

COMICS AS A TOOL FOR INQUIRY
 (CONCERNING A DISSERTATION IN COMIC BOOK FORM)
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 AN IMAGE-TEXT DOCUMENTATION OF THE AUTHOR'S TALK PRESENTED AT SEQUENTIAL SMART MAY 19, 2012:
[HTTP://WWW.SEQUENTIALSMART.COM/](http://www.sequentialsmart.com/)

ABSTRACT: Comics' integration into classrooms and other educational forums is exciting and long overdue. Yet, this increasing recognition as a literacy gateway is only the tip of the iceberg. Comics are an essential medium in their own right, ripe for exploration across academia. Through his interdisciplinary doctoral dissertation created entirely in comic book form, the author expands the boundaries of what comics can achieve while radically reimagining what scholarship can look like. In both content and form, his dissertation serves to challenge the verbal's dominance as the mode for serious thought and the narrow notion of intelligence imposed by standardized assessment. Richly dense, multi-dimensional, and multimodal, comics are uniquely suited to speak to the complexity of our thinking, making them a fertile site for creative and critical practice. In his presentation, the author will draw on his dissertation and the comics course he developed for teachers at Columbia University's Teachers College.

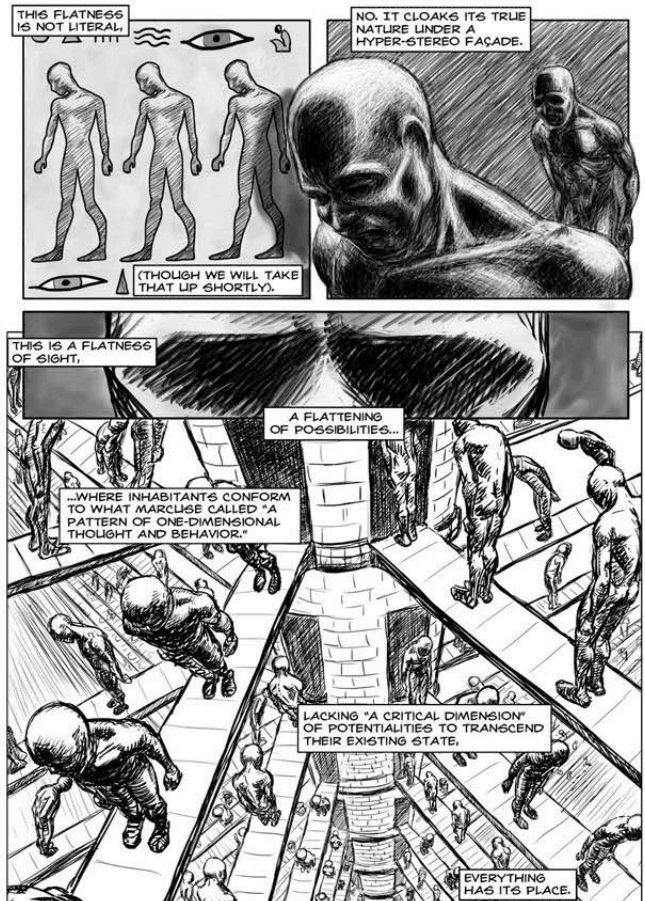
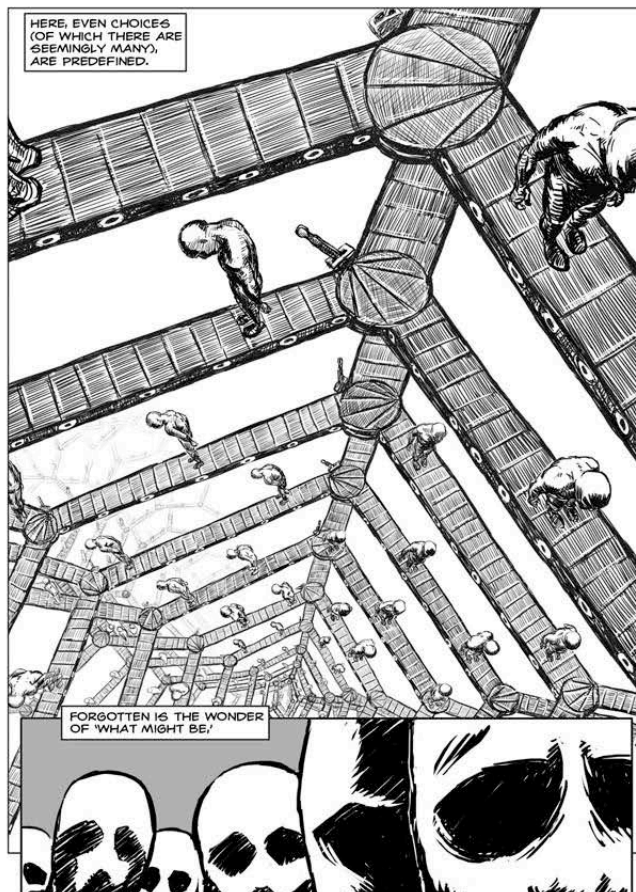
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COMICS' ONGOING INTEGRATION INTO CLASSROOMS TO AID IN LITERACY EFFORTS AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IS EXCITING AND LONG OVERDUE. YET IN THE HASTE TO ELEVATE COMICS AS A CATCH-ALL SOLUTION FOR IMPROVING CLASSROOM LEARNING, WE RUN THE RISK OF REDUCING COMICS TO A MERE GATEWAY SERVING TO INTRODUCE STUDENTS TO MORE "SERIOUS" EDUCATIONAL GOALS AND SUBJECTS. IN THE PROCESS, WE MISS OUT ON POSSIBILITIES ACROSS ACADEMIA THE MEDIUM HAS TO OFFER IN ITS OWN RIGHT. COMICS ARE A POWERFUL TOOL FOR THOUGHT. THROUGH A DISSERTATION CREATED ENTIRELY IN COMIC BOOK FORM, I SEEK TO EXPAND THE BOUNDARIES OF WHAT COMICS CAN ACHIEVE WHILE RADICALLY REIMAGINING WHAT SCHOLARSHIP CAN LOOK LIKE.

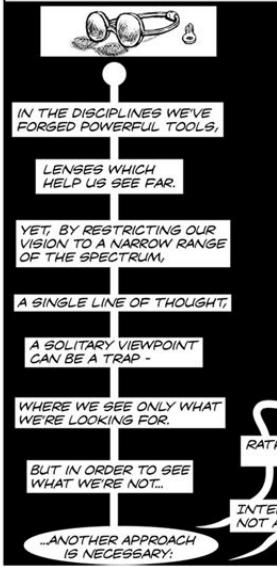
IN THE FOLLOWING DISCUSSION, WE WILL TAKE UP WHAT I'M UP TO IN MY DISSERTATION ALONGSIDE HOW I'M USING COMICS TO GO ABOUT IT. THIS WILL BE PRIMARILY FOCUSED ON THE MEDIUM WHICH WILL DOVETAIL BACK INTO THE DISSERTATION PREMISE - THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPT "UNFLATTENING".

FIRST, LET'S ADDRESS FLATNESS. BY THAT I MEAN A FLATNESS OF SIGHT, OF POSSIBILITIES. IT'S A STATE OF "THIS IS HOW IT IS" WHERE EVEN OUR CHOICES ARE PRE-DEFINED. AKIN TO WHAT HERBERT MARLISE (1991, 1964) DESCRIBED AS "A PATTERN OF ONE-DIMENSIONAL THOUGHT AND BEHAVIOR" WHERE INHABITANTS LACK A "CRITICAL DIMENSION" TO TRANSCEND THEIR EXISTING STATE.



