WHERE DO THE PICTURES FIT IN THE OVERALL PICTURE? GRAPHIC NOVELS AS LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Numerous artists and scholars advocate a literary consideration of graphic novels. However, their arguments seldom present a clear analysis of what makes graphic novels literary, let alone a clear definition of literature. This thesis seeks to fill in these explanatory gaps by arguing for the literary consideration of graphic novels, understood as a genre within comics, on the basis of an institutional theory of literature. As this theory posits a shared practice of production and appreciation of artistic value, the value of a literary work is not exclusively tied to the linguistic medium. On the contrary, pictures can significantly contribute to the particular value that literature affords. Nevertheless, the particular use of pictures in graphic novels exemplifies artistic conventions that are conceptually distinct from those of literature. A literary analysis can therefore explain partially, but not exhaustively, the artistic value of graphic novels.

RÉSUMÉ

De nombreux artistes et acteurs du milieu académique défendent une considération littéraire du roman graphique. Cependant, leurs arguments offrent rarement une analyse précise de ce qui rend le roman graphique littéraire, encore moins une définition claire de la littérature. Le présent mémoire vise à combler ces lacunes en justifiant la considération littéraire du roman graphique, défini comme un genre de la bande dessinée, sur la base d'une théorie institutionnelle de la littérature. Comme cette dernière postule une pratique partagée entre artistes et audiences de production et d'appréciation d'une valeur artistique, la valeur de l'œuvre littéraire n'est pas exclusivement déterminée par son texte. Néanmoins, l'usage particulier des images dans un roman graphique démontre la présence de conventions artistiques qui sont conceptuellement distinctes de celles qui gouvernent la littérature. Une analyse littéraire du roman graphique peut donc expliquer partiellement, mais non pas totalement, sa valeur artistique.

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INTRODUCTION

In the early nineteen-sixties, the Belgian *Journal de Spirou* ran a recurring feature called "9^{e} Art" in which they revisited classics of the world of comics or *bandes dessinées* (BD). *Spirou* was then one of the biggest-selling weekly magazines in French devoted to BD, a direct competitor of *Tintin.* In the pages of "9^{e} Art," American comics of the early twentieth century such as Krazy Kat, Little Nemo, Alley Oop, Bringing up Father, and Little Orphan Annie were studied, critiqued, and situated in their historical contexts. Not only were the publishers of *Spirou* confident in the value of the artists they were distributing, they were also making a strong case for the artistic potential of all comics.

In the late nineteen-eighties, American and Canadian comics artists such as Seth, Daniel Clowes, Joe Matt, and Chris Ware were producing thick black and white autobiographical comics, in which their moping alter egos complain about not being taken seriously enough, not being appreciated enough, not making enough money, not meeting enough girls, and not being literary enough. It seemed as if nothing in their future would ever change, and that they saw nothing in the past suggesting that things had ever been different for comics in English.

In 2007, artists are moping much less. Scholars write articles on Chris Ware; Seth collaborates in academic conferences; and Daniel Clowes brought his best-selling graphic novel to the big screen (as for Joe Matt, sadly, he is still moping). Comics have overall a much better time now than they did twenty years ago. Moreover, one can now find scholarly articles, deluxe editions, and tributes to Krazy Kat, Little Nemo, Alley Oop, Bringing up Father, and Little Orphan Annie that are coming up from publishers, scholars, and critics who claim that comics are literature, "not for kids anymore," "serious," and worthy of appreciation. Thirty years after the Belgians applauded them, the English-speaking world is starting to appreciate its comics.

What is more striking about the recent praise for comics in English-speaking North America is the fact that they are considered a literary form, not as the "ninth" art. The "ninth" label implies of course that number one to six

refer to the fine arts according to Hegel, number seven refers to cinema, and number eight to performance, leaving number nine for comics. Choosing to consider comics exclusively as literature seems to belittle the originality of their medium, a rather tame position to adopt when it is devalued. The "ninth art" position, on the other hand, boldly asserts the individuality of craft and tradition of comics, and makes a strong case for them as a unique category of artistic endeavour that does not ride any other art's coattails to achieve proper recognition. Yet this apparent contradiction also raises a more important question: is there a particular relationship between comics and literature? Perhaps the "ninth art" argument is in fact overreaching.

If we reduce the problem to its simplest formulation, we are asking the question "are comics literature?" In the present thesis, I will however transform this simple yes-no question into many more complex ones. First, what definition of literature should we use before applying this concept to comics? Second, how can graphic novels, understood as a genre of comics, be literary if they are predominantly constituted of pictures? Third, are graphic novels entirely explained by the concept of literature, or should we consider other aspects beyond literariness in their study? In answer to the simplest question, this thesis argues that some comics are literary, but that being literary is not their only characteristic.

The first chapter delineates the manner in which the existence of graphic novels prompts renewed investigation in the nature of literature. *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* by Art Spiegelman anchors this argument in a concrete case. *Maus* has done more than any other work in the recent years to kindle the debate on putatively literary comics, labeled "graphic novels," and there is enough scholarship about it to warrant its consideration as a lighting rod for academic debate. The stronger claims that have been made by both artists and scholars to consider graphic novels as literature however suffer from explanatory gaps that need to be addressed by careful attention to the pre-existing scholarly debates about the nature of literature. The notion of literature as a special kind of language, dominant in the recent decades, is contrasted here with the notion of

literature as a way of dealing with works. This author takes the position developed by Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen that literature is a practice regulating the production and appreciation of literary works, and that nothing intrinsically defines a work as literary outside of the practice. Readers of literature appreciate literary works for the particular value they afford, and authors strive to produce it accordingly. Because existing arguments on the nature of literature chiefly considered works exclusively constituted of text, it is necessary to investigate further the relationship between pictures and literary works.

In the second chapter, Lamarque and Olsen's theory of literature is first fleshed out through a study of Paul Auster's *City of Glass*. In order to address both the role of pictures in literature, and the applicability of a theory of literature to graphic novels, the adaptation of Paul Auster's work in graphic novel format by Paul Karasik and David Mazzuchelli anchors the rest of the discussion. The present author argues that literary value, the touchstone of literature, is compatible with the particular value that pictures afford their viewers. Pictures afford the value of *seeing-in*, the ability for a suitable audience to recognize a depiction as an aspectual representation of a subject. Literature can accommodate pictures insofar as their value as conduits for seeing-in contributes to the overall literary value of the work. The graphic adaptation of *City of Glass*, exemplifies this point by reusing and reinventing graphically many themes and formal features of the original work. However, because pictures are not exclusively literary, it is necessary to investigate further the manner in which graphic novels diverge from the literary practice.

In the third and last chapter, a study of the medium of graphic novels attributes a distinct value to the sequences of pictures that constitute them. Although traditionally understood as a commingling of text and image, the medium of graphic novels (evidently that of comics as well) is in fact defined by a particular set of conventions governing the articulation of pictures in a sequence, and thus labeled "sequential art." On the basis of David Davies's ontology of art works, text and image are in fact *vehicular* media, whereas

comics constitute an *artistic* medium. An artistic medium is distinct from a vehicular one in that it is made of conventions governing the articulation of artistic statements in the vehicle itself. Vehicular media only carry the manipulations therein made meaningful by the artistic medium. Because no vehicular medium entails a particular artistic medium, it is possible for a commingling of text and image to function on the one hand as a traditional novel (Auster's *City of Glass*), and on the other hand as a graphic novel (its graphic adaptation). Literature must be understood as a pluralistic concept: many distinct artistic media, such as poetry, plays, the prototypical novel, or the graphic novel, can possess literary value. Literature is however not a spurious concept because works like *Maus* afford at the same time the value of seeing-in, literary value, and the value of sequential art. More traditional literary works afford for example both a literary and a moral value. Being a work of literature is thus an aspect of an artwork, and even though no work of literature might exist outside this plurality of aspects, the notion of literature still holds its explanatory power.

It is this author's hope that these three chapters will provide some substance against the sometimes incomplete or purely speculative arguments that beleaguer the debate over the place of comics in literary studies. In the final analysis, comics are literary, but they are not just literary. There are equally good reasons for studying them in a literature department as there can be for dedicating them more a more original perspective. The bookstore clerk trying to decide whether *Maus* should be shelved in the "Literature" section need not fear on her shoulder the insistent pressure of literary scholars. Perhaps the clients will find *Maus* more easily if she gives it its own shelf.

Notes on sources and formatting

A few sources are cited in their original French, but their English translation is also provided in the notes at the end of each chapter. I have used standard translations, and provided my own where necessary. For technical reasons, I have also converted many accented characters in Eastern European names to

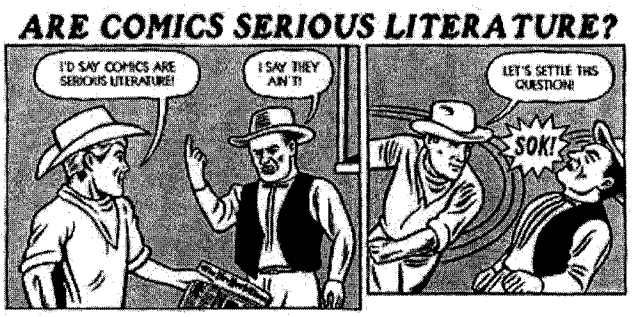
their non-accented form. Unless noted otherwise, the emphasis in quotations is from the original text.

Because the current Modern Language Association formatting guidelines do not yet cover extensively the case of comics, I have formatted all quoted passages as parenthetical references rather than numbered figures. Photographs and other illustrations are formatted as figures.

CHAPTER ONE

Maus and the problem of literature

It is the book to which we are all
indebted and from which none
of us can escape.
—T.S. Eliot



—Michael Kupperman, from
Tales Designed to Thrizzle #1

I wish it were as easy to determine whether comics are literature as believe Michael Kupperman's cowboys. Unfortunately, even a good one-two punch would do little to convince anyone who is no such cowboy that there is an answer to the question. But this problem is not a trivial one, and graphic novels require us to sharpen our thinking about literature. On the one hand, they seem to share with literature a certain value and certain formal features. On the other hand, the medium of graphic novels seems strikingly dissimilar to that of literature. The inescapable *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* by Art Spiegelman is often studied as a work of literature because of its resemblance in many respects to other works of literature. Yet to consider something as literature implies an understanding of what literature is at all. This is a question that has been often sidestepped or only partially addressed by the same people who argue for a literary consideration of works like *Maus*. Academic debates on the problem of defining literature will both illuminate, and benefit from, the understanding of graphic novels as a literary form.

Questioning literature

Critics and scholars interpret *Maus* along lines that could apply similarly to a novel or a short story. At the formal level, *Maus* can be read as containing "three separate genres usually found in fiction, which form distinct but interwoven narrative layers: the *kunstleroman*; the *bildungsroman*; and the epic" (Tabachnick 155). A *kunstleroman* relates the construction and development of a work of art. In the present case, it is the making of *Maus* itself, related through the research and interviews Art Spiegelman conducts with his father Vladek, a Holocaust survivor. The *bildungsroman* layer of *Maus* consists in the ways in which Spiegelman himself comes to terms with the difficult relationship he has with his father. By interviewing him, Spiegelman makes sense of the ups and downs that defined their relationship, and he emerges with a solidified sense of his place in the world, personally and historically. Finally, the sprawling tale of Vladek Spiegelman through exile, hiding from the Nazis, and life in the concentration camps constitutes an epic narrative of wartime travails. Following Tabachnick, these three narrative layers relate *Maus* to existing literary forms, and justify its appreciation as a literary work.

At the level of content, scholarship on *Maus*'s thematization of ethical issues abounds, and forms a body of research that does not tread the familiar waters of para-literature, or mass culture study, which used to be the standard approaches towards the study of comic strips and comic books. For these scholars, "Art Spiegelman's *Maus* succeeds brilliantly not just for the way it side-shadows the history of the Holocaust, but for the ways it sideshadows memory itself" (Young 699); "The second thing that militates against a shrinking of the event is the effectiveness of the author in transforming the genre, or alternatively, in hybridizing the genre, such that it is no longer 'comic book' but also allegory and parody, documentary and memoir" (Wagner-Pacifici 313); "By situating a nonfictional story in a highly mediated, unreal, 'comic' space, Spiegelman captures the hyperintensity of Auschwitz—at once more real than real and more impossible than impossible" (Rothberg 670); "Out of the

Holocaust, Spiegelman has created a modern Jewish epic, whose primary theme is the family and its survival under impossible conditions" (Tabachnick 162). Not only chronicling history, *Maus* also engages with the human condition from the angles of survival, sacrifice, and oppression, but also family discord, personal guilt, choices and their consequences, as well as the role of art before the humongous monstrosity of massacre. In a manner reminiscent to that of a prototypical novel, form and content in Spiegelman's work not only serve historiography, but also develop organized themes, and use original creative devices to do so—chief among them is the representation of humans as various species of animals, as we shall soon see.

Adequation to certain received standards of literariness follows *Maus* through the institutions of literary merit. Many awards that pertain to the world of traditional letters were bestowed upon it over the years in the United States and internationally. Among others, *Maus* received a 1987 nomination for the National Book Critics Circle award in biography (Witek 96), and a 1992 Special Award in Letters from the Pulitzer Prize Board, an honor it has occasionally awarded since the Prizes' inception (Prizes). In the eyes of the general public, such appreciations of merit consolidate the idea that graphic novels represent a new species of literary works. For the scholar, it is rather *Maus*'s treatment of themes through form and content, that provides the justification for its literary consideration.

Maus is nevertheless an ambiguous candidate for categorization as a work of literature, chiefly because it uses drawings, speech balloons, and other pictorial devices. Their presence disrupts received notions of literariness, and certain critics have found such commingling of text and image to be an artistic dead-end that can only belittle the importance of its subject matter:

> Language may indeed be tyrannically word-bound, but the visual arts are no less tyrannically space-bound, and yoking two tyrannies together . . . . is a poor strategy for overcoming them. . . . an artist who has to turn out a spatially cramped and crudely reproduced

> graphic accompaniment to every ten or twenty words of a story can hardly produce high-level work. (Halkin 56)

In other words, according to certain standards of literary appreciation, the artistic value of a work depends on the purity of its medium. The apparent competition of media in *Maus* thus restricts the latitude of the artist to create something significant and profound. And images are inherently inferior to text in this respect, according to the above critic.

Unfavorable associations between *Maus* and other works in the same medium are another pitfall against which it must stumble. "In a society which views comic books as *essentially* trivial," Joseph Witek argues, "*Maus* thus might appear as a grotesque degradation of the Holocaust, mocking the catastrophic sufferings of millions of human beings as the squirming of cartoon rodents" (Witek 96). Spiegelman's work addresses this obstacle in a self-reflexive manner by commenting subtly about its own representational strategies. In both volumes, Jewish characters are represented as humans with mouse features:

(Spiegelman *Maus I* 104)

The conceit of anthropomorphic animals gestures toward another critically derided household name in comics, the Walt Disney characters. However, *Maus* differs slightly from this standard by showing characters whose bodies are humans, except for their animal heads, which serve as tokens of their racial identity:

> The choice to turn people into animals, as the Hitler quote that opens the first volume ("The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not

> human") makes clear, can be read as straightforward metaphor for the dehumanization of victims . . . . Simultaneously, *Maus's* reliance on increasingly banal associations—especially in the second volume where French frogs, Swedish reindeer and Gypsy moths all make an appearance—works to expose the hollowness of "racial" theory of all kinds. (Staub 38)

These characters are not mice: they are Jews, represented *as* mice, a reflection and self-deprecating mockery of the racist gaze set upon them. This strategy is made even more explicit in the second volume of *Maus*. In the following scene, the character of the author is riddled with doubts about his own artistic endeavour, and consults a psychiatrist for counsel:

(Spiegelman *Maus II* 44)

Here the animal conceit is shown plainly as a device, an artist's trick, by showing the mouse figure as a mask, detached from the person underneath. Such exposition of the work's artistic seams suggests the difficulty of sustaining visually the representation of Jews as mice throughout the story without losing credibility from an association with more entertainment-oriented works. Even though anthropomorphic animals have literary precedents in Aesop's fables or Chaucer's tales, Spiegelman must nevertheless stress that the Jews-as-mice conceit of *Maus* is not a Disneyfication of his father's story.

Graphic novels are not the only works using images to push the boundaries of literature. The art world is rife with painted canvas bearing an ambiguous relationship to literary works, such as Glenn Ligon's "I am an invisible man":

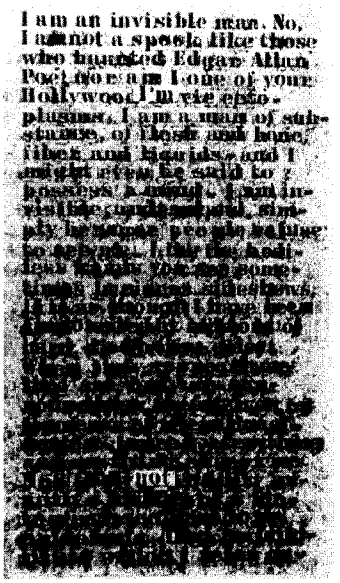


Fig. 1. "I am an invisible man"

by Glenn Ligon (Ligon)

Glenn Ligon's appropriation of Ralph Ellison's novel can function either as a depiction of printed words, or as a non-representational canvas similar to a painting by Jean-Paul Riopelle. Under either interpretation, Ligon's work uses the same text as the first paragraphs of Ellison's novel, and prompts the question: what makes it something else than an excerpt from *Invisible Man*? That it hangs in the Museum of Modern Art in New York instead of being sold in bookstores orients our interpretation, but why? We can see that the text on the canvas functions visually, for the gradual accumulation of letters creates darkness instead of language—except for the isolated "not" at the bottom of the canvas—but Ligon's work has a foot in both the worlds of literature and that of visual arts. It represents

> a further extension of the slave narrative tradition whereby written texts become the basis for "visual" texts. He uses both the classical *literary* convention of the bearer-of-the-word motif set forth in slave narratives and the contemporary *visual* word-as-image tradition to address matters of race and liberation. (Connor 39)

By duplicating a portion from a novel by one of the most important African American writers, Ligon establishes a thematic and formal link between

Ellison's work and early autobiographical accounts written by African Americans, inspired by their experience as slaves. Whereas *Invisible Man* is hailed as a work of profound originality, slave narratives of the post-Civil War era quickly fell out of favour with the reading public because of their formulaic aspect (Connor 35). "I am an invisible man" erases this opposition like it blurs the opposition between literature and painting.

