegetic environment. These are often represented through onomatopoeia, such as when an explosion is represented by “boom!” or a cat’s meow by

“meow”. Perhaps the most famous examples aren’t actually from comics, but rather from contingent media: the title-card sound effects from the 1960s TV show *Batman*, and the title and key feature of Roy Lichtenstein’s painting *Whaam!* (fig. 10). Though neither of these are comic books, this style of usage has become inherently linked to the medium (and especially American super-hero comics). Yet discussion of this channel of meaning is rare, and in general focuses more on the containers (word balloons) than what the usage of this channel of meaning can and does do for the art form.

While the visual means of representing this channel of meaning is perhaps the most iconic representation of the medium, hence why its utilization in other media immediately will link those texts to comics, there is limited discussion of how it is employed. Generally, the discussion that there is revolves around whether the representations are motivated or arbitrary semiotically. But regardless of why these representations are what they are, this pedagogy will instead focus on what they do for the reader, and how they are utilized and manipulated. This will instead provide classrooms with means by which to discuss what these sound effects are being used for and how they impact the overall meaning. These representations are a vital part of how comics build, to borrow Jacob’s phrase, a “textual environment” (“More than Words” 22).

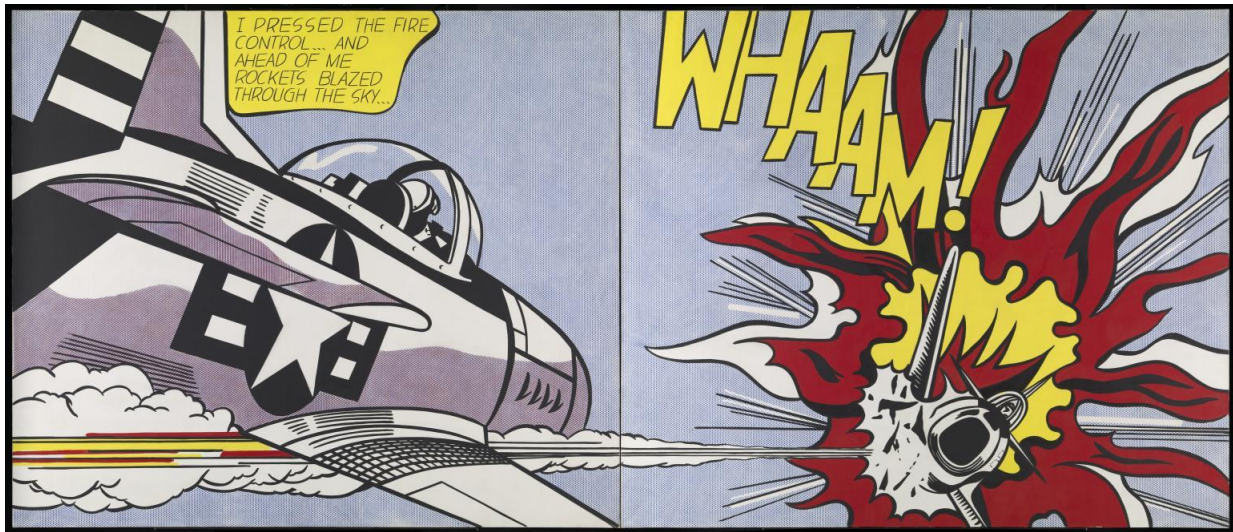


Figure 10. Visual representation of sound. From: Lichtenstein, Roy. *Whaam!*. 1963

Furthermore, comics often take advantage of the visual nature of the medium to represent changes in the audio aspect of the intrapanel environment. In his breakdown of *Polly and the Pirates*, Jacobs notes that “We are better able to ‘hear’ the narrator’s voice because we can see what words are emphasized by the bold lettering” (22), but that is just a rudimentary example, and the uses this affordance is put to are extensive.

An especially notable example is throughout Neil Gaiman’s *Sandman* series. The character Delirium (a physical manifestation of that psychological state, see fig. 11) has the text representing her speech heavily manipulated. Unlike most of the text in the series, her speech is represented by an uneven, dizzying scrawl, mirroring the character’s state of mind and the traits she represents. While this may seem an obvious artistic choice, it underscores the character’s mindset, and the text itself is difficult to read quickly, which can be frustrating for a reader. Additionally, it compounds the impact of the character’s mode of speech, which is as disjointed and circuitous as its visual representation. Beyond what the text style implies about the character and her consciousness, it implies also a great deal about what this character sounds like. The letters in her word balloons grow and shrink whenever she speaks, implying that she speaks with

a constantly varying volume, and the rounded quality of the text represents a very distinct tone and mannerisms in her speech, though different readers may interpret it differently. Regardless, the visual representation of her speech not only provides an idea of what she may be like, but also what she may sound like, creating an entirely new mode within the textual world.

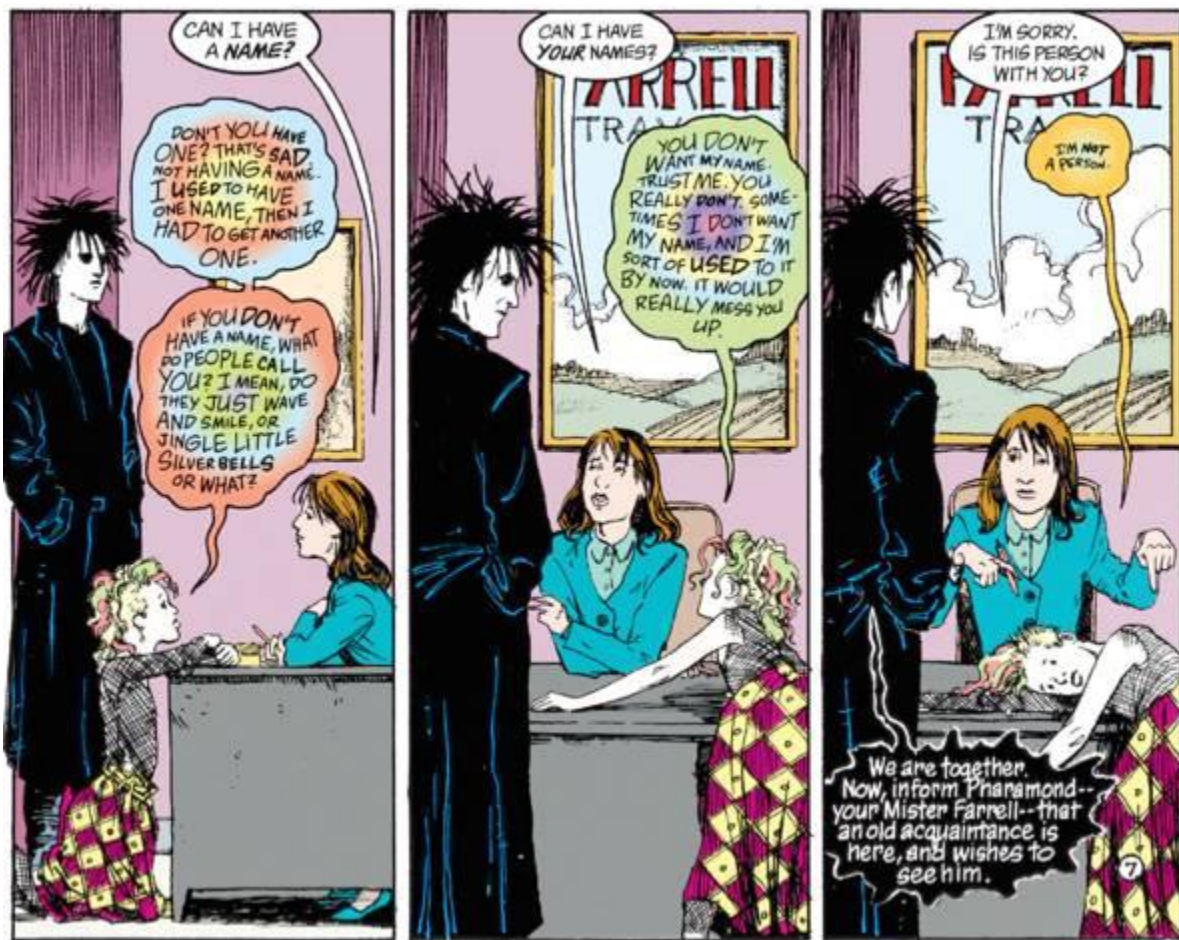


Figure 11. Delirium's words are heavily manipulated. From: Gaiman, Neil, et al. "Brief Lives". *The Sandman*, #43. DC Comics, 1992.

The Gestural Channel of Meaning

The gestural channel is perhaps the most difficult to analyze and is also often subsumed in analysis of the visual. But, to be precise, everything in a comic, including the text, is visual, but dividing representation into what channel is being visually portrayed, at a given time and by a certain mode, is pedagogically and critically expedient. To that end, Jacobs defines the gestural

channel as that which “refers to facial expression and body posture” (22), or in other words it is the channel that best represents body language and other non-verbal communications. As in real-life interactions and in film, the gestural channel provides vital context for interpretation of events, suturing each of the other channels into a limited number of meanings. In Jacobs’ analysis of *Polly and the Pirates*, he notes that the gestural cues designate the center of attention within panels for the reader (that thereby defines the protagonist). But the most important role this channel plays is in the interpretation of emotional content via facial expressions.

Scott McCloud talks at length regarding the means by which readers become involved in a comic, that is partly by “amplification through simplification” (*Understanding Comics*, 30). He notes that “Simplifying characters and images toward a purpose can be an effective tool for storytelling” (31), and this applies to facial expressions as much as any other aspect of representation. The gestural channel, through the means of simplified and amplified facial expressions and body posture, is a primary method of emotional conveyance, and as such is one of the ways that readers become invested in a comic. The facial and other body gestures then become icons (in McCloud’s sense of simplified symbols that represent something else [27]), and “icons demand participation to make them work” (58). By amplifying emotion, and demanding readers participate in them directly by conveying them through icons that must be interpreted, the gestural channel of meaning is a primary means of engaging readers in a comic, and a powerful tool for narrative and for fostering commitment to these (often difficult) texts.

The Spatial Channel of Meaning

The spatial channel is difficult to extricate from the visual channel and analysis of the multiframe itself, but it does function within panels distinctly. Relative position of characters and action, relative sizes of the same, and areas of focus are all defined through how space in a panel

is used or not used. Jacobs argues that “the spatial refers to the meanings of environmental and architectural space” (22), and he extends that externally, out of the panels into the page layout. While this pedagogy focused on comics literacy argues that space is instead part of the multiframe, the intrapanel management of space is a powerful tool (often at its most effective when it is working explicitly with the multiframe as well). This impact that management of space can have is perhaps best exemplified by a famous sequence from *The Amazing Spider-Man #33*, by Steve Ditko and Stan Lee (fig. 12). That issue opens with Spider-Man trapped under a collapsed building, and as he struggles to free himself, panels become successively larger, and more and more of the collapsed building is shown, further revealing the extent of the danger in that Spider-Man finds himself. By increasing the size of the panel, and decreasing the relative size of the character, Steve Ditko (the credited artist) effectively increased the sense of danger and claustrophobia within the narrative and, comparably, the impact when the hero frees himself. Had the relationship between the character and the space within the panel not changed, the effect of the multi-page panel sequence would be greatly reduced. This channel of meaning can be exploited in far simpler and obvious ways (as in moving from a “wide-shot” panel to a close-up in order to bring focus to and place emphasis on a specific character or event,) but it is employed in nearly every panel, in nearly every comic, yet is rarely discussed on its own. But due to its ubiquity and the unique ways in that comics can depict space, this channel must play a clearly defined role in this praxis.



Figure 12. Manipulation of panel architecture. From: Lee, Stan and Steve Ditko. “If This Be My Destiny...! The Final Chapter.” *The Amazing Spider-Man #33*, Feb. 1966, Marvel Comics.

Something needs to be said, however, of how an instructor can analyze a comic text more holistically. Identifying, analyzing, and critiquing discrete modes of meaning is a necessary skill for achieving comics literacy. As Kirtley et al. state “In order to fully participate and, ultimately, to transform the world, our students must be able to name it” (6), and this applies to specific ideas and constructs in the world as well. In order to engage with a medium, it is useful to have a vocabulary with which to address it and engage in dialogue about it with a community. It is through a discourse community that a medium is interrogated, analyzed, and made to expand; comics however still is lacking this specific language, and importantly is also, for the most part, lacking a way to analyze the success or failure of attempts in the medium to create or engage in discourse through the affordances of the medium. So, in addition to analyzing comics via their distinct modes, it’s necessary to examine how one addresses the effectiveness of a comic in regard to how well it is relating the discourse it is trying to convey.

Tan et al. propose that what makes a comic work, or effectively produce its intended discourse, is a “cohesive relationship between modalities” (104), that can be judged by

“similarity, proximity and continuity” (104). Is there a clear, recognizable relationship between gestures in a panel and what’s being conveyed by the linguistic mode? Do representations of sound relate to what is being portrayed sensibly in regard not only the action in the comic but also to the genre and style? While as a medium, comics are extremely inventive, and in some genres nearly anything is fair game as a source for a narrative, that characteristic perhaps increases the necessity of each comic itself to be cohesively engaging its audience within the structures it creates for itself. In short, does a comic have internal consistency, and is that recognizable across each mode? While a single mode’s usage may be exceptional, that matters little if it doesn’t have a cohesive relationship with the rest of the modes being employed. All of the modes of meaning-making employed in a comic must, more than anything, be cohesive with the discourse it is trying to convey, even more so than with each other.

A primary avenue of assessing a comic then is analyzing whether or not the cohesive relationship between its material modes furthers the discourse it is attempting to produce. Whether or not the form enhances, inhibits, or does not impact the function is perhaps the most necessary evaluation of a comic that needs to be made, as most other questions regarding their effectiveness are under this umbrella. How effectively a comic engages a reader through narrative or representational gaps, how its styles of discourse impact the other modes, and so on—each is a further question that needs to be asked after determining, on the terms of cohesion between modes and discourse, if the synthesis between the various modes a comic employs contributes materially to its goals as an artifact of discourse.

Understanding these foundational concepts, the multiframe, styles of discourse, iconic solidarity, intrapanel multimodal discourse, word balloons, and multimodal cohesion, allow instructors a way to build an analytical approach to a given comic. There are certain comic texts

that best exemplify the larger arguments and teaching strategies that are being advocated. The first of these is that there is value in comics both in the oft derided genre of superhero comics, and those on the edge of legitimatization, such as graphic autobiographies and other works of non-fiction. The second is that comics as a medium, and no specific genre, can provide unique and valuable opportunities in the classroom for instructors and students. This is not to say that what is provided below is a complete analysis of every feature of every comic. But it should be comprehensive enough for an instructor hitherto unfamiliar with the medium as a teaching tool to be able to deploy it in the classroom effectively.

CHAPTER 5: THE COMICS

To further the goal of providing a multimodal pedagogy through comics literacy, the focus going forward is on five texts: Dave McKean and Grant Morrison's *Arkham Asylum* (1989), Fabien Vehlman and Kerascoët's *Beautiful Darkness* (2014), *Maus*, by Art Spiegelman (1980-1991), *From Hell*, by Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell (1989-1998), and *The Uncanny X-Men* issues 141-142 by Chris Claremont and John Byrne (1981), usually referred to collectively as *Days of Future Past*. Also discussed is how to bring each of these texts productively into a post-secondary classroom. Each text offers both students and instructors unique affordances and require different approaches to interpretation and criticism but not every aspect of comics discussed above is discussed in depth. Instead, the characteristics that provide the most analytical and pedagogical opportunities in each of the chosen texts is the focus.

This project is striving to create a pedagogy that gives meaningful instruction in comics literacy, and as such the selection of a text for the class is important beyond the direct classroom uses it provides. Two of the texts would certainly be considered graphic novels, despite the foregrounding of mainstream comics that this pedagogy encourages. *Maus* is the almost certainly the most thoroughly analyzed and critiqued text in the medium. Alan Moore, the writer of *From Hell*, is arguably the most critically acclaimed comic author. The pedagogical approach that is being proposed, however, will want to emphasize the range of the medium, and furthermore ignoring the sub-genre of graphic novels would simply further the imaginary divide that lurks in comics studies and make calls to address comics as a medium disingenuous. *Arkham Asylum* and *Beautiful Darkness* don't really fit on either side of the imaginary divide, however, and *Days of Future Past* is part of one of the most popular titles from the largest comics publisher—perhaps as mainstream as one can get. This range is vital as in order to be viable this pedagogy has to

demonstrate the worth and value of teaching with comics from across the publishing spectrum. In order to actually provide an opportunity to gain comics literacy, and to understand the ways in which various genres and cultures interact with and deploy the affordances of the medium, one has to read and teach comics in general.

In order to provide students then with a new critical literacy, a workable method of generalizable critique and composition, choices of what is being taught must foreground their actual use value in the classroom. Therefore, suggested comics will emphasize a specific mode or approach to producing discourse, that will allow each to be exemplary texts in terms of understanding a specific affordance of comics. *Arkham Asylum* is especially adept at underscoring how visual modes of meaning can be the primary method of discourse, over and sometimes in direct conflict with linguistic modes. *From Hell* and *Maus* both emphasize the impact on a text, and the use value for a text, of being embedded in ongoing cultural discourses. *Beautiful Darkness* makes special use of architectural space, both literally in its multiframe and as an ongoing narrative metaphor, which provides learners with striking example of Tan et al.'s concept of modal cohesion, albeit ironically. And *Days of Future Past* especially is useful at demonstrating the use value of the medium as objects of efficient political discourse through various traits comics borrows from literature and visual arts. Below is an analysis and discussion of each, hopefully providing teachers a starting point for bringing these texts into the classroom on their own terms, and using them to productively sponsor analysis, engagement with, and composition of multimodal texts.

Arkham Asylum

Dave McKean and Grant Morrison's *Arkham Asylum* offers both students and instructors unique opportunities in the classroom. The comic, as is characteristic of both artists, straddles the

imaginary divide between “graphic novel” and mainstream “comic books,” and exemplifies many of the best characteristics of both. Like many that are perceived as being on the more legitimate side of that divide, *Asylum* was largely the work of three people (the two credited authors and letterer Gaspar Saladino, whose typography is an expressive artwork in and of itself), as opposed to the large collective teams that often work on mainstream superhero comics. Also, it is a work of intense psychological detail and one that eschews the stereotypes of simple moralizing of superhero comics in favor of a story that undermines much of the ethical assumptions that surround its characters.

However, first and foremost, *Arkham Asylum* is a Batman comic. Unlike some of its contemporary Batman comics (such as *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Batman: Year One*), *Asylum* does nothing to distance itself from its comic’s tradition, instead reveling in its usage of some of Batman’s strangest villains and largely relying on reader understanding of his Rogue’s Gallery to comprehend the various character motivations that bind the narrative together. As such, *Asylum* stands not only as an excellent example of either side of the divide, but also as an example of why said divide is not only arbitrary but immaterial.

The divide between the two types of comics mirrors closely long-standing divides between high and low art, and the respective socioeconomic classes that are presumed to be primary consumers of each. Graphic novels tend toward high-brow literature, while comic books are one of the lowest of the low arts. However, *Arkham Asylum*, if that divide is to be taken as a given, is deeply troubling categorically. It is far removed from its comic book history, perhaps more so than any other text in the class. The visuals are exceptionally well rendered, and the narrative itself wrestles directly with historical and personal trauma. The maturity of both the visuals and the story are more often features of the graphic novel. But it also involves a man that

spends his evenings dressed as a bat, another that believes himself to be Zeus with the costume to match, and a giant crocodile-person. While the representations herein lean more towards the grotesque than the comedic, the histories of these characters as young adult entertainment is not at all obscured. These features make it difficult to categorize, straddling a line that is supposed to be immutable, based on clear-cut cultural and artistic ideals. Therefore, bringing this comic before students, especially as the first comics text in the class, foregrounds for them the importance of questioning how texts are categorized culturally, and the inherently constructed nature of constructs that have been naturalized.