WHILE THE VISUAL HAS BEEN SEQUESTERED TO THE WORLD OF SPECTACLE AND AESTHETICS, TEXT HAS BEEN PRIVILEGED AS THE PROPER MODE OF EXPLANATION, AS THE TOOL OF THOUGHT. THE CURRENT CULTURE OF TESTING AND ACADEMIC BIAS FOR THE VERBAL-LINGUISTIC FURTHER AMPLIFIES THIS DISPARITY.

"But isn't everything here green?" asked Dorothy. "No more than in any other city," replied Oz; "but when you wear green spectacles, why of course everything you see looks green to you." - The Wonderful Wizard of Oz.

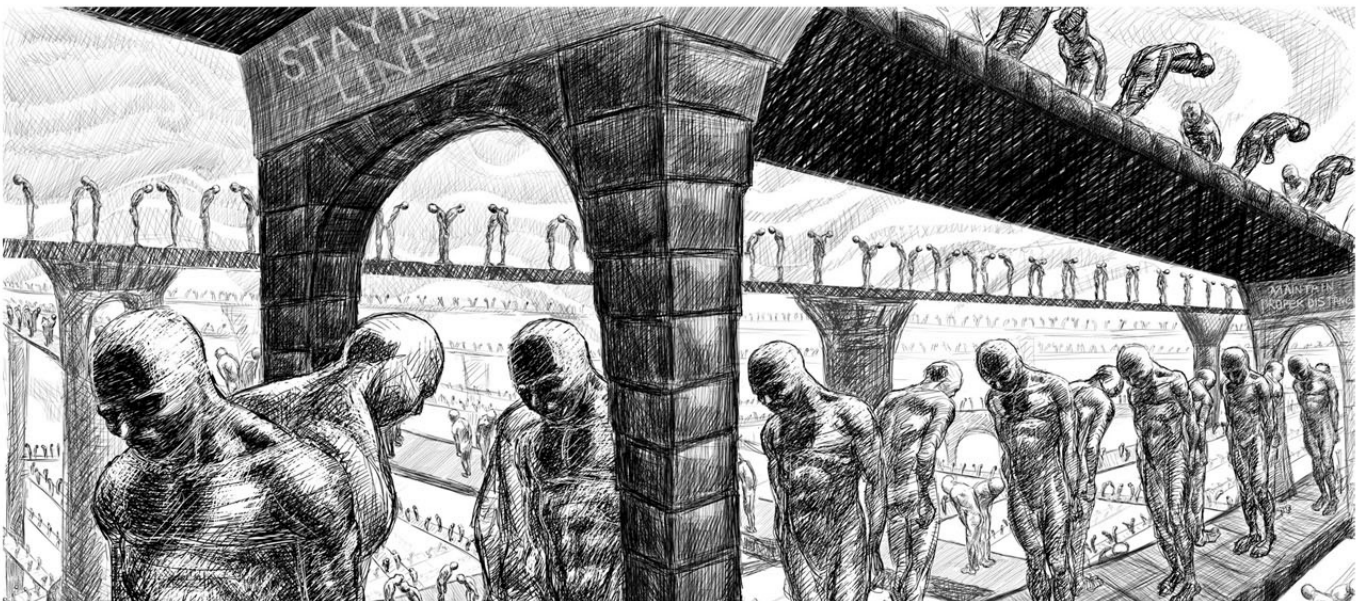
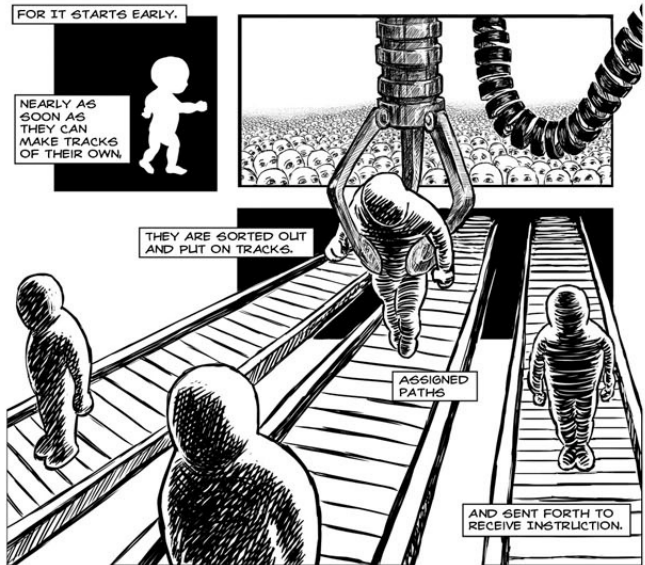
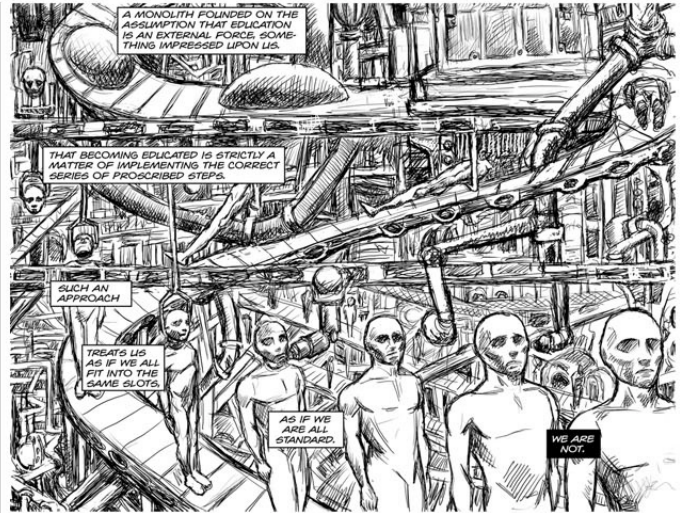


THIS EMPHASIS ON ONE-MODE OF THINKING SACRIFICES A NIMBLENESS OF MIND - A MULTIPLICITY OF APPROACHES TO HOW WE LEARN - FOR AN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM ORDERED AROUND A LIMITED NOTION OF INTELLIGENCE.

THE EFFECTS OF STANDARDIZED ASSESSMENT ARE PERVERSIVE AND START AT INCREASINGLY EARLIER AGES. IN 2010, THE NEW YORK TIMES REPORTED A SIGNIFICANT DECLINE IN THE SALE OF CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOKS. WHILE ACKNOWLEDGING THE ROLE THAT THE ECONOMIC DOWNTURN AND DIGITAL MEDIA PLAYED, THE ARTICLE ATTRIBUTED THE PRIMARY CAUSE TO THE CURRENT CULTURE IN EDUCATIONAL POLICY: "PARENTS HAVE BEGUN PRESSING THEIR KINDERGARTNERS AND FIRST GRADERS TO LEAVE THE PICTURE BOOK BEHIND AND MOVE ON TO MORE TEXT-HEAVY CHAPTER BOOKS. PUBLISHERS CITE PRESSURES FROM PARENTS WHO ARE MINDFUL OF INCREASINGLY RIGOROUS STANDARDIZED TESTING IN SCHOOLS" (BOSMAN, 2010).

AND WHEN THEY GROW UP?

FLATNESS IS A GREAT WEIGHT, SUFFOCATING AND OSSIFYING IN ITS WAKE. THE VERY CAPABLE, DYNAMIC CREATURE THAT ONCE OPENED ITS EYES WIDE, ANIMATED AND TEEMING WITH POSSIBILITIES, ENDS UP STUCK, ITS VISION NARROWED, POTENTIAL ENERGY CURTAILED - A TOP DORMANT, NEVER TO BE SPLIN.