Ligon displaces the originality of Ellison's novel into the formulaic world of slave narratives. He effectively creates an artistic type out of *Invisible Man*, in a manner reminiscent of Kendall Walton's "Guernicas." Conceived as a thought experiment, Walton's "Guernicas" are works of art created by an imaginary society that are identical in all respects to Picasso's "Guernica," except for the fact that they are looked at from the side, not frontally. Variations in their thickness is the source of aesthetic contemplation, not what they depict (Walton 347). For Walton, this is a way to suggest that appreciation of artworks depends on the proper understanding of their context and of the category to which they belong. Likewise, "I am an invisible man" upsets appreciative expectations by repositioning a text on the frontier between readable text and indecipherable darkness. But most importantly, it can be said that Ligon creates the genre of *Invisible Man* works. His canvas and Ellison's novel are now two tokens of this type, just like slave narratives were tokens of a type. Ligon thus questions the high value attributed to Ellison's original work by recasting his novel into the less valued context of formula inhabited by his literary predecessors. "I am an invisible man" thus functions like a metonymy, questioning received human dualities (white/black; original/formulaic; valuable/disposable) through an aesthetic one (text/image).

Questioning the nature of literary work is thus not a sterile academic exercise for Glenn Ligon, but a vital way of approaching the human problems of slavery, the hierarchy of social classes, colonization, and the value of literature relative to who writes it and who judges it. Without concepts that relate to artistic categories, neither the artist nor the scholar can articulate their statements. If graphic novels belong to the category of literary works, as the

authors that follow argue, then we also need a meaningful conception of literature to understand what they are about, and how they function.

Arguments for graphic novels as literature

Historically speaking, the term "graphic novel" was applied by authors to works of comics they intended to present as being literary. Will Eisner coined the term in the nineteen-seventies in an attempt to help his publisher sell to the public the idea of an extended, self-contained narrative using the medium of comics—of which he was a major figure (Weiner 17). Eisner wanted to make comics of a better quality, thematically and intellectually more challenging than the then current production. He considered comics as a potentially literary form because "the deployment of [their] unique elements takes on the characteristic of a language . . . . Comics can be called 'reading' in a wider sense than that term is commonly applied" (Eisner 7). For Eisner, literature is defined by the presence of a text, and depends on literacy to be appreciated. Because comics extend the process of reading, they can therefore be considered works of literature. In contrast, scholar Joseph Witek puts forth an argument for comics as a literary form on the basis of their artistic value:

> A critical analysis of the comic-book form is especially necessary now, when a growing number of contemporary American comic books are being written *as* literature aimed at a general readership of adults and concerned, not with the traditionally escapist themes of comics, but with issues such as the clash of cultures in American history, the burdens of guilt and suffering passed on within families, and the trials and small triumphs of the daily workaday world. (Witek 3)

For Witek, there is a principled difference between comics written as literature (i.e. graphic novels) and mere comics. The distinction hinges on whether the work addresses or not issues relevant to an adult readership, construed as exemplary of human condition's inherent conflicts. It is important to note that

Witek's statements implicitly reject the possibility that children be an appropriate audience for such topics. Thus, content and audience's maturity, not medium, discriminates between literature and non-literature in the case of comics according to Witek.

The popularity of the "adult comics are literary" argument ebbs and flows over the nineteen-eighties and nineteen-nineties, but the consideration of comics as literature becomes a much more crucial issue when a critic such as Dave Eggers (founder of the graphics-heavy literary magazine *McSweeney's*) argues that graphic novels will even supersede literature itself:

> With Katchor, Barry and Clowes—and half a dozen others working the territory—Ware's work insists that we look at this genre, where art and words are conceived together and inextricably interwoven, not as literary fiction's half-wit cousin but as, more accurately, the mutant sister who can often do everything fiction can, and, just as often, more." (Eggers BR10)

Eggers's "mutant sister" position is the polar opposite of the "two tyrannies" position that Halkin maintains towards *Maus*: by virtue of combining text and image, graphic novels double their potential for greatness, leaving literature (construed as the set of purely textual artworks) in the dust. Such intimations of graphic novels' role as the future of literature sprouted liberally around the time Chris Ware won the 2001 Guardian First Book Award for his *Jimmy Corrigan*. Eggers's interpretation echoes for instance scholar Jeff Williams's prognosis: "The Bakhtinian notion of 'novel' is not static. . . . *Maus* demonstrates a potential within the comics medium to become the next evolutionary stage in the life of the novel and offers some very interesting portents for the next century" (Williams 188). In a manner reminiscent of Eisner, these arguments associate graphic novels with literature on the basis of their medium, but they do not consider images as peers to text. Images are an addition, rather than an extension, of text, so that literary works can only be a subset of graphic novels. Art Spiegelman thus cogently summed up this naïve mathematics: "Since 'graphics' were respectable and 'novels' were respectable (though that hadn't

always been the case), surely 'graphic novels' must be doubly respectable!" (Spiegelman "Picturing" i). By joining text and image, one would then immediately make something bigger and better than literature, thus defeating the possibility raised by both Eisner and Witek that pictures could be a part of, rather than be an addition to, literature.

More recent scholarly work however deflates such "post-literary" attitudes. Charles Hatfield, in his monograph *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*, argues for a more conventional literary consideration of graphic novels, understood as products of anti-establishment comics milieus, on the basis of being an art of writing and reading, in a manner reminiscent of Eisner (Hatfield 33). Hatfield is careful not to repeat his predecessors' sweeping claims, and develops a milder argument:

> the graphic novel has been repeatedly invoked as a radically 'new' form, even the harbinger of a new visual literacy. Such claims, of course, mislead: graphic novels are neither 'post-literary' nor without precedent. They are comics, thus examples of a venerable tradition. Yet the graphic novel is of recent coinage, and its commercial upsurge even more recent. (Hatfield xi)

Hatfield proposes that the active involvement of the audience in absorbing the complex interplay of text and image defines an experience of reading rather than one of passive absorption. Echoing Eisner's intuitions, he argues, "These are images that *stay*, unlike the successive moments in a film or video as it is being viewed. In that sense, the images in comics read more like printed words or characters" (Hatfield 33). Such a pro-literature argument about the graphic novel answers directly to the post-war belief held by psychologists and educators concerned with comics such as Fredric Wertham that reading them diminishes literacy abilities: "Comic-book readers are handicapped in vocabulary building because in comics all the emphasis is on the visual image and not on the proper word" (Wertham 125). Hatfield argues instead that they foster a different form of literacy, which is not in competition with the textual one (Hatfield 67). Eisner and Hatfield both predicate literature upon literacy, thus identifying literature

with a particular medium, as do the supporters of the "post-literacy" argument, but without making a distinction of kind between text and image. Their belief in a unified field of symbols grounds the similarities between novels and comics, all of which are thus created in the same medium.

This brief survey of positions divides the consideration of some comics labeled "graphic novels" as literature between issues of value and issues of medium. Proponents of both perspectives make valid points, but neither avoids making noticeable mistakes in the manner they define literature, and often subordinate assertions of literariness to the needs of defending the works they study. To show that works such as *Maus* or *Jimmy Corrigan* are not "fast food" or any variant of adolescent trash, these authors argue for the maturity of content and quality of craft that set these works apart from other comics. But this argument does not substantiate the idea that *Maus* or *Jimmy Corrigan* are literature. It only supports the more limited claim that it is possible to create works worthy of appreciation and study in a medium that was hitherto considered to exclusively foster shallow creations. To argue like Hatfield and Eisner that the internal organization of symbols in a graphic novel categorizes it under the heading of literature, one must carry the burden of proving an actual continuity between the textual and pictorial symbols. In the second chapter, I will dispute more extensively this claim. Finally, proposals that literature is mutating to become the sum of text and image simply avoid defining what literature is at the present moment, except for being made of language, and thus defer our understanding of what is changing about it.

If graphic novels prompt the question of literature's definition, such a question is not without its own history and internal debates. An argument for graphic novels as a literary form must not answer only to comics scholarship, by showing what aspects of comics can warrant their literary consideration as do Witek or Hatfield. It must also have a footing in theories of literature if it is to overcome the shortcomings in their argument. Without awareness of scholarly debates on definitions of literature, one is condemned to fall back on intuitive and inadequate concepts.

Theories of literature: justifications and survey

Before examining specific conceptions of literature, it is important to make a distinction between "literary theory" and what is understood here by "theory of literature." "Literary theory" means what René Wellek calls the *organon* of methods with which we characterize the individuality of a work, an author, or a national literature (Wellek and Warren 19). In contrast, a theory of literature is not the meaning of the word "literature," which varies across time and space, but rather the intellectual tool with which we "elucidate and construct a notion referring to some reasonably distinct collection of items in the world" (Livingston 538). In this sense, literature consists of the class of all literary works, and a theory of literature explain what makes them distinguishable from other human productions in a coherent manner.

Relating together the sprawling and variegated set of works that constitute literature is of course not a walk in the park, and might appear as an intractable endeavour. Terry Eagleton nicely sums up in a nominalist way the conclusion many reach before the staggering number of counter-examples confronting the coherence of "literature":

> It is most useful to see "literature" as a name which people give from time to time for different reasons to certain kinds of writing within a whole field of what Michel Foucault has called "discursive practices," and if anything is to be an object of study it is this whole field of practices rather than just those sometimes rather obscurely labeled "literature." (Eagleton 178)

Literature would thus be but an arbitrary, contingent label worth shaving off with Ockham's razor. It is however the position of the present thesis that literature is not a mere signpost held at various time by various individual for whatever purpose they see fit. If there is such a thing as literature, it is for the present argument a regularized human activity possessing its own internal logic, not a phlogiston that dissolves without a trace in the aforementioned "field of practices" upon closer scrutiny. In the following pages, I will try to show how

such doubts on the existence of literature find their source in the unfruitful search for a linguistic definition of literature that occupied a large part of literary theory in the twentieth century.

Like Eagleton, however, I agree that we must look at human activities rather than texts if we want to make sense of literature. Taking a distance away from textuality will in fact help us understand better the role of pictures, and the specificities of the graphic novel medium later on in the next chapters. However, I will try to show how in fact these human activities are the unifying force between literary works, rather than the bag of winds that disperse them to the four corners of academia. A theory of literature concerns itself with the mode of existence of literary works. If this mode has more to do in a non-spurious and coherent way with our attitudes, beliefs and values than with the grammatical properties of a text, then we must simply update our notion of literature accordingly. A useful theory will not only find some coherence to the body of literary works, but also help to navigate the more complex ways in which works such as "I am an invisible man" or *Maus* relate to literature, thereby contributing to further refine theory itself.

Formalist and structuralist theories are the germs of most twentieth century theorization about literature, and their influence still persists further up the tree from which grows current graphic novel scholarship. Exemplified by the *Theory of Prose* of Viktor Shklovski, the formalist position defines a work of literature as a species of language that is a work of art because it has been "created by special devices whose purposes is to see to it that these artifacts are interpreted artistically as much as possible" (Shklovski 2). Literature, typically poetry, is a special mode of language whose purpose is to create an affective experience in the reader. Building on this argument of linguistic specificity, the Prague School structuralist Jan Mukarovsky goes beyond the affective dimension of literary language, and erects the latter into a self-contained system: "*Poetic language* is a functional linguistic form differing from the rest by virtue of the fact that it uses linguistic means to create an esthetic self-orientation and not to communicate" (Mukarovsky 79). While this argument echoes older

autonomous conceptions of art such as Sir Philip Sidney's "the poet nothing affirms" (Sidney 493) or Oscar Wilde's "All art is quite useless" (Wilde 1761), literature's specificity according to the structuralists justifies instead a scientific approach that is also applicable to any other foreign language: "If the poet Ransom is right (and he is right) that 'poetry is a kind of language,' the linguist whose field is any kind of language may and must include poetry in his study" (Jakobson 93). The tools of linguistic analysis that are used to investigate natural languages can thus be refurbished for the study of literature, and the horizon of a grammar of literary work seems conceivable.

Despite their prefix, post-structuralist theories navigate in the waters of their forebears by defining literature as a self-referential, exotic linguistic item. However, self-containment breaks the communicative contract between writer and reader, and induces despair in the critic. Where the formalists see a vivifying process of defamiliarization, and the structuralists an exotic species of language awaiting its Linnæus, the post-structuralists only see a perpetual and infinite semantic instability created out of the encounter between text and reader. For Maurice Blanchot, for example, "L'écrivain appartient à un langage que personne ne parle, qui ne s'adresse à personne, qui n'a pas de centre, qui ne révèle rien. . . . Là où il est, seul parle l'être — ce qui signifie que la parole ne parle plus, mais est, mais se voue à la pure passivité de l'être" (Blanchot 17).[1] The post-structuralist perspective on literature differs from the structuralist one mainly from its nihilistic overtones with respect to the impact of communicative disruption, but preserves the notion of literature's linguistic specificity.

Finally, lest the linguistic specificity argument seem a purely Continental fashion, New Criticism also bought into a similar perspective. In the words of Cleanth Brooks: "the language of poetry is the language of paradox. . . . paradox is the language appropriate and inevitable to poetry" (Brooks 3). For most of the twentieth century, the dominant theories of literature derive thus in one form or another from the notion that there is a language of literature, often referred to as the *linguistic turn* in literary studies.

The linguistic specificity arguments must eventually confront the question of literature as an essential negation of communicative clarity, a disengagement from the world, one that splits thinkers on the question of literature's ethical relevance. For a moral philosopher such as Jean-Paul Sartre, this proves once and for all that writers fulfill Oscar Wilde's "uselessness" maxim:

> Les poètes sont des hommes qui refusent d'*utiliser* le langage. Or, comme c'est dans et par le langage conçu comme une certaine espèce d'instrument que s'opère la recherche de la vérité, il ne faut pas s'imaginer qu'ils visent à discerner le vrai ni à l'exposer. . . . En fait, le poète s'est retiré d'un seul coup du langage-instrument ; il a choisi une fois pour toutes l'attitude poétique qui considère les mots comme des choses et non comme des signes. (Sartre *Littérature* 18)[2]

On the other hand, for people more interested in the issues of marginalized ones within power structures, the idea of an essential distance between literature and the real world makes it a fertile ground for thinking. Michel Foucault, for instance, professed his interest in literature for theory-building because of its nature as an experience of the alterity of language, of the obscuring of meaning (Bruns 250). Studying literature is a way to empathize with the experience of being outside the norm if the language thereof is distinct.

That contemporary artists and scholars working on the graphic novel should adopt the linguistic turn is therefore no surprise. Formalists and (post-) structuralists all argue for a literary specificity that a linguistic analysis can reveal. For defendants of comics as literature Will Eisner and Charles Hatfield, this is the extent of their concept of literature. They generalize from the notion of language to that of organized systems of signs, including pictures, but their understanding of comics as a form of literature depends on their existence as a special mode of structured signs.

Ethical considerations aside, theories that consider only the nature of symbols as sufficient to identify a literary work fail to explain certain limit cases, what Arthur Danto would call the "indiscernibles." Taking two visually

indistinguishable paintings, Danto asks in the wake of conceptual art how it is possible for them to function as different artworks (Danto 577). In the literary discourse, this example is more commonly known through Jorge Luis Borges's short story "Pierre Ménard, autor del Quijote" in which a modern French writer tries to write again Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* word for word, while attempting to imbue it with a distinct signification. Although this is a theoretical rather than an actual problem for most literary scholars, such a case highlights a fundamental issue about the use of language in literature, namely that understanding it requires the recognition of an appropriate context. In "Work and Text," Gregory Currie argues that some features of literary interpretation—irony, for instance—cannot be properties of a text, understood as a sequence of words in a natural language (Currie 335). Borges's short story illustrates fittingly this point when the critic therein who compares the same passage in the *Quixote* left by Ménard with that of Cervantes praises the former for its delightful archaisms, while condemning the banality of the latter (Borges "Ménard" 94). Cervantes's *Quixote* cannot delight us in refined linguistic archaisms simply because its author used a language that was current at the time of composition. Ménard's *Quixote*, on the other hand, uses a language nobody uses anymore. Currie thus distinguishes from the text the actual act of its composition, which he proposes as the work (Currie 336). Borges's story is an ironic, rather absurd, yet coherent illustration of the role of what exists beyond the text in defining a literary work. More than the conditions for individuating a literary work is however needed to define literature. The "indiscernibles" argument shows that a literary work does not exist as an instance of text written in a "literary" language, but to keep the notion of literature, we must characterize in what ways the world outside the text is organized.

Conceptions of literature not derived from the notion of its linguistic specificity come from scholarship in aesthetics concerning the nature of artworks. Their guiding assumption is that literary works are works of art, so that knowledge about literature requires a preliminary assessment of the nature of art (Beardsley 24). At the origin of this work is Morris Weitz's seminal 1956 article

"The Role of Theory in Aesthetics," which argues against the notion that artworks possess essential properties setting them apart from other objects. Extended to the notion of literature, this position rejects the possibility of a "poetic language." It is however a radical Wittgensteinian one, insofar as he jettisons the idea that any property of an object could classify it as art, because art itself is an open-ended concept similar to that of a game:

> If we actually look and see what it is we call "art," we will also find no common properties—only strands of similarities. Knowing what art is is not apprehending some manifest or latent essence, but being able to recognize, describe and explain those things we call "art" in virtue of these similarities. But the basic resemblance between [the concepts of "art" and "game"] is their open texture. In elucidating them, certain (paradigm) cases can be given, about which there can be no question of as to their being correctly described as "art" or "games" but no exhaustive set of cases can be given. (Weitz 31)

According to Weitz, we can identify something as being art or not, but we cannot specify fixed conditions that will enable us to label next year's groundbreaking work by the *enfant terrible* of the hour as such. Such conditions would preclude the possibility that his work be groundbreaking at all. The concept of art has no unifying internal logic following Weitz, even though artworks share partial similarities. In a manner similar to Terry Eagleton's argument about literature, we should therefore shave this concept off the face of academia with the Franciscan friar's razor.