As a practical teaching tool, it is perhaps the medium's best example of providing emotional and psychological depth purely through artwork. In a narrative that is largely concerned with its own loss of coherence and cohesion, McKean and Saladino's visual work emphasizes and exaggerates each character's relationship to their shared space; it is the key aspect in conveying that no one, not even Batman or the attending psychiatrists, are "all there". The artwork bleeds across lines and character's proportions change in the manner of a fun house, while the typography, especially when dialogue is spoken by The Joker (fig. 13), underscores the character's recognition of and reaction to their own splintering perceptions. It stands then as perhaps one of the best examples of how everything in a comic, including the words, is part of the image, and how the images themselves are the units of narrative that we are reading, instead of words as in a novel.



Figure 13. The Joker's dialogue is rendered as a bloody scrawl. From: Morrison, Grant and Dave McKean. *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*. DC Comics, 1989.

From that perspective, *Asylum* is one of the easiest texts for applying the analytical framework that is proposed above, in that it clearly exemplifies how each of those aspects informs on, controls, and reinforces the thematic content of the narrative, particularly in regard to iconic solidarity. The solidarity is, in many ways, actually lacking in this text, as the basic rules of similarity and recognition do not apply; characters' depictions can shift from panel to panel, and leave the reader disoriented, confused, and searching for something to guide their reading. *Asylum* is a useful tool in teaching the value of the solidarity in that we recognize the critical reading opportunities it grants readers best when it's lacking.

Additionally, across the entire narrative, Dave McKean's artwork seems to be far more concerned with conveying the disorientation and confusion that underlies the events of the narrative than making his artwork easily intelligible. The images often lack clear outlines for characters; Batman especially is often just a darker shadow among shadows (fig. 14, among

many other examples). But while the artwork directly addresses the psychological theme of the comic, it does also simply make it hard to read at times. By making it, intentionally, not always clear what is occurring in a panel, or what action has occurred, or who is performing said action, the artwork undermines the fundamental of solidarity.



Figure 14. Batman is a dark shape among other dark shapes. From: Morrison, Grant and Dave McKean. *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*. DC Comics, 1989

This is a text that would be most effective for a class that is relatively familiar with the genre. The break from even the loose conventions of comics is striking and makes the text a challenge, unless a reader chooses to focus solely on the linguistic channel of meaning (though even that has its difficulties here). Because the most important question to ask of this text is how it maintains narrative momentum while simultaneously undermining its own iconic solidarity and cohesion. More experienced readers though would hopefully recognize that this is achieved by the manipulation of the multiframe itself, and the novel alters its style of discourse in order to allow the reader to follow along, if they're willing to put in the substantial work the comic still requires.

An exemplary sequence is a conflict between Batman and the enormous villain Killer Croc. Driven by an ironic, anachronistic narration, the layout of the nine-page battle (49-58) varies dramatically, most notably between the standard and narrative styles. At the beginning of the sequence, Croc appears as a looming presence, above Batman in the panel, and the panel itself is a full page high, but narrow, emphasizing the relative differences in size and (presumably) physical power (fig. 15).



Figure 15. Croc looms over Batman in the right-hand panel. From: Morrison, Grant and Dave McKean. *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*. DC Comics, 1989

The conventions of reading a comic lead us through the next page of seven panels as the fight commences, despite the fact that only the seventh panel contains an image that is easy to interpret, that of Croc holding Batman above his head, preparing to throw him through a window. The next two pages again employ full-height, half-width panels to enhance the visual, that of Batman falling almost to his death and struggling to rejoin the fight. The fifth page portrays Croc standing near the window through which he has just thrown his foe, and slowly realizing that Batman is again bearing down on him (fig. 16). This is one of the best examples of the narrative frame engendering meaning, as panels three and four are seemingly almost non-sequiturs, being just a close up of grey scales and a red eye. But in the standard format in which they appear, readers are made to understand that Croc is moving towards their point of view, and they are seeing, reflected in his eye, Batman's return, that is punctuated on the next page. Batman crashes through the top of the left half of the page, a long spear pointed towards Croc's head, emphasizing the reversal of relative power from the beginning of the sequence (fig. 17). It is no coincidence that the three remaining pages, presented in a blend of standard and narrative styles, contain much clearer imagery than the previous. The layout employed, that of four horizontal panels per page, provides less interpretive space for the reader, meaning that readers have to be led through the narrative via the usual methods of representative artwork and linguistic information. The sequence ends with a return to the usual panel format of two horizontal strips arranged one of top of the other, and to artwork that again relies largely on positioning and narration in order for it to be sutured into any sort of sequential narrative.



Figure 16. Croc realizes Batman is returning to their battle. From: Morrison, Grant and Dave McKean. *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*. DC Comics, 1989



Figure 17. Batman returns. From: Morrison, Grant and Dave McKean. *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*. DC Comics, 1989

The styles of discourse employed in this text are informative as they move across all four that are described in above. While one would argue it's largely narrative, in that the layouts mirror the mental state and action of the characters, it also incorporates each of the others at various times. On some pages the layout acts as visual/narrative barrier, creating the intensely claustrophobic atmosphere of Arkham. In others the layout is purely aesthetic (fig. 18), meant to convey the affective impact the visual surroundings are having. In the few moments where the narrative steadies and readers are not being called to question the veracity of what they are seeing, a standard layout is employed. While the plot of the comic is related through dialogue, the story of *Asylum* is embedded within the multiframe. The layouts not only challenge the readers' expectations and eyeline in order to express the thematic depth of the comic, but also encourage the reader to relax their rigid expectations of how to make meaning from the context provided by the authors/artists, that mirrors the narrative arc of the characters as well.



Figure 18. Batman enters the asylum. From: Morrison, Grant and Dave McKean. *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*. DC Comics, 1989

Beautiful Darkness

Most comics rely on a single semantic affordance of the medium most heavily in order to convey their meaning, be that McKean's visual artistry in *Arkham Asylum* or the ever-evolving visual metaphors in Spiegelman's *Maus*. In general, the usage of this method is obvious. For Vehlman and Kerascoët's *Beautiful Darkness*, however, much like the fairy tales that it draws on, the space and place occupied by the characters is simultaneously the most important semantic device of the comic while also almost never being directly addressed. Returning to Jacobs, "the spatial (channel of meaning) refers to the meanings of environmental and architectural space" (22). In this case, that environmental space is a non-descript, though clearly wild, forest. While clearly linked here with the diegetic, narrative concept of setting, the depiction of the space and the relation of the characters to the forest is a primary source of tension in the narrative.

The forest or woods is a (perhaps *the*) primary metaphor in the fairy tale genre. It in large part represents danger of every kind, and also is a marker of removal from any sort of social structures. As an icon, the woods have come to be a synecdoche for the European branch of the genre. Therefore, the forest that the characters in *Beautiful Darkness* are soon forced into is already a loaded symbol, along with being a method by which to create narrative drama. However, the artists Kerascoët (the pen name for the team of Marie Pommepeuy and Sebastien Cosset), magnify the impact of the symbol by making the main characters approximately three inches tall, while the forest itself is a more standard scale. The effect this has is widespread. Every background image includes objects rendered at a much larger scale relative to the characters. Debris, such as leaves and twigs, become daunting trials in daily life. Forest animals that would normally not be noticed or ignored become enormous (fig. 19).



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Figure 19. A character is eaten by ants. From: Vehlman, Fabien and Kerascoët. *Beautiful Darkness*. Translated by Helge Dascher. Drawn and Quarterly, 2014.

The depiction of characters in space relative to their surroundings, especially since they are day-to-day environs that most readers are familiar with, provides ongoing conflicts, enhances the central fairy tale metaphor and the connection to that genre, and drives the thematic argument of the text, that being that relationships with natural environments are inherently destructive unless basic assumptions about human usage of wild spaces are addressed.

The intrapanel spatial representations are one of the primary methods that explicate that theme. While the main characters routinely struggle for basic subsistence and are frequently preyed upon by birds, toads, and other creatures, the lone living human creature seems to be unaffected by the struggles of forest life, as his home is portrayed as comfortable, with abundant supplies, and warm even in winter. But he is portrayed as a giant, his relative size dwarfing the main characters, and taking up the majority of each panel in which he appears. Through the usage of relative space, Kerascoët underscores the powerlessness of the tiny people living in the forest when faced with the blank reality of the Wild, and the relative power of the full-sized person. Granted, the fairy tale setting conflates the human with the forest, as just another force in the trees that the main characters must contend with, and he becomes another factor that they must work with in their struggle for survival. The text does this by removing any possibility of interaction between the tiny and full-sized people, making the main characters seem ever more lost in a world that is simply too big for them. By consistently juxtaposing the main characters against things of a standard scale, they seem to become more and more vulnerable to the Wild that has consumed them. They do attempt to subdue nature, to essentially create a world to their scale. But throughout the course of the text, it is repeatedly shown that they simply don't fit with the Wild, and eventually only one character, Aurora, is willing to subsume herself entirely and incorporate into a mode of survival that is defined by those with a vastly different scale of needs.

In order to survive, Aurora essentially stops trying to assert her position within the forest, and instead tries to find a space that already exists in that she can incorporate her needs.

To best examine this channel of meaning in a classroom, however, the most effective example in the text of where to employ this type of spatial analysis is during a tea party (59-61). The tiny people's princess has invited various forest creatures to tea, and she, as the readers most likely do as well, expect the animals to behave in the manner of people. The fairy tale connection is especially obvious here, and it is to the great shock and anger of the princess when the animals behave like animals. This behavior, and the destruction that is wrought by these animals, is largely conveyed through their depiction relative to the tiny people in that the animals almost completely overwhelm the space of the panel. Instead of manipulating the frame size to a great extent, the animals are instead depicted as filling the scene almost gutter to gutter, emphasizing their lack of restraint and civility, as well as their truly untamed nature that the princess thought she had under control like in any good fairy tale princess. The spatial metaphor at play, of these tiny people being lost, overwhelmed, over-run, and eventually almost eradicated by the sheer excess of space that is portrayed, is perhaps the most obvious and easy to convey to a classroom in this moment (fig. 20).



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Figure 20. A tea party is ruined. From: Vehlman, Fabien and Kerascoët. *Beautiful Darkness*. Translated by Helge Dascher. Drawn and Quarterly, 2014.

Truthfully, *Beautiful Darkness* is, in many ways, an outlier on this list. But its international origin provides readers and teachers with some unique opportunities. Created outside the structures of self-consciousness and the ongoing struggle for legitimization that continues to impact American and British comics to a great degree, this comic instead comes out of the French *Bande Desinee* tradition. Similar to *Arkham Asylum*, it shares many characteristics of both “graphic novels” (especially in its production) and of comic books (the water-color

artwork is intentionally cartoon-y, and the story is loosely based on Snow White and Little Red Riding Hood; fairy tales are largely part of the same “low-art” category as comics). But as a teaching tool in this case, the schism is unimportant. Instead, it stands as a prime example of how comics can function as sources for discussions grounded in literary theory as well as any graphic novel or traditional text.

A large part of what is lost in the current bent of comics studies (which is largely concerned with legitimization, form, and our culture’s changing relationship with comics,) is the type of work that largely makes up literary and film studies. Where is the criticism of actual work? It does exist and exists as a critical mass in regard to texts like *Fun Home*, *Maus*, *Krazy Kat*, and a few others. But the field is focused on definition and acceptance, which paradoxically has probably made it harder to achieve said legitimacy. The field hasn’t been focused on comics criticism the way other fields critique their primary sources. As Chute notes in “Drawing is a Way of Thinking,” “The best way to make people pay attention to the value of particular comics...is to model through scholarly rigor why any particular work or genre is worth studying” (631). That is an area where comics studies continues to lag.

Why *Beautiful Darkness*, then? A trait that is often shared by many *Bande Desinee* comics is the lack of suturing into a specific reading that a majority of US and UK comics perform through narratives and images; and this is a characteristic across the spectrum of comics genres. The relative lack of self-consciousness in Franco-Belgian comics has led to productions in which creators are less concerned about being misunderstood, as they are less concerned about the reputation of their field as a whole. As such, many are more open to interpretation, and *Beautiful Darkness* especially provides a rich context where students have ample opportunity to apply various forms of criticism. The text seems especially useful for ecofeminist criticism, but

its reactions from other readers would call for critique in fields as varied as horror studies, psychoanalytic perspectives, and Marxist criticism. As such, the text is hopefully a solid primary source on which students can practice the types of direct, theoretical, and social critique on a comic that is sorely lacking in a field that is working to legitimize itself within the academy.

Beautiful Darkness is also a comic that would struggle to achieve the same impact were the story told in other mediums, especially in regard to its styles of discourse. Unlike some of the others on this list, and the majority of mainstream comics, *Beautiful Darkness* plays with the multiframe very little. While the number of panels per line varies frequently, usually between three and four, and the number of rows per page does as well, the layouts are generally still in comfortable rows and columns, read from left to right, top to bottom. It would then be tempting to categorize its style of discourse as “Standard” and move on to critique on the terms of the artwork and text. However, the comic doesn’t allow that as the variations that do exist in layout are asking even more so to be analyzed. In a largely standard layout, why occasionally have full-page panels, or pages on which the reading order changes from linear to vertical half-way through? Though at first glance rather uncomplicated, the multiframe plays a deeply significant role in the aesthetic impact of much of the story, and furthermore changes in responses to narrative needs.

That being the case, the text functions very well for exemplifying the impact styles of discourse have even when they aren’t especially noticeable on a first reading. The page layouts are simple enough that someone that has never read a comic before would likely not lose track of the story, and unlike in *Arkham Asylum*, knowing how to read the multiframe isn’t a requirement to grasp the structure of the plot. But that may actually be an advantage in teaching the impact of approaching comics in the way that is being suggested. It’s easy, and necessary, to talk about

form in the reading of certain texts, even for the most rudimentary encounters with them. But approaching a relatively straightforward layout like that in *Beautiful Darkness* with this same analytic framework will underscore that comics of all types have something to say, and something that can be taught, when you move away from standard literary criticisms and discuss those same or similar theories in the terms of the comics medium.

Maus

Art Spiegelman's *Maus* is, in contrast to Kerascoët's delicate and evocative watercolors and Dave McKean's surreal, phantasmagoric renderings of the familiar, a prime example of artistic restraint in comics. This is to the extent that the artwork itself is far less talked about than the central metaphor of the text. Ostensibly a biography of his father Vladek, a Holocaust survivor, Spiegelman chose to represent each nationality that played a part in his father's story as a different animal. Jewish people were mice, Germans were cats, Americans were dogs, the French were frogs, and so on. This gives the text the ability to not only directly represent the events of Vladek's story, but also to provide the readers with distance from the genocide that Vladek witnessed. A direct representation, representing people as people, could well be overwhelming or alienating for a reader. Instead, Spiegelman's representation provides readers with critical distance while also underscoring the racial and nationalistic animosity that was ever-present throughout Europe. But this concept is written about extensively (See Frank Cioffi's "Disturbing Comics," Terry Barr's "Teaching *Maus* in a Holocaust Class," and Bryan E. Vizzini's "Hero and Holocaust" to start), and instead it is more useful to concentrate on other manners in which this text uses other channels of meaning, and especially other ways in which it uses the visual. This text then becomes so necessary to incorporate as instruction in visual literacy, a key component of how comics function, is a direct pathway to instruction in the

multimodal literacy that stands as this pedagogy's direct use-value for students and institutional justification. But also, visual literacy is a primary skill for students in regard to understanding when and how they are being subjected to cultural messaging and discourses in their environment. Comics stand as a powerful example of the difference between the "perceptual message and cultural message" (Barthes 196) of an image, as the already-in-context existence of images in comics emphasizes the impact seemingly extraneous information can have on an image and its viewer. The medium by its nature demonstrates that a single image can have more meaning than what it is in and of itself, and that basic concept applies across all visual rhetoric. It would be up to the instructor, most likely, to foreground this concept specifically, but it would drastically further the goal of having students use these texts as foundations for questioning the multimodal milieu in that they frequently operate.

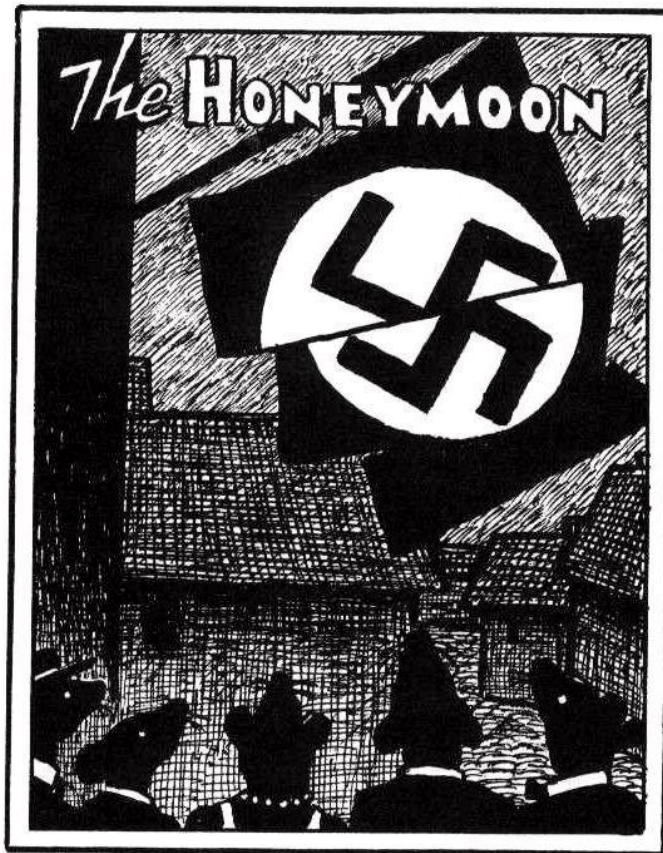
Maus would function as an excellent example of the impact images have on a reader/viewer without them being entirely aware of their effectiveness. For such an important, groundbreaking text in a medium that is largely visual, it is, at first glance, an artistically very simple text. This is especially the case for readers familiar with other work by Spiegelman, that tends to be anything but understated (see *Prisoner on Hell Planet*, itself included in *Maus* 102-105). The representations are simple, almost to the point of being non-descript where one mouse/Jewish person or one cat/German person appear more or less the same. But the simplicity, while undermining the iconic solidarity for the specific characters, provides various visual opportunities, and furthermore greatly enhances the use of the gestural channel of meaning. This is especially the case as the mouse characters very rarely show any facial expressions, further enhancing the impact when they do.

Really the primary opportunity afforded by the simplicity of the artwork is that of easily drawing readers into the text. While making things less distinct, the art also makes it far easier for readers to identify with all of the mice. As McCloud stated, “icons demand our participation to make them work” (*Understanding Comics* 58) and simplifying characters down to almost blank icons furthers the concept of amplification through simplification that McCloud argues is a key artistic technique behind comics in general. The more simplified an icon is, the more participation it demands from a reader to become meaningful, and the further it pulls a reader into the world of the text. But with so much focus given to the character’s simplicity, and the involvement that engenders, other icons and symbols are less often discussed despite their importance and the immediacy they bring to the text. As an example, it is not surprising the importance the swastika plays in this text. It is, as it came to be in the time frame of Vladek’s narrative, recognized almost universally as a symbol of hate and genocide. Spiegelman uses it to great effect at various times, such as when his father recounted a story from the early days of WWII when he first saw the Nazi flag flying over a town (fig. 21), or when it is used as an ironic and foreboding element in the title card of chapter two of *Maus I*, titled “The Honeymoon” (fig. 22). But the most impactful usage of the symbol is also perhaps the most subtle.



Figure 21. Vladek sees the swastika for the first time. From: Spiegelman, Art. *The Complete Maus*. Pantheon, 1996.