BUT, WE'RE MORE THAN THAT.

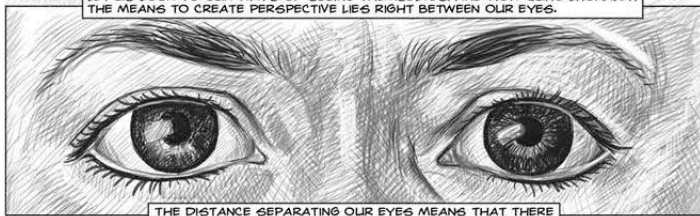
SWIMMING WITHIN THE WORDS, THE WORLD THAT DEFINES AND CONFINES US - IT'S HARD TO CONCEIVE HOW TO STEP OUTSIDE AND DISCOVER NEW POSSIBILITIES. I FIND THIS PASSAGE FROM ITALO CALVINO HELPFUL IN ARTICULATING WHERE I WANT TO GO FROM HERE: "WHenever HUMANITY SEEMS CONDEMNED TO HEAVENESS, I THINK I SHOULD FLY LIKE PERSEUS INTO A DIFFERENT SPACE. I DON'T MEAN ESCAPING INTO DREAMS OR INTO THE IRRATIONAL. I MEAN THAT I HAVE TO CHANGE MY APPROACH, LOOK AT THE WORLD FROM A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE, WITH A DIFFERENT LOGIC AND WITH FRESH METHODS OF COGNITION AND VERIFICATION..."



THE KEY IS IN GAINING PERSPECTIVE ...

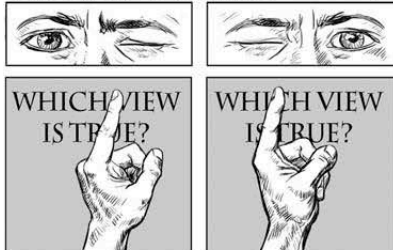
...AND THE MEANS TO CREATE PERSPECTIVE LIES RIGHT BETWEEN OUR EYES. WE ARE ALWAYS NEGOTIATING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE VIEWS OF TWO EYES - TWO VANTAGE POINTS CONVERGE TO PRODUCE STEREOSCOPIC VISION - TWO FLAT IMAGES BECOME THREE-DIMENSIONAL.

LET US LOOK TO OUR WAYS OF SEEING THEMSELVES, AND HOW QUITE LITERALLY, THE MEANS TO CREATE PERSPECTIVE LIES RIGHT BETWEEN OUR EYES.

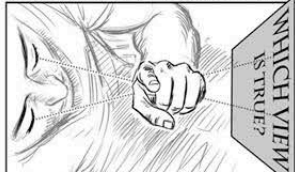


THE DISTANCE SEPARATING OUR EYES MEANS THAT THERE IS A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE VIEW EACH PRODUCES - THIS THERE IS NO SINGLE, "CORRECT" VIEW.

THIS BECOMES EVIDENT BY LOOKING ALTERNATELY THROUGH ONLY ONE EYE AT A TIME...

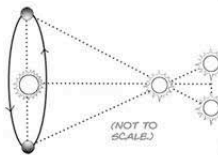


AND IT IS THIS DISPLACEMENT - PARALLAX - WHICH ENABLES US TO PERCEIVE DEPTH.

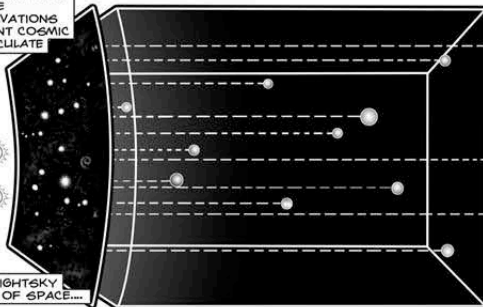


OUR STEREOSCOPIC VISION IS THE CREATION AND INTEGRATION OF TWO VIEWS. SEEING MUCH LIKE WALKING ON TWO FEET, IS A CONSTANT NEGOTIATION BETWEEN TWO DISTINCT SOURCES...

BY MAKING A TRIP HALFWAY AROUND THE SUN, WE ESSENTIALLY CREATE TWO 'EYES' A GREAT DISTANCE APART. THE DISPLACEMENT OF THE OBSERVATIONS FROM EACH AGAINST A DISTANT COSMIC BACKDROP, ALLOW US TO CALCULATE DISTANCES TO THE STARS.



(NOT TO SCALE)



THEREBY UNFLATTENING THE NIGHTSKY TO REVEAL THE VAST DEPTHS OF SPACE...

THIS I DEFINE UNFLATTENING AS "A SIMULTANEOUS ENGAGEMENT OF MULTIPLE VANTAGE POINTS FROM WHICH TO ENGENDER NEW WAYS OF SEEING."

JUST AS THE COMING TOGETHER OF TWO EYES PRODUCES STEREOSCOPIC VISION,



WITHIN THIS SPACE BETWEEN DISCIPLINES, THEIR INTERPLAY...

... AND OVERLAP.

...FACILITATE THE EMERGENCE OF NEW PERSPECTIVES.

AT ITS CORE, THIS IS AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH. BY WEAVING AND INTEGRATING MULTIPLE VIEWPOINTS AND DISCIPLINES WE ENABLE EXPANSIVE MEANS OF SEEING AND CREATE NEW POSSIBILITIES.



MY WORK IS GROUNDED LITERALLY IN SEEING.

I BUILD ON RUDOLPH ARNHEIM'S PROJECT TO RECONNECT THINKING AND SEEING, WHERE PERCEPTION IS NOT SOMETHING SEPARATE - MERE DECORATION - BUT INTEGRAL TO OUR MAKING OF MEANING. THE VERBAL'S ROLE AS THE SOLITARY PATH TO SERIOUS, RATIONAL THOUGHT IS IN URGENT NEED OF RECONSIDERATION. BY USING A MEDIUM THAT EMBODIES IN FORM WHAT IT ADDRESSES IN CONTENT, I CAN NOT ONLY TALK ABOUT NEW WAYS OF SEEING - I CAN WALK IT. COMICS ALLOW ME TO MAKE THE METAPHOR OF MULTIPLE WAYS OF SEEING LITERAL.

PRIMARY REASONS FOR USING COMICS IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS:



HENCE, MY FIRST WORD IS "BATMAN"

COMICS PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE AS A LITERACY TOOL - THIS WAS CERTAINLY MY EXPERIENCE AS A CHILD.

EXAMPLES OF PROJECTS USING COMICS TO TRANSCEND AND BRIDGE LITERACY BARRIERS INCLUDE WORLD COMICS, WHICH CALL COMICS A "LOW TECH COMMUNICATION MEDIUM" THAT ANYONE CAN CREATE & SHARE TO IMPACT THEIR COMMUNITY; THE COMIC BOOK PROJECT, WHICH HAS BEEN ADOPTED TO GREAT EFFECT IN SCHOOLS NATIONWIDE; AND MAKING CURRICULUM POP, AN ONLINE NETWORK WHERE EDUCATORS INTERESTING IN IMPLEMENTING COMICS INTO THEIR INDIVIDUAL CLASSROOMS CAN CONNECT AND SHARE RESOURCES.

OUTSIDE OF THIS LIVING WORK, NUMEROUS RESEARCH



SO WHY GAMES, AFTER ALL AREN'T THEY JUST FOR KIDS?

(AND BY THAT I MEAN, AREN'T COMICS JUST FOR KIDS TOO?)