Weitz's paper stirred an important reaction at a time when arguments about *intrinsic* properties of artwork such as Clive Bell's "significant form," Viktor Shklovski's "defamiliarization," or the early structuralists' "language of literature" were the building blocks of aesthetic theory. But many philosophers rejecting intrinsic properties also criticized Weitz for having dropped the towel regarding the definition of art. If intrinsic properties were not adequate to define art, one must not conclude that art is impossible to define, but should look instead at *extrinsic*, or relational, properties for an answer. Maurice Mandelbaum

debunks Weitz's argument via the shortcomings in the latter's reliance on Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblance. For the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*, things sharing a family resemblance have merely a "complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing" (Wittgenstein §66), and no unifying, essential property. However, as Mandelbaum argues, "What marks the difference between a literal and a metaphorical sense of the notion of 'family resemblance' is . . . the existence of a genetic connection in the former case and not in the latter" (Mandelbaum 221). In other words, the relational property of having common ancestors unifies neatly items sharing a family resemblance; to present this resemblance as an open-ended concept is simply shortsighted. Applying this logic to the question of art, Mandelbaum argues that the notion of art's specificity need not lie in

> a specific ingredient which identifies it as a work of art; rather, that which is held to be common to these otherwise diverse objects is a relationship which is assumed to have existed . . . between certain of their characteristics and the activities and the intentions of those who made them. (Mandelbaum 223)

Two 1951 Canadian nickels may share the same intrinsic property of being composed of nickel at 99%, but one has the extrinsic property of belonging to me. "Being an artwork" is thus a proposition like being a "nickel that belongs to me," not like "being made of nickel."

Echoing this insight, institutional theories of art such as those of Arthur Danto or George Dickie organize a reconceptualization of the nature of art on the basis of extrinsic properties. For Danto, "to see something as art requires something the eye cannot decry—an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld" (Danto 580).[3] Without artistic intentions, a conceptual framework of justification, a relationship to art history, and the support of existing artistic practices, Andy Warhol's Brillo boxes would be mere "pasteboard cartons" (Danto 581). Dickie goes one step further and discounts the role of the art theory apparatus in his definition of art, to concentrate instead on the conferral of artwork status by a public. For Dickie, the artwork does not

serve any specific function within existing artistic practices. It exists only by virtue of authoritative persons representing the artworld (Dickie 34). In sum, institutional theories of art try to grapple with the problem of "indiscernibles" between works of art and normal objects, in the wake of Duchamp's artworld-sensation *Fontaine*.

Institutional theories of art are not without their own shortcomings, but with respect to defining literature, they offer a solid externalist paradigm best exemplified by Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen in *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*. The two scholars argue that literature is a practice of production and appreciation of texts shared between writers and readers, and that no textual features distinguish a priori literary works from non-literary ones:

> A text is identified as a literary work by recognizing the author's intention that the text is produced and meant to be read within the framework of conventions defining the practice (constituting the institution) of literature. . . . Adopting the literary stance towards a text is to identify it as a literary work and apprehend it in accordance with the conventions of the literary practice. The mode of apprehension which the practice defines is one of *appreciation*. The literary stance is defined by the expectation of (and consequently the attempt to identify) a certain type of value, i.e. literary aesthetic value, in the text in question. (Lamarque and Olsen 256)

Literary value is a form of aesthetic value, constituted by the "creative-imaginative" and the "mimetic" aspects of literature (Lamarque and Olsen 261). Roughly speaking, the "creative-imaginative" aspect of literature concerns the specific way in which it creates form or content, either by re-writing in a novel way existing *topoi*, stories, or characters; or by inventing them (Lamarque and Olsen 262). The "mimetic" aspect of literary value define why humans care about literature: "an *expectation* of a humanly interesting content is thus the other central element in the literary stance, and the other central aim of appreciation is to identify such a content in a literary work" (Lamarque and

Olsen 266). In response to Sartre, Lamarque and Olsen thus present literature as something inherently human, and vitally relevant.

It would be tempting to subsume their argument under an intrinsic properties argument—literature is what possesses the "humanly interesting" essence—but literary value exists only because readers and authors adopt a specific stance towards a text.[4] Appreciating literature is thus more the appreciation of a work in Currie's sense because of the ineliminable role given to the context of interpretation. A text cannot be literary *a priori* because it is only a prop for a specific practice of production and appreciation. Some props may function better than others, but their literariness always *follows* from the pre-existing practice.

The notion of literary value may also appear similar to the process of status conferral in Dickie's institutional theory of art, but literary value is more like *currency*: a nickel and a loonie both have different monetary values, but they function within the same system of valuation, that of economic currency by those who adopt it (Lamarque and Olsen 442). It is not by virtue of being "good" that a work is considered literary; it is literary by virtue of functioning within a specific logic of valuation. Lamarque and Olsen's position answers directly to the argument by Joseph Witek to the effect that, once comics became "good" via the graphic novel movement, they could function as literature instead of being adolescent trash. Even "bad" comics could be literary. Their argument nonetheless remains consistent with Witek's attention to value rather than medium as springboard for explaining the literary aspect of graphic novels.

Some understanding of the literary medium is necessary if we want to make sense of the role of pictures. Lamarque and Olsen say little beyond the assumption that language is the medium of literature. Many options are hence possible. In a manner similar to Eisner and Hatfield, one could subsume language and images under a general theory of signs. Images in *Maus* are therefore a different genus of language, possessing a syntax and semantic whose compatibility with that of English allows their smooth and coherent insertion within any theory of literature. One could also argue for a fundamental

difference between image and text, and consider instead graphic novels as a hybrid art form, one that *borrows* from literature without *being* literature. Finally, and this is the guiding assumption of this thesis, one could try to find a way to reconcile the notion of literary value with pictures, and dispense with the notion of text and image as sufficiently useful concepts for understanding the medium of literature. Chapter two tackles the first task, while chapter three examines more closely the notion of medium itself in order to develop a more refined alternative to the concepts of text and image for understanding the medium of graphic novels.

Intermediate conclusions

Maus provides incentives not only to investigate the problem of graphic novels as a literary form, but also the nature of literature itself, the role of value therein, and the nature of its medium. Institutional theories of art trace a way out of the dominant conception of literature as linguistic alterity by looking instead at the surroundings of the literary work. Yet, they are also fraught with the twin problems of arbitrariness and circularity. If an artwork is whatever the artworld decides it is, the notion of artwork becomes vacuous. Lamarque and Olsen's anchoring of their institutional framework in literary value implies that there is an internal logic to literature, and that it is a regularity of human behaviour rather than an arbitrary bestowing of meaning and importance.

Neither the institutional recognition of *Maus* nor its similarity to texts can justify its consideration as literature, but when readings of it such as Tabachnick's illuminate so convincingly its meaning and significance, it is this author's hope that exploring the boundaries of Lamarque and Olsen's theory in the next chapter will yield an answer.

Notes

[1] "The writer belongs to a language no one talks, which addresses nobody, which lacks a center, which reveals nothing. . . . Where he is, only Being speaks—which means that speech does not speak anymore, but only is, dedicates itself to the pure passivity of Being" (my translation).

[2] "Poets are men who refuse to *utilize* language. Now, since the quest for truth takes place in and by language conceived as a certain kind of instrument, it is unnecessary to imagine that they aim to discern or expound the true. . . . In fact, the poet has withdrawn from language-instrument in a single movement. Once and for all he has chosen the poetic attitude which considers words as things and not as signs" (Sartre *Literature* 5)

[3] A more succinct version of Danto's theory of art is offered in episode four from season one of *Da Ali G Show*, American edition. Not only does Danto explain what is art, but also he lucidly distinguishes it from Art Nouveau, Art Deco, and Art Garfunkel.

[4] In fact, Viktor Shklovski was approaching such an idea in his *Theory of Prose* when he wrote, "Art is a means of experiencing the process of creativity. The artifact itself is quite unimportant" (Shklovski 6). He went too far by arguing for an essential difference between the nature of ordinary and poetic language, probably under the influence of the discovery of a specialized vocabulary used by Japanese poets (Shklovski 4), but he considered the primacy of the communicative aspect in art like Lamarque and Olsen do.

CHAPTER TWO

City of Glass: a quixotic literary effort by Paul Auster, Paul Karasik, and David Mazzucchelli

The art that uses only speech by itself or
verse. . . has as yet no name; for we have
no common term to apply to the prose
mimes of Sophron and Xenarchus
and to the Socratic dialogues
—Aristotle, *Poetics*

—*City of Glass*, p. 97
graphic novel version

The previous chapter argued that graphic novels push literary scholarship to re-examine its assumptions about the nature of literature. Such interrogations will see further elaboration in the present chapter by examining the contribution of pictures to literary value. Because the literary consideration of the graphic novel raises issues similar to those surrounding the literary consideration of a so-called "popular" genre such as detective fiction, I will use Paul Auster's novel *City of Glass* to distinguish the notions of status and literary value. Transferring the resulting understanding of literary value from Auster's novel to its graphic adaptation then shows how a definition of literature based on value is compatible with the distinct value afforded by pictures. Ultimately, graphic novels exemplify Lamarque and Olsen's definition of literature, but reading them in a literary manner does not exhaustively show what is artistically interesting about them.

Literary devaluation

Before defending the literary value of graphic novels, I would like however to demonstrate first the literary *devaluation* of comics. If there is one important obstacle against the appreciation of comics as literature, it is their rejection as either bad literature, or as literature's nemesis. This devaluation in turn helps to contextualize and explain the literary aspirations of modern graphic novelists. If one considers the work of Swiss artist Rudolph Töpffer in the early nineteenth century as the first instance of comics (Groensteen and Peeters 87), the ironic corollary is that from its inception this form of art has had to endure critical judgments about its aesthetic shortcomings. Goethe, in reaction to Töpffer's *Festus*, famously exclaimed

> 'That is really too crazy,' he kept repeating, 'but he really sparkles with talent and wit, much of it is quite perfect; it shows just how much the artist could yet achieve, if he dealt with modern [less frivolous] material and went to work with less haste, and more reflection. (Kunzle 183, parenthetical content in the original text)

Goethe's remarks encapsulate a reaction all too familiar to comics artists who have tried to be taken seriously. One the one hand, Goethe lauds the artist's potential and the powerful impact of the work, while on the other hand he dismisses the subject matter, and the facture of the work. Such encouraging, yet critical comments will however yield to more severe condemnations by the time comics are well established in newspapers and magazines.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, traditionalist literary critics in the United States dismiss illustrations in general as a hindrance to the acquisition of a genteel, literate culture. For instance, in the June 1895 edition of *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, Sidney Fairfield opposes strongly the illustration of novels: "The written word is the first and the highest expression of thought, and it ever will be. To illustrate the perfect literary production does not necessarily improve it artistically. . . . is not the literary art of a master amply sufficient to portray to the appreciative, intelligent reader all in his book that is

charming or thrilling or pathetic or humorous?" (Fairfield 5-6). In the *Dial* of November 1, 1903, Annie Russell Marble's warns readers: "To cultivate individual ideas, to educe subjective interpretations of life and letters, is the desideratum of all education; such results are often hindered by excess of scenic material" (Marble 8). Finally, for Ralph Bergengren, the means of mass production of newspaper illustrated pages is the cause of their badness: "it is not humor but simply a supply created in answer to a demand, hastily produced by machine methods and hastily accepted by editors too busy with other editorial duties to examine it intelligently" (Bergengren 10). Redundancy of text and image, threat to literacy, and low standards of production are long-standing criticisms against comics, some of which still persist to this day, as the study of *Maus* in the previous chapter has shown. Moreover, such criticisms have conditioned the responses to it: Art Spiegelman wryly suggesting that if graphics and novels are good separately, then together they are even better; Will Eisner and Charles Hatfield arguing for comics as a different type of literacy; and modern publishers counterbalancing the previous low standards of material and artistic production by the marketing of richly printed and artistically ambitious works. But before such an organized response develops, a more symbolically important episode must brand collective memory.

Mere dismissal by critics turns into active repression after World War II, when educators and psychiatrists posit a link between juvenile delinquency and the comic books then available to children. For educators and librarians, comic books

> tend to crowd out reading of a more desirable type; they are too easy to read and spoil the taste for better reading; the adventure are so fantastic that children do not acquire an understanding of the world that comes from better literature; there is little progression of reading experience in comics; the artwork is of inferior quality; and the books are poorly printed on cheap paper and hard on the eyes. (Nyberg 9)

Such a point of view, it must be noted, conflates the notion of literacy with that of literariness: the object of reading defines literature, and the more valuable instances thereof are in competition with the less valuable ones. Building up on the anti-literary critique of comic book, the American psychiatrist Frederic Wertham[1] upped the ante in his analysis of crime and horror comics, *Seduction of the Innocents*:

1) The comic-book format is an invitation to illiteracy.
2) Crime comic books create an atmosphere of cruelty and deceit.
3) They create a readiness for temptation.
4) They stimulate unwholesome fantasies.
5) They suggest criminal or sexually abnormal ideas.
6) They furnish the rationalization for them, which may be ethically even more harmful than the impulse.
7) They suggest the forms a delinquent impulse may take and supply details of technique.
8) They may tip the scales toward maladjustement or delinquency.

> Crime comics are an agent with harmful potentialities. They bring about a mass conditioning of children with different effects in the individual case. A child is not a simple unit which exist outside of its living social ties. Comic books themselves may be the virus, or the cause of a lack of resistance to the social virus of a harmful environment. (Wertham 118)

Comic books are not only a debased form of literature; they also have an active role in the moral dispositions of readers. It would be easy to dismiss Wertham's argument as advocating a simplistic and direct cause-to-effect relationship between the reading of certain comics and delinquent behaviour. But as Nyberg points out, Wertham is arguing from the point of view of a psychiatrist trying to understand the role of a cultural matrix on individual behaviour, and never suggested that comic books had a uniform effect on children (Nyberg 86). If anything, certain comic books might create an "unhealthy" environment, and Wertham is more interested in providing a "safe" mental environment to children

(Nyberg 89), one that is less subject to the diktats of the publishers' profits (Nyberg 90). Moreover, Wertham's position that bad literature has a negative influence is not incompatible with the widely accepted view that good literature has a positive effect on people.

In parallel to Wertham's warnings to the general American public concerning crime and horror comic books, publishers began to establish the Comics Code, an industry-wide standard of content publication to preempt a more institutionalized form of censorship. First adopted in 1948, and revised periodically in 1954, 1971, and 1989, the Code regulates the representation of violence, sexuality, profanity, crime, substance abuse, religion, and similar matters in the publications abiding by it. However, unlike the like-minded *Loi sur les publications destinées à la jeunesse* adopted in France in 1949, the Code does not rest on a legal infrastructure (Nyberg 104). The installation of the Code indicated some willingness by publishers to answer the educational and moral concerns raised by activists like Wertham. However, it did not exactly foster a "literary" comics culture, and many people felt it prevented such a culture from happening. Art Spiegelman, for example, blames Wertham for having "triggered the Senate hearings [which were instrumental in the creation of the Code] and thereby toppled the industry" (qtd. in Beaty 197). The Code, by imposing strict moral standards fit for a readership of underage people, would have squashed the creativity of artists who wanted to step outside the norm, and kept the American comics in a perpetual artistic limbo.

This oft-repeated tale has become somewhat of a post-lapsarian myth of creation for many graphic novelists. In *Frederic Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture*, scholar Bart Beaty argues that publishers, not activists and moral crusaders destroyed the potential of the comic book medium (205). He notes that nothing in the Code prevented publishers from creating

> the type of mature, sensitive and adult-themed texts that were so popular with, for instance, filmgoers or television viewers. In the mid-1950s, both film and television labored under production codes that were at least as restrictive as the Comics Code, but attracted

> enormous adult audiences by developing material specifically for them. . . . Ironically, the "adult age" of comic books arrived as comic book publishers adopted Wertham's suggestions. (206)

Underground comics since the late 1960s do in fact follow Wertham's exhortations by labeling most of their publications "For adults only." That publishers themselves did not attempt for a long time such market segmentation reveals more about their intentions than about the role of the Code itself. Unwilling to expand their markets, they remained in the niche that had served them well so far. By declaring their independence from the canons of superheroes comics, constituting the bulk of the post-Code production, graphic novelists in fact accept partially some long-standing criticisms, levelled against works produced in their medium since Goethe: aesthetic shallowness, cognitive simplicity, and moral corruption.

Mass production and the preponderance of images over text in comics are two important strands of criticism against them from the literary and educational establishments. Bergengren's description of comics as "supply created in answer to a demand," made and published in haste, paints a picture of a publishing world that relinquishes the quality of craft, the painstaking process of art-making. It is not my purpose here to address with historical data this depiction of the comics industry in the early twentieth century, but I want to point out that such criticism often goes hand in hand with an essentialist dismissal of the modes of mass production as being appropriate for "genuine" art-making. As Noël Carroll suggests, dismissing art forms adapted to mass reproduction and understandable by the largest possible audience follows from a misreading of the Kantian theory of autonomous beauty (Carroll *Mass Art* 89). Kant's idea that free beauty has no rule—as exemplified by the purposeless experience of a beautiful sunset—led many to a theory of art in which "anything that is properly called art must be unique and original, forging a law unto itself, rather than being tethered by determinate concepts or purposes or rules" (Carroll *Mass Art* 93). The market logic behind the production of many comic books therefore prevents them unilaterally from being artworks, because they are tethered to an organizing

principle, making money. Formulaic storytelling, another widespread feature of comic books outside the graphic novel world, suffers the same criticism. It is a further validation of Beaty's irony that most graphic novels are not serial stories, and are less aggressively marketed than superhero comics. As much as they loathe the literary devaluation they have suffered over time, the graphic novelists also buy into the anti-mass art argument of their critics.

The irony ends however with the importance of images. If the anti-mass art argument is a debased version of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, the anti-image argument in literary criticism is a debased version of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocöon*. I will directly address Lessing with respect to comics in chapter three, but the gist of his argument is that text is more appropriate to the development of temporality, whereas images are more appropriate to the representation of a single moment (Lessing 80). From the representation of temporality comes the ability to create narrative, and thus character development and moral content (Lopes *Sensibility* 163-64). Given these conditions, pictures can only represent the surface of the things they depict, and cannot bear moral content. Against critics like Fairfield or Marble, and educators like Wertham, who follow Lessing against images, a graphic novel like *City of Glass* explores unabashedly the pictorial realm, and does not concede to text any artistic supremacy. Display of pictorial talent might well be the single most important declaration of independence by graphic novelists from the literary paradigm, as well as their most important contribution to literary art, as I will show later in this chapter.