C H A P T E R T W O



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Figure 22. A grim honeymoon. From: Spiegelman, Art. *The Complete Maus*. Pantheon, 1996

McCloud was not referring only to representations of people when he noted that icons require the reader to make them work. On page 127 (fig. 23), Vladek is recounting the story of how he and his then-wife, Anja, were fleeing the town of Srodula, hoping to reach Hungary or at least a safer part of Poland. A central panel on the page shows the two of them running towards a crossroads. They themselves are small, in the foreground, while the road and sky above them are barren and largely blank. It is not a hopeful image, despite the knowledge the reader has that they are fleeing a quickly worsening situation, and even with the knowledge that both Vladek and Anja do ultimately survive to have a life in Sweden and America after the War. But such is the narrative investment that a safe future seems impossible at the time. Though the couple seems to be running towards hope, it may take a careful reader to recognize the swastika that is brooding in the actual landscape of the panel. The crossroads, with their branching paths, form a clear swastika in the center of the panel, one that may not immediately be consciously recognized but that is there, nonetheless. Upon recognition, the panel implies that no matter where Vladek and Anja go, they will still be under the oppression of the Reich. Through a simple (and diegetically realistic) rendering of a crossroads, the text manages to imply the hopelessness of the characters and the land itself. It implies all of Europe is under the influence of the icon.



Figure 23. A swastika is embedded in the landscape. From: Spiegelman, Art. *The Complete Maus*. Pantheon, 1996

The simplicity of the art then largely acts as amplification, in McCloud's terms, for other channels of meaning in this text, and another example is how it impacts the gestural. As discussed previously, perhaps the most important deployment of this channel in comics is in the representation and coding of facial expressions. As expressive as words and typography are, a great deal can often be missed in an utterance if the speaker's expression can't be seen. This fact lends *Maus* as a whole a remarkably bleak tone. The characters in general have no expression, nor even the capability to have one. Lightly shaded triangles and three circles don't always emote well. But this creates the opportunity for extreme contrasts. Perhaps the example easiest to analyze occurs when Vladek is relating the story of a time, early in the war, when he had the opportunity to send his son Richieu to potential safety in the care of a wealthy Polish family. But

Anja argues with him and declares “I’ll never give up my baby. Never!” More important than the text is the depiction of Anja in that moment. Already described as unwell (mentally and physically,) the representation is one of obsessive fear and rage. Were the drawings in general more detailed, this may have been a difficult feat. But through the simple addition of a few extra lines beneath and around the character’s eyes, and the simple change of actually showing the whites of her eyes, Anja is changed from a blank canvas to an enraged mother, terrified of losing her child. While the text is bleak from start to finish, this is a moment of pure desperation portrayed largely through the contrast transmitted via the gestural mode of meaning (fig. 24). While potentially something that could be described through linguistic means, the abrupt, direct, and unnerving representation of Anja works in the moment to incorporate the reader into Anja’s anguish. When up until now Anja had largely been a vacant canvas on which readers project themselves, the sudden direct depiction of such strong emotion has an unexpected, and very unpleasant, impact on the reader, bringing them into the mindset of a person who was having to seriously considering sending their children away to escape death in concentration camps. The critical distance that Spiegelman had employed so as to not alienate or upset readers is in that moment stripped away.

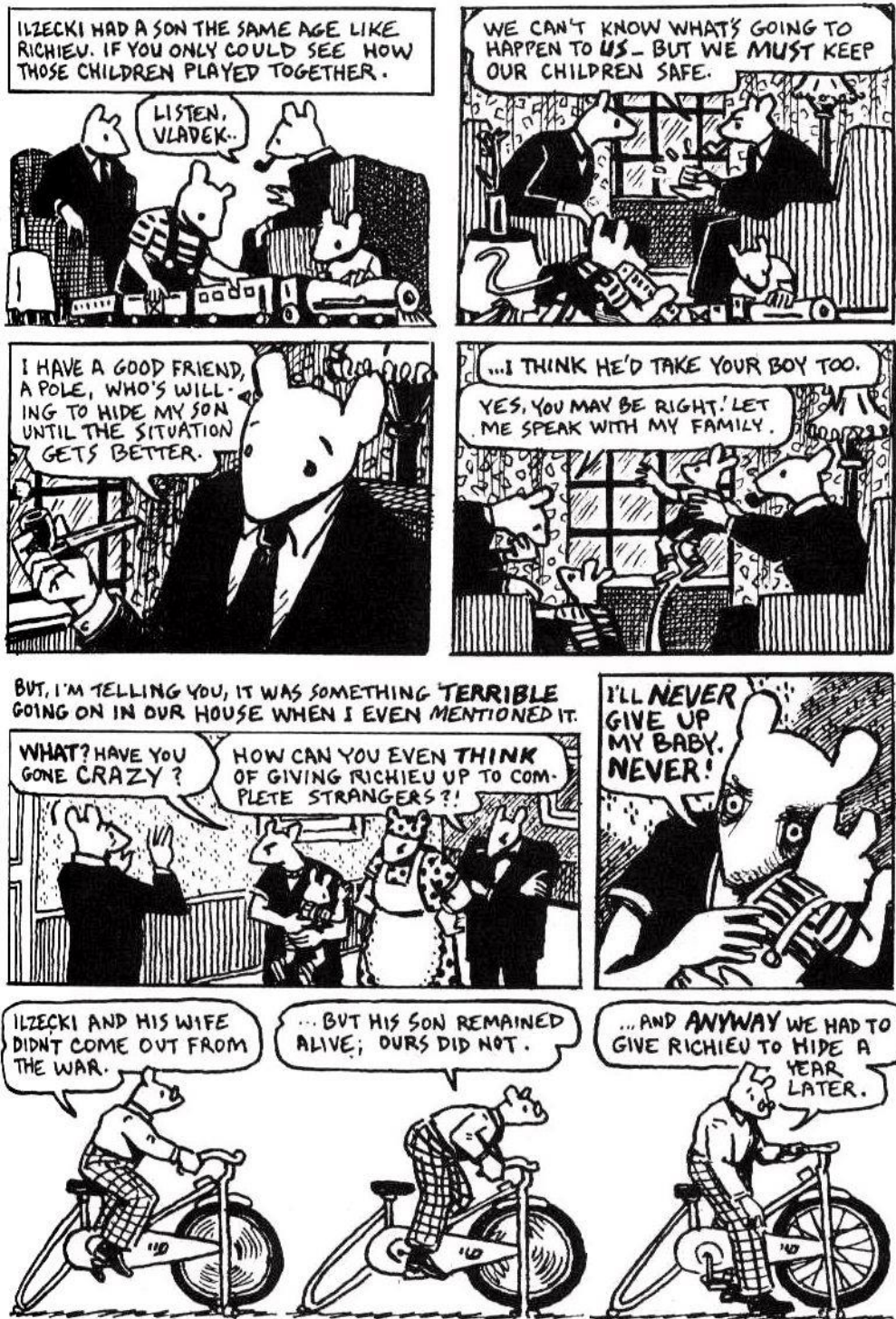


Figure 24. Anja refuses to part with her son. From: Spiegelman, Art. *The Complete Maus*. Pantheon, 1996

Perhaps the most interesting way to approach *Maus* in the context of this praxis then is to focus on the way that the text manipulates the reader. *Maus* very quickly creates expectations in its readers for how the story is going to progress, and the methods by which it's going to convey its story through various channels of meaning. But it also quickly frustrates those expectations, through incorporation of breaks in its own style like the one mentioned above, or the inclusion of one of Spiegelman's other comics, that is radically different in style. *Maus* is a very restrained, generally very uniform text. The best way to approach it then is through the instances in which that restraint and uniformity is broken.

From Hell

From Hell, by Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell, offers something similar to *Maus* in the method by which it historicizes its subject, Jack the Ripper. But unlike *Maus*, *From Hell* is a fictionalized version of actual events, though it still offers insight in the time period in that it is set, and the social constructs that resulted in not only the infamous murders but more importantly, western culture's reaction to them. Also similar to Spiegelman, Eddie Campbell uses his artwork to emphasize key narrative turns, not just in what he draws but in how he draws them, shifting back and forth between thin line drawings and distorted, undefined pencil work that conveys the dreamlike quality of the Ripper's connection to the fictional London of 1888. But of most import for teaching is the depiction of the murders, both the artwork used itself and how the text treats them from a narrative standpoint.

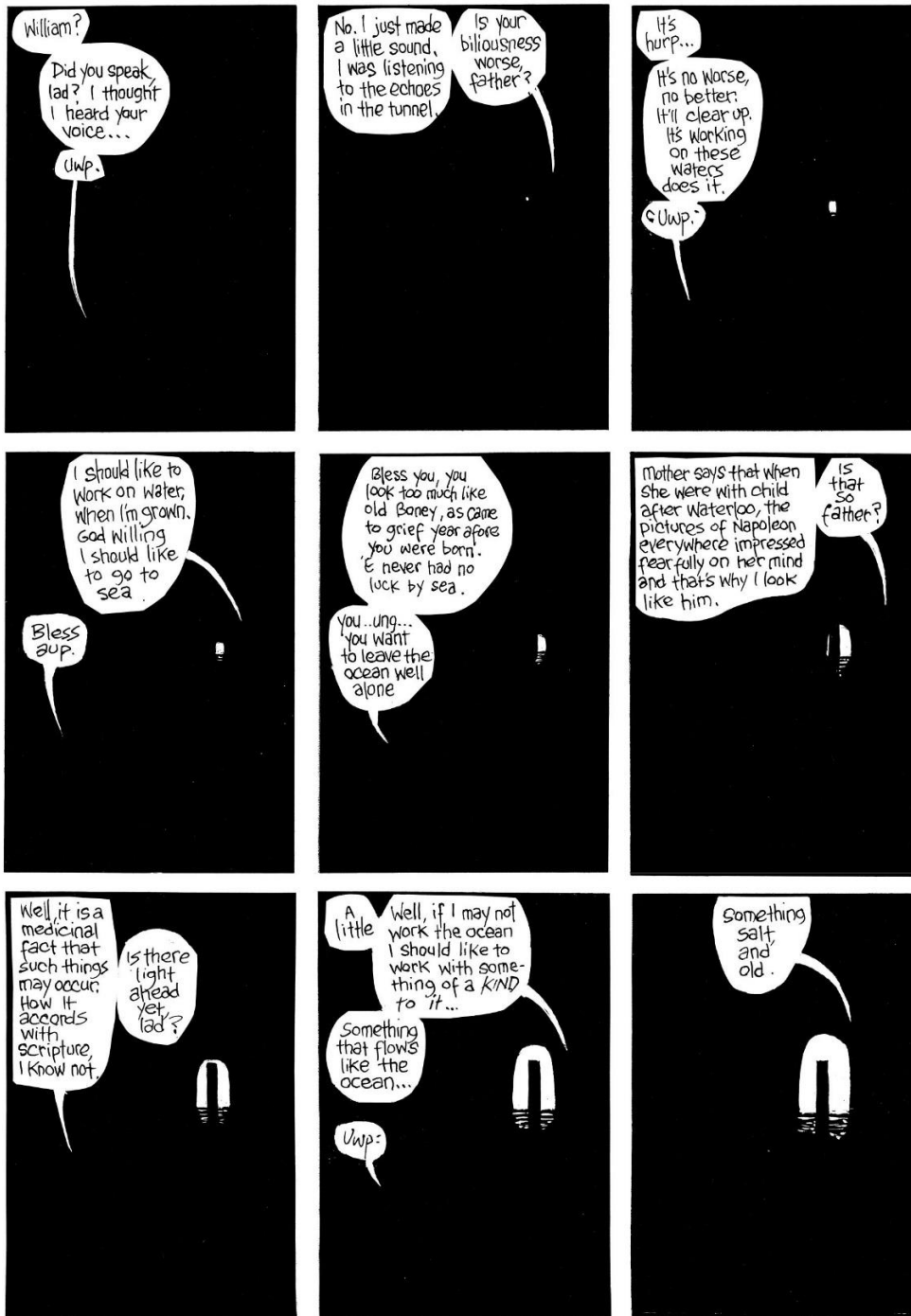
Because, as a comic intended for adults only that made no apologies for its subject matter, the murders, particularly the final one, are depicted with great attention to detail, based on the case files of the original police investigation. They are grisly, disturbing, and made even more so by Campbell's stylistic choices. The critical import of this is that it begs the question of

the reader, “why are you reading this?” For, as Postema argues, comics “create an implied reader more explicitly than many other forms of text” (107). As such, the implied readers must consider their relationship to the depictions of horrific violence against women the text conveys.

Why would one read this? That is for each student to consider for themselves, but the implied answer seems to be that the people that would most likely be reading this text (avid comics readers in the US and UK, from 1989 onward) are functioning within an art object whose subject was the murder of five women; or in other words, that the Ripper murders so indelibly changed Western Culture’s relationship with violence against women that we are still working under their influence. The Ripper in this depiction is the ideal Auteur, approaching women’s bodies as his art object and making certain that the entire city of London shares his aesthetic vision of them as victims, and the comic posits the disturbing idea that western culture post-1888 was largely framed by this murderer’s subjectivity. While the conclusion may be suspect, the text’s approach to explicating the means by which media, burgeoning mass culture, and structures of power impact people’s most visceral lived experiences is a valuable viewpoint to wrestle with for students. It implicates its own readers as members of the culture that made the Ripper possible and subsequently infamous. While comics are an excellent tool for teaching students to identify their own collectivities, that doesn’t necessarily mean that those collectivities are going to be ones that students are comfortable addressing.

From the position of an instructor, the comic offers further opportunities within the framework described above. While it doesn’t go to the extreme of *Arkham Asylum*, the text does often undermine readers’ expectations regarding the coherence and cohesiveness of its iconic representations. It does this in three primary ways, each foregrounding different thematic undercurrents in the text, two in a specific chapter and one throughout.

In chapter two, which details the life of the killer, iconic solidarity is largely severed. In the section that functions as the first part of his biography, the reader may initially be very confused as the point of view in the text changes from that of a viewer outside the panels to that of the Ripper (fig. 25). The un-telegraphed switch to first person not only jars the reader, but also the disjointed nature of the panels themselves question the impact a person's physical point of view may have on their identity and actions. The chapter presents key events in the Ripper's life largely without judgement, allowing the reader to somewhat identify with him, but more importantly the narrative is mostly incoherent. What Moore and Campbell were attempting to convey is of course up for debate, but from a teaching standpoint that is largely the point. Upon coming into contact with the subjectivity of the murderer, the narrative devolves into fragments, if nothing else implying the Ripper's deeply fractured relationship to the world around him. The larger thematic and social goals that the text is trying to accomplish by eschewing iconic cohesion is a rich ground for critical interpretation.



From Hell—Chapter Two—Page 2

Figure 25. Chapter two begins in complete darkness. From: Moore, Alan and Eddie Campbell. *From Hell*. Topshelf Productions. 2004.

There is another break in narrative cohesion in that same chapter, but this time it is accomplished by introducing elements that are seemingly far disjointed from the narrative being told. While for the most part the text is firmly grounded in the realities of London in 1888, towards the end of this chapter the Ripper has what at first seems to be a stroke. However, the text then introduces some of its more fantastic elements, as the Ripper encounters what he and the reader see as a Masonic Deity (fig. 26).



Figure 26. The Ripper has an encounter with the Masonic deity Jahbulon. From: Moore, Alan and Eddie Campbell. *From Hell*. Topshelf Productions. 2004.

The text goes on to include a variety of mystical and supernatural elements, but this first introduction is unprecedented and seemingly out of place. Iconic solidarity is often accomplished not just by representing similar objects, but by constraining what objects are being represented to objects that are sensible and realistic within the genre of the text that is being created. However,

From Hell doesn't technically break this rule, but it does strain it by introducing one of its most dramatic examples of the supernatural without prefacing that this was a text in which the reader should expect mystical intrusions. Before the full-page panel where the reader encounters a rendering of a four-headed god, the only indication of paranormal aspects in the text was a character's possible experience with ghosts while having a stroke; much less of a narrative leap. Iconic singularity then doesn't just include the ideas already discussed, but also in a generic sense. When the diegetic world of the story is being built, we learn from the representations included very quickly what kind of story we're reading, whether it be a biography, superhero story, or horror comic. This text approaches that concept in a unique way, broadening the scope of the comic at an unusual time.

The final example of how one can discuss iconic solidarity is in regard to the many, many instances in that it seems to be overdone. This shows up on the page in that too many characters look alike, especially the victims of the murders and the Masons. This is another useful place in that the uncertainty provided by the comic engenders important conversations; through the lack of solidarity, or rather the excess of it, Campbell and Moore provide a running commentary on how people view members of various socioeconomic classes. It is an excellent use of the text for students to use this excess solidarity to discuss said commentary, and to what that critique of the authors' actually amounts. Furthermore, the comic itself makes the argument that certain symbols, acts, subjectivities, and histories embed themselves in culture and are thereby preserved. Whether or not the specific subjectivity of Jack the Ripper has done so is less important, though, than the way the text exemplifies what continues on, untroubled, when a culture is not critically engaged with and instead is unquestioned.

Days of Future Past

So far there is an issue with the texts chosen as examples, however. *Beautiful Darkness* is treated, when it is written about, as either an artistic curiosity or as something near to literature, as Franco-Belgian comics usually are. *Maus* is arguably the most critiqued, studied, and awarded text in the medium, and is often the centerpiece of any argument that focuses on legitimizing comics as a whole. *From Hell* benefits from its authorship, as well as its subject matter, that is too dense and too violent in almost any sense for it to be considered along with the comic book sub-genre. This is especially true as a frequent disparagement against comic books is that they are meant for children. Even *Arkham Asylum*, with its superhero roots, is treated as graphic literature as opposed to a comic book. Its usage of heavily modernist themes and surrealist art would seem to elevate it as compared to its source material. Most importantly, it is far enough removed from the standard continuity of the series that it stands out from the mainstream Batman comics, and becomes, like *The Dark Knight Returns*, *Watchmen*, or *Superman: Red Son*, an exception that proves the rule. Comics seem to only be able to be taken seriously when they make a conscious effort to deconstruct the mythos of superheroes and comic books in general. *Arkham Asylum*, while not working against those tropes, does reduce them to their psychological cores, changing them from silly to unnerving. In short, the texts being discussed all may fall under the more legitimizing genre of “graphic novel” as opposed to “comic book.” But an important point that this comics literacy pedagogy is trying to make is that the supposed difference is arbitrary, and that a text has value because it can do work for a reader or instructor.

As a contrast to the relatively high brow work of Morrison and McKean, Vehlman and Kerascoët, and Spiegelman, Chris Claremont and John Byrne’s *Days of Future Past* is a landmark piece in comics fandom, exemplifying many of the narrative tropes and styles that

provide justification for comic books to be ignored. But employing the critical techniques described in Chapter 4, it can instead stand as a counter-argument to the dismissal of superhero comics as a whole, that is based on the ideas that they are ethically suspect, poorly made, poorly printed, lacking in mature methods of storytelling, and essentially that they are best left to children's entertainment. The mini-series though uses the central metaphor of the *X-men* series, of the mutant superheroes standing in for real-life othered groups, and extends it to a logical conclusion, where the main characters are imprisoned or killed in Nazi-like concentration camps across a future America under Fascist rule.

The title signals that a key plot device is time-travel, which is largely used to dramatize the cause/effect relationship between xenophobia and America's tendency to other large portions of its own population under the guise of them not being "real Americans" (that is replaced in the comic with mutants not being perceived as really human). Comic books are often denigrated as being base entertainment, with little of value to say and poor expressive capabilities. *Days of Future Past* stand as a counterpoint to that, not only using its own narrative but also the history of the series (the long-running, convoluted nature of which is an aspect that is almost always criticized by critics and graphic novelists alike,) as a way to make a direct statement regarding rising tides of racism in the early 1980s. By incorporating time-travel in the narrative, it makes the statement that the discrimination mutants face in 1981 (that was similar to, and directly patterned on, instances of racism experience by minority groups of the time,) logically leads to genocide with little provocation.

When it comes to the classroom, *Days of Future Past* is a useful tool to tie comics into social issues and political discourse. Students are most likely quite familiar with performing this sort of task with print literature: asking what something like *Petals of Blood* or *The Bluest Eye*

has to say about current socio-political issues is standard practice. But doing so with a comic, and, importantly, as mainstream a superhero comic as could be, underscores that this is a medium that also has actual critical value—we just need to learn to read (and teach) somewhat differently in order to fully exploit the opportunities given. In this case specifically, one can easily focus on the vivid (often grotesque) artwork, or the incredibly efficient world-building that occurs in the first pages of the comic. But a more fruitful critical approach is to approach it similarly to a print novel, focusing on the (very blatant) metaphors that the text employs. For this reason, this pedagogy would suggest not only that this be one of the texts that students encounter, but also that it be one of the *last* texts that teachers bring into the classroom to underscore that the primary methods deployed for comics must have a different foundation than literary analysis.