ABSOLUTELY GAMES ARE FOR KIDS - THEY EVOKE PLAY, WONDER, CREATIVITY - ALL IMPORTANT FOR OUR CHILDREN!

BUT JUST AS IMPORTANT FOR ADULTS, YES.

TOO BUSY SCOURING ABOUT, ALWAYS LATE, ADULTS HAVE NO TIME FOR PLAY.

PERHAPS WE NEED THAT PULSE OF PLAY.

H. ARNHEIM

COMICS POSSESS GREAT EXPLANATORY POWERS COUPLED WITH BROAD ACCESSIBILITY. I CAN HAND A COMIC TO SOMEONE AS DEEP AS ANYTHING I MIGHT WRITE IN STRAIGHT TEXT - YET PEOPLE ARE WILLING READ THEM. IN THIS WAY, I FIND THEY BECOME SUBVERSIVE!

BEYOND THESE IMPORTANT ARGUMENTS FOR USING COMICS

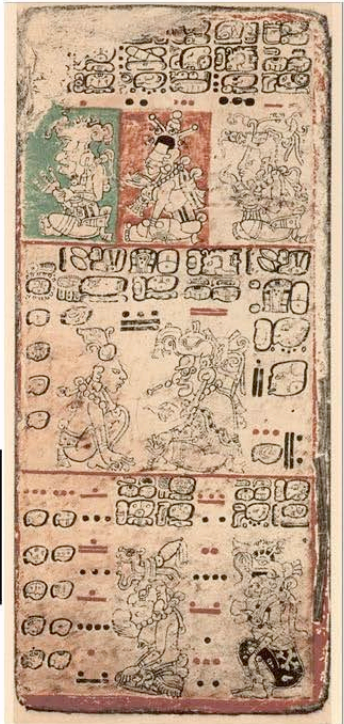
IN ORDER TO SHOW THAT COMICS ARE UP TO SUCH A TASK, LET'S EXPLORE WHAT COMICS ARE AND HOW THEY WORK...



LASCAUX



BAYEUX TAPESTRY



MAYAN CODEX

A BRIEF HISTORY - RATHER THAN APPROACHING COMICS AS A NEW MEDIUM, INSTEAD LET US CONSIDER THEM AS CONTINUING THE LONG LINEAGE OF VISUAL NARRATIVES STEMMING FROM STORIES TOLD ON CAVE WALLS TO GRAND TAPESTRIES. PLACING COMICS IN THIS CONTEXT LENDS THEM A CERTAIN LEGITIMACY. THIS TRADITION OF VISUAL LANGUAGE PRE-FIGURES WRITTEN TEXT, AND PERHAPS COMICS RETURN US TO A TIME BEFORE THE RIFT BETWEEN IMAGE AND TEXT GREW SO WIDE. AS A CREATOR, I SEE WORKING WITH WORDS AND PICTURES INTERCHANGEABLY AS RESTORING A WHOLENESS TO MY THINKING.



MCFADDEN'S ROW OF FLATS FEATURING THE YELLOW KID FROM 1896

ONE SIDENOTE, JUST AS IMAGE PRECEDED TEXT, GESTURE PREFIGURES VERBAL SPEECH. AS LYNDA BARRY (2010) PUT IT, "IN MOTION YOU SPEAK THE LANGUAGE THAT LANGUAGE IS BASED ON" (P. 35). TO BARRY'S POETIC POINT, IT HAS BEEN SURMISED (TOMASELLO, 2010) THAT COMMUNICATION VIA GESTURE IN FACT PREFIGURES ORALITY IN OUR SPECIES' EVOLUTION.

COMICS AS WE MORE FORMALLY RECOGNIZE THEM, KICKED OFF IN NEWSPAPERS IN THE 1890S - WITH RICHARD OUTCAULT'S YELLOW KID (PICTURED LEFT) FREQUENTLY NOTED AS THE FORERUNNER OF MODERN COMICS.

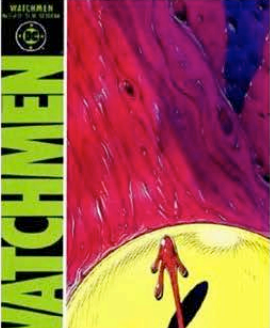
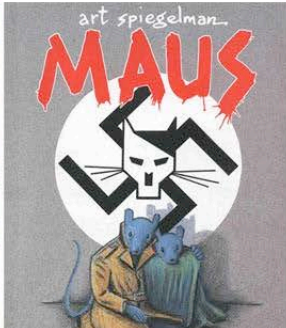
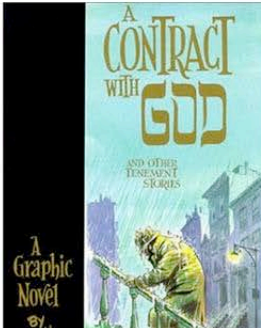
BUT IT WOULD BE THE 1938 DEBUT OF SUPERMAN WHERE COMICS TOOK OFF - SO TO SPEAK. BUT IN MANY WAYS THIS MERGING MEDIUM ENDED UP BEING HIJACKED BY A PARTICULAR GENRE (OR SET OF GENRES). AND WITH SOME EXCEPTIONS (MOST NOTABLY UNDERGROUND COMIX IN THE 1960S), COMICS WERE LIMITED IN THE SORTS OF STORIES THEY WERE DEEMED WORTHY TO TELL.

BUT THIS WOULD CHANGE...



ACTION COMICS #1

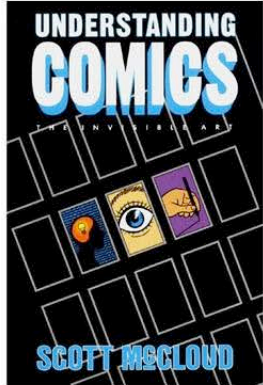
IN 1978, WILL EISNER, ONE OF COMICS' EARLY MASTERS RETURNED TO PRODUCE WHAT HE REFERRED TO AS A "GRAPHIC NOVEL," PRIMARILY AS A MARKETING TERM TO APPEAL TO ADULT AUDIENCES AND BE SOLD IN BOOKSTORES. IN 1986, A TRIFECTA OF COMICS WERE RELEASED TO MAJOR CRITICAL SUCCESS, ART SPIEGELMAN'S PULITZER PRIZE WINNING "MAUS," ALAN MOORE AND DAVE GIBBONS'S "WATCHMEN," THE SOLE COMIC ON TIME MAGAZINE'S 2005 LIST OF "ALL-TIME 100 GREATEST NOVELS"; AND FRANK MILLER'S "THE DARK KNIGHT RETURNS."



THESE WORKS PAVED THE WAY FOR MORE SERIOUS APPROACHES TO WHAT COULD BE ADDRESSED IN COMICS AND OPENED THE FLOODGATES FOR THE WORKS BEING PUBLISHED TODAY.

AND IT WOULD BE A COMIC ON COMICS THAT...

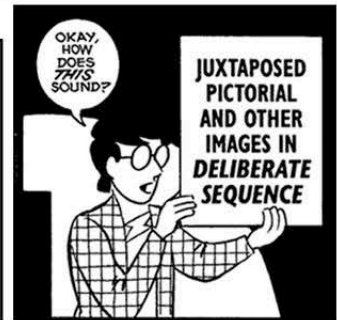
SCOTT MCCLLOUD'S GROUNDBREAKING 1993 "UNDERSTANDING COMICS," OPENED WIDE THE POSSIBILITIES FOR THE MEDIUM AND THEIR EDUCATIONAL INTEGRATION - MAKING POSSIBLE THE SORT OF WORK I'M DOING.