Literary revaluation

As John Cawelti argues, "Two central aspects of formulaic structures have been generally condemned in the serious artistic thought of the last hundred years: their essential standardization and their primary relation to the needs of escape and relaxation" (Cawelti 8). I have presented in the first chapter critiques of *Maus* as examples of a literary valuation of comics, and in the present chapter

linked such literary ambitions to a partial dissociation from formulaic, mass art. This template for literary valuation is not unique to graphic novels. In fact, it defines almost every transition of "formula-bound" works into the "artistic" sphere: Eisner's graphic novels are not "just" comics; the films of Sergio Leone "go beyond" the Western formula; Wordsworth's and Coleridge's lyrical ballads are not "just" folk songs; and the photographs of W. Eugene Smith are not "mere" reportage photographs. All these artists who transcend the actual or putative boundaries of the genre in which they work validate a certain critical attitude, just like the graphic novelists validate some of the criticisms leveled against their formulaic forebears. The process of valuation (or re-valuation in the present case) consists thus in acquiring the blessing of established powers, while at the same time defending a hitherto neglected genre. Paul Auster's *City of Glass* is one such example of a work indebted to both the formulaic art of hard-boiled detective novels and to the literary establishment of the recent years. Its adaptation as a graphic novel provides us with a complex case with which to test the boundaries of an institutional theory of literature, and unravel the difference between literary value and status.

The two major traditional genres of detective fiction, classic and hard-boiled, both relate the prosecution of crime by investigative action. Whereas the classic detective story shows an emotionally detached detective, usually a man, solving mysteries with his superior, "transcendent intelligence" (Cawelti 87), the hard-boiled story features an investigator, often a man as well, who "invariably finds that he must go beyond the solution to some kind of personal choice or action" (Cawelti 142). As much as the classic detective restores order in a detached manner, and is so much in control of his deductive power as to trump the reader's own deductions, the hard-boiled private eye is befuddled by the events he investigates, involves himself ethically and personally with the other characters, and invariably feels he is fighting an uphill battle against a corrupt society, even though he catches the villain. The hard-boiled formula inverts the narrative and ethical conventions of the classic formula, but remains another formula, and thus suffers critical scorn for the same reasons.

So-called "anti-detective" novels take a step away from the formulae of detective fiction in much the same manner graphic novels try to shed some of their comics heritage: by rejecting the features of mass art—formulaic story structures, appeal to the largest public possible, and mass marketing. Such an attempt "to lift the popular detective novel onto a new and more literary plane" (Holzapfel 22) goes hand in hand with a rejection of the genre it purports to elevate. *City of Glass* is a potent example of an anti-detective novel,

> not [a] detective novel in the true sense of the meaning. It is rather a parody of the genre, toying with the readers' expectations and conventions of detective novel. Through deconstructive techniques like the interlocking of contents and meaning onto another plane and the re-evaluation of hierarchies, a change of meaning is created which leads the anti-detective novel away from the genre's standard formula. (Holzapfel 23)

Rejecting formulaic storytelling is a significant departure from conventional detective fiction, but incorporating aspects of literary theory in *City of Glass* belies an important anxiety towards canonical literature. By employing dominant forms of academic discourse like deconstruction, the novel calls for a certain form of institutional recognition, both as an attempt to bring to detective fiction the status-granting blessing of academic discourse, and as an attempt to take distances from traditional detective fiction. The anti-detective novel positions itself in a space between the canon of literature and the putative anti-canon of mass art, combining formal institutional recognition of the former with variations on the themes of the latter. If Auster's anti-detective novel rides the coattails of established literature, then so does its graphic adaptation.

Yet is being "more literary" and "less formulaic" really dependent on bowing down to a critical authority, an "artworld," or is there more to literary value than a nod from Sainte-Beuve and five stars on an online book forum? Is *City of Glass* "more literary" because it uses deconstruction, an accepted paradigm of literary studies? How can it be "more literary" than a traditional detective novel, and does its adaptation into a graphic novel by Paul Karasik and

David Mazzucchelli preserve this "added literariness?" To answer these pressing questions and more, we shall now turn to the theory of literature and literary value developed in *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*, by Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen.

Literature and literary value

For Lamarque and Olsen, a work of literature is a work possessing literary value. Literary value is not inherent to the work, but exists only within an organized social activity:

> There are no syntactic, semantic, or even more loosely 'rhetorical' features of a text that define it as a literary work. A text is identified as a literary work by recognizing the author's intention that the text is produced and meant to be read within the framework of conventions defining the practice (constituting the institution) of literature. (Lamarque and Olsen 255-6)

An equivalent of literary value in common experience would be monetary value: no adequate description of the value of a five-dollar bill is possible without appeal to the structure of norms constitutive of the monetary system. However, because there is no literary institutional equivalent to the Bank of Canada, Lamarque and Olsen consider that literature is a *practice*, a manner whereby authors and audience behave, not a centralized institution.

To engage in the literary practice is thus to adopt the *literary stance* towards a text to "identify it as a literary work and apprehend it in accordance with the conventions of the literary practice" (Lamarque and Olsen 256). In the monetary system, one aspect of adopting the "monetary stance" towards a chunk of cupronickel, would be for example to accept its equivalence to a few gummy bears at the corner store. The goal of the literary stance, in contrast, is "the expectation of (and consequently the attempt to identify) a certain type of value, i.e. literary aesthetic value, in the text in question" (Lamarque and Olsen 256). Literature is thus "an evaluative concept and an expectation of value and

strategies for revealing that value are a definitive part of the literary stance" (Lamarque and Olsen 449). *Critical appreciation* is the dominant mode of our relationship towards literature; just like expectations of truthfulness is the dominant mode of our relationship towards news (although lately we have been offered more truthiness).

Evaluation requires that the person appreciating a work of literature possess applicable concepts. The concepts that identify the literary features of a work exist at three levels: form, content, and theme. Understanding a literary work at the formal level follows from making sense of its internal organization (Lamarque and Olsen 258). To understand *City of Glass*, it is necessary to have a basic grasp of the genre of hard-boiled detective fiction, with its stock motifs of tail jobs, narration riddled with clues, and stereotypical descriptions of women (Holzapfel 27-29). Understanding form allows one to discern variations from the norm. For instance, the protagonist *of City of Glass,* Daniel Quinn, is not hired to solve a crime, but rather to prevent one (Holzapfel 29). Awareness of form is also necessary for grasping the levels of irony, as observable in the following discussion between Quinn and Virginia Stillman about Peter Stillman Jr.'s case:

> Quinn smiled judiciously and then told himself to plunge in. "Whatever I do or do not understand," he said, "is probably beside the point. You've hired me to do a job and the sooner I get on with it the better. From what I can gather, the case is urgent. I make no claims about understanding Peter or what you might have suffered. The important thing is that I'm willing to help. I think you should take it for what it's worth."
>
> He was warming up now. Something told him that he had captured the right tone, and a sudden sense of pleasure surge through him, as though he had just managed to cross some internal border within himself.
>
> "You're right," said Virginia Stillman. "Of course you're right." (Auster 29)

In his opinion, Quinn has successfully impersonated a private eye by mimicking the stereotypical turns of language characters in his own detective novels would use. This make-believe utterance reassures Virginia Stillman, and she confidently provided Quinn with more details about the experiment performed by Peter Stillman Sr. on his son. Stereotyped dialogues advance the plot, as would be the case in a real dime novel, but one of the characters is perfectly aware of the cliché he is re-enacting. Quinn's playful awareness of his situation is emblematic of the whole novel's take on genre conventions: simultaneous reuse and subversion.

In addition to form, one must be able to identify the content of a work. Doing so essentially taps into the reader's ability to apply everyday life concepts to the world of the novel, such as characters, actions, objects, or settings (Lamarque and Olsen 259). *City of Glass* turns conventional expectations at the level of content in the same manner it deals with form. Describing what happens in the following scene in *City of Glass* is apparently straightforward, but some elements therein also require more subtle interpretative work:

> "I'm sorry to disturb you," Quinn apologized. "But I'm looking for Paul Auster."
>
> "I'm Paul Auster," said the man.
>
> "I wonder if I could talk to you. It's quite important."
>
> "You'll have to tell me what it's about first."
>
> "I hardly know myself." Quinn gave Auster an earnest look. "It's complicated, I'm afraid. Very complicated." (Auster 111)

On the doorstep of the person he believes to be the detective Paul Auster, Daniel Quinn meets Paul Auster, a writer. The two characters are trying to apprehend each other, and Paul Auster is mildly surprised to see someone else than his wife, whom he was expecting. This stranger believes in turn that Auster is someone else. What invites to interpretation in this passage is the relationship of the fictional Paul Auster to the actual Paul Auster, the person who wrote *City of Glass* according to the blurb and photo at the back of the book. It is known, for instance, that many biographical details of the fictional and the real Paul Auster

intersect, such as the names of his son and wife, or the address of the apartment that Quinn visits (Springer 13), while other details such as age and writing history intersect between the real Auster and Quinn himself (Springer 12). An ironic reading could suggest that the real Paul Auster, but not his fictional counterpart, is a composite of details belonging to various fictional characters. The previous scene would thus turn upside down the usual writer's habit of blending aspects from different people into a single fictional character. It would suggest that the real Paul Auster is in fact a fictional composite. On top of applying ordinary concepts, the reader who elucidates the content of the above scene must also struggle with the paradoxes infuse therein by the writer.

For Lamarque and Olsen, the signature of a literary work, what makes it valuable, is our construal of its subject as the bearer of a theme. Thematic concepts "identify the point and purpose of the subject and the way in which the subject is presented" (Lamarque and Olsen 260). A theme is "an organizing principle that seeks coherence both among diffuse elements of a work's subject and in the imaginative interest aroused by the work" (Lamarque 136), and *City of Glass*, according to most critics, "is a detective story in which the mystery revolves around the question of identity. . . . Its protagonist, Quinn, is engaged in two quests which proceed in opposite directions: to find Stillman and to lose himself" (Shiloh 45). Themes identify a literary work. They justify its existence, and explain why it matters for humans.

Identity is the overarching theme of *City of Glass*, and the motif of the failed quest structures and develops this theme throughout the novel. Quinn engages in multiple quests, but every quest fails. At the arrival of Stillman Sr. in Grand Central Station, Quinn believes he has found the man he is looking for. A moment later, he finds instead two men closely matching the description he received from Virginia Stillman. His only option is to take a chance: "Whatever choice he made—and he had to make a choice—would be arbitrary, a submission to chance. . . . There was no way to know: not this, not anything. He went after the first Stillman, slowing his pace to match the old man's" (Auster 68). The premise of his initial quest is flimsy, and only a leap of faith supports

the adequation between the idea he had of Stillman, and the man he chooses to follow.

The Stillman he follows for many days thereafter engages in a quirky sequence of itineraries. Once Quinn decides to map them, he believes they correspond to the shape of letters that spell "OWEROFBAB" (Auster 85). Quinn concludes that this is an allusion to the Tower of Babel, an overarching motif in the book version of Stillman Sr.'s Harvard thesis on language and theology. Yet because Quinn did not record in the walk of Stillman the missing letters of the expression, he is left with a shaky conclusion. Trailing the old man in the city reveals a pattern, but doubt and incompletion beleaguers his interpretation, and makes it no more epistemologically certain than the image seen in a Rorschach inkblot.

After a few meetings with the putative Stillman Sr., Quinn loses his track (Auster 107). In despair, he tries to find Paul Auster the detective (whom he is in fact impersonating) for some help, yet he only finds a writer of the same name (Auster 111). In light of his failure to uncover any useful information, he tries to call Virginia Stillman to abandon the case formally, but a persistent busy signal prevents him from doing so (Auster 125). Bereft of the possibility to close their professional deal, he decides to set up camp in front of her apartment to ensure that Peter Stillman Jr. can never be harmed in the event of a surprise visit from his father (Auster 134). His endless watch eventually exhausts him completely. When his money runs out, he calls Paul Auster one last time to see if the cheque left by Virginia to the writer's name had cleared (Auster 145). It has not. Meanwhile, Stillman Sr. has jumped off a bridge, and no one knows where Peter Jr. and Virginia are (Auster 146). Upon returning to his apartment, Quinn finds out that it has been rented to someone else. The new tenant chases him out, and tells him that everyone thinks Daniel Quinn has disappeared for good (Auster 149). Nothing can prove his identity anymore.

At this point, after all these failed quests, Quinn in fact succeeds in the one he has set for himself since the beginning of the novel: "to be nowhere. New York was the nowhere he had built around himself, and he realized that he had

no intention of ever leaving it again" (Auster 4). His desire to be nowhere follows from the loss of his son and wife (Auster 3). The past is no longer relevant to him, and he abandoned any literary endeavour under his real name to limit himself to the writing of detective novels under a pseudonym (Auster 4-5). Quinn's various quests after determinacy of meaning (in Stillman Sr.'s behaviour, of Paul Auster) are underscored at the same time by his underlying attraction to oblivion and self-effacement. In the aftermath of a trauma, which destroyed his previous identity as visible writer and family man, he suffers both from the presence of over-powering symbols with over-determined meaning (the Tower of Babel, the clues in Stillman Sr.'s thesis), as well as perpetually unstable conclusions and explanations thwarting any deterministic epistemology: "The only certitude the reader is left with is the certitude of lack" (Shiloh 54). His story is left unfinished, and the narrator concludes the novel with a confession of failure that seals him in eternal oblivion: "As for Quinn, it is impossible for me to say where he is now" (Auster 158). *City of Glass* conflates the two famous folk Socratic maxims: "Know thyself," [2] and "Wisest is he who knows he does not know." The search for absolute knowledge about Stillman Sr. has only given Quinn infinite ignorance, an *aporia* of signification.

Yet the literary value of *City of Glass* lies not in its philosophical argumentation or its kinship with deconstructive literary theory. Two contracts between author and reader govern the valuation of literature. The first one is the creative-imaginative convention, the expectation that a work of literature is a product of imagination, of invention (Lamarque and Olsen 262). This is not to say that literature must be fictional: the retelling of a true story can satisfy the creative-imaginative convention through the imposition of a form over subject, in the *treatment* the author gives to it. The creative-imaginative convention is an expectation of subject and form in a literary work, one that results from the work of an author. In this sense, we expect the author to perform a work in a medium, to metaphorically carve something out of a primary material. One of the important aspects of *City of Glass* is how it *treats* the genre of detective stories,

how it reuses and subverts their classic epistemological assumptions. We evaluate the quality of that work.

The second contract is the expectation that a work of literature is relevant to a human being, instead of fulfilling a purpose better suited to the construction of a Martian spaceship, for example. This expectation is the *mimetic* convention, the presentation of humanly interesting concerns through theme or subject choice (Lamarque and Olsen 266). In *City of Glass*, this is accomplished through the thematic development of the ideas of identity, loss, memory, and quest for meaning. Lack of successful human encounters through his various quests brings Quinn closer and closer to the internal void the loss of his family has created inside him, as shown by the failure of the detective inquiry to which he tries to hold on. *City of Glass* affirms the futility of a determinate epistemology. The literary value of this theme lies not in its philosophical truth, but rather in how well it is executed, in how subtle or powerful these ideas take shape, in how much of a human experience they encompass. Of course, *City of Glass* may also have some philosophical value as well; a work can possess many other values, but the actual truth of its statement does not guarantee its literary value, or lack thereof. For Lamarque and Olsen, to participate in the literary practice, it is necessary that the work defined at the levels of form, subject, and theme, be appreciated along the creative-imaginative and mimetic axes. *City of Glass* rewards the reader who takes the literary stance towards it by developing in an intricate and poignant manner its major theme, the profound experience of loss and its subsequent confusion of one's identity.

A different picture of literature

Can images participate in the literary practice as well, or do they distract from it? Is Sidney Fairfield justified in dismissing them as parasitic to the accomplishment of the literary task, which is sufficiently served by working only with words? In the introduction to the adaptation of Auster's novel by Paul Karasik and David Mazzucchelli, Art Spiegelman points to the apparent

absurdity of "why on Earth anyone should bother to adapt a book into… another book!" (Spiegelman "Picturing" ii). In contrast, film adaptations of novels or plays are such a common fixture of contemporary cinema, that no one attempts anymore to delineate properly the domain of the novelistic from the domain of the cinematographic, as André Bazin did, in order to exclude misguided uses of each media. Yet the physical support of the graphic novel, the printed codex, is identical to that of the common novel as Spiegelman remarks. A book filled with text and some pictures may not seem so different from a book filled with pictures and some text:

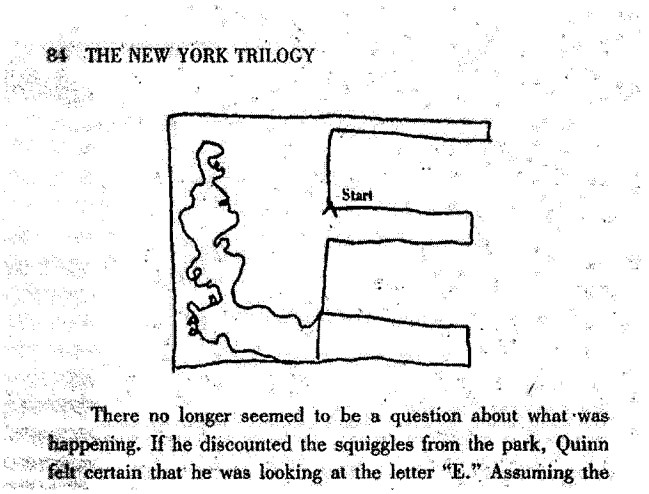
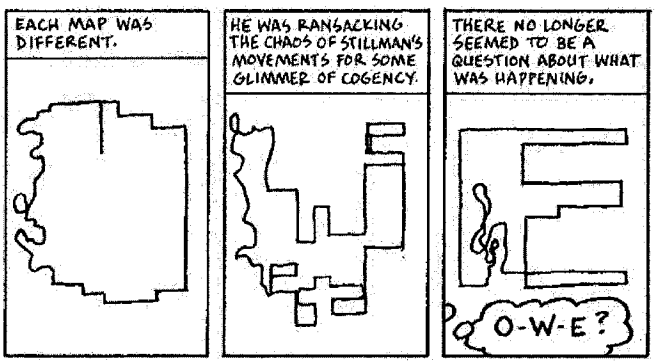


Fig. 2. Partial scan from a page of *City of Glass* (Auster 83)



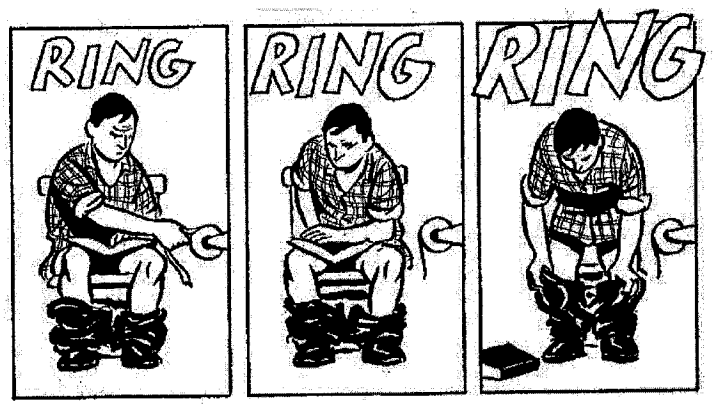
(Karasik 63)

If the story of *City of Glass* was first conceived as a standard novel, then what do the pictures add to this story? Were critics like Sidney Fairfield and Annie Russell Marble correct to dismiss pictures as unnecessary for literature?