Methodologically, teaching this doesn't have to stray very far from traditional literary approaches—focusing on metaphor, characterizations, narrative, etc., is productive. But *Days of Future Past* rewards analysis that diverges from those standards and applies more of the multimodal textual studies approach that is posited here. It lends itself to not only literary analysis but also analysis targeting other modes of discourse such as visual rhetoric, and it can therefore act as a bridge text for both students and teachers to get them accustomed to reading comics in a way that takes advantage of what is represented on the page. It therefore functions as a linkage from this course into the larger context of multimodal textual analysis. *Days of Future Past* is especially useful for this analytic method as, unlike most comics, it does work without having any sort of familiarity with the genre. Despite its entrenchment in the history of the Marvel Universe, it presents a full narrative when readers simply pick up the comic. However, there is also the related, but far more in depth, narrative concerning American reactionary politics at work that is easily noticed by those familiar with analyzing the art form. John Byrne,

the artist and primary author, achieved this largely through the use of imagery that works specifically in the comic for what it is representing diegetically, and then also as a reference to other cultural icons. In that lens, a representation of a graveyard comes to refer to the mass graves that followed the Holocaust (fig. 27), and a depiction of an anti-mutant politician (fig. 28) becomes that of far-right politicians throughout American history along with Fascist rulers in Europe.

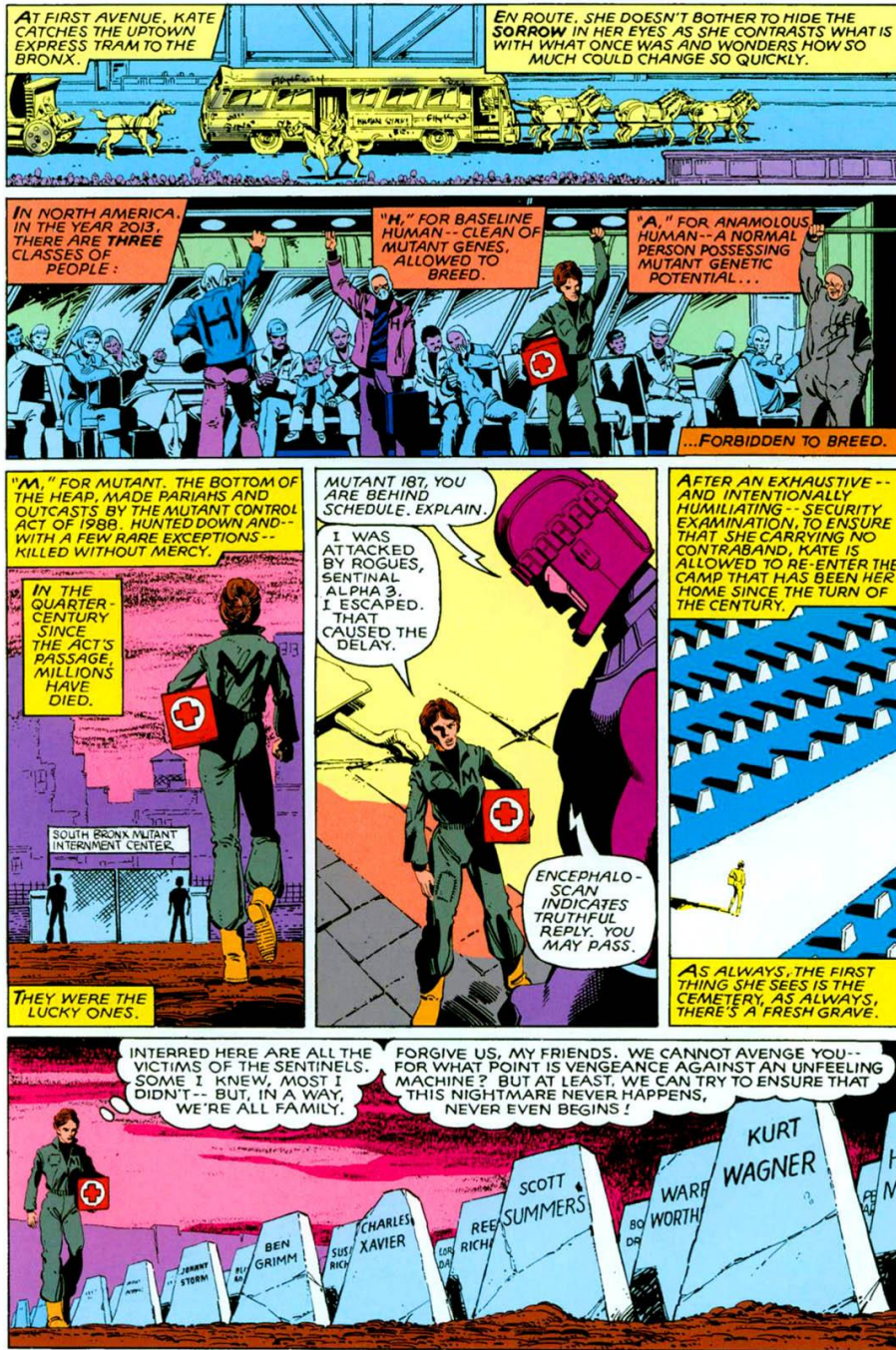


Figure 27. The graveyard image references mass graves throughout Europe. From: Claremont, Chris and John Byrne. "Days of Future Past." *Uncanny X-Men* #141-142, January-February 1981. Marvel.

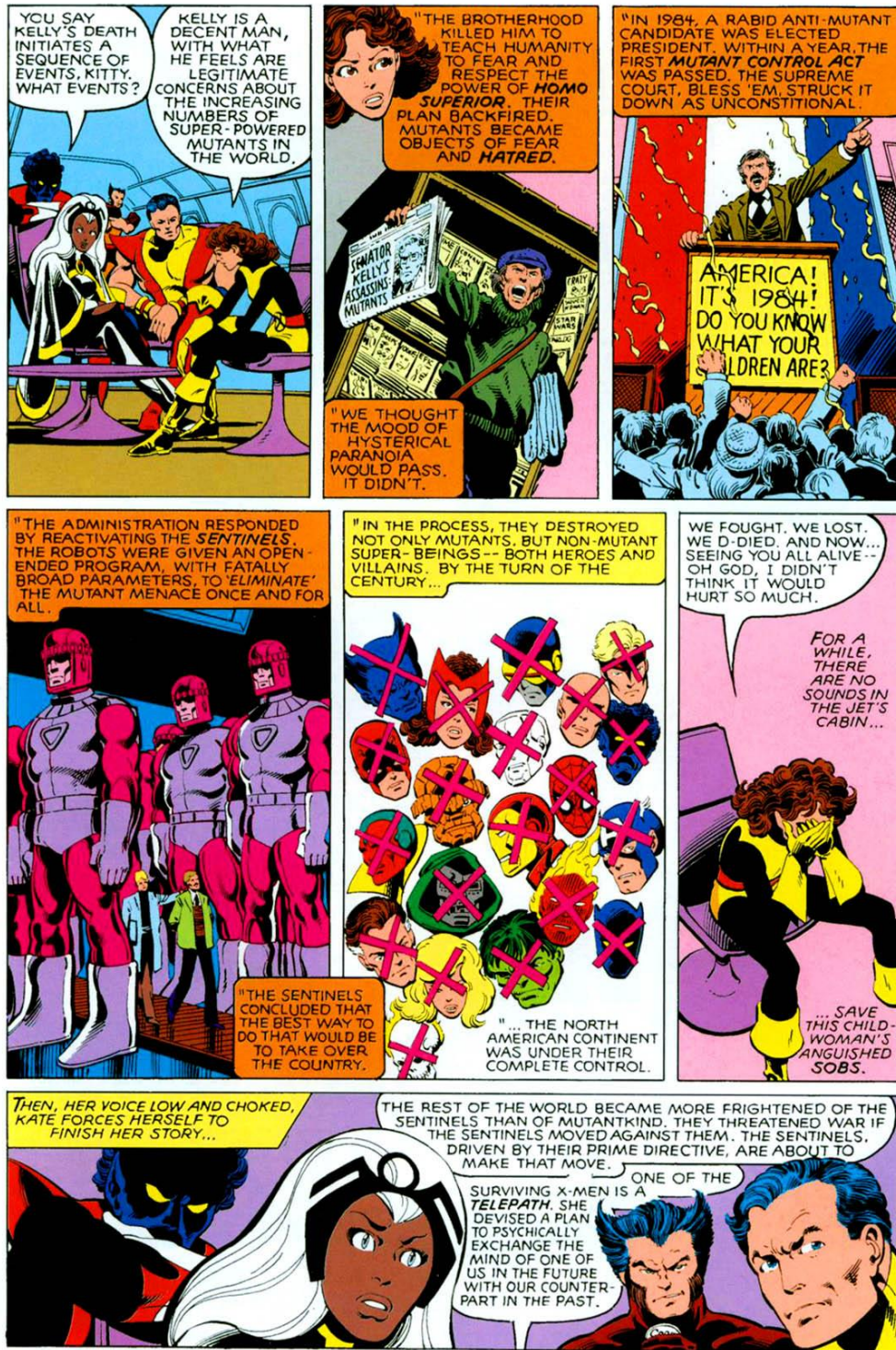


Figure 28. One of the X-men recounts America's fall into fascism. From: Claremont, Chris and John Byrne. "Days of Future Past." *Uncanny X-Men #141-142*, January-February 1981. Marvel

Largely relying on the un-specific nature of representations in comics, Byrne manages to, by single images, refer to histories and ideologies that inform on the narrative in a single panel. Similar to Barthes' French soldier in *Mythologies*, Byrne employs symbols that refer to entire histories and systems of meaning that are largely missed if a reader fails to approach the comic as a multimodal medium and instead focuses on just one channel of meaning (which would render this text narratively flat or perhaps incoherent, depending on which is the focus). To put this in the terms of the proposed analytic framework, it is necessary to explain that iconic solidarity isn't necessarily a purely diegetic, internal function. Just as *Maus* uses realistic renderings of Auschwitz to braid its narrative into history, and just as *Beautiful Darkness* uses simple icons such as a picnic basket or a red hood to tie itself into fairy tale traditions, *Days of Future Past* uses icons of various kinds to weave its story into a tradition of narratives that catalogue the experiences of oppressed people. It does this by incorporating images that evoke cultural understandings of politics and politicians (what can be termed, to borrow from Barthes, image-myths) to braid its own fiction into the histories of actual fascist states. Iconic solidarity then is always used to tie panels into a larger story of which they are a part, but often that narrative extends well beyond the comic. Again, as Wysocki notes, "Designs of words and pictures...come with attached discourses" (26).

In some cases, the icons that are being referred to are those within the history of the comic itself. Though these two comic issues function largely on their own, familiarity with the characters does engender additional meaning. The primary example is a key panel from the second issue (fig. 29). One of the main characters, Logan, is known in the series as being more or less invulnerable. That is one of his most recognizable traits, and the method by which the various writers of the character very quickly turned him from a minor villain into one of the most

popular characters in comics. To see him be graphically murdered then is a shock to readers and was an event that moved backwards through the character's history, forcing readers to re-evaluate him as a character. It was a diegetic break with the iconic status of the character, and the dissolution of that solidarity impacted the narrative extensively. Not only was that event troubling in itself, but it also symbolized that this series was no longer staying within the bounds of what was considered acceptable for readers. By disrupting the history of this iconic character, the comic was striving to not only push the boundaries of the X-Men series, but also integrate it into the external history that it was attempting to parallel, where real-life icons were also lost.

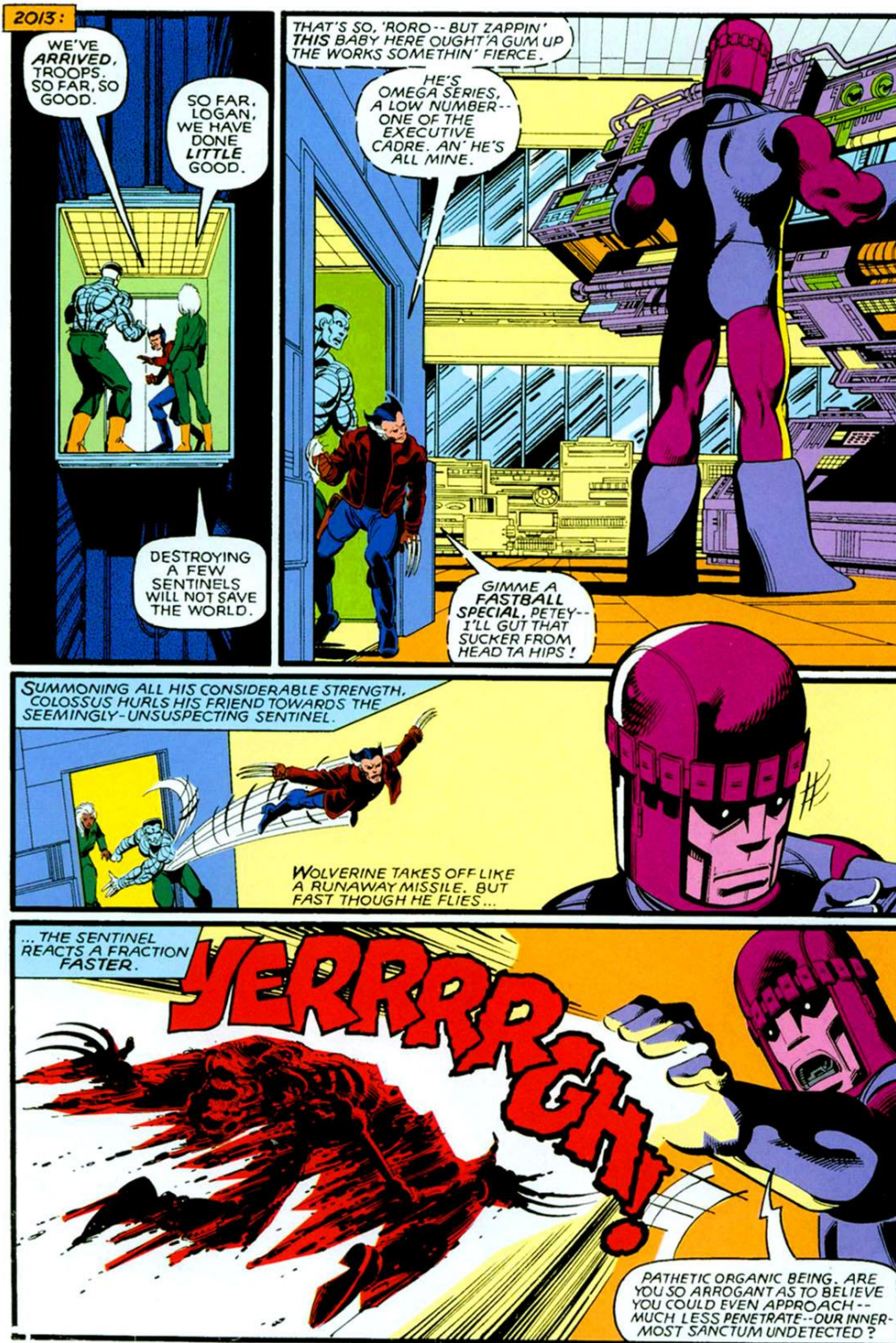


Figure 29. The seemingly invincible Logan is disintegrated. From: Claremont, Chris and John Byrne. "Days of Future Past." *Uncanny X-Men* #141-142, January-February 1981. Marvel.

The mini-series also evinces the fact that not every comic fully exploits every channel of meaning. Just as a print text may not make extensive use of certain literary devices, or a film may not necessarily use every available technique to manipulate the narrative, *Days of Future Past* largely focused on using iconic solidarity to convey the plot and themes through aesthetic and linguistic means. The management of space is less critical than in other texts being discussed, and the deployment of auditory and gestural meaning is straightforward. Nevertheless, *Days of Future Past* drives home the fact that comics are not simply illustrated dialogue (that is still a common viewpoint). While the artwork in a panel may, at times, simply act as such (just as at times the text or narration in a panel is little more than a title for the art in the panel,) Claremont and Byrne created a productive synthesis between the two primary mediums being used, and used the affordances of the medium to extend their story into a socio-historical context. By exemplifying some of the most fruitful opportunities for analysis of comics as comics, *Days of Future Past* is useful both for teaching, and for working to undue many of the falsely stated justifications for the textual prejudice that exists around mainstream comics.

Each comic presented here provides their own opportunities for the classroom. By specifically tying them into a multimodal pedagogy, however, several goals of the project are accomplished. First and foremost, students need to be walking away from the course with a working literacy in comics and multimodal composition. Comics especially work to emphasize the conversation that occurs between modes in multimodal texts, as they function as substantially more than the sum of their parts, and instead as a synthesis of various channels of discourse into a cohesive discursal text. The institutional context in which this course would exist can't be ignored, and therefore it has to function as effective post-secondary instruction. Comics in general provide an opportunity to meet institutional and practical outcomes related to providing

students with skills that allow them to engage with and manipulate discourses, that are largely being produced by multimodal means.

CHAPTER 6: THE SYLLABUS

What follows is the justifications for specific choices made in the construction of a course founded on the concept of comics as efficient transmitters of multimodal literacy. Grounded in the research of, among others, Barbara Postema, Thierry Groensteen, Dale Jacobs, and Shane Wood, this syllabus will argue, when put into practice, for this medium as an exemplary tool for teaching multimodal literacy with regard to both analysis and design/composition. The primary goal of pursuing this strategy is to deploy a pedagogy that foregrounds the importance of multimodal literacy for students as a method for engaging critically with their environments both in and out of the classroom.

This course is also designed to address a specific moment in regard to the teaching of literacy, literature, and composition as it pertains to the medium of comics, as the current critical context is in dramatic flux as more comics are being incorporated into post-secondary classrooms. As cultural theorist Alexander Starre notes “The increased willingness to think of comics as literature has left its mark on college curricula, that are exemplary indicators of the intellectual climate in the American cultural sphere” (40), but the issue has continued that they are seen as either “simply as a stepping stone to the acquisition of other, higher skills” (Jacobs “More Than Words” 20) or “as a debased... print literature” (Jacob “Marveling” 182). This viewpoint is embedded in an aesthetic ideology of purity that dates back at least to Lessing and the Romantic period and is not based in any sort of concern for the effectiveness of a medium as a transmitter of ideas, emotions, or information. Therefore, approaching comics within the current critical context means that one must constantly argue for their legitimization on the terms of different art forms (literature, visual arts, or more recently, film). But approaching comics as their own medium, with their own guidelines and aesthetics, reconsiders them not as failing

literature or visual art, but as successful methods of narration and conveyers of discourse. With that in mind, approaching comics as comics becomes the cornerstone of this course and of an effective multimodal pedagogy

The goal of this project I other instructors is to create a course that they feel they can teach, perhaps adapting it to their own needs or own texts, but at least having this as a guideline. This approach is fundamental to what this project is striving to do with comics as “Key to multimodal perspectives on literacy is the basic assumption that meanings are made (as well as distributed, interpreted, and remade) through many representational and communicational resources, of which language is but one” (Jewitt 246). Comics deploy an array of those resources that can be directly analyzed.

Also, Rowsell and Decoste argue that “multimodal research prompts us to account for more modes in texts and acknowledge that modes introduce new forms of thinking and learning” (248), and comics satisfy the need of engaging with a greater number of modes of meaning. They go on to state that “To expand notions of composition, there is a need to not only introduce other modes such as visuals, sounds and interactive modes, but also develop frameworks, activities and lesson ideas to actually teach other modes of representation and expression” (246-247). While they don’t directly address it here, the implication is that this is because traditional frameworks of composition, that “rely on the teaching of composition through a singular mode—specifically the alphabetic text” (Wood 244), are becoming less and less like writing and composing situations that students will encounter elsewhere. Hence grounding this course in multimodal approaches to multimodal texts seems a reasonable response.