RATHER THAN NARROWING OURSELVES TO A SINGLE DEFINITION, IN THE SPIRIT OF UNFLATTENING I WANT TO EXPLORE SEVERAL DEFINING ASPECTS OF WHAT COMICS ARE AND HOW THEY DO WHAT THEY DO.

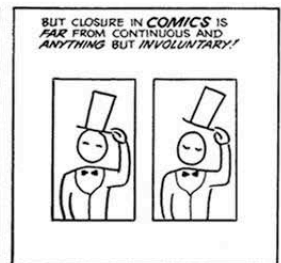
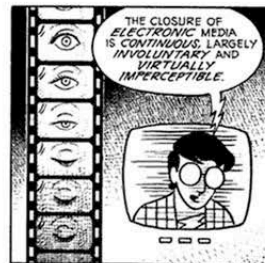
FIRST UP, IS MCCLLOUD'S BIG IDEA OF JUXTAPOSITIONS.

MCCLLOUD MADE AN INSPIRED DECISION TO LOCATE COMICS' ORIGINS NOT IN THEIR EMERGENCE NEAR THE START OF THE 20TH CENTURY BUT TO LEAP PAST THAT POINT AND INSTEAD CONNECT COMICS TO THE LINEAGE OF VISUAL NARRATIVES AS DISCUSSED PRIOR. MCCLLOUD (1993) OFFERED A DEFINITION OF COMICS THAT REFLECTED THEIR PLACE WITHIN THE BROADER SCOPE OF VISUAL LANGUAGE: "JUXTAPOSED PICTORIAL AND OTHER IMAGES IN DELIBERATE SEQUENCE, INTENDED TO CONVEY INFORMATION AND/OR TO PRODUCE AN AESTHETIC RESPONSE IN THE VIEWER" (P. 9).



McCloud by McCloud

THE NEGATIVE SPACE BETWEEN PANELS - OR GLITTERS - IS WHERE MCCLLOUD SUGGESTS COMICS DERIVE THEIR LIFEblood, FOR, "IN THE LIMBO OF THE GLITTER, HUMAN IMAGINATION TAKES TWO SEPARATE IMAGES AND TRANSFORMS THEM INTO A SINGLE IDEA" (P. 66). THE GRAPHIC READER CONSTRUCTS MEANING AND A COHESIVE NARRATIVE FROM THE STATIC, JUXTAPOSED PANELS THROUGH A GESTALT-LIKE ACT OF CLOSURE - WHAT MCCLLOUD DEFINES AS "OBSERVING THE PARTS BUT PERCEIVING THE WHOLE," (P. 63). JUXTAPOSITIONS ARE KEY - THE READER STITCHES TOGETHER THE SEPARATE ELEMENTS, CONNECTING THE DOTS TO MAKE MEANING.



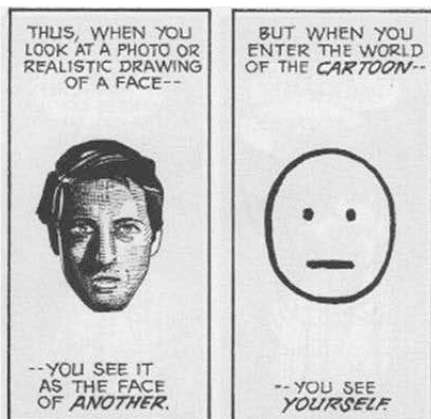
LEAPING ACROSS THE EMPTINESS BETWEEN ELEMENTS,

THE GRAPHIC READER ACTIVELY CREATES MEANING THROUGH A GESTALT OF CLOSURE - JOINING THE SEPARATE AND TRANSFORMING STATIC INTO KINETIC.

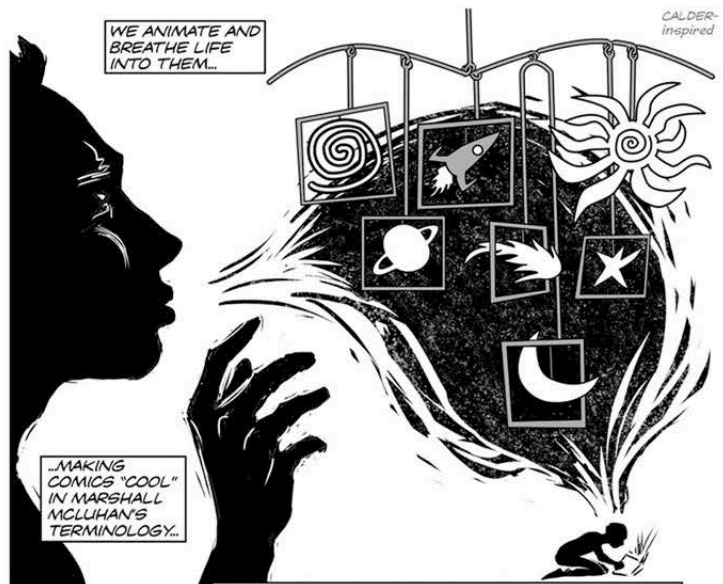


McCloud on Closure in comics

COMICS ARE THUS AN ACTIVE, PARTICIPATORY EXPERIENCE FOR THE READER. AKIN TO READER RESPONSE THEORY OR "COOL" IN MARSHALL MCLUHAN'S MEDIA THEORY TERMINOLOGY.



McCloud on cartoons



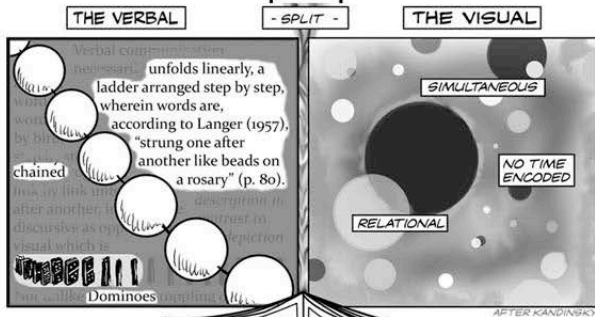
CALDER-inspired

THIS PARTICIPATORY NATURE OF COMICS IS FURTHER COMPOUNDED BY THE DISTILLED DRAWING STYLES EMPLOYED. MCCLLOUD HOLDS UP CARTOONING AS ALLOWING THE READER TO INHABIT THE CHARACTERS

THE **SECOND ASPECT**: COMICS POSSESS A DUAL NATURE - BOTH A **LANGUAGE & ART/SEQUENTIAL & SIMULTANEOUS**.

BALANCED BETWEEN ART AND LANGUAGE,

SO YES, WHILE COMICS ARE READ SEQUENTIALLY, PANEL BY PANEL, LIKE TEXT, AT THE SAME TIME THE COMICS PAGE IS ALSO VIEWED ALL-AT-ONCE, LIKE VISUAL ART. THIS "ALL-AT-ONCENESS" - OR SIMULTANEITY - SPEAKS TO OUR ABILITY TO SEE THE WHOLE AND THE PARTS AT THE SAME TIME (ANOTHER FORM OF CLOSURE). THUS COMICS POSSESS A DISTINCT DUAL NATURE - WHERE SEQUENTIAL IS ENCODED WITHIN THE SIMULTANEOUS.



THIERRY GROENSTEEN LIKENS THE ORGANIZATION OF SIMULTANEOUS IMAGES IN COMICS TO A SYSTEM OR A NETWORK (P. 146). A CONNECTED SPACE OF ASSOCIATIONS STRETCHES WEB-LIKE ACROSS THE PAGE BRAIDING THE FRAGMENTED ELEMENTS ON THE PAGE (PANELS, TEXT BOXES, ETC) INTO A COHESIVE WHOLE.