Despite all hopes to the contrary by ekphrastic poets, pictures differ categorically from linguistic utterances. Dominic Lopes, in *Understanding Pictures*, defines a picture as

> a representation whose content presents a 'spatially unified' aspect of its subject. By this I mean that every part of the scene that a picture shows must be represented as standing in certain spatial relations to every other part. What these relations are is not absolute or fixed for every picture alike. Pictures represent a variety of different kinds of spatially unified aspects, depending on what relations are selected and what are precluded. There is no reason why the spatially unified aspects that pictures embody must be those definitive of Albertian pictures, for instance. (Lopes *Understanding* 126)

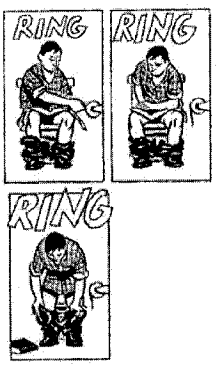
Because they are inherently spatial objects, and possess their own particular value by virtue of depicting scenes, a depiction cannot be entirely redundant with a description. In its simplest formulation, a picture is a set of points in a two-dimensional space, all of which are unified by standing in spatial relationships to each other inside the depicted space. The following excerpt from *City of Glass* is a set of three distinct images:



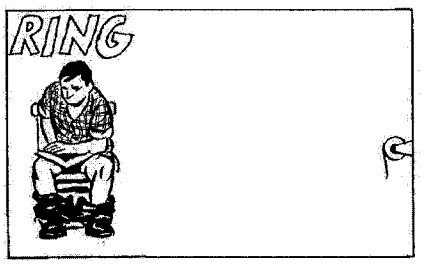
(Karasik 9)

In the two-dimensional space of the page, the Daniel Quinn that is sitting on the toilet seat in the left-hand frame stands a spatial relationship to both the roll of paper he is grasping and the roll of paper in the third frame. However, within the depicted space, the Daniel Quinn of the first frame stands in no spatial

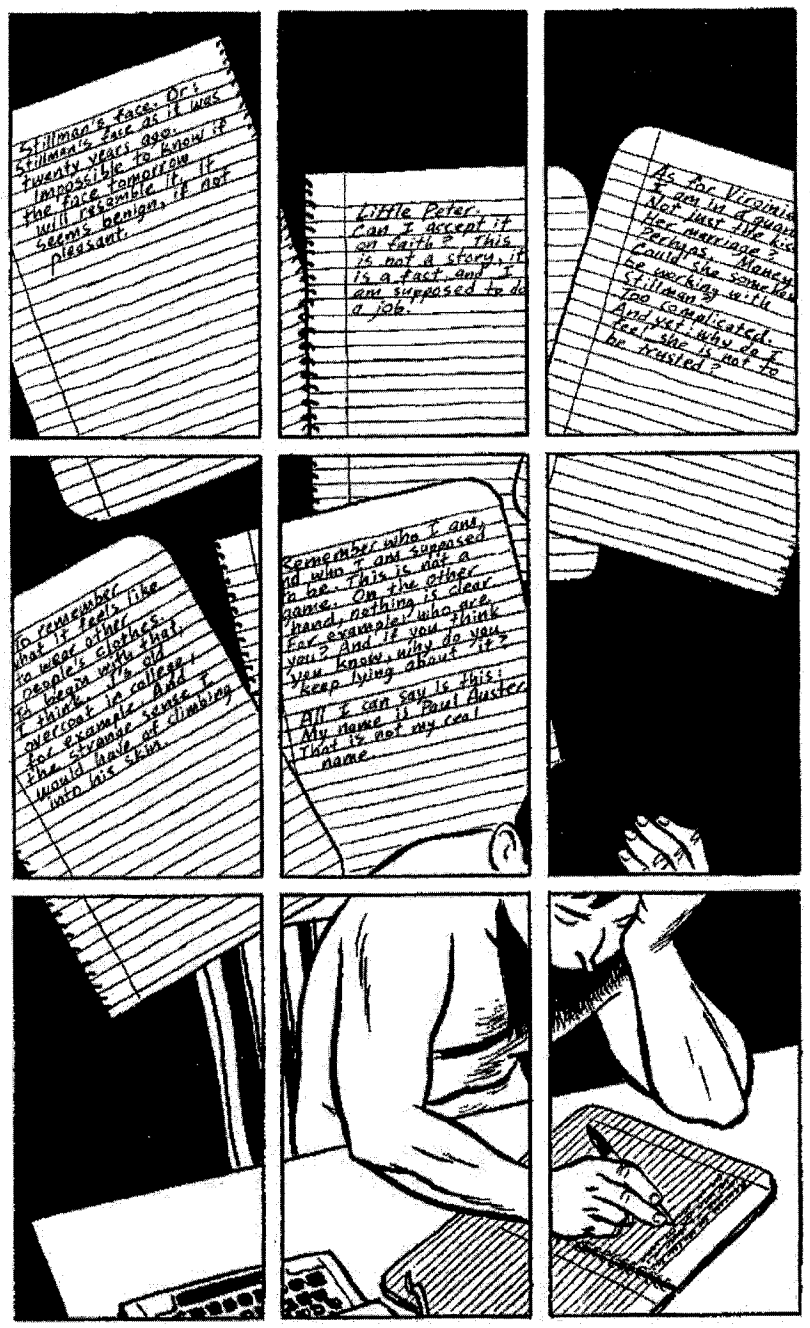
relationship to the roll of toilet paper of the third frame. If I move the third frame from its current position on the page, like this:



Spatial relationships in the two-dimensional space have changed, but those inside the depicted space have not. Because it is understood here that each frame represents Daniel Quinn at successive moments in time, the content of the whole scene is unchanged by the spatial displacement of a frame on the page. On the other hand, if I modify a frame like this:



Spatial relationships in both the two-dimensional space and the depicted space have changed. Only conventionality can properly sustain the distinction between the two kinds of space. The following page (overleaf) from *City of Glass* brilliantly illustrates the difference between the two-dimensional space and the depicted space by blurring their conventional distinction. Whereas the first frames can appear spatially disjoined, the last frames force a spatially unified interpretation:



(Karasik 37)

The graphic novel version of *City of Glass* differs significantly from the original novel first because it exists spatially. It spatially recapitulates the narrative strategies of the original novel by reusing and subverting the conventions of comics, in a manner reminiscent of Paul Auster's reuse and subversion of the detective novel's conventions.

In the portion of the two-dimensional space that corresponds to each frame, however, there are points standing in spatial relationships to Quinn that are not understood as being part of the depictive space which he inhabits. The "sound effect" of the telephone's ring, for instance, stands in a particular two-dimensional relationship to the sitting Quinn of the same frame, and not to the Quinn of the subsequent frame. However, it is by no means understood that there is, for example, a poster on wall behind him that says "RING." The spatial representation of sound is not part of the depicted space that Quinn inhabits.

Distinctions between the nature of depicted space and other graphic elements typical of comics, like sound effects, illustrate the second aspect of depiction, the recognitional abilities they afford:

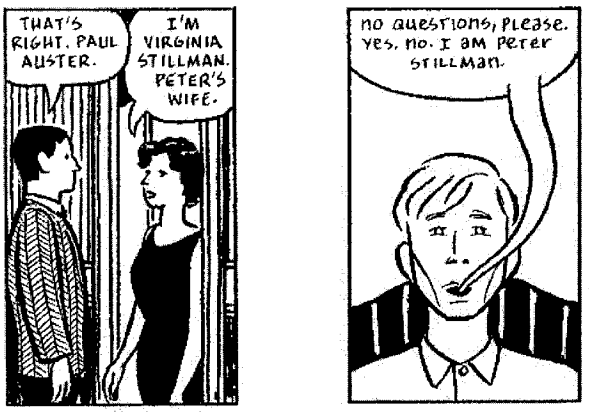
> identifying what a picture represents exploits perceptual recognition skills. In particular, viewers interpret pictures by recognizing their subjects in the aspects they present. The thrust of this is not simply that pictorial representation makes use of recognition abilities for objects, kinds, and properties. . . . Unlike ordinary recognition, pictorial recognition operates at two levels. . . . Pictorial recognition at [the first] level may be called 'content-recognition', since it consists in recognizing a design as the features making up an aspect of its subject. At the second level, viewers recognize pictures' contents as of their subject. (Lopes *Understanding* 144-5)

A picture is a depiction of something insofar as a human observer can apply its recognition skills on it to understand a specific design as an aspect of its subject. The design of the next frame (overleaf) allows the reader to recognize a man, a photograph held by a hand, the design of this same photograph, and two passersby on each side of the old man:

(Karasik 52)

Following Lopes, recognizing the face of an old man is an extension of recognitional ability insofar as we map a design pattern on paper with the concept of an old man, making the design a representation of an old man under the aspects of viewpoint, distance, shape, and so on. At the second level, this recognition is that of Peter Stillman Sr. Or not, depending on whether Quinn's information was reliable. Here, the unstable epistemology of the original novel is recreated within the paradigm of depicted subject recognition. Content and subject recognition explain as well why the text on the page is both in two-dimensional spatial relationships with the depicted Quinn on his toilet, and not within the depictive space. The marks on paper do not *represent* an object under a specific aspect, a poster for example: they *constitute* an object. The "RING" is a text, not the depiction of a text. In contrast, the handwritten sheets seen on page 37 are a depiction of a page of text.

Another illustration of this tension between depictive and non-depictive space in the medium of comics is the nature of the word balloon. The following two examples (overleaf) contrast the way in which *City of Glass* employs judiciously this distinction:



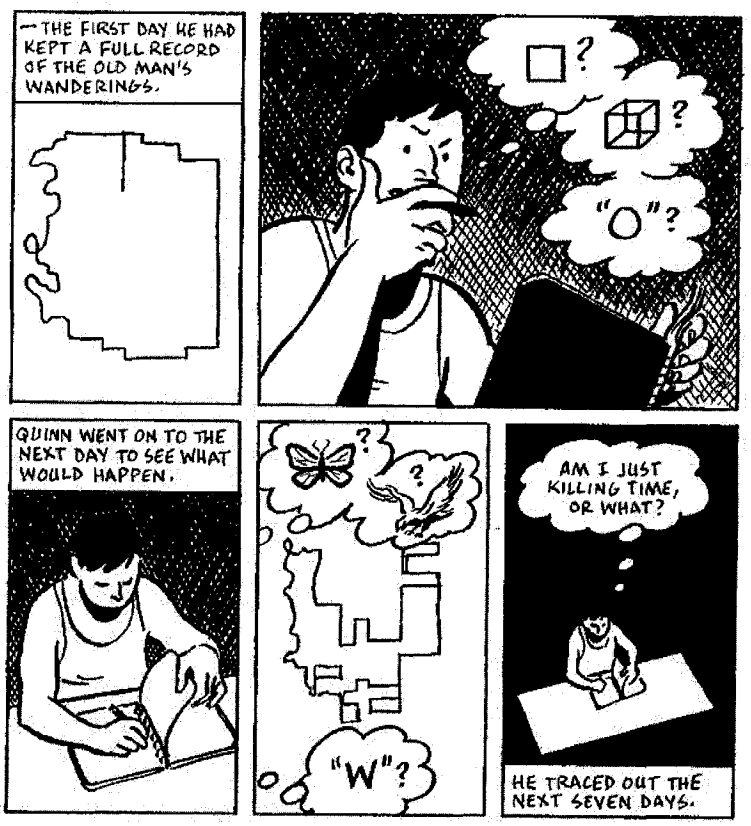
(Karasik 13; 15)

The first frame shows a traditional use of the phylactery, the "word balloon," which is meant to exist outside the depicted space, in the same manner as the "RING" of the previous example. The second frame upsets this convention by occluding the stem of the phylactery with the mouth of Peter Stillman Jr. This visual treatment illustrates the description of Stillman's voice as Quinn heard it first on the phone: "as if from a great distance, there came the sound of a voice unlike any he had ever heard. It was at once mechanical and filled with feeling, hardly more than a whisper and yet perfectly audible" (Auster 7). The two-dimensional and depicted spaces, normally separated by convention, once again collapse indistinguishably into each other, subverting the comics medium in a manner reminiscent of Auster's own subversion of the conventions of detective fiction.

We can thus characterize what the graphic adaptation of *City of Glass* adds to the original novel: first, it translates certain aspects of the novel in spatial form, for instance by applying the category-blurring strategy of Auster to pictorial elements. Second, pictures provide a perceptual experience of aspectual recognition. For Dominic Lopes, affording this recognitional experience is the principal value of depictions, and I will now show how it can participate to the literary value posited by Lamarque and Olsen.

The value of pictures

Richard Wollheim defines as *seeing-in* one's ability to identify patterns out of random sets of stimulus. For example, seeing a human torso in a cloud or a face in a stain on the wall are instances of seeing-in (Wollheim 221). Seeing-in is explainable by experimentally verified psychological phenomena, such as the perception of subjective contours (Wagemans 19). In the *City of Glass* graphic novel, Quinn's puzzlement at the meaning of Stillman Sr.'s trajectory illustrates well the process of seeing-in:



(Karasik 62)

We are privy to Quinn's attempt at exercising seeing-in. He alternates between various possible depictions, and even between depictions and letters. Once more, the adaptation of *City of Glass* upsets categorial boundaries, doing so at a fundamental psychological level. Seeing-in is the core of the recognition process in Lopes's theory of depiction, and its unique nature also governs the particular

value of pictures: "To evaluate a picture as a picture is in part to evaluate it as a vehicle for seeing-in" (Lopes *Sensibility* 91). Appreciating a picture *qua* picture, Lopes argues, is to evaluate it as a trigger for recognizing an object under certain aspects. The fundamental difference between direct encounter with an object and the experience of its depiction is the process of seeing-in. Pictures are not valuable because of their resemblance to an actual object (if it even exists in the real world, as is the case with Daniel Quinn), but because of their ability to sustain seeing-in (Lopes *Sensibility* 93). Such an evaluation is prior to any aesthetic evaluation:

> A picture may have merit as a picture because it enables members of her fan club to know, for example, what Oprah Winfrey looks like—but that is not an aesthetic evaluation of the picture. To say what it is to evaluate a picture *as a picture* is not yet to say what it is to evaluate it *aesthetically*. (Lopes *Sensibility* 94)

Taken alone, the value of depiction appears to diverge perfectly from all the subtleties of literary value. There is however one crucial link between the value of pictures and that of literature: pictures can also carry cognitive and ethical values, which can be incorporated into the larger framework of literary value. For instance,

> [p]ictures may bear moral content by narrating actions or by depictions persons as having moral qualities. Recognizing that something is depicted as having some moral quality requires exercising and sometimes also acquiring or realigning moral concepts. These moral concepts have a special property: they are applied on the basis of seeing, including seeing in a picture, so they are at once pictorial and moral concepts. (Lopes *Sensibility* 179)

Pictures' ability to possess moral content can sustain a theme in the literary sense, especially when they are connected in a sequence. After having an omelet lunch with Daniel Quinn, Paul Auster discusses theories of authorship about *Don Quixote*, and concludes smugly on the frivolousness of the mystifications engineered by de Cervantes regarding the real identity of the novel's author:

(Karasik 94)

The depictions of Auster and Quinn show them respectively as confident and anxious. Auster's relaxed pose and satisfied closed eyes contrast with Quinn's tense pose, the rings under his eyes, and his vexed gaze. In relationship to the larger theme of the quest for meaning, Auster's statement and his depicted attitude seem to present a *cul-de-sac* in Quinn's inquiry. His Quixote argument leads nowhere but to the amused satisfaction of the writer confident he has played mischievously with the expectations of the reader. In like manner, Quinn's expectations about his quest have been played on mischievously. The point of view of the scene shifts from a general view of Quinn and Auster to a subjective rendition of Quinn's own visual field, showing the empty space in front of him. We bounce through space with him back to his own self, as if hitting one's head on a wall. Through spatial devices, this episode of *City of Glass* develops the theme of the futile quest, by representing the moral attitudes of two characters through direct depiction of body language, and through purely pictorial devices, such as point of view. Quinn is showed as an isolated and failed questor subjugated by his task, and Auster as a flippant trickster confounding him.

Doubling literature

If the visual component of the *City of Glass* graphic novel participates in literariness, it can also provide narrative information redundant with the running text, in clear violation of Sidney Fairfield's classical sense of unity of poetic means. This redundancy also runs afoul of certain aesthetic prescriptions concerning the medium of comics: "In comics at its best, words and picture are like partners in a dance and each one takes turns leading. . . . when these partners each know their roles and support each other's strength, comics can match any of the art forms it draws so much from its strength from" (McCloud 156). In the present context, informational redundancies between text and image actually reinforce and expand important thematic aspects of Auster's work.