To that end, the course being proposed below is a multimodal composition course with an emphasis on comics literacy as a sponsor of generalizable proficiency in analyzing, engaging

with, and composing multimodal texts, and approaching those texts as artifacts of discourse. The focus is on the five comics above as primary sources as demonstrations for how comics can relay narratives, function as discursal texts, and provide examples of how meaning is made between different modes. Several additional comics are included, though they are all much shorter web or newspaper comics strips. Students will also be required to create comics themselves across a range of genres, as composing comics underscores the complexity and potential impact of the medium. Again, as Wood states, “multimodal texts...are everywhere”; discourses produced through them are constantly being directed towards our students, potentially without them having the skill sets to critically engage with those discourses. In short, “Students need education that prepares them to be literate, informed, and actively engaged citizens capable of navigating and influencing society, texts, and discourses” (Dallacqua 209), and currently that means gaining proficiency in engaging with discourse via multimodal texts, of which comics are a valuable example.

A major emphasis in the course is in looking at comics as texts that exist at a point in a process, whether published or not, and the choices that writers/artists/composers must consider at each point therein. Wood argues that multimodal composition is especially useful at building rhetorical and discursal competencies for students as it requires them to be considering choices that are being made in every point in the composition process (246), and comics are an excellent foundation for interrogating that. The five source comics can easily be analyzed in regard to what various choices had to be made in order for the comic to exist as it does, and this rhetorical awareness is especially impactful when learners compose their own comics. Because of the very deliberate nature of composing in this medium due to the various characteristics of it that need to be taken into consideration, they are powerful examples of how choices during composing

impact later moments in the process. “The combination of different semiotic modes magnifies these choices in multimodal pedagogy” (Wood 246), and this is especially true because, as multimodal texts that synthesize the various modes they employ, choices made in regard to one mode in a comic impact meaning being conveyed by all others. Scanlon states that “Comics are especially rich for exploring multimodal composition because they combine image and text interdependently” (106), that while accurate is simplifying the situation somewhat. “Image” includes visual, spatial, and gestural forms of meaning, and a comic not only conveys linguistic meaning but often also incorporates other modes of meaning through the manipulation of visual representations in the printed text therein. Auditory meaning, a ubiquitous feature in the medium, falls somewhere in between the text and image, as its representation is sometimes linguistic, sometimes iconic, and often both. Every mode above functions interdependently; with that complexity in mind, it’s important to understand how students are approaching the class.

The expectation is that students are understandably anxious at the prospect of composing in this medium. As Comer, quoted above, mentions, contemporary students aren’t routinely engaging with comics, and furthermore “Resistance to comic books, especially superhero comic books, is still present in some students” (Kelley 165) (that instructors should be aware of when approaching *Arkham Asylum* and *Days of Future Past*). Students aren’t going to be especially familiar with the many ways one can be successful in creating discourse in this medium and may very well be concerned about their ability to convey a message through narrative art (see Kølbert and Sousanis, and especially Comer). For this reason, and many others discussed above, the grading for this course is based on a grading contract, meaning that grading will be labor-based.

While I favor contract-based grading in general, it is especially applicable in this context as a great deal of what students will be engaging with will be unfamiliar, and a major intent of

many of the assignments in this course is to push them into creative or rhetorical situations in which they are uncomfortable and with which they are unfamiliar. This is primarily because “disequilibrium does help students develop robust rhetorical awareness and increases their creative abilities” (Santos and McIntyre 6) and hewing to familiar pedagogies and texts while hoping to encourage new literacies seems counter-productive. Contract grading in this case allows the course to more enthusiastically “ask...students to take risks, meet or subvert genre expectations, play with style and modes, and become attuned to the decisions they make as they engage in different labor processes” (Wood 246). The goal is to have them engage with this medium that is largely new to them as a sponsor of literacy or as an example of multimodal discourses in productive ways. This is best done by allowing them substantial freedom in how they do so, not emphasizing finished products. Hopefully this will ameliorate to a substantial degree the anxiety that students experience when asked to compose in this medium.

Most importantly, labor-based grading will allow students to fail at specific tasks without that impacting their grade. Engaging with a new medium, and especially composing in it, requires experimentation, and failure is an inherent part of that; rather than evaluating that punitively, experimentation should be encouraged. Santos and McIntyre phrase it thus: “We want to reward students for the various investments they make because, if we agree that developing the robust material and rhetorical awareness Shipka articulates involves taking risks, then we must also acknowledge that it can involve failure” (12). Students that are preoccupied with turning in a product that will earn them an acceptable grade will be much less likely to take risks, especially in a new medium. The hope is that by removing a major incentive not to, students will be more likely to take considered risks in what they compose.

Experimentation is an excellent teacher, but, and especially in the context of a defined class, can be time consuming in the extreme. Scanlon argues that, for them to be effective, “multimodal assignments should allow for substantial dedication of class time to assisting students in establishing and carrying out several recursive stages of composing in unfamiliar and disorienting modes” (122). And we do want learners to have the opportunity to “consider and experiment with multimodal choices they might make” while composing a multimodal text (Dallacqua 213). The necessity of substantial time investment, experimentation, and numerous opportunities for experimental approaches to not succeed furthers the practical value of labor-based grading in this course, as each of those experiments, recursive stages, and potential failures can be put towards the satisfaction of course requirements.

Further, those course requirements are negotiated between instructor and the class as a way to provide substantial authority (and responsibility) to students. “One of our greatest challenges as writing instructors is convincing students to own their authority as authors, to move from reluctant consumers of texts to producers” (Sealey-Morris 48), and empowering them to make their own decisions about what comics literacy looks like to them should greatly enhance commitment to the coursework. Tan et al. argue that “granting students decision making in establishing assessment criteria increased students’ goal-setting and engagement” (108), and though this comes from a discussion on digital compositions, many of the fundamental classroom structures are similar. Students are being asked to analyze and engage in discourse in ways they are not familiar with and granting them authority to set their goals puts greater responsibility on them while increasing their feeling of ownership over their work and class time. The position of relative authority students will hold in the class meshes productively with the grading contract as it emphasizes the commitment in the course to allowing the opportunity to,

especially in terms of composing comics, experiment with ways of approaching a challenging medium, attempting various ways of conveying discourse thereby, and, most likely, failing at doing so as a pathway to learning more effective means of producing discourse.

However, it is possible (and in my experience, quite likely) that students will ask for evaluative feedback on their compositions, whether tied to their final course grade or not. And more importantly, feedback through the processes of composing and analysis are vital, especially in encouraging students to question how and why a comic has chosen to engage in discourse in a specific way. It is at this point that instructors should employ the analytical framework described in Chapter 4, but with special attention to the final synthesis into a specific discourse that a comic is creating out of its various modes of meaning. But it must be made clear that the efficiency or proficiency at creating discourse is less important than the process of creating and engaging with it. Because if “multimodal pedagogy truly wants to move forward, it must look at the affordances of the pedagogy and the assessment system that helps construct it” (Wood 257). In this case that means focusing evaluative energy on the process and the rhetorical choices students make while creating compositions, what the reasoning was behind them, and fostering an understanding of how those choices impact every aspect of an interdependent multimodal texts. This interdependency should be especially foregrounded in discussions of the source texts and is a primary indicator of comics literacy.

Weekly Course Description

From here, most of what’s under discussion is referring to specific aspects of the course and will include references to specific notes on the document itself.

Week 1 of the course will serve as an introduction to the course but also, more importantly, to the approach we are taking to the medium of comics. While many students have

probably read some comics (though realistically their experience may be limited to examples such as Nathan Pyle's *Strange Planet* or Sarah Andersen's *Sarah Scribbles*, each of which are ubiquitous on social media platforms,) it is unlikely they are used to approaching it as we will be here. The notion of comics being designed narratives or interdependent multimodal discourses is uncommon but should help to underscore the difference between comics and the stereotypical approach to them as "degraded Literature." In order to emphasize that point, defining just what comics are and do is very helpful for readers, and as such the first portion of the course will approach the base components of the medium and how they work together to form cohesive wholes. The major concept under discussion in the first course is that of the gutter (that will also be discussed in the next class), which is given a comprehensive discussion in McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, Chapter 3, Groensteen's *The System of Comics*, Chapter 2, and Barbara Postema's *Narrative Structure in Comics*, pp. 28-66 (see note 2). Week 1 will also include the students first major assignment (see note 3). In order to properly arrange the comics with which they are presented, students will not only have to analyze the panels themselves, but also situate them in a context for which they have no real guidelines, requiring critical analytical skills. Furthermore, the hands-on, multimodal aspect of the task requires understanding of the medium in a sophisticated way, being able to abstract the content before them and replace it in its original format including its frame.

Week 2 of the course will continue the discussion of the concept of the gutter, while also addressing how comics convey the passage of time and their usage of icons. While the conveyance of time isn't directly related to the critical apparatus that is being deployed through this course, it is a fundamental aspect of any representative art form, and a thorough investigation of conventions and techniques used in comics is warranted. Many of the best

comics artists make certain that a reader doesn't need to understand these conventions, but others do work to actively undermine how we understand the passage of time on the page (such as Chris Ware, Chris Onstad, and Alison Bechdel). As a whole, this concept is best described as how comics complete "the task of expressing an order of time in an order of space" (Schapiro 215), it's best discussed by Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics*, pp. 94-117.

As far as icons are concerned, the most thorough discussion of this in the comics sense is found in Chapter 2 of *Understanding Comics*. It's important to make the distinction that this is a medium-specific understanding of the term, and is not to be confused with the more precise definition found in the study of semiotics, such as that formulated by Charles Peirce, in that there is an inherent likeness between the icon and that for which it substitutes (Peirce 10). Instead, comics studies uses the term to mean something more akin to the general semiotic term "sign," in the sense that it is a thing that is representing something else (and the relationship between the two may be very close, non-existent, or somewhere in between).

After some introduction to the language of comics, Week 3 will introduce them to some of the unique aspects of how this course is approaching the medium. First and foremost, a workable, thorough understanding of the convention of the multiframe is necessary to go further in the course. While comics are generally thought of as being constructed of panels laid out in sequence, with gutters and borders facilitating interpretation, Chapter 4 of this text argues instead that the multiframe, the system of borders and gutters that acts as the confines of the comic, is the primary rhetorical device of the medium, not the events occurring within the panels. Without the narrative sequencing and implicit connection between the panels that the multiframe conveys, the comic as a whole would be unintelligible. Referring back to Major Assignment 1, the reason that assignment is possible is that there are imaginary schemas that readers project

onto comics when they approach them with the idea that they are in sequence. The multiframe is more than anything making these schemas visible and literal. One of the most difficult aspects of comics to articulate is how they manage “To transform a meaning into form” (Barthes 131). By situating this idea in the terms of the multiframe, hopefully it will be sensible to students. In addition to this text, a useful resource for this concept is Groensteen’s *The System of Comics*, Chapter 1.

Styles of discourse is the term used in Chapter 4 of this text for the four major ways multiframe are used rhetorically in comics (and it’s important to note that one comic, and hence one multiframe, may employ more than one in the course of a single comic). Refer there for a more thorough definition and examples of how their usage can play out in specific texts.

Braiding is Groensteen’s term in *System of Comics* for repeated usage of images, phrases, contexts, or situations that tie one part of a comic to another thematically. Unfortunately, there is no single place that a discussion is catalyzed, but instead appears throughout the text. It is a concept that should be emphasized however as certain comics on this syllabus, especially *From Hell*, employ this extensively.

The primary goal that this course has in regard to the medium is providing students with an actual vocabulary, similar to those in discussions regarding literature or film, that can address how well a comic is accomplishing the goals of its medium. By doing work to define what the medium is, and how to evaluate it, hopefully it will encourage educators to adopt it more frequently. Round argues that ““We are so often restricted to analyzing comics using terminology taken from literary criticism or visual media” (316). That is one of the primary problems this course is trying to counter by providing students with a workable apparatus for examining and analyzing comics on their own terms. Over weeks two and three much of that will

be introduced, and discussion about and engagement with said apparatus will continue throughout the semester. “We lack a common language for discussing the ...page as a whole, making that invisible structure visible” comics scholar Jesse Cohn notes (45), and by providing that to students hopefully their interactions with comics is more valuable.

Week 4 will conclude the formalized discussion of the gutter and will also discuss how a comic relays a narrative: sequentiality. Drawing heavily on Barbara Postema’s work, this week will define the impact that sequence has on a narrative, and especially how that sequence can be manipulated to engender different or covalent meanings in a comic. As many readers are often puzzled by what the actual sequence of panels in a comic may be (that is, what panel comes after that,) the assumption is that students will be especially interested in this topic.

Also, in this class students will examine the concept of paratextuality. Not only related to comics studies, but an excellent discussion of this concept in general is found in Dale Jacobs’ “Marveling at The Man Called Nova.” In essence, the paratext is aspects of the text that aren’t directly involved in conveying the narrative, such as the cover design, publishing information, author/artist, etc. Another useful source is in Chandler’s *Semiotics: The Basics* (2006), where several different types of textuality are defined efficiently, including both paratextuality and intertextuality. This topic, while slightly outside the confines of the critical apparatus being used, is an important one in order to understand how comics are viewed, and what a reader can understand about a text, especially in regard to genre, just based on these elements. This is the groundwork for an assignment in week 12.

Week 5 covers three primary topics: Negative Narration, Weaving, and the Implied Reader. Negative Narration is a collective term for the type of narration that Postema argues, throughout the second half of her book, occurs between and around the panels of a comic.

Perhaps better phrased, it's the narration done by things that aren't there in the comic itself, and that must be inferred by the reader.

Weaving is the name given by Postema to the narrative concept of re-using images throughout the course of a comic to tie disparate moments in time or space together in the narrative. For example, in Alan Moore's *Watchmen*, several issues are tied together mainly by the repeated usage of a clock about to strike midnight, which is used as a symbol to remind the reader how close the world is to Doomsday. The concept is extremely similar to Groensteen's "Braiding," the main difference being that weaving works narratively and braiding works thematically.

The Implied Reader is somewhat more complicated, especially in regard to comics. Postema argues that the implied reader is an especially powerful "construct due to the degree of 'involvement' that comics require of the reader" (121). In other words, since comics require the reader to perform extensive amounts of narrative closure by filling in the gutters, they are more tightly bound into the world of the narrative. Yet it goes both ways; because comics rely heavily on icons and the readers' interpretation thereof, comics artists must be extremely aware of the context in which their readers are functioning. The multimodal presentation of comics gives them substantial semantic weight, but the complex relationship between the art and their interpreters means that there's much being done rhetorically just by default in regard to who can read a specific text.

For Week 6, students will read *Arkham Asylum*, the first of the primary texts, along with Roland Barthes' "The Rhetoric of the Image." These two function as a pair, as the Barthes' text discusses the concept of suturing, in that additional information that is presented along with an image constrains its possible meanings. In comics, if a reader is interpreting a panel, this is

everything from text in word balloons, the balloons themselves, the frame of the panel, the entirety of the multiframe, and most importantly, the representations in the panels before and after it in the sequence. *Arkham Asylum* is rather abstract in its style and famously difficult to read, and the Barthes should encourage students and facilitate interpretation. The week focuses mostly on visual modes of meaning, and to go along with Barthes more general discussion thereof, Dale Jacobs provides the most accessible discussion of this in a comics context in “Marveling at The Man Called Nova” (184), defining what the various modes are through which a comic functions. Because, while Barthes speaks to the interaction between image and text, Jacobs points out that there is more that needs to be discussed due to the representational nature of artwork in comics. While a visual art object has a meaning and rhetoric of its own per Barthes, Jacobs points out that in comics the art is not a work in and of itself, but represents movement, action, sounds, etc.; all the ways in which meaning is conveyed. Modes such as the spatial, gestural, and auditory can’t be ignored if students want to be interpreting comics to the fullest.

Also discussed in Week 6, due to it being vital to grasping even a passing understanding of the primary text, is iconic solidarity. Groensteen provides a useful description of this starting on page 18 of *The System of Comics*, but in brief it is the construct through which readers recognize that the same person-shaped icon throughout a comic is meant to represent the same character at different times. Owing to the heavily abstracted and confounding nature of the artwork in *Arkham Asylum*, a working understanding of this, and how and why a writer/artist may choose to manipulate it, will provide a useful theoretical context to discuss deeper formal and thematic aspects of the text.

For *Arkham Asylum*, there are three in-class assignments and one out-of-class (referred to on the assignment sheet as “major assignment”). In large part, these are designed to address the

overarching argument of the course: that comics are an artistic medium, commensurate with literature, film, visual arts, etc. By Carrier's definition that "Being an artwork requires being about something and embodying its meaning" (118), this comic is not just an example but one of the best examples of how this medium can reach that goal. That it's a superhero comic is also valuable in that it is a tool to disengage the study of comics from the cultural elitism (founded in auteurism) that is currently keeping the medium from being deployed in a variety of context where comics could be powerful source texts.

In-Class Assignment 1 (see note 4 for the assignment sheet for this primary text) is mostly designed to encourage students to engage directly with how the layout of a page creates meaning itself. In order to read comics, and to interpret beyond the surface meaning, it is necessary to understand and consider the relationship between the visual and textual meanings being conveyed, as well as their relationships to the layout of the comic as a whole. Asking them to consider the rhetoric of the layout should emphasize the potential for the layout to create meaning, best summed up by literary scholar Kai Mikkonen: "The shape and size of panels, frames, or gutters can be given expressive value" (78). This will hopefully work to drive home that comics, according to media scholar Patrick Jagoda, "may embed narrative information within their *mise-en-scene*" (237), and that the multiframe and representations in the visual modes hold as much or more meaning than the text in this comic, as comic readers tend to privilege the linguistic mode of meaning over any other—a tendency that must be counteracted in order to appropriately engage with this medium.

In-Class Assignment 2 asks students to directly engage with the ambiguous presentation of the narrative, as this comic is perhaps the best example of literary scholar Hannah Freed-Thall's assertion that "what happens in a narrative is far less consequential than how it happens"

(68). The plot of this text is rudimentary, simplistic at most. But the story, largely due to its structure and representation, is a tremendously complex history.

This meets similar goals as the previous assignment, but encourages an understanding of how this comic, and multimodal texts in general, engage in intertextual discourse as each element brings with it cultural semantic meanings. Importantly, *Arkham Asylum* works both as a narrative embedded in its own ongoing history (as most comic books and other serialized productions do), but also functions as an aesthetic break from the majority of its medium. While hardly the first comic to play with the readers' expectations regarding what comic artwork should resemble, its heavily impressionistic influence binds it into an entirely separate aesthetic tradition. In-Class Assignment 3 will ask them to re-draft a portion of the narrative in a different style of discourse, which will require students to have appropriately read the discursual style in order to adapt it to another, a vital skill in comics literacy. Understanding the rhetoric of the layout is especially necessary when discussing the synthesis of various modes across the layout into a cohesive discourse.

The Major Assignment for this text asks them to directly consider an often-overlooked avenue of meaning in comics, the depiction of linguistic meaning; that is, word balloons and the text therein. Generally, analysis focuses on what is being said by characters in comics, but word balloons are often a conveyer of substantial meaning (see Chapter 4 for a discussion of how *Sandman* manipulates this mode). This is a rather complex research task they are being set on, as the impact which typography has on readers is largely latent. The specific effect is sometimes difficult to articulate as it draws on visual theories such as Color Theory and the how lines of certain thickness and fullness are interpreted (Forceville et al. has a good discussion of this,

hence its inclusion as a student resource). But it's especially important to define just the effect it has here in this comic as it's the best example on the syllabus.

For Weeks 7 and 8 (these are combined as it's up to individual instructors just how they want to divide the course time), students will read *From Hell*, a pseudo-history of Jack the Ripper. In relation to the text, three major concepts will be addressed: genre, iconic solidarity in more detail, and how comics deploy actions as symbols. Genre and iconic solidarity are both best addressed in terms of how this comic undermines expectations in these regards. Concerning genre, the paratext and first portions of the text itself give the impression that the comic is a straightforward historical fiction, while later on the reader encounters gods, monsters, time travel, and all manner of fantastic elements. Iconic solidarity though is especially interesting here, as depictions and levels of detail in the artwork change, undermining the readers sense of whether or not they are looking at consistently-used images. The theoretical reason for that is addressed in some of the assignments for this text. Finally, the text itself centers on the argument that single acts can be so powerfully symbolic that they alter the course of a century (in this case, the murders stopped what the Ripper saw as the impending fall of the Patriarchy). In the comics context, this becomes literalized in that actions, along with everything else, are only symbolically conveyed. As such, the text becomes a literalized example of its central argument.