DUE TO THE CONNECTED, SIMULTANEOUS NATURE OF THE COMICS PAGE, TIME IN COMICS (QUITE UNLIKE FILM), TRANSPIRES IN SPACE.

Simultaneity in Moore and Gibbon's "Watchmen." The text - "There is no future. There is no past. Do you see?" - metatextually references the fact that we can SEE the panels before and after the one in which the character is "speaking" - the sequence is also occurring simultaneously.

COMICS' DUAL SEQUENTIAL-SIMULTANEOUS NATURE OFFERS SOME NEAT IMPLICATIONS...

SPECIFICALLY THIS PROVIDES THEM WITH AN EXPANSIVE CAPACITY FOR LAYERED, PARALLEL, AND INTERWOVEN NARRATIVES. COMICS CAN INTERLACE MULTIPLE LAYERS OF STORY WITHIN A SINGLE SPACE IN WAYS QUITE DISTINCT FROM WHAT TEXT OR FILM CAN ACHIEVE.

BECAUSE WE VISUALLY TAKE IN THE ENTIRE COMPOSITION ALL-AT-ONCE, SEPARATE ELEMENTS REMAIN DISTINCT WHILE STILL BEING SEEN AS PART OF THE GREATER, COHESIVE WHOLE.

THINK OF THIS A BIT LIKE FOOTNOTES: IN COMICS, INSTEAD OF HAVING TO LEAVE YOUR SPOT, FIND THE FOOTNOTE AND RETURN BACK TO YOUR PLACE, IT IS ALL THERE - PRESENT AND INTEGRATED VISUALLY.

SOME EXAMPLES WILL ILLUMINATE THIS FURTHER.



THE CHAIN-LIKE SEQUENTIAL READING OF TEXT CAN THIS BE CLEAVED AND OPENED UP TO NONLINEAR STORYTELLING APPROACHES.

IN THIS SINGLE PANEL FROM WATCHMEN BY MOORE & GIBBONS, THE PARCHMENT PROVIDES A VISUAL CLUE ALERTING THE READER THAT THE UPPER TEXT IS OCCURRING IN A SEPARATE SPACE. IN FACT THIS IS A COMIC BEING READ BY A CHARACTER WITHIN THE MAIN NARRATIVE. THE TEXT "BLACK SAILS AGAINST THE YELLOW INDIES SKY..." IS OVERLAID ON A CLOSEUP IMAGE OF A YELLOW AND BLACK FALLOUT SHELTER SIGN - METATEXTUALLY THE TWO REALITIES SPEAK TO ONE ANOTHER OF SIGNS OF WAR.

THE CHECKERBOARD COLORING OF THIS 9-PANEL GRID FROM WATCHMEN ILLUMINATES THE WAYS THE AUTHORS UTILIZE THE MEDIUM TO HELP KEEP READERS FIRMLY GROUNDED IN MULTIPLE NARRATIVES. HERE THE "X," BRIGHTLY-COLORED PANELS ARE TAKING PLACE IN CALIFORNIA, INTERCLUT WITH THE "O" PANELS IN NEW YORK CITY. EVEN WITHOUT BEING ABLE TO DISCERN THE DIALOGUE - THE VISUAL PATTERNS STAND OUT.

HILLARY CHUTE (2009) OBSERVES SPIEGELMAN'S INTEGRATION OF PAST AND PRESENT IN MALIS THROUGH THE SPATIAL SIMULTANEITY OF THE COMICS PAGE, "HE THIS REPRESENTS THE ACCRETED, SHIFTING 'LAYERS' OF HISTORICAL APPREHENSION NOT ONLY THROUGH LANGUAGE BUT ALSO THROUGH THE LITERAL, SPATIAL LAYERING OF COMICS, ENABLING THE PRESENCE OF THE PAST TO BECOME RADICALLY LEGIBLE ON THE PAGE" (P. 351).

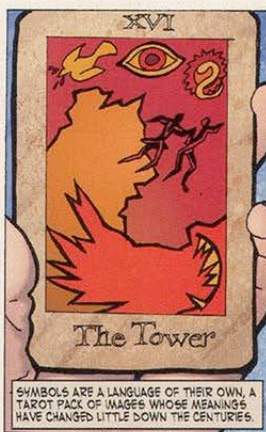


ASPECT THREE: VISUAL-VERBAL WEAVING.

NOT ONLY DO COMICS FUNCTION LIKE A HYBRID BETWEEN TEXT AND IMAGE, THIS SEQUENTIAL-SIMULTANEOUS ECOSYSTEM FACILITATES DIRECT VISUAL-VERBAL WEAVING. UNLIKE MAGAZINES OR NEWSPAPERS WHERE TEXT AND IMAGE MAY LIE ON THE SAME PAGE BUT REMAIN SEPARATE ENTITIES, IN COMICS, TEXT BECOMES A VISUALIZED ELEMENT WITHIN THE PAGE. (IN FACT, MODERN COMICS DERIVED FROM THE DISSOLUTION OF TEXT-IMAGE BOUNDARIES IN ILLUSTRATED NEWSPAPER SECTIONS (COUCH, 2001).) AS R.C. HARVEY (1979) STATES, COMICS DEPEND ON THIS BLENDING SUCH THAT "NEITHER WORDS NOR PICTURES ARE QUITE SATISFACTORY WITHOUT THE OTHER" (P. 641).

it's a push and pull - a dance of equals.
 biggest words suggest pictures

COMICS ALLOW THE VISUAL AND VERBAL TO RESONATE AND COHABITATE SUCH THAT THE FRUITS OF THEIR UNION MULTIPLY AND EXCEED WHAT EITHER CAN ACCOMPLISH APART. NOTED INFORMATION DESIGNER EDWARD TUFT (1990) EXPONDS UPON THE NECESSITY OF DIRECTLY INTEGRATING IMAGE AND TEXT IN ORDER TO ESCAPE WHAT HE SEES AS A FLATNESS OF INFORMATION DISCOURSE AND ORCHESTRATE A GREATER DIMENSIONAL WHOLE.



Alan Moore's works demonstrate a sophisticated level of visual-verbal resonance - image and text amplify one another. Left, from "This is information" with Melinda Gebbie and right, from "Watchmen" with Dave Gibbons.



Visual-verbal resonance from the author's work.

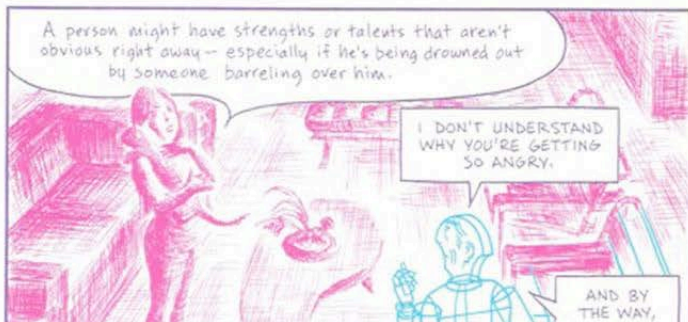
AND FINALLY, VISUAL-VERBAL INTERDEPENDENCY IS A SUBSET OF COMICS' INHERENT **MULTIMODALITY**.