As Spiegelman's introduction to the graphic *City of Glass* proposes, it seems ironic to duplicate a book into another book by adapting it to the graphic medium. Yet duplication and mimicry are also the most important recurring motifs of the novel: pairs such as the fictional Auster/real Auster. Daniel Quinn and Don Quixote are twins from their initials and the place fiction has taken in their life. Quixote himself is a parodic double of the fictional Errant Knight, while Quinn is trying to impersonate a fictional detective resembling Max Work. Daniel Quinn and Daniel Auster, son of Paul, are also indistinguishable entities: "I'm you and you're me" (Auster 122), says Daniel Quinn to a Daniel Auster delighted to share his first name with a stranger. Peter Stillman Sr., who fails to see how one could use the same name for a working umbrella and a broken one, is a double of Jorge Luis Borges's Ireneo Funes, who could not accept "that the 'dog' of three-fourteen in the afternoon, seen in profile, should be indicated by the same noun as the dog of three-fifteen, seen frontally" (Borges "Funes" 136). All of these *doppelgängers* develop the theme of identity's constancy by questioning whether constancy without imitation is possible.

We have seen earlier that the medium of the *City of Glass* adaptation plays upon the conventions of one frame for one image. This play also translates the anxiety of identity by putting into question whether there is only one Daniel

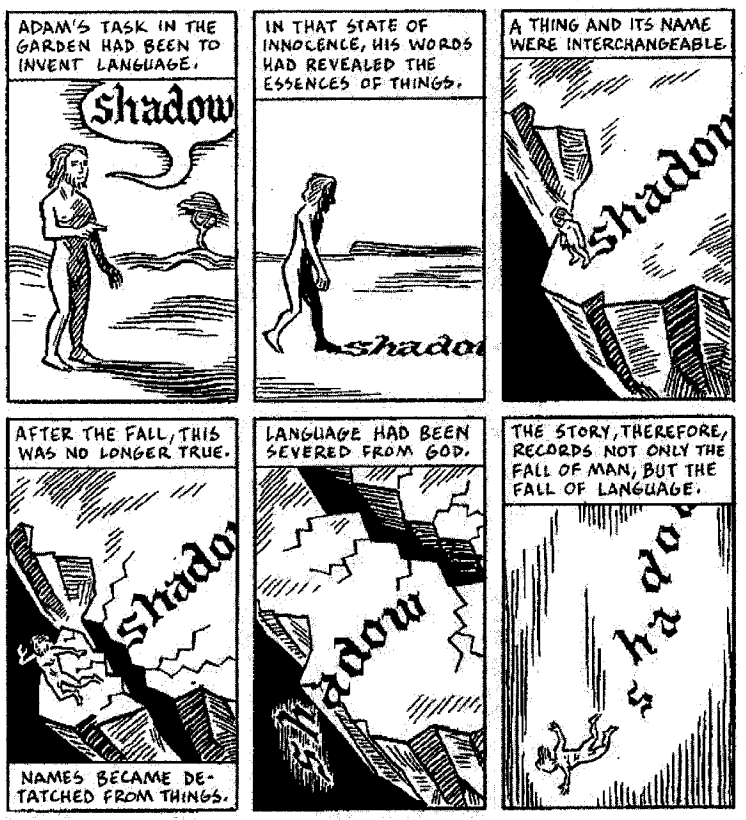
Quinn. He is depicted between two subsequent frames, and thus as unique over time, but the blending of some side-by-side frames into each other erase the rigidity of this convention. Karasik and Mazzucchelli exemplify the ambiguity of identity through repetition when Max Work takes over Daniel Quinn in the handling of the Stillman case:

(Karasik 7)

We can see there a potent instance of Rimbaud's dictum "Je est un autre." Quinn beholds himself through the character of Max Work, but the two occupy the same depicted space. This illustration duplicates the caption "If he lived at all, it was through the imaginary person of Max Work" in the same frame. Here, text and image can be said to be in nearly complete redundancy, if not for the fact that the text is less committed to the ontology of Max Work as a fictional character. In the picture, on the other hand, he exists on the same ontological plane as Quinn, sharing the same depicted space. The picture thus transforms the metaphor into an actual state of affairs within the story. Quinn's identity is split

between the residual Quinn and the overwhelming Work (a pun, and therefore yet another doubling of meaning and identity). The graphic novel version of this situation represents through redundant text and image two redundant beings inhabiting the same space, so that the less useful one goes back to sleep.

Ultimately, the motif of doubling in the *City of Glass* graphic novel leads to the philosophical problem of the adequation between language and objects in the world. It is the major research interest of Stillman Sr., and one which led him to the patient and infinite enumeration of denatured beings in the trashcans of New York, in order to give them a truer name. In the graphic medium, there can be a unique sign for each object:

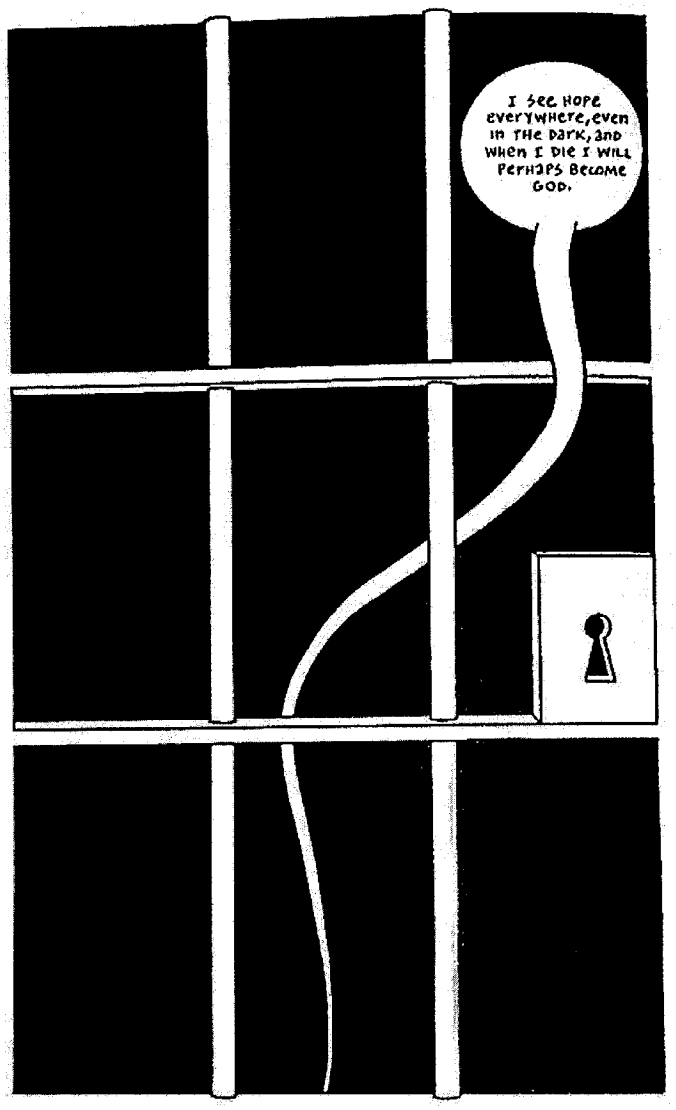


(Karasik 39)

According to the myth, Adam's names were the things themselves, and this adequation was lost after the fall, the *logos* was denied (Shiloh 54). In a linguistic context, this myth represents the anxiety we have about the way in which word match their referents: is Quinn really Paul Auster the detective

simply because he uses the words "Paul Auster the detective" to talk about himself? Do these words denote an entity existing independently of them? These question tie into doubts about identity entertained by the pseudonym-using Quinn, and the episode of Adam before the Fall suggests that their solution was lost. But there is one way in which pictures can solve the discrepancy between a sign and the ever-changing object it represents. Because each depiction of Adam at different moment is pictorially autonomous from the previous one, the Adam at the moment he is walking in Eden is represented in a distinct manner from the Adam at the moment of the Fall. He has, so to speak, a different "noun" to represent him each time.

Here I do not wish to suggest at all that pictures behave like language. If seeing-in is an essential feature of pictures, it is conspicuously absent from linguistic utterances. Rather, I want to point to the poetic logic of the *City of Glass* graphic novel: its medium possesses the means to effortlessly represent as distinct and unique each object at different moments by using distinct pictorial representations. In other words, the graphic novel, by its use of sequences of pictures, can allude to, and solve in its own way the problem of adequacy between sign and object that troubles the post-lapsarian consciousness of Stillman Sr. In this manner, the graphic novel creates a tension between the themes of its story and its own presentation: if only the characters could escape their fiction and see the page on which they are represented, they could perhaps find an answer to their metaphysical problems. This is however not the case, and the authors of the graphic novel themselves seem to consider their medium as a prison for their characters (overleaf):



(Karasik 22)

We see the drama of *City of Glass* unfolding between the bars of representation, and it is fitting to see the denied *logos* of its characters represented not only through language, but also through pictures. Such a treatment is an original addition to Paul Auster's novel, but also one translating into a different medium the same themes.

Intermediate conclusions

Comics, like detective fiction, have been devalued as "not sufficiently" literary, and many answers to such criticism seem to justify this claim to a certain extent. A work of detective fiction such *City of Glass* participates in the literary practice by developing important themes, through creative work and the imaginative engagement of their audience, but also rides the coattails of academia and canonical literature. It richly rewards the literary stance through its perplexing tensions, powerful treatment of the experience of loss and solitude and the uncertainty of self-knowledge, as well as the metaphysical anxiety it expresses. But the explicit subversion of formulaic literature also belies a contingent anxiety towards status. Likewise, the appropriation of academic concepts such as deconstruction is reminiscent of the insistent imitation of classical literature to which the Renaissance poets employed themselves in order to raise their literary status.

By its ability to sustain themes and a humanly interesting content, the graphic novel adaptation of *City of Glass* also rewards the literary stance, and thus ironically responds in a positive manner to criticisms such as those of Fredric Wertham, which devalue comics for their sub-par literariness. However, this graphic novel brushes aside the depreciative comments about text and image redundancy that typically accompany anti-comics positions. First, by capitalizing unabashedly on the singular value of seeing-in afforded by pictures, Karasik and Mazzucchelli show how they can contribute something unique to a literary work. Second, the redundancies between text and image in the graphic novel adaptation of *City of Glass* actually harness existing redundancies within the original story. By reusing and subverting the conventions of the medium of comics, the graphic novel develops and reinterprets the meta-fictional treatment of themes typical of Paul Auster's novel. In a way, the very existence of two *City of Glass* books echoes the motif of doubling and the theme of ambiguous identity at the core of the novel, just like the two similar men in Grand Central Station disrupt Quinn's certitude about the identity of the man he is tailing.

Positing a degree of literariness does not explain the differences between *City of Glass* and the hard-boiled novels it turns inside out, or between Auster's original novel and its graphic adaptation. All of these works can participate in the literary practice, as defined by Lamarque and Olsen. What we can distinguish between them, however, is the degree with which either is successful. A work can be poor, trite, and irrelevant, while another can be profound, insightful, and pertinent, but both remain works of literature. In this respect, the two versions of *City of Glass* fare pretty well.

They also show that pictures and words are not allergic to each other in a work of literature. Both works in fact contain similar pictures. Compatibility between literature and pictures need not strike us as a revolutionary development integrating for the first time the abstractions of language with the perceptual immediacy of images. William Blake produced many memorable instances of such integration, but perceptual means have been a part of literary works long before him. Alliterations, assonance, and rhyme are all tools of poetics that contribute to the literary value of a work, as do the pictures in both versions of *City of Glass*.

As we have seen, a prototypical novel can contain illustrations, and a graphic novel can be appreciated as a *bona fide* work of literature. However, because we can distinguish between the value of pictures and the value of literature, it follows that a graphic novel is not uniquely literary. On top of participating in the development of themes, the value of pictures might serve other ends as well. In the next chapter, I will show what unique value can graphic novels afford.

Notes

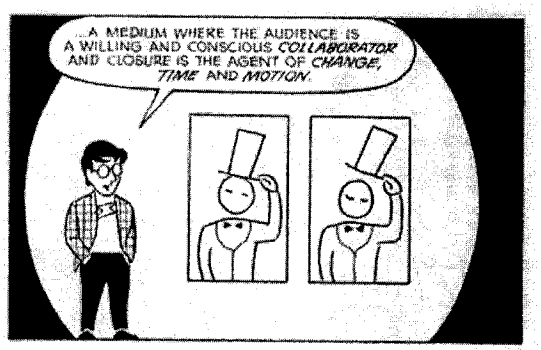
[1] Wertham is however more famous in literary circles through Ralph Ellison's essay "Harlem is Nowhere," which depicts his free mental clinic in Harlem.

[2] In fact an inscription at the Oracle of Delphi.

CHAPTER THREE

Medium and object of appreciation

The comic strip is an exceptionally supple medium, giving play to a variety of talents, to the use of many methods, and it adapts itself to almost any theme.
—Gilbert Seldes,
The Seven Lively Arts, p. 214



—Scott McCloud,
Understanding Comics, p.65

We have seen so far that pictures can contribute to the literary value of a work, while bearing a different value, related to their capacity to afford seeing-in. The preceding chapter thus extended the institutional theory of literature developed by Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen by showing how a particular graphic novel fits within the literary paradigm. Their theory argues that being a work of literature is contingent on affording a particular value, understandable under the auspices of a shared practice of production and appreciation. It is this author's hope that such a position can put some peace in the minds of those worried by the literary status of comics. Even if not every comics can be seen as literary, there is no reason to reject the literary consideration of particular works like the adaptation of *City of Glass* by Karasik and Mazzucchelli. In other words, if there is a difference between *City of Glass* by Paul Auster and its graphic dopplegänger, it is vain to define it as the literature/non-literature dividing line.

In this chapter, I will explain the differences between a prototypical novel and a graphic novel on the basis of their medium. The preceding chapter has

shown that the predominance of text against images was not in fact a relevant feature of literature. Both Auster's *City of Glass* and that of Karasik and Mazzucchelli are created using text and images as well, yet I will show here that important internal and external differences separate them. It should be clear by now that fleshing out these differences will not serve an exclusionary purpose, elevating one to the Empyrean realm of literature and throwing the other on the Gehenna of para-literature. These distinctions have instead a deeper ontological purpose in attempting to flesh out the specificity of graphic novels beyond literariness, and demonstrating the independence of their artistic medium. Their immediate payoff is methodological, by helping a scholar to apprehend, understand, and criticize these works of arts with a more thorough understanding of an artist's accomplishment. Moreover, they will serve as floodgates to a spurious extension of Lamarque and Olsen's theory of literature, by showing which elements of a graphic novel are relevant to literary appreciation, and which ones are not.

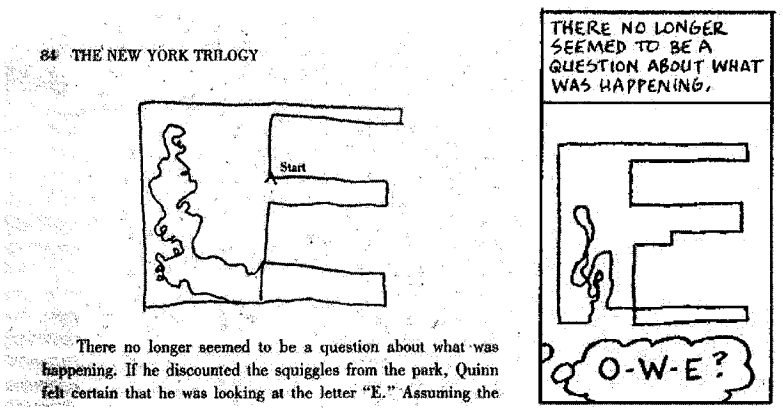
From medium to media

It might be fruitful to think simply of literature as an art with a "pure" medium and of works like *Maus* as works in a "mixed" or "hybrid" medium. Literary works are thus those made only with words, while the hybrid ones combine words and images. Graphic novels would be such hybrid works where images are predominant. But as Jerrold Levinson points out,

> with ingenuity, almost any art form can be conceived so as to appear the combination of simpler artistic strands. String quartets composition can be thought of as writings for trios coupled with writing for solo violin. . . . It is not the intrinsic features of works in a hybrid form that mark them as such. . . . Rather, hybrid status is primarily a *historical* thing, as is, in a way, being a biological hybrid. An art form is a hybrid one in virtue of its development and origin, in virtue of its emergence out of a field of previously existing artistic

> activities and concerns, two or more of which it in some sense combines. (Levinson 5-6)

Levinson's argument implies that a combination of text and image might be perceived as a hybrid form at a certain point in time, but that it could later on be considered a non-hybrid, "pure" artistic form. To posit that graphic novels are simply a hybrid between text and image eschews their consideration as a coherent art form, and in fact does not clarify their nature vis-à-vis more prototypical works of literature. If we compare the same passage from both versions of *City of Glass*, it might be hard to pinpoint what is different between the two versions, if we only use the notion of text and image hybridization.



(Auster 83; Karasik 63)

Both excerpts contain an image that represents a day of peregrinations by Peter Stillman Sr. in the streets of New York. Quinn inscribes them into his notebook, and eventually concludes that their shapes form the text "OWEROFBAB." Both excerpts also use the same text, "there no longer seemed to be a question about what was happening." Finally, they both belong to a larger work possessing literary value. Minor differences between the two excerpts exist in the squiggles making up the letter "E" and in the way Quinn's inference is represented—indirect speech in the former, direct speech in the latter. The Borgesian paradox of Pierre Ménard nevertheless springs to mind: have Karasik and Mazzucchelli simply tried to re-write Auster's novel in the most exacting manner? As was suggested by the discussion of this paradox in the first chapter, the difference

between the prototypical novel and the graphic novel might in fact lay outside the material conditions of the work in a network of conventions governing appreciation. However, there are also particular internal details in each work that warrant differentiation. But we need to think through the notion of "medium" before we can understand these differences.