There are two In-Class Assignments and one Major Assignment for this text (See note 5 for the assignment sheet). In-Class Assignment 1 asks them to consider the utility of reading the text, something that will probably come under question due to its uncomfortable subject matter and graphic depictions of sex, nudity, and violence against women. The goal of this writing assignment goes back to part one and the discussion of how comics create so clearly implied readers. In this comic, then, the implied reader is one that most directly shares the viewpoint of

Jack the Ripper. The further implication is that we are still working within a culture that The Ripper had a direct hand in creating, one that at best views women as art objects. Without that shared subjectivity between reader and character, the narrative would lose much of what makes sense about it. In other words, we read this and can understand it as we are part of the culture that the Ripper created, and again, “there’s no way out of the game of culture.” Essentially, we are reading this as a text that exemplifies the affordance of comics in that they are tools to identify the subjectivities of readers. Pioneering literary theorist and scholar Robert Scholes argued that “A major function of the teaching of fiction should be to help students identify their own collectivities” (*Textual Power* 23), and comics as a medium facilitate this through identification. Who the narrative calls on the reader to identify with, and who the reader actually identifies with, is a dual function of the reader’s own subjectivities and how the comic artist manipulates the representations in their work. In McCloud’s terms, artists facilitate identification across the medium, and in Scholes’ terms this allows readers to very easily understand with whom they are most powerfully identifying. In the context of the manipulation performed by Campbell and Moore, this is used to identify problematic collectivities within their implied readers.

This text is best understood through the lens of the history on which it is drawing and is deeply entrenched in the ethics and geography of a specific time and place. As a fiction text grounded heavily in historical fact, actual historical events become one of the primary references in this comic (see Darren Harris-Fain “Revisionist Superhero Graphic Novels”). Foregrounding that understanding of Campbell and Moore’s narrative technique is one of the easiest ways to understand that what this comic is striving to do is make commentary on the actual cultures that have been influenced by Victorian England. By sharing this history, our culture is bound up in its implications. Also, this assignment is a prime example of literary scholar Katharine

MacDonald's formulation of the entire Literary Theory project, that "literary analysis is based in making an argument through available textual evidence about some larger phenomenon" (228). There is much to be said about western culture and its reliance on victimizing women in just this text.

In-Class Assignment 2 relates to more formal aspects of the text. This assignment would essentially be a close reading, but applied not just to text, obviously. Have them read Jacobs "More Than Words" before class. Then ask them to specifically categorize the text along the metrics we've defined, qualifying what the Style of Discourse is and how it performs on the text, and what the comics does in terms of Iconic Solidarity. Most importantly, ask them to argue and defend what deviations they see in the text and what they do to their reading of the text, not just in and of themselves, but also in contrast to the majority of the text. For example, the chapter of the final murder employs a loose, relatively free form multiframe. On its own, this implies much about the narrative, but in the context of the whole text, the deviations convey additional meanings to the visual approach of the comic. The reading of visual texts that this course asks students to perform is necessary in order to best discuss the structural norms that this text adheres to and violates as it suits the narrative.

For Weeks 9 and 10, students will read and work with *Maus*. Of all the comics on the syllabus, this is the one that is most likely to be familiar to students owing to its common appearance in classrooms and the frequent references to it culturally. Instructors should be aware that they may encounter some resistance or preconceived notions regarding this comic in particular. That aside, *Maus* is an ideal text to address two specific modes of meaning, the Textual (written prose,) and the Gestural (meaning conveyed by character's body language and facial expression). This is mainly because the key metaphor of the text works primarily by

manipulating the mechanisms of identification with and objectification of its characters. The vaguely drawn mouse characters require substantial investment from the reader, which facilitates Identification, and the rare detailed drawings work to highlight atrocities in the text, objectifying the victims, removing their identity, and simultaneously making the text easier to stomach while making the themes seem more universal. For discussion of the concepts of both identification and objectification, see *Understanding Comics* Chapter 2.

The Textual mode is somewhat difficult to address solely due to the fact that doing so relies on methods of interpretation that students may be very familiar with from studying literature, film, or drama, and as such it's easy to lapse back into the habit of analyzing comics as a whole on the merit of the text. This impulse is probably in large part why *Maus* has become one of the most celebrated comics; a stand-out in the graphic novel genre, it draws more obviously on familiar literary techniques than most comics. It also provides a textual channel of meaning that is well-suited to facilitating classroom engagement. The Gestural mode of meaning is used to great effect, however, and though it's often overlooked in comics studies, *Maus* is one of the best exemplars of the impact it can have, especially in regard to facial expressions of characters. For a more thorough discussion, see Chapter 4 of this text and Pavis' "The Discourse of (the) Mime."

There are four In-Class Assignments and one Major Assignment for this text (See note 6). The first In-Class Assignment asks them to find in the text an example of McCloud's concept of Amplification Through Simplification, in that narrative points are emphasized by simplifying artwork. Understanding this comic technique is necessary to interpret a tremendous amount of the artwork presented in the medium. As such, this assignment is providing practice with a tool they will need in the future in order to adequately read these texts.

Assignment 2 addresses a narrative break within the comic itself, in that one of the author's older comics is referred to and inserted into the text. Its inclusion is often a point of contention for critics and scholars, as it doesn't employ the same visual metaphor as the rest of the comic and therefore would seem to break the reader out of the narrative. So by moving the reader into an entirely different representational context, addressing this sub-text will encourage flexible reading strategies (as it's engaging with a new genre within the text,) be instructive regarding the impact of narrative weaving (as the inclusion deeply impacts the surrounding text and articulating that impact is necessary for further interpretation), and demonstrate how comics engaging in discourses in and out of the text simultaneously (as it is extending the comic into Spiegelman's earlier work, essentially making his life and this text intertextual elements of *Maus*). This could also be their second experience with the comic, and this portion of the class will begin with a discussion regarding how its context in a larger work changes it in comparison to when we read it on its own.

Assignment 3 asks the students to directly engage with the most obvious differences between the two parts of the comic, *Maus I* and *Maus II*. *Maus I* creates its visual metaphor and deviates from it almost not at all (except for the inclusion of *Prisoner on Hell Planet*). *Maus II*, while still straightforward in its artistic style, moves away from the consistency of *Maus I* in important ways; see especially the beginning of Chapter II ("Auschwitz: Time Flies"). By incorporating more complex, less consistent visual metaphors, the author seems to undermine some of his own iconic solidarity (when more accurately it's just incorporating ruptures in the narrative and including the experience of the author as author, instead of just as a character). This assignment will provide another tool in the chest for analyzing comics. Often the best way to

understand what a comic is doing is to analyze the breaks from its own internal consistency and focus on the impact that has on potential readers.

Assignment 4 asks students to address a common criticism of the medium (that in my experience many students agree with); that any comic could possibly function just as well as a fully prose work. To emphasize the strength of other modes of meaning in this medium, though, students will be asked to translate as much of the text as they can into a purely prose work. Also, along with other goals that directly play out in the classroom, this assignment is one that best exemplifies comics' ability to bridge the divide between linguistic and visual modes of communication and meaning making, and that I will hope emphasize for students that one is not superior to the other, and that the meaning the various channels engender together is greater than the sum of their parts. Invariably, students will be neglecting key information, especially in regard to gestural and spatial information conveyed by the comic. Either that, or they will not get very far as they try to interpret the entirety of the meaning in each panel. This is based on Archer's assertion that "It is clear that using one mode to reflect on another can open up interesting spaces for reflection" (211). Understanding the interrelated and inextricable nature of the text and art in comics is necessary for interpretation. Additionally, part of the point of this assignment is to work against a culturally embedded assumption about the superiority of one mode of meaning vs. another in comics or representation in general. "Some tug of war between words and images or between writing and design can be productive as it brings into relief the multiple dimensions of all forms of communications", George states (767), that is largely the phenomena that allows *Maus* to function so well; the text and images are often held apart to create tension. But it will be interesting to see what students make of the stress this applies to the narrative.

The Major Assignment for this text asks that students perform some outside research, either on *Maus* itself or on the time and specific places it's depicting. The text has often grappled with allegations of racism, especially directed towards Polish and French characters in the scenes taking place in WWII. What students are asked to consider is if the short-hand that comics use in illustrating, that of amplifying stereotypes in order to facilitate identification of characters, invariably leads to being embedded in racist ideologies. By directly addressing the metaphor used to address prejudices and the European nationalist viewpoints of his Father's time, this is directly discussing the comic in the context of its history. As comics scholar Christina Meyer puts it, comics "Teach visual literacy as well as inter-cultural competence by means of graphic narratives" (54), and *Maus* can be viewed as either an example of how to do that, or as a cautionary tale of what not to do artistically.

Week 11 will focus on the Spatial Mode of Meaning, as well as addressing the concept of Intertextuality. For a thorough discussion of the Spatial Mode, refer to Chapter 4 or Jacob's "More Than Words," but in brief it's the semantic information conveyed by the environment, both in the panel and in the multiframe. The primary text is *Beautiful Darkness*, a French comic that draws heavily on the fairy tales of Little Red Riding Hood and Snow White. The comic derives much of its meaning from the depiction of the environment, and also through intertextual references. By situating itself as a fairy tale and setting itself in a forest, the comic takes advantage of the meaning that environment has in the genre in which it is embedded. This intertextuality (founded in the philosopher Julia Kristeva's "Word, Dialogue and Novel" where it receives its most useful elaboration), allows comics, or really any text, to expand their meaning by referencing other texts, and thereby drawing themselves into a semantic network of inter-referential texts that exists culturally. Further, *Beautiful Darkness* is a prime text to work against

the idea that comics are not rigorous reading. Comics are, in general, seen as “easier” texts than print texts. Though that is probably not true (see Horn’s formulation of the dual triads of meaning that must be understood to even read them in “The Graphic Novel as a Choice of Weapons” pg. 97), the perception remains that they are less difficult to get through, and that therefore the more difficult comics are more likely to be worth reading. This is the first comic that we’re reading that advances literary scholar Stephen Hoepfner’s argument that there’s little or no relation between how difficult a text is to get through and the intellectual or aesthetic value thereof (“Digging Up the Dirt?”). *Beautiful Darkness*, while perhaps taking an hour or less to read, is as valuable a text as any other on the syllabus. This idea though is something that comics struggle against as a medium, and this is a prime example of not only why comics are a powerful medium but that the basic formulation proposed regarding value is not necessarily the case.

There are two In-Class Assignments and one Major Assignment for this text (see note 7). The first In-Class assignment will address directly the ways in which the comic manipulates the multiframe, especially in regard to panel size, in order to engender specific meanings. Though this is the first assignment that explicitly addresses the phenomena, a cornerstone of understanding the discursive styles of the multiframe is grasping that “the shape of the panel and the use of perspective within it can be manipulated to produce various emotional states in the viewer” (Eisner 90). Discussion of this is woven in throughout the course. To this end, this assignment asks students to explicitly articulate what impact the changing styles of discourse and panel presentation has on their readings.

In-Class Assignment 2 will continue the discussion of the multiframe in the comic, but in a more general sense. Despite the frequent, minor shape and size changes of the panels, relative to the comics that have been objects of study so far, the format of *Beautiful Darkness* is fairly

regular and uncomplicated. That begs the question then of why major variations are there, and more importantly what the comic is trying to do with the multiframe, as, unlike in some comics in that the Standard style is not deviated from, small variations and modifications of the framing is ubiquitous. Students will then be asked to define the opportunities and challenges this presents to the reader. Both assignments 1&2 are mostly designed to engage students in analysis of the manipulation of the multiframe that's performed here, as critically engaging with that manipulation is contingent on being able to read comics on their own terms, specifically addressing how the form impacts overall meaning and interpretation.

The Major Assignment for this text is a more standard research paper than previous assignments, in that they are being asked to investigate how a specific fairy tale genre trope is being used in the comic, and how its translation into the comic medium impacts how readers view it. The Major Assignment is designed to provide practice in properly understanding what a comic is doing via the spatial channel of meaning, familiarity with the cultural importance of not just the genre of fairy tales but of a specific trope therein is necessary. Further, completion of the project means discovering and synthesizing several sources and applying them to a medium not necessarily directly related to the ones under discussion, an important skill especially in regard to multimodal literacy (engaging with multimodal texts often requires research strategies to be adapted from other fields of literacy and disciplines). It's a relatively complex research and writing task, that should provide a challenge that will be mitigated depending on how willing students are to engage with the comic as a fairy tale in a new medium. The doubling of cultural baggage, of both comics as a medium and fairy tales as a genre, may encourage some students to approach this comic especially as simply a children's book, though hopefully the visceral violence is enough to underscore that the text is working on a more complicated level.

For Week 12, students will read *Uncanny X-Men # 141-142: Days of Future Past*. While students will have read a superhero comic before, this is the first in the class that is in no way, shape, or form, a standout from the genre (though a Batman comic, *Arkham Asylum* is often categorized in the more prestige genre of graphic novels). And when approached from a technical standpoint, the modes of meaning employed in *Days of Future Past* are not as proficient or elegant as some of the previously discussed texts. The artistry does not match McKean's work in *Arkham Asylum*, and the dialogue and other text lack the impact on their own that writing has in *Maus* or *From Hell*. As such, *Days of Future Past* is an ideal text to emphasize the general strength of comics across genres, as despite those supposed shortcomings it is one of the most powerful examples of how the medium works as a deployment of multimodal design strategies, and of how that basic multimodal tool (the multiframe) creates a framework for artistic, impactful, and valuable texts/narratives. It's especially useful then as an example of how what matters for evaluating and analyzing a comic is the synthesis of modes into a productive discourse. Also, the variance in technical proficiency between *Days of Future Past* and some other inclusions is especially important to note here, as not acknowledging the disparate strength in some of the modes between *Days of Future Past* and, for example, *Maus*, would invite counter arguments focused on that juxtapositioning as opposed to the actual pedagogical work that is done here.

As such, there are two primary ways I would suggest instructors have students approach this text: not one or the other, but in succession or perhaps simultaneously depending on the dynamics of the class. As discussed in Chapter 5, one of the key strengths of this text how it links its own narrative into other narratives regarding genocides. It primarily achieves this through the use of symbols that work diegetically, but also harken to other fictional and real-

world events. As comics scholars Anne Cong-Huyen and Caroline Kyungah Hong argue “Social and cultural critique is often veiled in the guise of almost inhuman heroes of mythic proportions” (86). Therefore, I would suggest students approach the comic as a superhero comic, focusing on the generic elements, but also as a text deeply laden with symbolic references to other comics and real events, that mostly function via intertextual gestures. As such, discussion for this text will mostly focus on semiotics, intertextuality, and paratextuality.

For this text, there is one in-class assignment, and two in- and out-of-class assignments. The first in-class assignment will ask students to define the elements of the text, diegetically, intertextually, and paratextually, that inform the reader what the genre of this text is, as that plays a tremendous role in shaping expectations and controlling for what readers will suspend disbelief. This assignment requires students to exhibit skill in reading each mode of meaning in a comic and assigning to it a generic identity. That is, they’ll have to say whether a certain aspect of the text is part of a superhero comic, a comic in general, or not really a trait of the medium at all. It will also be necessary to tell them to keep in mind the argument that “‘subject matter is the weakest criterion for generic grouping because it fails to take into account how the subject is treated’” (Stam, qtd. in Chandler 2), so work to have students approach this from the perspective of how the text presents certain themes. Or rather “one way of defining genres is as ‘a set of expectations’” (8), and therefore what are the expectations regarding this text that the paratext may engender?

For Assignment 2, which begins in class but requires work between classes, students will take a symbol used in the text (my guess is that most students will pick a row of headstones the feature prominently in issue 141; that works just fine) and do their best to articulate what it is doing in the comic diegetically and how its usage in the superhero genre informs on perhaps

previous understandings of the symbol or genre. For the out of class portion, students will research how the symbol is used in other contexts. Furthermore, they will have to define how it is generally used and understood, and also how that general meaning informs on its usage in the comic. Embedded in the intertextual nature of the medium, this assignment underscores the connections that comics make and rely on to give greater weight to individual issues, panels, and representations.

For Assignment 3 students will need to work on their own multimodal composition and design. They are to draft a novel representation of a symbol (for example, using a smiley face in a unique way as Dave Gibbons and Alan Moore do in *Watchmen*). In order to do this, they should create a list of other places they have seen the symbol they want to work with, along with meanings and perhaps latent connotations it has in those various contexts. As Groensteen states “Once the same motif is represented several times it transports all of its attributes...along with it” (124), and that doesn’t necessarily need be all in a single text. To sum up, students should pick a symbol and do their best to define the baggage it has culturally.

Students will then begin to work on their representations, with a focus on keeping it intelligible for others. As a guideline, suggest they look to “Rhetoric of the Image” once more. Except instead of using text to suture an image, students will use a representational context of their own choosing to suture a symbol of some sort into an interpretive context. For example, two crossed, perpendicular lines mean something very different when used as an “x” on a map. That representational context is a key interpretive affordance of the comics medium, and one of the primary ideas that this assignment should underscore is that in comics, as literary and feminist scholar Susan Van Dyne argues “The ephemeral is raised to the status of the iconic. The ordinary is elevated by its insertion in the discourse of art, and what counts as art is enlarged and

enriched” (109). Hopefully, students will make the connection that by creating and inserting an icon into the ongoing representational discourse of a comic it can be better communicated to others through the means of the medium.

But that may or may not be the case. Students will be asked to finish their work that class and then exchange their symbolic representations with a classmate, who will attempt to define it based on contextual clues before the next class. Since “Students seem to think that...text [or in this case, symbols] requires no explanation, that everyone must see (and interpret) it in the same way” (Cioffi 186), frustration with their classmates is probably inevitable, as it is unlikely that the interpreters will get exactly the meaning from the symbols that the creator was trying to convey. But this is a vital task in demonstrating how much responsibility an author/artist has to make their work intelligible to the implied reader. Because, as McCloud notes, “icons demand our participation to make them work” (*Understanding Comics* 58), and that reliance on the interpreter means symbols are in some sense always subjective. As composition scholars Peter Rabinowitz and Michael Smith put it, “No writer can ever be sure of what his or her readers will be like” (5), and this provides an excellent opportunity to underscore that a person’s own context can greatly impact what they create and how they interpret symbolic representations. “The multicultural literature classroom should be a site to investigate the very politics of cultural production and social reproduction” (Knight 103), and by emphasizing the contingent nature of icons and symbols in our day-to-day visual cultures, I hope that this will underscore the concept of the socio-political nature of even the seemingly most naturalized texts and representations. For a further review of suturing, refer to the introduction of Joyce Goggins and Dan Hassler-Forest’s *The RISE and REASON of Comics and Graphic Literature* for a specifically comics context, and back to Barthes’ “Rhetoric of the Image” for a more general discussion.

Following *Days of Future Past*, for week 15 students will work on Major Assignment 2. Between weeks 14 and 15, they will be provided with Muna Al-Jawad's article "Comics are Research," as an example text of how comics can work in non-narrative genres (both in the article's argument and in its own existence, as the article itself is a comic). Refer to note 8 for the assignment sheet and a discussion of it, but in brief students here are asked to create a non-narrative comic of their own. In my experience this causes significant anxiety, as most readers think of comics as purely a narrative medium, but the Al-Jawad article should be helpful as an example, and for further examples instructors may want to refer to some technical documents available online, such as examples of assembly instructions from IKEA. The goal here is to underscore the medium's adaptability, and that designing comics is a cognitive task that requires different, but comparable, processes of the creator. This is also taking comics and putting them in the context of new genres for the students and having them create therein is one of the best ways for them to exemplify their understanding. Students are expected to complete this task in class, though they will be given the majority of the class period to do so.