THIS DYNAMIC RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WORDS AND PICTURES IN COMICS EXEMPLIFIES GUNTHER KRESS'S (2001) NOTION OF **MULTIMODALITY**, WHERE MEANING RESIDES IN MULTIPLE CHANNELS CONTRIBUTING ENSEMBLE TO THE WHOLE (P. 1). THINGS LIKE GESTURE, IMAGE, AND ACTION ARE NOT ILLUSTRATIVE OF THE "REAL" THING, BUT INTEGRAL TO THE CREATION OF THE ENTIRE MEANING. THEIR INTERACTION CREATES A KIND OF **RESONANCE**, WHERE EACH ENRICHES AND BRINGS GREATER COMPLEXITY OF MEANING TO THE OTHER, REINFORCING AND GROWING NOT IN ADDITIVE FASHION BUT RATHER **MULTIPLICATIVE**.

DAVID MAZZUCHELLI'S **ASTERIOS POLYP** (PICTURED) OFFERS A PARTICULARLY POWERFUL EXAMPLE WHICH POINTS TO THE MEDIUM'S POTENTIAL FOR MULTI-DIMENSIONAL COMMUNICATION.



"Asterios Polyp" by David Mazzucchelli



AT THE SURFACE LEVEL, THE TEXT TELLS A STORY (THE DIALOGUE), WHILE THE DRAWN ACTORS SHOW WHAT IS HAPPENING. FURTHER INFORMATION IS PRESENTED IN THE CHOICE OF FONTS, DISTINCT AND LINKED SPECIFICALLY TO EACH CHARACTER, AS IS THE SHAPE OF THEIR WORD BALLOONS - HERS ROUNDED, HIS HARD AND GEOMETRIC. BOTH THE STYLE IN WHICH THE CHARACTERS ARE RENDERED AND THE COLORS ASSIGNED TO THEM (WHICH ALSO BLEEDS INTO THEIR ENVIRONMENT), FURTHER CONTRIBUTE TO UNFOLDING DYNAMIC OF THEIR EXCHANGE. ALL OF THIS INFORMATION IS BEING RECEIVED VIA MANY CHANNELS SIMULTANEOUSLY TRANSFORMING SOMETHING

IN CONSIDERING THE SHAPE OF OUR THOUGHTS - I'M REMINDED OF MY GRANDMA'S SIDETRACK-FILLED STORIES AND HOW CLEAR MY THOUGHTS ARE WHILE OUT RUNNING, WHICH ALWAYS SEEM FLAT AND MISSING SOMETHING WHEN I TRY TO COMMIT THEM TO LINED PAPER.

IN CONVERSATION, I OFTEN CATCH MYSELF INTERJECTING ONE THOUGHT ON TOP OF ANOTHER, ALL OUT OF SEQUENCE.

MY PARTICULAR PENCHANT FOR PARENTHETICALS (NOT TO MENTION ALLITERATION (ANOTHER STORY ALTOGETHER)), BRINGS TO MIND MY GRANDMOTHER WHO DELIGHTED IN TELLING STORIES, WHICH INEVITABLY ENDED UP GOING DOWN MULTIPLE SIDETRACKS OF THOUGHT.

SHE'D BE TALKING ABOUT SO-AND-SO, AND THE MENTION OF THE STREET THIS PERSON LIVED ON

SENT HER OFF VISITING ITS INHABITANTS, LAYERS DEEP IN NESTED STORY.

(SHE ALSO LOVED DOING CROSSWORD PUZZLES, HMMMM...)

I THINK COMICS OFFER A MEANS BY WHICH THESE MEANDERING, INTERSECTING NARRATIVES COULD BE WELL-REPRESENTED.

AND THAT HAS ME WONDERING...

WHAT DO OUR STORIES LOOK LIKE BEFORE WE TELL THEM?

OR, HOW CAN WE BEST DESCRIBE,

The Shape of Our Thoughts

a meditation ON & IN COMICS

WITH THEIR CAPACITY FOR **JUXTAPOSITION**; THEIR **DUAL SEQUENTIAL AND SIMULTANEOUS** NATURE; **VISUAL-VERBAL WEAVING**, AND INHERENT **MULTIMODALITY**, COMICS HANDLE THE NESTED, TANGENTIAL, PARENTHETICAL, AND ALL-OVER NATURE OF OUR THINKING AND OFFER A WHOLENESS OF EXPRESSION THAT FAR EXCEEDS THEIR DECEPTIVELY SIMPLE APPEARANCE.

PERHAPS THIS NETWORK OF SPATIALLY CONNECTED IMAGES AND WORDS SHARES SOME RESEMBLANCE WITH WHAT GOES ON IN OUR HEADS...

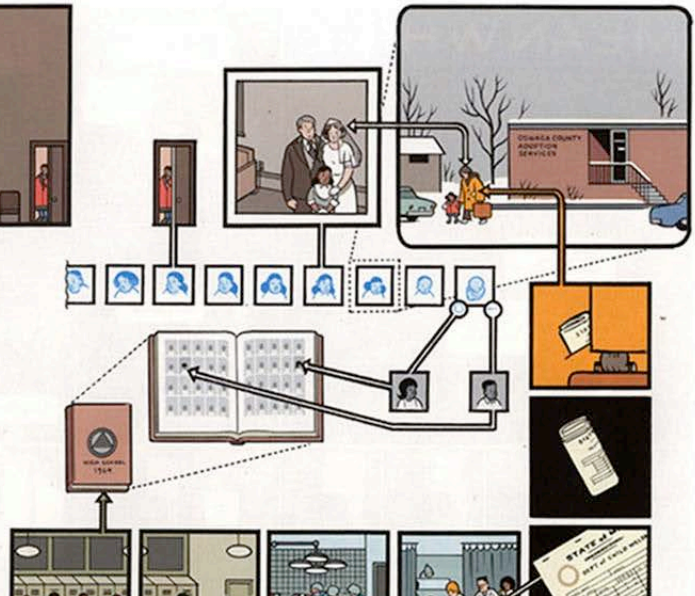
BENEATH COMICS' APPROACHABLE APPEARANCE LIES A DECEPTIVELY DENSE, MULTI-MODAL, MULTI-DIMENSIONAL STRUCTURE

A COMPOSITION OF NODES AND GAPS - DYNAMICALLY LINKED.

NOT UNLIKE WHAT GOES ON INSIDE OUR HEADS.

I WONDER HOW MY GRANDMOTHER'S STORIES MIGHT BE COMPOSED BY CHRIS WARE - WHOSE WORKS (BELOW) DEMONSTRATE THE GREAT POTENTIAL FOR CONVEYING THE COMPLEXITY AND TANGENTIAL NATURE OF OUR NARRATIVES.

SUSANNE K. LANGER (1957) CITES BERTRAND RUSSELL AS REGRETTING "WE CANNOT CONSTRICT A LANGUAGE WHICH WOULD EXPRESS ALL RELATIONS BY ANALOGOUS RELATIONS; THEN WE WOULD NOT BE TEMPTED TO MISCONSTRUE LANGUAGE" (P. 81). BUT PERHAPS WITH COMICS - WE CAN HAVE THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS. RICHLY DENSE AND MULTI-DIMENSIONAL, COMICS ARE UNIQUELY SUITED TO CAPTURE AND REPRESENT THE COMPLEXITY OF OUR THOUGHTS.



COMICS FACILITATE CREATIVE SEEING.

IN THEIR CAPACITY FOR INTERSECTING MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES, COMICS FACILITATE THE MAKING OF UNEXPECTED CONNECTIONS, EXEMPLIFYING MAX ERNST'S (GHISELIN, 1952) DEFINITION OF CREATIVITY: "THE PAIRING OF TWO REALITIES WHICH APPARENTLY CANNOT BE PAIRED ON A PLANE APPARENTLY NOT SUITED TO THEM" (P. 66). COMICS ARE THUS A FERTILE SITE FOR PLAY AND IMAGINATION, LADEN WITH POTENTIAL FOR CREATIVE POSSIBILITIES.