Joseph Margolis proposes a distinction between "physical" and "artistic" medium. The physical medium is the manifest substrate of a work, oil paint for instance, whereas the artistic medium is the system in which the physical medium is purposefully organized, for instance by articulating lights and shadows in the case of a painting (Margolis 41-2). Because "physical medium" is a rather limited concept to understand certain art forms, David Davies refines further Margolis's analysis by positing instead a "vehicular" medium:

> in the case of much late modern art, the artistic medium may allow the articulation of an artistic statement through the execution of a particular action in a given cultural-historical context. . . . We may adopt the term 'vehicular medium' as a generalization of Margolis' notion of a physical medium to accommodate such works. (Davies 59)

This distinction is minor, but it is a step away from seeing media exclusively as tangible objects (sounds, clay, paper), which would discriminate against certain art forms such as dance, which employs gesture instead of matter. Davies then presents the notion of artistic medium as twofold. It consists in the organized actions of the artist in a vehicular medium, as well as in a set of shared conventions between the artist and its audience, on the basis of which the latter can construe the artist's manipulation as purposeful and meaningful (Davies 60). The artistic medium does not exist only as a system or a structure immanent in the vehicular medium, but also as a shared convention between artist and audience. Finally, Davies is careful not posit too strong a link between vehicular and artistic media: "An artistic medium . . . cannot supervene upon a physical medium, because what is intuitively the *same* material or substrate can be worked in different artistic media" (Davies 58). Davies's remarks point to a

solution to the problem of identifying the medium of certain ambiguous works such as Glenn Ligon's "I am an invisible man," analyzed in the first chapter of the present thesis. Like Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Ligon's work uses a particular sequence of text-tokens, thus the vehicular medium of text. However, that which is on the canvas of Ligon is made of an artistic medium similar to painting or drawing. The gradual accumulation of text creates a visual impression of darkness, whereas the text-tokens of Ellison are interpreted within the literary practice. The case of *City of Glass* and its adaptation is subtler: even though both works use the vehicular media of text and image, it could be the case that they use distinct artistic media despite functioning under the conventions of the literary practice. The spatial acrobatics of Karasik and Mazzucchelli contribute to the literary value, but they may possess their own value as well if they use unique conventions.

What it boils down to is whether "literature" has a unified artistic medium, or many possible ones. Lamarque and Olsen define two conventions at the heart of the literary practice—thematic and creative-imaginative—that must be shared between artist and audience. In Davies's terms, these conventions are part of the artistic medium. They allow the audience to construe the artist's manipulations in the vehicular medium as purposeful and meaningful. A work of literature is thus a set of manipulations in a vehicular medium that are purposeful and meaningful under the creative-imaginative and thematic conventions in order to articulate a particular artistic statement. As the previous chapter has argued, the two versions of *City of Glass* share these conventions, and thus are similar at the level of artistic medium in this respect. Even the value of seeing-in afforded by depiction is shared between the two works, although it is not an essential component of literary value.

They differ however at the level of concepts that identify the work. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Lamarque and Olsen identify three classes of concepts that define a literary work: form, content, and theme. These concepts govern the artist's manipulations in the vehicular medium. For example, creating a sonnet about dying roses can express the futility of erotic love; a play about a

hung jury of twelve men, class conflicts in post-WWII American society; a novella about a train trip across Russia, marriage as an irremediable dead-end for the freedom of men and women. Although a common set of concepts define these works, the particular ways in which they realize form, content, and theme, differ. A poem, a play, or a novel all use distinct forms, and often consider different types of content and themes. Whereas a play most often considers the action of characters over time, it is not uncommon for a poem to simply describe a thing in its human context, as is the case for Arthur Rimbaud's "Buffet." The literary artist, following Davies, can thus manipulate her vehicular medium in a variety of ways, but these varied manipulations all fall under the umbrella of the shared conventions of literary practice that govern their appreciation. The artistic medium of literature is unified at the level of shared understandings between artists and audience, but pluralistic in its poetics, in the particular instantiation of the concepts defining a literary work.

Karasik and Mazzucchelli thus extend literary poetics by employing spatial representations that function within the literary practice. However, their appreciation and understanding is also governed by a shared convention between artist and audience that falls outside those defined by Lamarque and Olsen, prompting us to argue that the graphic novel intersects with the practice of literature, rather than being a strict subset of it. This governing convention distinguishes strongly Auster's *City of Glass* from its adaptation, and defines a non-literary aspect of its artistic medium, which carries as well its own artistic value as we shall later see.

Conventions and the artistic medium of graphic novels

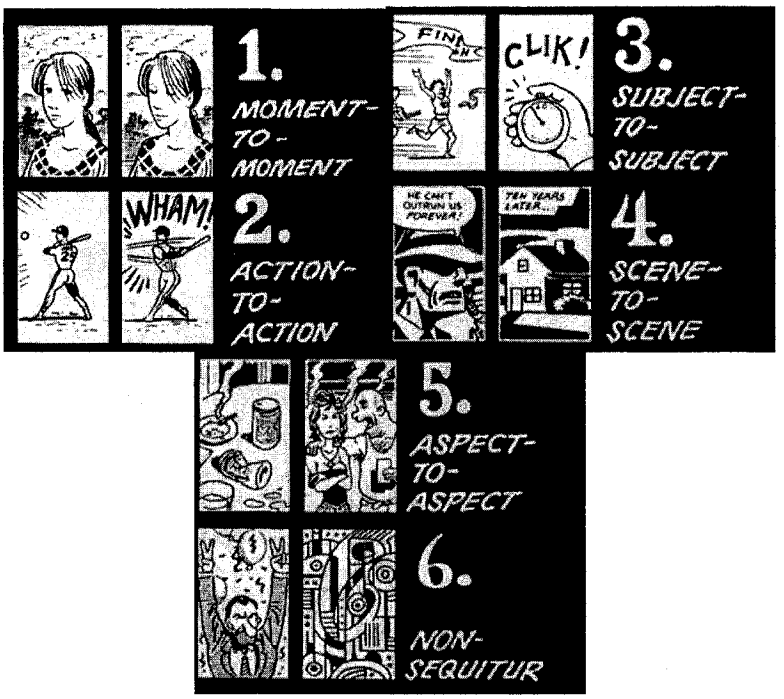
The medium of graphic novels is steeped in the history of comics, and authors themselves have traditionally been more interested in explaining their medium than scholars. As defined by Will Eisner, the basic premise of the graphic novel was to direct comics toward a different course, by emphasizing character depth and thematic development (Weiner 20). Although works such as Phoebe

Gloeckner's *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* take a more prosaic approach by incorporating purely textual sections, the bulk of graphic novels are understandable under the theory of comics (or "sequential art," to borrow Eisner's term). In the Anglo-Saxon tradition, Eisner's definition of a "sequential art" is one of the most influential:

> The format of the comic book presents a montage of both word and image, and the reader is thus required to exercise both visual and verbal interpretative skills. The regimens of art (e.g. perspective, symmetry, brush stroke) and the regimens of literature (e.g. grammar, plot, syntax) become superimposed upon each other. . . . In its most economical state, comics employ a series of repetitive images and recognizable symbols. When these are used again and again to convey similar ideas, they become a language — a literary form, if you will. And it is this disciplined application that creates the 'grammar' of Sequential Art. (Eisner 8)

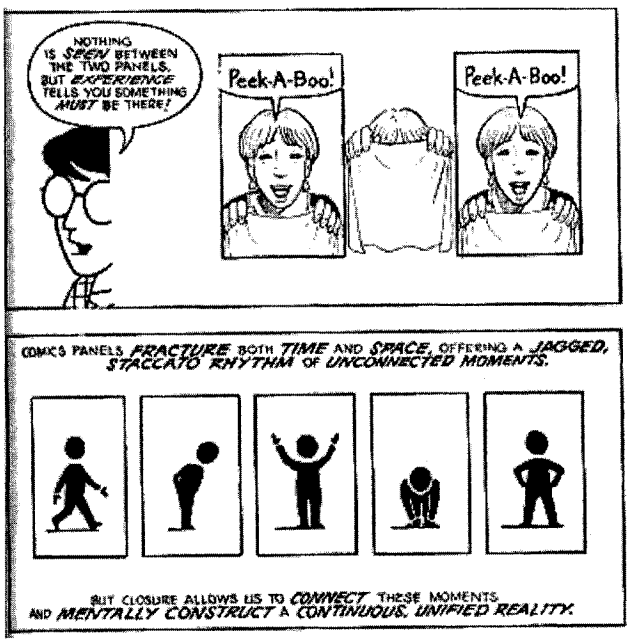
Eisner's definition harnesses together text and image as constitutive of sequential art, but its minimal form involves pictures functioning into a narrative sequence by the use of certain pictorial repetitions. We have already seen that positing a difference between the two *City of Glass* versions on the basis of their use of text and image is a pitfall: both works use the same vehicular media, and would therefore count as two works of sequential art. Eisner's more minimal definition of sequential art however points into another direction for a definition of the artistic medium, that of the relationships images in sequence hold to each other.

Comics author Scott McCloud, refines Eisner's notion of sequential art in his typology of pictorial sequences. A different type of transition is understood for each pair of images in the following examples (overleaf):



(McCloud 74)

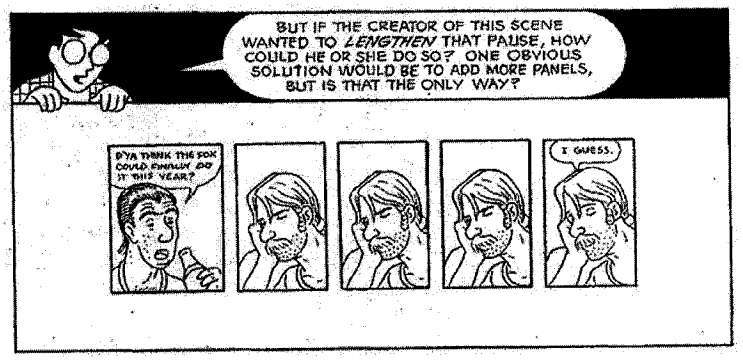
McCloud's goal is to show how sequential pictorial art is a fundamental and universal human practice. It relies on the psychological concept of "closure" whereby an agent constructs a unified representation of reality out of incomplete information:



(McCloud 67)

McCloud's theory of sequential art thus attributes intrinsic properties to the pictures that make them understandable as a narrative sequence. In other words, McCloud argues that we cannot avoid seeing such pictures but as a representation of events unfolding in time, because we possess a fundamental psychological ability to see suitably arranged pictures as representing events unfolding in time. Therefore, this ability should be cross-cultural.

However, there are some problems with such a strong thesis when we compare various cases of pictures in sequence. McCloud gives another example of the translation of temporality in the pictorial sequence by presenting the repetition of an identical image as a means to lengthen the impression of time:



(McCloud 101)

If narration moves forward because of a sequence of distinct images representing distinct moments in time, then a sequence of identical images would indicate a lack of change over time, thus a stillness in plot. Compare these panels with the following work:

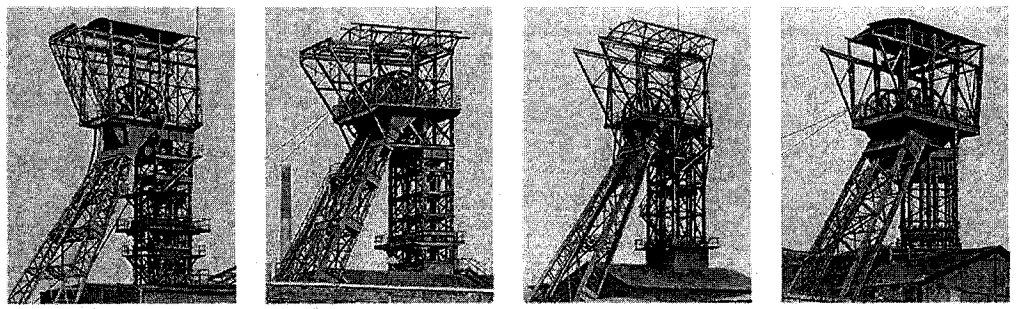


Fig. 3. Photographs of winding towers
by Bernd and Hilla Becher (Becher and Becher 41)

Whereas the series of winding towers by Bernd and Hilla Becher employ "a series of repetitive images and recognizable symbols," most people do not read them as a still moment in an event-driven narrative: "we should think here more of the classification systems used in the natural sciences and morphological studies" (Zweite 17). These pictures function either as a catalogue, a map of industrial artifacts, an organization of items according to features, but not as an event-driven narrative. Perhaps one could read them as a narrative depicting the morphing of a winding tower into another one, given the small differences that distinguish each photograph. This would be a challenging and perhaps interesting way of looking at them, but it is not a common one, as their critical commentary suggests. That a real psychological process allows us to transform a series of images into a continuous narrative is maybe not an outlandish proposition: after all we depend on language comprehension to understand *Ulysses* and on edge perception to appreciate Cubism. But McCloud goes one step too far by arguing that "comics IS closure" (67). If so, closure as defined by McCloud would also apply to the case of the Bechers photographs.

Thierry Groensteen, in his *Système de la bande dessinée*, proposes a conception of sequential art similar to that of McCloud or Eisner, but does so via a more abstract formulation, which dispenses with the problem of proving the existence of an underlying psychological process. He names "solidarité iconique" (which I will translate here as "conjoined pictures") the underlying principle behind all sequential art, a necessary, if not sufficient condition to define this medium:

> On définira comme solidaires les images qui, participant d'une suite, présentent la double caractéristique d'être séparées (cette précision pour écarter les images uniques enfermant en leur sein une profusion de motifs ou d'anecdotes) et d'être plastiquement et sémantiquement surdéterminées par le fait même de leur coexistence *in praesentia*. . . . Il nous suffira qu'on ne puisse concevoir de bande dessinée ne vérifiant pas la loi générale énoncée, celle de la solidarité iconique. La condition nécessaire, sinon suffisante, pour qu'on

> puisse parler de bande dessinée, c'est que les image soient plusieurs, et en quelque façon corrélées. (Groensteen 21-23)[1]

Groensteen's definition is broad, and purposefully not exhaustive enough to describe in totality the medium of sequential art, but it narrows down the inescapable fact that images are not organized in the same way in an illustrated prototypical novel than they are in a graphic novel. His definition also admits that the links uniting pictures need not be defined at a psychologically deep level. For instance, conventions existing at the same ontological level as those regulating the literary practice can govern conjoined pictures.

If closure really were the primary psychological processes we must tap into for understanding comics, as McCloud argues, we would still need a governing convention on top of it to indicate that its application is appropriate or not, as the case of the Bechers photographs suggest. Even if closure is not necessary in each instance of sequential art—and this is an argument I must leave to those studying the cognitive aspect of comics reading—a distinction between conjoined and non-conjoined picture sequences still requires from the reader to recognize an appropriate intention to this effect by the author. Something as simple as the force of habit can be sufficient: very few photographers actually create works using such conjoined pictures,[2] and a viewer can use this statistical regularity heuristically to interpret an ambiguous work similar to that of the Bechers. Other cues such as allusions to other works that employ the same conventions can subtly direct the attention of the audience toward proper appreciation. A similar strategy applies with respect to certain works of literature demanding a particular mode of interpretation. For example, classical allusions in *Ulysses* point the reader toward the *Odyssey*-like structure of the novel. It would be an oversimplification to claim as McCloud does that we understand comics without the need for a few guidelines, even though we were tapping into one or many fundamental psychological mechanisms for doing so. Reading a text is as much "automatic" for the literate than reading comics is for an audience used to them, yet appreciating literature requires governing conventions, and appreciating comics requires other ones.

In addition to the basic convention of conjoined pictures, defining the artistic medium of sequential art also requires historical awareness. Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle, like the above authors, uses conjoined pictures as a minimal requirement of comics, but he also narrows the definition of the medium to a particular historical context. McCloud, for example, tends to read works of art like the Bayeux tapestry or Egyptian sacred paintings as instances of sequential art (McCloud 12). Despite its similarities with such works, sequential art consists in "un faisceau de codes plus ou moins spécifiques, qu'il est, en effet, possible de retrouver tout au long de l'histoire de la figuration, mais dont la systématicité et le fonctionnement résultent d'une recherche liée à des impératifs directement ou indirectement commerciaux" (Fresnault-Deruelle 16).[3] In other words, we can find at various moments in history sequences of pictures that create a narrative, but this mere fact is not sufficient to argue that they use the artistic medium of sequential art. Without a particular set of contracts between artists and audience, there are no graphic novels, even if pictures in a work are conjoined. That the conventions for reading comics are more regular between different works and artists suggests their consideration as part of an artistic medium, more than as being an author's idiosyncrasies as is the case for the Homeric schema of *Ulysses*. It is therefore necessary to find a stronger set of similarities between the Bayeux tapestry and *Maus* than the mere fact of their use of pictorial sequences. Otherwise, our definition of sequential art may overreach to works like the Bechers' photographs. The burden of the proof resting with McCloud is to show the regularity of the conventions of sequential art between modern and putative ancient instances.

We can now see that one fundamental distinction between the medium of prototypical novels and that of graphic novels is not the relationship therein between text and images, but rather the relationship between images themselves. The few pictures in Auster's novel are not conjoined, unlike those in the graphic novel of Karasik and Mazzucchelli. It is of course important to note that the pictures of the *City of Glass* novel form a certain coherent sequence, insofar as Daniel Quinn's understand them to be the letters of a word. But they lose thereby

their status as spatially unified representations to become alphabetical letters, arbitrary symbols for representing language. This ambiguity between their status as sequence of pictures versus sequence of letters follows perhaps from an allusion to sequential art in Auster's novel, but it would betray more an attitude of doubt and playfulness towards its artistic conventions, as he does with detective fiction, than their fulfilment.

The present discussion has not exhausted the list of shared understandings that govern the artistic media of literature and sequential art, but it has proposed that a fundamental convention governing the understanding of pictures distinguishes the prototypical novel from the graphic novel. Conjoined pictures do not automatically create a narration, and the transitions enumerated by McCloud require a cue to be understood. For instance, the "moment-to-moment" transition (no. 1) could function under a different convention as the juxtaposed portraits of two twin sisters in a Bechers-inspired typology; the seedy bar scenes in the fifth transition could be happening in different bars; the supposedly non-sequitur sequence between Nixon and a Cubist painting (no. 6) could in fact function metaphorically. The convention of sequential art here outlined is independent from those governing literature as argued by Lamarque and Olsen. We can conclude that what separates the two *City of Glass* from each other is neither their literary status, nor their vehicular media, but one of the shared understanding governing their artistic medium.