For weeks 16, 17, and the final period, students will have a two-part final project to work on. The first part will ask them to adapt a comic into a different medium (see note 9). The comic and the medium are subject to instructor approval, mainly due to length. Adapting a long-form or multi-issue comic would most likely be simply too time consuming to put in another mode, excepting maybe Drama, so it will be up to the instructor's judgement whether or not to allow an adaptation to move forward. This will accomplish several goals. First of all, it will encourage students to interact with more comics outside of the reading list, as none are very viable options for this assignment. Most are too long, and *Arkham Asylum* would be a monumental task for adaptation. Secondly, it will once again highlight the density and intrinsic strength of the

medium as a conveyance of meaning. Realizing, for example, the gestural mode of meaning in a linguistic text is certainly possible but requires much more of the reader and writer. Third, this will require students to approach comics with an understanding of them as complete, multimodal texts. The primary task of adaptation is to reformulate the meaning conveyed in one medium, through its own unique affordances, and redeploy them through entirely different means. A competent adaptation of a comic would need to demonstrate not only what's going on panel by panel, but also in the relationship between the modes in one panel, the modes in the surrounding panels, and between the panels and the multiframe as well. This will of course require the instructor to read or already be familiar with the texts their students are selecting. Apologies in advance.

Furthermore, this assignment will have students performing what Scholes refers to as “interpretation proper, that is the thematizing of a text” (*Textual Power* 29). Essentially, they will be required to move beyond the most surface level interpretations in order to perform adequate adaptations and solve the issue of “how we get from the things named in the story...to the level of generalized themes and values” (31). In this case, it is through performing the structural and thematic analysis that we've been working on throughout on a new text.

For Part II of the Final, students will essentially be doing the opposite and adapting a different text into comic form. Bowen and Withaus state that “Understanding the interactions and relationships between different expressive modes is integral to understanding the composing processes and enabling students to develop their own writing techniques fully” (“What Else is Possible?” 7), and this is a chance for students to demonstrate this understanding by putting it into practice across several modes. Further, “there is a need to provide learning opportunities that overtly enable students to move across the multiple modes of text design and textual presentation

so that creative possibilities are explored and enhanced” Edwards-Groves states (“The Multimodal Writing Process” 51) as “much of what we regard as creativity happens as students move across modes” (51). Learning to adapt modes and creatively apply solutions across and between them is a necessary skill.

Each of these is designed in part to address different necessary skills in regard to comics literacy; in order to properly adapt a text (either a comic into a new medium or vice-versa), students must have an advanced understanding of what the original text is about, that includes its situatedness in time, place, ethics, and sociopolitical context. Further, it requires students to show not only proficiency in composing at least two different mediums, but also for the conveying the purposes of those mediums, that rarely are synonymous. Finally, in order to adapt a comic, students will have to be proficient at reading each of its various modes, so they aren’t missing anything crucial that the comic is trying to convey.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of this is the presentation aspect; students will have to select either their work in Part I or II and present it to the class, including their arguments for why they made the choices they did in their adaptation. While many students may feel they intuitively know what to do in order to appropriately adapt a text one way or the other (which may be true), being able to articulate why choices were made is essential in order to make this a generalizable skill.

The syllabus includes grading criteria for Major Assignment 2 and the Final Project; this may or may not be shared with students however, depending on the instructor’s viewpoint on whether or not that will unduly impact student work. In my own courses, students have noted that they appreciate having the rubric, even though they aren’t being assign a letter grade based on it, as it provides and more systematic breakdown of some of the competencies they are hoping

to achieve. Major Assignment 1, as an introduction to the course, would function best as labor-graded only, and the assignments related directly to texts may also best function as such, though I leave that up to the instructor's discretion. As those are largely either in-class work focused on getting students to participate with the texts or more standard research assignments, most instructors are comfortable evaluating those as they are not comics-exclusive. Also, the syllabus provides a list of required readings for students, along with suggested additional readings, and also suggested readings with that instructors to familiarize themselves. Specific notes and sections that are key to the course have been noted throughout this document.

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APPENDIX A: SYLLABUS FOR ENGL XXX, MULTIMODAL LITERATURE AND
COMPOSITION

Course Description: Course stressing the importance of multimodal literacy in the contemporary world, focusing on comics as texts representative of multimodal compositions, the study of that provides transferable skills in approaching social environments that increasingly use similar techniques in making meaning. Students will analyze, critique, and create comics as a foundation for broader multimodal literacies in general. The course will demonstrate that it is not simply making “...the *hip* choice of using graphic novelists...”², but that rather it’s employing the unique affordances of comics as an avenue to exploring multimodal literacies in the classroom by reading and composing texts that rely on multiple modes of meaning in order to function.

Course Objectives: In this course, students will

- study and analyze a selection of texts designed to foreground the concept of comics as multimodal texts
- interpret comics in their cultural and historical contexts
- recognize the interconnectedness of texts
- demonstrate their learning by (a) participating in classroom discussions (b) completing in-class assignments, including designing and constructing their own multimodal texts, (c) completing all assigned out-of-class reading, assignments, and research.
- comprehend, contextualize, and historicize literary works from a wide range of cultures/countries
- locate, apply, and criticize scholarly articles
- write reflective, interpretive, and critical responses to literary and non-narrative works

Required Reading

- *Arkham Asylum*, by Grant Morrison and Dave McKean
- *Beautiful Darkness*, by Fabien Vehlman and Kerascoët
- *From Hell*, by Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell
- *Making Comics*, by Scott McCloud
- *Maus*, by Art Spiegelman
- *Narrative Structure in Comics*, by Barbara Postema
- *The System of Comics*, by Thierry Groensteen
- *Understanding Comics*, by Scott McCloud

Required Reading That Will Be Provided

- Al-Jawad, Muna. “Comics Are Research”
- Forceville, et al. “Balloonics: The Visuals of Balloons in Comics
- Jacobs, Dale. “More than Words: Comics as a Means of Teaching Multiple Literacies.”
- Claremont, Chris and John Byrne. “Uncanny X-Men, #141-142”
- Barthes, Roland. “The Rhetoric of the Image”

² Baetens, Jan. *The Graphic Novel: An Introduction*. Cambridge University Press, 2015.

The Grading Contract³

Research in education, writing studies, and psychology over the last 30 or so years have shown overwhelmingly how the presence of grades in classrooms negatively impact the learning and motivation of students. In an effort to make this environment one that motivates you to compose and create your own texts, we won't use grades to assess your compositions. Instead, we will use a contract to determine course grades. The best way to learn is to teach others, to help, and to serve, so we will function as collaborators, allies with various skills, abilities, experiences, and talents that we offer the group or our partners, rather than working for grades.

You will get lots of assessments on your writing and other work during the semester from your colleagues. Use these assessments (written and verbal) to rethink ideas and improve your writing and practices, to take risks – in short to fail and learn from that failing. Always know that I will read and shape our classroom assessment activities and discussions around your work, but you will not receive grades from me. I want you to not only rely on your colleagues and yourself for assessment and revision advice, but to build strategies of self-assessment that function apart from a teacher's approval.

Therefore, the default grade for the course is a "B". If you do all that is asked of you in the manner and spirit it is asked, if you work through the processes we establish and the work we assign ourselves during the semester, if you do all the labor asked of you, then you'll get a "B" course grade. If you miss class (do not participate fully), turn in assignments late, or forget to do assignments, you will get a lower course grade (see the final breakdown grade table on the last page of this contract).

Contract Requirements

"B" Grades:

You are guaranteed a course grade of "B" if you meet all of the following conditions.

1: Active and Engaged Participation- Class participation is based on attendance and level of active, meaningful participation in class. I expect you to come prepared and *on time* to class in order to participate in a meaningful way. This means completing close and careful readings of assigned texts and being prepared to thoughtfully discuss the assigned material. Students who have not completed the assigned reading or activities/exercises may be asked to refrain from the discussion (it is not my job, nor the job of other students, to "fill in" those who fail to come prepared). Bring to class the required text, reading, and/or writing assigned for discussion and be ready to locate, analyze, and discuss relevant passages or components.

NOTE: Assignments not turned in will be late, missed, or ignored (depending on when you turn it in, see guidelines #5, "Labor Classification," below).

Any absence due to a university-sponsored group activity (e.g., sporting event, band, etc.) or mandatory military-related absences (deployment) will be considered independently of the above attendance policy, as long as the student has FIRST provided written documentation in the first 2 weeks of the semester of all absences.

³ Adapted from Krista Aldrich's College Composition II grading contract at North Dakota State University

2: Timely Work- It is in your best interest to complete and hand in all work on time. You are expected to meet deadlines and due dates for all assigned work, from participation to daily work to writing projects. I will allow extensions—on some assigned work, not all—only if I am contacted in meaningful and/or reasonable advance before the due date. Do not abuse this courtesy.

Please note that regardless of the reason for the lateness or assessment (including any/all plagiarized work or work so late as to not meet expectations), you are required to complete all major assignments in the class in order to earn a grade in the course.

3: Major Assignments: You agree to turn in properly and on time all major assignments expected of you, that means you'll complete all labor for each assignment (such as drafts). You agree to turn in *all* of the following assignments listed below:

- Major Assignment 1
- Major Assignment 2
- Final Project Parts 1 & 2

4: Out-of-Class Writing Assignments: You agree to turn in properly and on time all out-of-class assignments expected of you. Your grade will be contingent on completing all large papers AND on the percentage of these assignments you complete in the manner expected of your (following the instructions) by the end of the semester.

Labor Classifications: Assignments not turned in will be late, missed, or ignored (see definitions below). A detailed chart regarding amount of late/missed/ignored work and grade results can be found at the end of the grading contract.

- **Late Work-** any work or document due that is turned in AFTER the due date/time BUT within 48 hours of the deadline. You must email or talk to me about late work; you can't just turn it in late. This does not include rough drafts. We as a class NEED you to have something for in class work each time we meet.
- **Missed Work-** If you turn in a major assignment AFTER the 48 hours stipulated above (Late Work), then it will be considered “missed work,” which is a more serious mark against your grading contract. Assignments more than two weeks late will receive an “ignored” unless prior arrangements have been made with me.
- **Ignored Work-** You agree not to ignore any smaller assignments expected of you. Ignored work is any daily/weekly assignment unaccounted for in the semester – that is, I have no record of you doing it or turning it in. Ignoring the work so crucial to one's development as a learner in our community is unacceptable; so, accumulating any “ignored work” will keep you from meeting our contract expectations (see table below). Ignored work does not apply to large assignments.

Revision Opportunity: You may revise one of the core assignments, preferably the one with the most revision needed, and turn it in after Week 9, but before the end of the semester. Each

revision must have a memo detailing what you have changed and how that revision has strengthened the document.

Thus, you earn a B if you put in good time and effort, participate fully, do all the work, and complete a final document. We will expect this from everyone. But to get higher grades, you must complete more labor while also meeting the conditions for a B contract.

Knowing Where You Stand: This system is better than regular grading for giving you a clear idea of what your final grade looks like at any moment. If you are doing everything as directed and turning things in on time (no matter what anyone says), you're getting a B. As for participation in class, you'll have to keep track of it, but you can check with me at any time. I'll tell you what I have recorded.

“A” Grades:

The grade of B depends primarily on *behavior* and *labor*. Have you shown responsible effort and consistency in our class? Have you done what was asked of you in the spirit it was asked? Higher grades, such as an “A,” however, require *more labor*. In order to raise your grade, you may complete on time and in the spirit asked of you two of the following bullet points/items of labor:

- A substantial revision of two or more out-of-class assignments
- Adapting a non-comic assignment into that medium while maintaining overall meaning
- Something else that is commensurate with the amount of labor of one of the above and benefits your colleagues in some way (must be cleared by me in advance).

Grade Malleability: The contract includes grade malleability from B to A. Grade malleability from C to B, D to C, or F to D requires you to conference with me. This malleability will be labor based; more labor will be required to increase your grade from a lower grade (i.e. F to D, D to C, C to B).

Academic Honesty:

I assume all the work you turn in will be your own. The academic community operates on the basis of honesty, integrity, and fair play

Students with Disabilities:

In keeping with the Americans with Disabilities Act, I encourage students with special needs who need accommodations in this course to contact me as soon as possible so that the appropriate arrangements can be made. Also, veterans and active duty military personnel with special circumstances are welcome and encouraged to communicate these, in advance if possible, to the instructor.

Syllabus is subject to change at any time during the semester.

Course Calendar

Week	Texts to have read	Class Topic	Texts for next class
1	None	Introduction to Comics Designing Narratives ² Major Assignment 1	<i>Understanding Comics</i>
2	<i>Understanding Comics</i>	Class Discussion: The Art of Time: Gutters, Icons	<i>The System of Comics</i>
3	<i>The System of Comics</i>	Class Discussion: The Multiframe, Styles of Discourse, Braiding	<i>Narrative Structure in Comics</i>
4	<i>Narrative Structure in Comics</i>	Class Discussion: Sequentiality, Paratextuality, Gutters, cont.	<i>Narrative Structure in Comics</i>
5	<i>Narrative Structure in Comics</i>	Class Discussion: Negative Narration, Implied Readers, Weaving	“The Rhetoric of an Image,” <i>Arkham Asylum</i>
6	“The Rhetoric of an Image,” <i>Arkham Asylum</i>	Class Discussion: Visual Modes of Meaning, Iconic Solidarity	<i>From Hell</i> , parts 1-8
7	<i>From Hell</i> , parts 1-8	Major Assignment Due, <i>Arkham Asylum</i> Class Discussion: Iconic Solidarity, Genre	<i>From Hell</i> , parts 9-16, “More Than Words”
8	<i>From Hell</i> ,	Class Discussion: Actions as Symbols	<i>Maus I</i>

	parts 9-16, “More Than Words”		
9	<i>Maus I</i>	<i>From Hell</i> Major Assignment due. Class Discussion: Textual and Gestural Modes of Meaning, Identification	<i>Maus II</i>
10	<i>Maus II</i>	Class Discussion: Objectification	<i>Beautiful Darkness</i>
11	<i>Beautiful Darkness</i>	Class Discussion: Spatial Mode of Meaning, Intertextuality	<i>Days of Future Past</i>
12	<i>Days of Future Past</i>	<i>Beautiful Darkness</i> , Major Assignment Due Class Discussion: Intertextuality, cont., Paratextuality, cont.	Self-Directed, 3+ sources
13	Self-Directed, 3+ sources	Class Discussion: Symbolic Connotations <i>Days of Future Past</i> Assignment 2 due	<i>Comics Are Research</i>
14	<i>Comics Are Research</i>	Class Discussion: Symbolic Contexts, Suturing, Comics Across Genres <i>Days of Future Past</i> , Assignment 3 Due Major Assignment 2, in class	Self-directed, 2 articles on other uses of comics
15	2 articles on other uses of comics	Discussion, Experience w/ Major Assignment 2 Begin Final	None
16	None	Continue work on Final	None
17	None	Presentations of Final	None

Suggested Further Reading for Students and Instructors

Theory

- Chute, Hillary. *Why Comics?*
- Jacobs, Dale. “Marveling at *The Man Called Nova*: Comics as Sponsors of Multimodal Literacy.”
- Thomson, Riki. “Writing Through Comics”

Comics

- Abel, Jessica. *La Perdida*
- Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home*
- Ennis, Garth and Steve Dillon. *Preacher*.
- *John Constantine: Hellblazer*, issues 1-84.
- Walden, Tillie. *On a Sunbeam*

Suggested Additional Texts for Instructors

- Baetens, Jan. *The Graphic Novel: An Introduction*
- Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*
- Cohn, Jesse. “Mise-en-Page: A Vocabulary for Page Layouts.”
- Jacobs, Dale. ““Text, Object, Transaction: Reconciling Approaches to the Teaching of Comics.”
- Jewitt, Carey. “Multimodality and Literacy in School Classrooms.”
- Kristeva, Julia. “Word, Dialogue and Novel.”
- Pavis, Patrice. “The Discourse of (the) Mime.”
- Rowsell and Decoste “(Re)designing Writing in English Class: A Multimodal Approach to Teaching Writing
- Round, Julia. “Visual Perspective and Narrative Voice in Comics: Redefining Literary Terminology”
- Schapiro, Meyer. “Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs.”
- *With Great Power Come Great Pedagogy*, Edited by Susan E. Kirtley, Antero Garcia, and Peter E. Carlson

APPENDIX B: MAJOR ASSIGNMENT 1³

This assignment will occur in week 1. A note for instructors: this assignment requires some prep work on the part of the instructor. It is the instructor's responsibility to find three comics to use (a single daily of a newspaper strip such as *Calvin and Hobbes* or *Peanuts*, a Sunday edition from the same genre, and something deliberately surreal or difficult. Art Spiegelman's older work in *Raw* is ideal). Before providing one copy to each student however, the instructor would print out physical copies and cut them up, so students are provided with the individual panels in random order as opposed to a comic.

Largely this assignment is focusing on literalizing the concept of the gutter, or the intrapanel space in that McCloud argues "a kind of magic only comics can create" occurs (92), and that is intimately tied to how readers make meaning out of comics. Normally readers are provided with the sequence in which comics occur, but still have to fill in the gutters. Removing the sequence emphasizes the participatory nature of the medium, but also emphasizes the process of sequencing and design (for the larger comics) in the process of creating a text. The simple question of "what goes where?" is fundamental to multimodal writings, and through this medium they are provided an exemplar regarding the impact placement has.

Suggested texts (Reproductions of those available provided below)

Short comic strip (Daily): I would suggest something that has a noticeable scene change or sequence of movement, but examples are plentiful. Suggestions are examples from:

Calvin and Hobbes, by Bill Watterson

Pearls Before Swine, by Stephen Pastis

Bloom County, by Berkeley Breathed (the revival, *Bloom County 2016*, is available exclusively on Facebook and is easily accessible)

Peanuts, by Charles Schultz

For Better or For Worse, by Lynn Johnston (if possible, use strips from first run at Universal, pre-1997)

Longer comic strip (Sunday format):

“January 27, 2005: Ray gets sort of stoned” *Achewood.com* by Chris Onstad (15 minutes)

<http://achewood.com/index.php?date=01272005>

“July 4, 1993” *Calvin and Hobbes* by Bill Watterson. (10 minutes)

Short Individual Comic:

Prisoner on Hell Planet by Art Spiegelman

(reproduced [here](#), on pages 76-79, or in Chapter 5 of *Maus I*)

Sometimes I Have Feelings by Isabella Rotman (This is a special case, however, as formal panels aren't used here. Instead I would encourage an instructor to remove the text from the comic and provide students with the illustrated multiframe and written text separately, and then have them work to place it). <https://www.isabellarotman.com/sometimesihavefeelings>

“April 6 to April 22, 2010: Philippe's Journey Home” *Achewood.com* by Chris Onstad (explicit adult content) Link to April 6, 2010 strip: <http://achewood.com/index.php?date=04062010>

Major Assignment 1 Assignment Sheet

1 class period

You will be provided with the panels of three comics: one daily newspaper comic, one Sunday newspaper comic or a comparable alternative, and one short-form comic (usually about 6-10 pages). Your task for each will be the same: place them in sequential order. In order to do this, you will have to determine from the information given in each panel whether it comes before or after other panels from the same comic. When you've completed the first comic, find two other students and compare your results. Be prepared to answer the following questions:

What cues are you using to determine what follows what? Explain this especially if you got a different order than others.

How did you find the first panel?

Repeat this process for each other the longer comics, pairing with two different students each time.

As a class: What do you think lets you assume the relationship between the panels in each comic? Why, for lack of a better phrase, do they make sense together?

APPENDIX C: ASSIGNMENTS FOR PRIMARY TEXT 1, *ARKHAM ASYLUM* (WEEK 6)⁴

1 week of reading. 3 in-class assignments, 1 to be brought back Week 7.