COMICS HOLD MULTIPLE THREADS TOGETHER - A LITERAL MEANS OF LATERAL THINKING - CREATIVITY.	
ROOT-BERNSTEIN (1985) FOUND THAT SCIENTISTS' TRAINING AS ARTISTS AIDS THEIR DISCOVERING	
SEE FROM OTHER SIDES	
UNEXPECTED CONNECTIONS	
TURN THINGS OVER	
PLAY	
ACCESS TO MULTIPLE MODES EXPANDS OUR THINKING	

I SEE THIS IN MY OWN CREATIVE PRACTICE, WHERE THE UNEXPECTED EMERGES OUT OF THE SPATIAL PLAY BETWEEN IMAGE AND TEXT.

BARBARA MARIA STAFFORD (1999) ARGUES THAT WE DERIVE NEW CONCEPTIONS THROUGH ANALOGIC PROCESSES, WHICH ARE INHERENTLY VISUAL, FOR "SEEING IS ABOUT BEING STRUCK THAT SOMETHING IS, OR CAN BE, CONNECTED TO SOMETHING ELSE" (P. 138). CONSTRUCTING METAPHORICAL RELATIONSHIPS IS THE HEART OF LEARNING AND FORGING NEW UNDERSTANDING - WE CREATE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE KNOWN AND UNKNOWN, JOINING THE DISSIMILAR TO GIVE BIRTH TO THE NEW. WE REFRAME OUR CONCEPTUAL SYSTEMS THROUGH THE ACTIVITY OF OUR PERCEPTUAL SYSTEM.

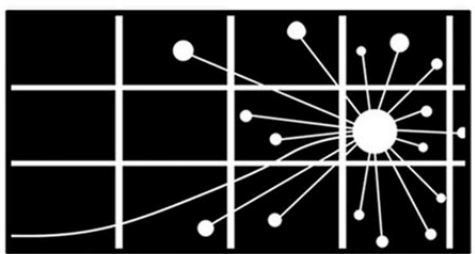
ROBERT ROOT-BERNSTEIN (1985) FOUND THAT SCIENTISTS' TRAINING AS ARTISTS HELPED IN THEIR PROCESS OF DISCOVERING. HAVING ACCESS TO ALTERNATIVE MEANS OF SEEING ALLOWED THOSE INDIVIDUALS TO LOOK AT PROBLEMS AND MAKE CONNECTIONS IN WAYS THEIR MORE NARROWLY EDUCATED PEERS LIMITED TO A SINGLE MODE OF THINKING COULD NOT. ARMED WITH MULTIPLE WAYS OF SEEING, BARRIERS TUMBLE AND OUR CREATIVE POSSIBILITIES FLOURISH. IN EXPLORING THROUGH THE VISUAL AND THE VERBAL, WE OPEN OURSELVES TO DISCOVERIES AND EXPAND OUR CAPACITY TO MAKE MEANING BEYOND WHAT WE COULD HAVE WHILE REMAINING SOLELY TIED TO A SINGLE MODE.

IN THEIR CAPACITY FOR INTERSECTING MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES, COMICS EXEMPLIFY MAX ERNST'S DEFINITION OF CREATIVITY (GHISELIN, 1952): "THE PAIRING OF TWO REALITIES WHICH APPARENTLY CANNOT BE PAIRED ON A PLANE APPARENTLY NOT SUITED TO THEM" (P. 66).

THROUGH SUCH ANALOGICAL PROCESSES, WHICH STAFFORD (1999) SUGGESTS ARE INHERENTLY VISUAL, WE JOIN THE DISSIMILAR TO GIVE BIRTH TO THE NEW.



AS SHE WRITES, "THE IMAGINATIVE LABOR OF MAKING A COHERENT MERMAID ... IS SYMBOLIC OF HOW KNOWLEDGE FORMATION ACTUALLY WORKS" (P. 29).



MORE THAN GATEWAY TO LITERACY, THE SPATIAL INTERPLAY OF VISUAL AND VERBAL

PEOPLE AREN'T ONE WAY - WE AREN'T FLAT.

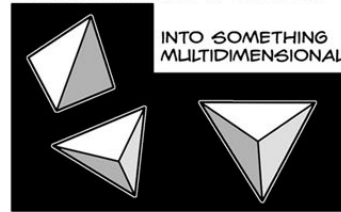


CONSIDER EDUCATING FOR THE ARTS, COMICS, AND VISUAL THINKING MORE BROADLY, AS NOT SIMPLY A MATTER OF CULTURE OR AESTHETICS, BUT ESSENTIAL AS A MEANS OF ENABLING MULTI-DIMENSIONAL SIGHT.

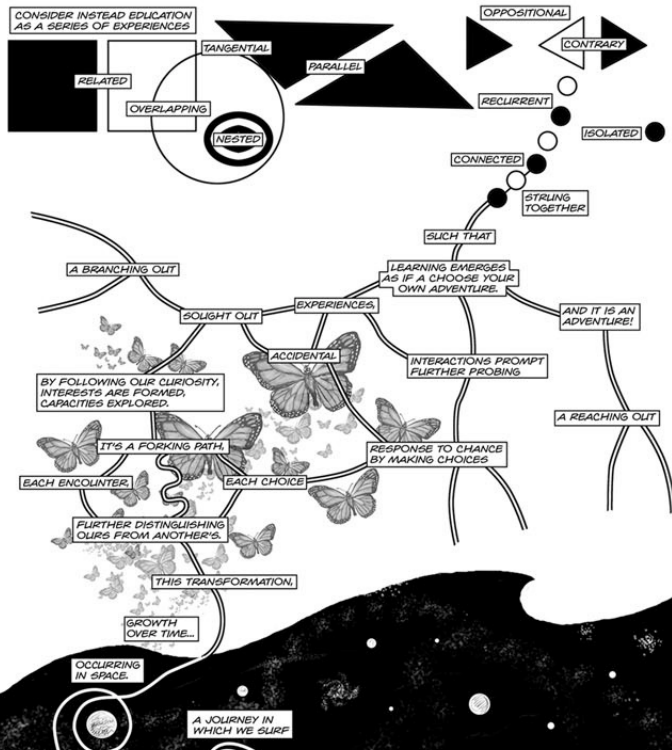
UNFLATTENING IS A DISPLACEMENT OF OUR EXISTING FRAMES OF REFERENCE - TO STEP BEYOND "THIS IS HOW IT IS" TO "WHAT MIGHT BE." IT'S RECOGNIZING THAT THERE ARE MULTIPLE SIDES AND WE CAN TURN THINGS OVER AND SEE FROM OTHER SIDES.



TRANSFORMING SOMETHING WE ONCE ONLY KNEW IN ONE WAY,



INTO SOMETHING MULTIDIMENSIONAL...



IMAGINE EDUCATION AS ACQUIRING THE MEANS TO FOLLOW OUR OWN CURIOSITY, TO DISCOVER OUR OWN PATHS AND WAYS OF MAKING MEANING. ULTIMATELY I INSERT THIS WORK INTO THE ONGOING EDUCATIONAL DEBATE AND OFFER ITS PHYSICAL PRESENCE AS MEANS OF BROADENING CONSIDERATION FOR THE WAYS UNDERSTANDING CAN BE CREATED.



...OPENING POSSIBILITIES AS WE GO FORTH AND FIND OUR OWN WAY.

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