In Class Assignment 1: In regard to the concepts of Discoursal Style (Standard, Aesthetic, Narrative, Formal), find examples in the comic where the management of the multiframe directly impacts your reading of the narrative. What impact does it have? What specific formal characteristics of the page layout inform on your interpretation? Find a specific page or sequence, and detail as best you can how you see the style contributing to overall meaning. (20 min. + 20 minutes discussion)

In Class Assignment 2: This comic is *not* easy to follow at time. Especially in regard to Iconic Solidarity, it can be difficult to track specific events and the positioning of characters. In some cases, it's simply hard to tell what's going on. What would you argue is the reason behind that? How would presentation in a more straightforward, directly representational style impact the text? And as it is, how do you determine how to read it? (Discussion based, 20 minutes)

In Class Assignment 3: Don't worry about your artistic ability (stick figures are fine, or even textual storyboards). But do your best to redraft a selection of the narrative in a different discoursal style. How would this change impact the meaning of that section, and perhaps the overall text? (30 minutes +presentation and discussion, 30 minutes)

Major Assignment: Comics tend to use word balloons as simple containers for linguistic data, but the balloons themselves can often function as part of the artwork and therefore be offering additional visual meaning. *Arkham Asylum* features a variety of balloon and text styles, each offering distinctive information to the reader about the speaker or context in which they appear. For this assignment, you will select two (2) characters to focus on and analyze how their word balloons function. That characters are most impacted by the representation of their thoughts/dialogue? What impact on these characters do their word balloons and lettering have? What effect does the representation of these characters' thoughts/dialogue have on their immediate context and the comic as a whole? Final analysis should be 3-5 pages. Start with Forceville et al.'s "Balloonics: The Visuals of Balloons in Comics" and inform your analysis with at least one other outside resource. Due next class, Week 7.

APPENDIX D: ASSIGNMENTS FOR PRIMARY TEXT 2, *FROM HELL* (WEEKS 7-8)⁵

2 weeks of reading, 2 weeks in class, 2 in-class assignments, one to be brought back Week 9

In Class Writing Assignment 1 (week 1):

Why are we reading this? Beyond it being an assigned reading. What purpose can a text like this serve? While clearly a social commentary, who is it commenting on, and in what manner? (30 minutes +Discussion)

In Class Writing Assignment 2 (week 2): We've talked about some "rules" of comics (Styles of Discourse, Iconic Solidarity, the Multiframe). What rules do you see this comic violating, and how? Most importantly, to what purpose? (45 minutes +Discussion)

Major Assignment: I suggest re-reading McCloud's section regarding icons and objectification. Then consider the rendering of the characters in the comic. Are they easily distinguishable? Is the narrative focus always clear? Who is most clearly given narrative attention and why? Provide a three (3) or more page analysis of how the comic's narrative foci impact your reading. Do your best to stick with *Understanding Comics* and the primary text as your sources.

3-5pgs, due next class. 2-3 sources only.

APPENDIX E: ASSIGNMENTS FOR PRIMARY TEXT 3, *MAUS* (WEEKS 9-10)⁶

2 Weeks Reading, 2 Weeks of Class, 4 in-class assignments, 1 to be brought back Week 11

Assignment 1: We've spoken at length about the concept of "amplification through simplification" in the context of artwork in comics. With such uncomplicated art, *Maus* is full of examples of this idea. Find an example in the text where the artwork enhances or exaggerates something about the narrative through its simplification (explained in three to five paragraphs) and be prepared to share it in your group and in the class at large. (30 min. +Discussion)

Assignment 2: Chapter 5 includes one of Spiegelman's earlier comics, *Prisoner on Hell Planet*, that is recreated in its original form for its inclusion here.

Why include this comic from a narrative standpoint? (10 minutes)

Why include this comic from a structural standpoint? What does it do to the ongoing visual metaphor of the rest of the comic? (10 minutes)

Hypothetically, do you think the impact of this comics inclusion would have been similar if it had been redrawn within the metaphor, i.e., with the characters as mice? (15 minutes) (+Discussion of answers)

Assignment 3: *Maus I* creates its visual metaphor and deviates from it almost not at all (except for the inclusion of *Prisoner on Hell Planet*). *Maus II*, while still straightforward in its artistic style, moves away from the consistency of *Maus I* in important ways; see especially the beginning of Chapter II ("Auschwitz: Time Flies"). How does the more complex visual presentation (inclusion of real photos, people with mouse masks instead of mice, etc.) impact you as a reader? Cite specific examples and provide detailed analysis of how it changes your reading in comparison to the consistency of *Maus I*. (35 minutes, +Discussion of answers).

Assignment 4: Dale Jacobs, a comics scholar, argues “that it is impossible to make full sense of the words on the page in isolation from the audio, visual, gestural, and spatial” (“More than Words” 22). Yet *Maus* in many ways is so text-heavy that the impact of the visual representations in the comic may seem less important than in something like *Arkham Asylum*. To explore this, take the rest of the class and pick any chapter of the text (part I or II), and try to write out as much as you can while still conveying the same information that you are receiving from the comic panels (30 minutes, plus presentations in small groups).

Major Assignment: The visual metaphor, and its consideration of race, is inescapable in this text. In a text that deals so directly with the structural and institutional racism that was the driving force of the Holocaust, how do you see the signature metaphor of this text (different races=different animals) functioning in regard to racism and anti-Semitism. Does the reduction of a people to specific animals that coincide with stereotypes problematic in its own way? Cite instances from the text where the undifferentiated depiction of race becomes prominent narratively and argue how that impacts your reading of the text itself. In order to best address the metaphor, find 3+ additional sources regarding the depictions in *Maus* and/or how they aligned with historical prejudices of the times.

3-5 pgs., 3+ sources, not including the primary text.

1 Day of Reading, 1 Day in class, 2 In-Class Assignments, 1 assignment to be brought back
Week 12

In Class Assignment 1: *Beautiful Darkness*, for the most part, employs what is being referred to as the “Standard” layout. Panels are generally in comfortable rows of three or four, generally being read left to right, top to bottom. Most of the deviations are still very easy to follow, such as on page 8, where there is a single-panel page. Because of that, the deviations from the standard grid format must be interrogated. In a staid format, why have these deviations, and why in the places they occur?

As a reader, what information do you gain from this manipulation of the multiframe? How does it impact the text:

Aesthetically?

Rhythmically?

Narratively?

Thematically?

Specifically in regard to spatial meanings, what does the usage of the full-page spread imply? (30 minutes)

Discussion: After you’re done, be prepared to share your answers and defend your interpretations in groups. (20-30 Minutes)

In Class Assignment 2: But despite noted exceptions, the format of this comic is much more regular and easier to follow when compared with the other primary texts we’ve so far discussed. What affordances and opportunities do you see this providing for the reader? Judging from the

text itself, what is the comic trying to achieve through its limited manipulation of the multiframe? (15 Minutes)

Discussion: same as previous.

Major Assignment:

Executive Summary:

What Fairy Tale Tropes does the comic use and to what ends?

How does the translation from fairy tale to comic impact the meaning or use of the tropes?

How is the trope of “The Woods” used in the comic?

Do “The Woods” perform the same function here as they do in fairy tales, or are they being used to convey different ideas?

5+ sources, 4+ formatted pages.

Description: *Beautiful Darkness* draws heavily on the fairy tale genre. Genres themselves come latent with ideas, ideals, specific metaphors and conventions, often referred to collectively as tropes. What fairy tale tropes does the comic use? Most importantly, a primary metaphor/trope in both Fairy Tales and the comic is that of the Forest or the Woods. How is that trope used and conveyed in the comic? Is it being used for the same thematic ends here, or is it being co-opted by the comic to convey different meanings?

This is a more complex paper than usual, so I would suggest you start with articles on fairy tales by Jack Zipes, or simply Google “Fairy Tale tropes” for a primer on what you’re looking for.

Analysis due next class, week 12.

APPENDIX G: ASSIGNMENTS FOR PRIMARY TEXT 5, UNCANNY X-MEN #141-142,
DAYS OF FUTURE PAST (WEEKS 12-14)⁸

1 day of reading, 1 in-class assignment, 2 in- and out-of-class assignments

In Class Assignment 1: Genre Play (Start Week 12)

Executive Summary

Students will define the elements that inform readers what genre of text they are reading, both diegetically and paratextually.

Students will perform the same task with a narrative text from a different medium

Description: *Days of Future Past* has numerous fantastic elements, even when compared to the more fantastic (in the genre sense) comics we've read to far (*Arkham Asylum, Beautiful Darkness, Achewood*). Best summarized, the text is a post-apocalyptic science fiction melodrama, or perhaps a speculative fiction where the source reality is that of the *X-Men* comics. Yet readers rarely question its believability, even though that key aspect of narrative verisimilitude, internal consistency, can't ever really be applied in superhero comics. Essentially, what makes this comic narratively plausible? Why do we buy into it as readers, besides life experience and class necessity?

Assignment 2: in and out of class (End Week 12, Start Week 13)

Executive Summary

Pick a symbol/icon from a text you're familiar with, that you know appears elsewhere
Analyze how it is used in that text, staying focused on diegetic information. Keep in mind specific connotations it picks up from and provides to the genre it's in.

What does it do

How is it used

What meaning does it hold in context (**In class**)

Research its other usages in other texts (3+ sources)

Contrast how it functions intertextually as opposed to in isolation

Examine how the additional meanings the symbol/icon brings into the original text impacts its meaning/narrative

Analysis should incorporate each of the five other sources

(out of class work, bring to class on week 13)

Description: Multimodality often is presented as various meanings being conveyed through various channels of meaning (visual, linguistic, gestural, etc.). But an often-overlooked aspect of this approach to meaning is intertextuality. The meaning something picks up when it's used across texts is a separate channel of meaning from those presented in a specific text. As an example, the impact of Logan's death in this comic is much greater if the mythos around the character is familiar to the reader (the death of a character whose primary trait is his ability to survive is especially disconcerting, something missed when a symbol or icons usage in outside texts is not considered).

For this assignment, you will be selecting a specific icon/symbol that you are familiar with across various texts. You will then analyze its usage in one text *in that specific context*, using as little outside information as possible (essentially performing a close reading of its usage). You will then analyze its usage across several texts (5+) and examine how that changes your understanding of its usage in the initial text you analyzed, and further how that changes your understanding of that initial text overall.

Assignment 3 (Symbol must be different than in Assignment 1) (End Week 13, Start Week 14)

Description: Symbols by their nature are intertextual/culturally grounded. However, there is still room for interpretation of a generally understood symbol based on representation, context, author/artist, etc. For this exercise, students will pair up, and each of you will create a novel representation of a symbol familiar to you (while the representation is encouraged to be multimodal, it doesn't need to be). The important qualification is that your partner has to have adequate contextual clues to attempt to interpret the symbol, as they will then analyze the representation and provide an interpretation of the symbol.

Part 1 (In-class, Week 13): As a starting point, each student should select a symbol/icon they want to work with, and create lists of:

- places they've seen it and how it's used in those other texts,
- meanings it has to them and others (if they know)
- Any connotations they are aware of (for example, the connotations of Neo-Nazism that have recently been attached to the "Okay" hand gesture).

Each student should then decide how they want to use said symbol and create a novel representation of it embedded in a context that informs on the usage of the symbol. The students will then exchange texts, and each will try to interpret the other's symbol based on what it is and contextual clues.

Part 2 (Week 14): Students should prepare and bring to class their interpretation of the other students' work. Students will share their interpretations with the other, with the creator noting where their partner deviated from their, the creator's, intended meaning. One of the primary goals for this assignment is to highlight two things: the ambiguous nature of symbols regardless

of their ubiquity, and the potential for alternate interpretations. Regardless of the effectiveness of the “suturing” provided by contextual clues, interpretation always plays a role in the interaction between creator, text, and reader, and regardless of the medium or context in that they are working, an important skill as a writer is to be able to be as certain as possible that a reader is getting what you intended out of a text.

APPENDIX H: MAJOR ASSIGNMENT 2 (WEEK 15)

1 class period (Week 15). Turned in at the end of class, graded and returned next class.

Different Uses for Comics

The stereotype of comics being a medium comprised of superheroes is on its way out, even in the United States. But resistance remains to comics being used across a broad spectrum of genres. Especially when it comes to the study of the medium, the focus is almost entirely on narrative comics. Yes, research takes place across a variety of narrative genres and forms, but that is still limiting for the medium. Just as writing can be used for other uses besides telling stories, so too can comics.

Working in the footsteps of the article “Comics as Research,” discussed in class, you will be encouraged first to find examples of comics that operate outside of narrative genres as exemplars (as an example, perhaps provide a sample of directions from IKEA). You will then create a comic that is not using a narrative style of writing. The genre and purpose of the text is entirely up to them with the guidelines that it must be a non-narrative mode but must still employ the mechanics of the comics medium. (1.5 hours)

Comics will be discussed in class using the criteria we’ve been applying throughout the semester but replacing the impact on the narrative of the discursal choices with impact on achieving the goal of the writing. For example, if a text is meant to convey instructional content, the major evaluation criteria will be how effectively it portrays instructions to its reader. If it is meant to make an academic argument, the criteria will revolve around how effectively it builds and supports an argument or relays research and results; and so on.

Grading Criteria

Effective		Has potential		Ineffective
Comic clearly shows an understanding of the usual goals of the genre	Comic shows an understanding of the usual goals of the genre, but expression could be more clear or concise.	Comic shows an understanding of the usual goals of the genre, but may struggle to express that understanding	Comic shows an understanding of the usual goals of the genre, but substantially struggle to express that understanding	Comic does not show an understanding of the usual goals of the genre
Comic effectively adapts the goals of the genre into the comic medium and takes substantial advantage of the unique aspects of comics, focused on creating discourse via the cohesive relationship between modes	Comic effectively adapts the goals of the genre into the comic medium, but may not take substantial advantage of unique aspects of comics	Comic performs the task of the new genre, but doesn't show substantial consideration of the impact of the new medium on the fulfillment of the genre's goals	Comic struggles to perform the tasks of the new genre in a substantial way, but some consideration of the new medium's usage therein is shown	Comic does not effectively perform the usual goals of the genre
Comic effectively exploits affordances of the medium to address the primary concerns of the genre	Comic uses the medium's unique traits to the further the goals of the new genre, but may not evince substantial consideration of how to use those to further the genre's goals	Comic uses the medium's unique traits to further the goals of the new genre, but may show a significant lack of consideration of the best deployment of those affordances.	Comic may struggle to use the medium's unique traits to meet the goals of the genre in any substantial way	Comic does not use the medium's unique traits to further the goals of the new genre in a meaningful way

After the criteria are explained, you will have the rest of the class period to construct their text.

APPENDIX I: FINAL PROJECT (WEEKS 16-17)⁹

1-3 person groups

2 In-Class Periods

Final will include presentation of either Part 1 or Part 2 during the final exam period.

The overwhelming majority of published comics are narrative and either 1: nonfiction memoir or 2: in one of the genres of the Fantastic (sci-fi, fantasy, horror, gothic, etc.) Experience with these texts can have particular usability in teaching students to write in certain genres such as memoir or doing creative work and emphasizing the general affordances of multimodal literacies. But these texts can also be deployed as performative blueprints in regard to how to convey information in a multimodal way. Coming off of Assignment 2, that emphasizes the medium's versatility, for the final students will be adapting two pre-existing texts.

Final Part 1

For the first half of the final, in order to highlight the capacity of comics for diverse, multimodal literacy practices, you will be adapting a comic of your choosing (subject to instructor approval) into another medium that you feel suits the text. The What, How, and Why is largely up to you. But the primary method by which the work will be evaluated is by the determination of how effectively the themes, relationships, arguments, and events within the comic are conveyed in this new medium.

Final Project Part 1 Rubric

Effective		Has Potential		Ineffective
New medium suits original text by adequately conveying the themes, relationships, events, and/arguments or original text	New medium suits original text and adequately conveys its meaning, but the reason for choosing the new medium may not be easily grasped by a reader.	Adaptation functions, but relationship between comic's meaning and new medium is not easily understood/well conveyed	Adaptation functions, but relationship between comic's meaning and new medium is unclear/confuses the original meaning of the text.	New medium confuses, distracts, or undermines themes, relationships, events, or arguments of original text.
Conveyance of meanings in new medium is clear, and takes advantage of the unique affordances of the new medium.	Meanings of the original comic are present, but may be somewhat unclear, or conveyance thereof is not taking advantage of affordances of new medium	Meanings of the original comic are present, but may be unclear, muddled, or not taking advantage of the new medium in any significant way.	Meaning of the original comic is not conveyed clearly or conveyance thereof does not take advantage of the new medium adequately.	Meaning of original comic is not conveyed at all, or conveyance thereof does not use new medium with any sort of effectiveness.
Themes, relationships, events, or arguments in new medium are reasonable adaptations of the original.	Themes, relationships, events, or arguments are clearly based on the original text. Adaptation is reasonable but may have left out some of the subtleties or nuances of the original texts	Themes, relationships, events, or arguments are clearly based on the original text, but adaptation may have confused them or are presented in a disjointed way.	Themes, relationships, events, or arguments are seemingly based on the original text, but relationship may be unclear or tenuous, without justification for the modifications.	Themes, relationships, events, or arguments in the adaptation do not reflect those in the original text.
Adaptation shows consideration of reasoning	Adaptation shows consideration of reasoning behind original design	Adaptation shows consideration of reasoning	Adaptation shows some consideration of reasoning behind	Adaptation shows little or no consideration of potential

<p>behind original design choices, and how the multiframe directly impacts the potential experience of the implied reader.</p>	<p>choices but may not demonstrate how the multiframe impacts the implied reader adequately.</p>	<p>behind original design choices, but not adequately adapt the relationship between design and meaning into the new medium.</p>	<p>original design choices but fails to adequately adapt the relationship between design and meaning to the new medium.</p>	<p>reasoning behind original design choices or their relationship to overall meaning. Adaptation does not reflect the experience of the implied reader adequately.</p>
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Final Part 2

For the second half of the Final, you will be doing the opposite, and will adapt a previously existing text into comic form. You will not be judged on the quality of the artwork: stick figures will suffice if that's what you are comfortable with. Visit www.xkcd.com for an example of how expressive that approach can be. Despite the power of an image has, as Berger notes, "it is not the image or symbol itself that is responsible but rather the ability of the image to call forth responses in people that are connected to their beliefs and values" (*Seeing is Believing*, 4). If an image can evoke a response, it is doing what it must. Instead, evaluation will be based on how well you can display overall competency with concepts of design, and an understanding of how the layout of your comic impacts meaning and the discourse being produced. Secondly, you will be evaluated on how well the comic conveys the meanings (themes, relationships, events, and arguments) of the original text. Again, the original text can be almost anything representational, but must be approved by the instructor.

Final Project Part 2 Rubric

Effective		Has Potential		Ineffective
Design of comic conveys meaning of original text clearly, especially through the employment of various modes in a cohesive way, as judged by similarity, proximity, and continuity.	Design of comic conveys meaning of original text, but some of the subtleties or nuances of the original structure may be lost	Design of comic conveys meaning of original text, but may not do so clearly or may partly confuse or undermine it in translation	Design of comic conveys meaning of original text, but does not do so very clearly or loses much of the depth in translation	Design of comic confuses or contradicts meaning of original work unnecessarily.
Comic layout shows consideration of original structure, and the changes necessary to adapt original meanings into a new medium.	Comic layout shows consideration of original structure and makes some of the necessary changes to best use the new medium to convey original meanings.	Comic layout shows consideration of original structure, but may not make adequate changes to adapt original fully into new medium	Comic layout shows consideration of original structure, but does not adequately adapt the structure into the new medium to be effective as a comic	Layout does not take into account the impact on meaning of the structure of the original text.
Conveyance of meanings in original text are adequately conveyed through comics' multimodal avenues, and displays cohesion between modes as evinced by "similarity, proximity, and continuity," or a conscious	Conveyance of meanings in original text are adequately conveyed, but may overly emphasize one mode in the comic at the expense of others	Meanings from the original text may be present, but either aren't conveyed through multimodal means or are done so in a confusing manner	Meaning from the original text may be present but is confused or partly lost in translation: doesn't exploit comics multimodal potential well.	Comic either doesn't convey original meaning or makes no usage of multiple modes.

rejection of those for discorsal ends.				
Adaptation deploys comics' design affordances to address unique structural, including narrative, choices in original text.	Adaptation deploys comics' design affordances to address choices in original text but may struggle with conveying the meaning its translating across mediums.	Comic is readable but may use little of the affordance of the multiframe to adapt unique meaning of original medium.	Comic is difficult to understand or lacks conveyance of the unique aspects of the original medium.	Adaptation does not employ any unique strength of comics/is not a comic