Medium, effort, and value

If we have two literarily valuable works that differ significantly with respect to the artistic medium in which they are produced, then we must concur that the definition of literature offered by Lamarque and Olsen is pluralistic. By this, I mean that "literature" is a concept covering more than a single artistic medium. Compatibility between the core conventions of literary value and the other conventions governing the artistic medium of a work is paramount to its consideration as a work of literature, but a particular work of literature may be

made according to certain conventions that are not universal to every other literary work. A work of sequential art can possess literary value, but a novel possessing literary value as well does not need to be governed by the conventions of sequential art.

There are, however, two obstacles between which the Odysseus-scholar must navigate to appreciate lucidly the value of a work of sequential art. Charybdis consists in the aesthetic prescriptions on the proper use of a particular medium: that a given medium is more suitable than another for a particular content. The present argument instead maintains that using sequential art to make a work of literature is not a perversion of purpose. Scylla is the restricted literary understanding of graphic novels. A work of sequential art may also be a work of literature, but not every work of sequential art is literary. Non-literary conventions can also bring with them their own value, and we should thus not limit ourselves to the literary appreciation of artworks like graphic novels for their full understanding. We must also consider the possibility that a work may fulfill the conventions of sequential art without fulfilling those of literature at all.

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoön* is the paramount formulation of Charybdis. It argues for the particular expressive potential of media between painting and poetry. According to this argument, while we contemplate painting, we must rely on our memory to understand poetry. Because we contemplate painting for an indeterminate period of time, it must hold our interest by refraining from depicting a complete scene, and leave a certain part of the work's meaning to the imagination of the spectator (Lessing 20). In contrast, poetry does not describe things visibly, so that no amount of description can impinge on our imaginative response. Because it is experienced transiently, even though in it "a garment is not impervious to our eyes" (Lessing 38), our attention will be attracted by something else later on and we are not overwhelmed by complete representations. It is therefore proper for a painter to focus on a single moment, one that occurs just before the paroxysm of action, so that we are not overwhelmed by a constant display of intensity (Lessing 20). Lessing exemplifies his reasoning by comparing visual and poetic representations of the

attack of the priest Laocoön by serpents, who had tried to alert the Trojans to the trickery of the horse they receive from the Greeks. In retribution, Poseidon sends two sea serpents to strangle him and his two sons. Whereas poems represent the entire agony of Laocoön and his suffering howls, depictions focus instead on the moment when he is just about to scream. Virgil, for instance, represents the scene in book two of the *Aeneid* from start to finish:

> From Tenedos, on the calm sea, twin snakes—
> I shiver to recall it—endlessly
> Coiling, uncoiling, swam abreast for shore
> . . . . . .
> They slid until they reached Laocoön.
> Each snake eveloped one of his two boys,
> Twining about and feeding on the body.
> Next they ensnared the man as he ran up
> With weapons: coils like cable looped and bound him
> . . . . . .
> Drenched in slime, his head-bands black with venom,
> Sending to heaven his appalling cries
> Like a slashed bull escaping from an altar.
> (Virgil II, 280-3, 91-5, 99-301)

In contrast, a visual representation such as the sculpture[4] "Laocoön and his sons" (overleaf) focuses on the moment immediately preceding the priest's "appalling cries":

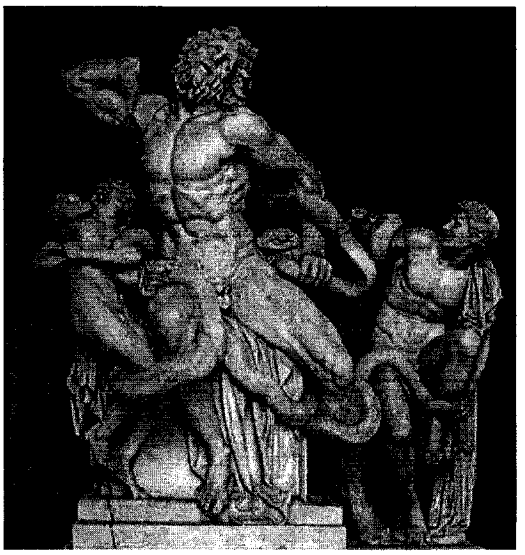


Fig. 4. "Laocoön and his sons"
Public domain photograph (Nguyen)

Lessing concludes, "It remains true that succession of time is the province of the poet just as space is that of the painter" (Lessing 91). This prescription forces poets to translate into their medium anything that is not germane to it, as seen in the famous description of Achilles's shield in the *Iliad*:

> And he forged on the shield two noble cities filled
> with mortal men. With weddings and wedding feasts in one
> and under glowing torches they brought forth the brides
> from the women's chambers, marching through the streets
> while choir on choir the wedding song rose high
> and the young men came dancing, whirling round in rings
> and among them flutes and harps kept up their stirring call—
> women rushed to the doors and each stood moved with wonder.
> (Homer 483)

The images on the shield forged by Hephaestos become a narrative in the hands of Homer, and like the various representations of Laocoön's story, prompt Lessing to consider that poetry's proper object is an action in time whereas painting's is a moment represented in space.

Although it may seem more appropriate to represent a progressive action through prose or poetry than through painting, the fact remains that Lessing's

formulation of medium-specificity is more of a prescription than a fundamental constraint. That many works of literature use language to describe events unfolding in time should not appear as an essential feature of literary art, but rather as the result of tradition, taste, or poetics. In counterpoint to the *Laocoön*'s prescription, Noël Carroll notes

> Even when analysts are not concerned with saying how a medium should be used but are only attempting to describe the unique, artistically pertinent features of a medium, I suspect that they are really speaking of styles within the medium. If we are told, for example, that temporal manipulation is the artistically relevant, unique feature of film, our informant clearly is thinking of film in relation to certain styles of filmmaking. (Carroll "Specificity" 18)

It is clear how the literary aims of the graphic novel authors fit into an attitude of suspicion towards the kind of doctrine expressed by Lessing: they do not want their medium to be considered as fit only for trivial stories of spandex-clad superheroes saving buxom innocents from the claws of cosmic supervillains, even though it had been used for so many such stories. Using both the conventions of the literary practice and of sequential art does not mutually depreciate either; if anything, the graphic adaptation of *City of Glass* shows that they are strongly compatible and actually reinforce each other. A claim such as "A work is literary only if it uses the linguistic medium exclusively or essentially" (Genette 2) implies therefore that only the linguistic vehicular medium can contribute something to the appreciation of a literary work, and also define its very nature. In other words, there would be a fundamental difference between different media in how they constraint the nature of the meaning they transmit. But as Carroll suggests, it is unclear how one could mark sharp boundaries between the expressive potential of text and that of image. One should not therefore transform Lessing's aesthetic prescription into a foundational truth.

Evaluating graphic novels requires awareness that the specific conventions of sequential art are not maladapted to the purpose of creating a

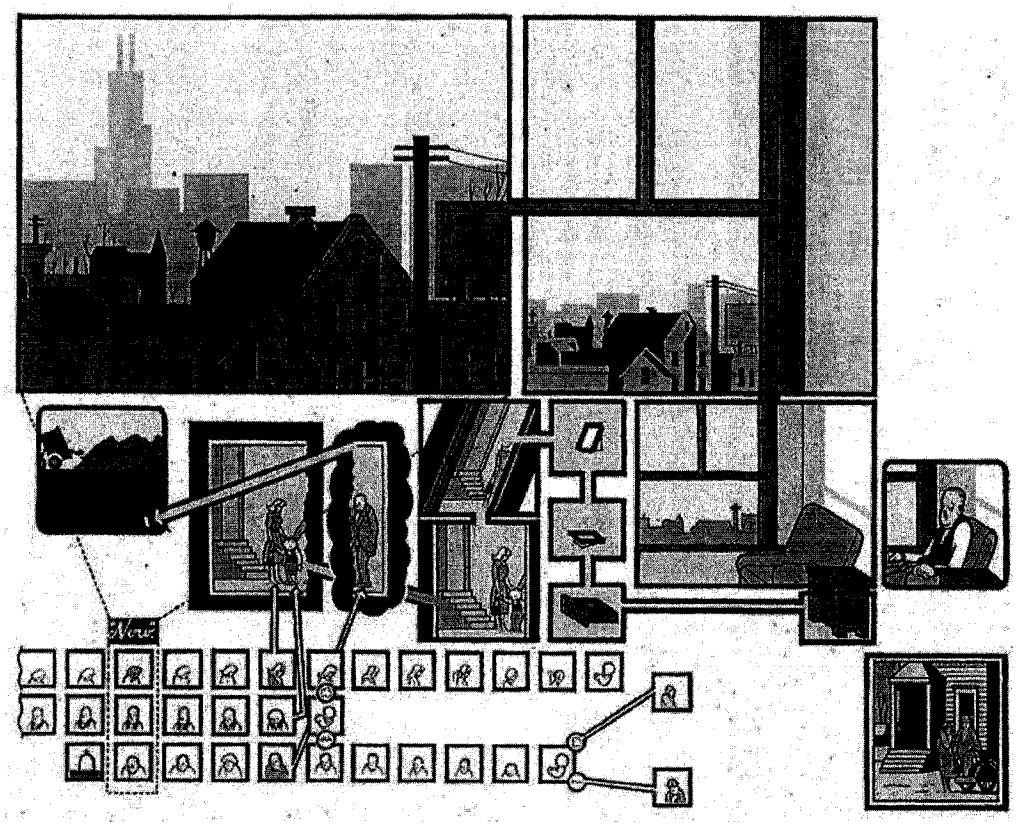
work possessing literary value, but is literary value the end of appreciation in the case of a graphic novel? To avoid falling into the trap of our Scylla, we must first think through the process of appreciation. David Davies defines appreciation of artworks not as the appreciation of an object, but as the appreciation of a process.

> Artworks, I have maintained, come into existence through the intentional manipulations of a vehicular medium . . . . In our attempts to appreciate the artwork brought into existence through such activity, we are interested in the product of that activity in virtue of both the artistic statement articulated and the manner in which that statement has been articulated. Since the latter depends upon both the manipulations carried out in the vehicular medium and the shared understandings that the artist is able to utilize in performing those manipulations, our appreciative interest in the product of the artist's activity encompasses three interrelated elements: an articulated artistic statement, a vehicular medium, and an artistic medium. In brief, then, the focus of appreciation in our engagement with an artwork is *an artistic statement as articulated in an artistic medium realized in a vehicle.* (Davies 60)

The use of the term "focus" is important here, because the focus is not identical to the work. The focus is the audience's epistemological entry point into appreciation of the work, like a printed codex or a sculpture in a museum, but the work itself is "a performance whereby a particular focus is specified" (Davies 81). The role of medium in art for Davies is thus to bear the trace of an activity. Or perhaps, in Walter Benjamin's more poetical terms: "The work is the death mask of its conception" (Benjamin 81). The proposition "*Maus* is a good work of art" is therefore similar to "Art Spiegelman has done a good job." Artistic value, following Davies, implies an appreciation of the artist's effort in a given artistic medium.

In the context of graphic novels, given that we can conceive of a particular convention governing their production and appreciation that is not

necessarily subservient to literary value, we should consider the possibility that there is a particular value to the effort of an artist working in the medium of sequential art. Defining appreciable effort in an artistic medium is however a subtler task than simply positing as Lessing does that all poems should strive to represent actions in time. Many poems that are held in high literary esteem such as Rimbaud's *Illuminations*, to name but one case, are overtly descriptive and represent little or no actions in time. I will therefore limit myself here to argue for the successful use of sequential art in a particular case, rather than presenting a rigid universal rule in the manner of Lessing. Consider the following passage from Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth*:



(Ware 40)

The rather complex network of images in sequence here relates the genesis subsequent breakup of the family of Jimmy Corrigan (pictured alone in the comfy chair on the right). The bottom sequences of tiny pictures are read from

right to left. They start with the paternal grandparents of Jimmy, whose father's birth is illustrated by the mingling of the grandparents' sperm and egg. At the same time, two rows above, Jimmy's mother grows up from baby to adult. When both father and mother reach adulthood, they conceive Jimmy, whose development is illustrated in the center row. Linked to these characters' ontogenesis is the photograph representing the three of them at the time of Jimmy's childhood. His parents' divorce is illustrated by the ripped photograph, the portion representing the father having been thrown away by the mother in a landfill, pictured on the left. What remains of the photograph is now in a frame hidden in the drawer of the table besides the couch in which the adult Jimmy sits. Finally, a "Now" filet encircles the depictions of Jimmy, his mother, and his father at the moment at which the story is told, which sums up the state of the Corrigan family just before the death of Jimmy's father: their marriage ended up in divorce, the father's picture was thrown away, and the rest of it sits in a drawer besides Jimmy. Not only does Ware represent the present state of the characters in a Cubist-like manner, unifying many divergent points of view and many disparate details, he also digresses through past and future to elucidate the trajectory on which each person and artifact exists. We are shown for instance that Jimmy's father will die before his mother does. In McCloudian terms, Ware synthesizes together "moment-to-moment" transitions (those that concern the evolution of a scene over time) with "aspect-to-aspect" transitions (those that concern the various simultaneous aspect of a single scene at a moment in time).

The story of the Corrigan family is a technical tour de force, but it is also a compact and elegant use of sequential art's conventions that shows how the past weighs heavily on Jimmy, and how he cannot disentangle himself from it. In a manner reminiscent of the geological layers in the soil, Ware's masterful manipulation of his medium creates both a static map and a continuous narrative of the interlocked moments in time that constitute the bedrock of present life. By witnessing all the layers of time at once, we as reader achieve a perspective similar to the medieval concept of *aevum*: "the durative state of the human soul when drawn out of the pure succession of events in earthly time, it is raised up to

the realization of its own wholeness and perfection by coming into contact with the divine presence" (Nolan 39). Though we might not literally touch the divine, we are drawn out of the pure succession of events in earthly time indeed.

The value in this achievement is not a beautiful experience or pleasurable sensation created by an artifact, but instead one that is akin to one that we attribute to record-breakers in competitive sports. Chris Ware has articulated a whole family situation, birth, death, love, separation, and indifference across time and space in one unified complex sequence that capitalizes on the conventions of spatial representations of time typical of sequential art. This passage also possesses literary value because it addresses so many perennial themes at once in a manner that is creatively dazzling, but if it were employed instead to explain the history of a building's renovation, it would lose its literary value without losing the particular value derived from the mastery of sequential art.

Intermediate conclusions

By separating literary value from its compatible, yet distinct consort derived from sequential art in a graphic novel, it might seem that the specter of hybrid media reappears like an uncanny annoyance: if a graphic novel possesses literary value and that special, as yet unnamed value, it is therefore a hybrid, unlike a novel, which possesses only literary value. It is not however the case that literary works are devoid of other values. The anonymous Middle English poem *Pearl* for example contains a good deal of moral and theological instruction, and it is not outlandish for a Christian reader to derive enlightening moral teachings from it. Likewise, George Orwell's *1984* is a useful starting point in high school classrooms for introducing the notion of totalitarianism. And *Maus* has earned its share of laurels for the talent with which it renders the historical circumstances of the Holocaust. Perhaps all works of art are hybrids then, and it is not possible to make a work of literature that is not historically, morally, or otherwise relevant in a non-literary manner as well. But though the heart lives not without

the bloodstream and neural circuits of the organism, it can also be understood and studied in isolation. Artworks might be similar organisms that interweave various media, yet we can still pinpoint when they achieve something literary, or something morally worthy, or something worthy as sequential art.

The various possible strands of inquiry into the medium of graphic novels show that they are not a strict subset of literature, and that to study them as such will not exhaust their significance. Conversely, literature itself is a more abstract conception that many theorists have believed it to be. It is perhaps more appropriate to consider it as the particular aspect of a given artwork rather than as a concept that defines it in totality. It has its origin in works that seldom integrated pictures, but it is not exclusively textual. It is a good shortcut for referring to novels or poems, but it remains nonetheless a shortcut. If artists continually and steadily produce works using the medium of sequential art that also possess literary value, we might eventually come to see graphic novels as prototypical works of literature, and change the extension of our common vocabulary accordingly. Even though the Greeks did not call Sophocles's tragedies "literature," we do so without reserve and without fear of anachronism. If we can present convincing evidence of continuity between Sophocles's works and the two *City of Glass*, then we should not reject the notion of literature, even when scholars employ "literature" to describe works that do not fit the majority's definition of it.

Notes

[1] "We shall define as conjoined pictures those which, being part of a sequence, present the twofold characteristic of being separated (this precision purports to exclude standalone pictures containing themselves a profusion of motifs or plot events) and of being also pictorially and semantically determined by the particular fact of their coexistence. . . . It will suffice us to say for the present argument that we cannot conceive of sequential art without fulfilling this general law of conjoined pictures. The necessary, if not sufficient, condition for defining sequential art is that pictures be many, and correlated in some manner" (my translation).

[2] Duane Hanson and William Wegman are two famous examples.

[3] "A network of more or less specific codes that in fact one can find at many moments in the history of pictorial representation, but whose systemic organization and functioning result from a directly or indirectly commercially-minded research" (my translation).

[4] This sculpture was not yet discovered by the time Lessing wrote *Laocoön* and is included here only to provide an illustration of his argument on visual and verbal representations.

CONCLUSION

Most of the argument presented in this thesis on the literary aspect of graphic novels rests on the analysis of *Paul Auster's City of Glass*, a graphic novel that adapts a prototypical novel. It is nowhere implied in this argument that a graphic novel can be literary only because it piggybacks on existing works of literature. Nor should we consider being published in book format the guarantee of any literary value. Appropriate participation in a practice is not mimicry, insofar as graphic novels actually extend and enrich this practice. Although literature is etiologically related to works making little use of pictures, it is not normatively non-pictorial. Literary value is a property of works, not a property of texts, and applies to an artistic medium rather than to a vehicular medium.

Graphic novels, as a species of comics, use the artistic medium of sequential art, which possesses its own value. Mastering sequential art is not an intrinsically literary accomplishment, but the example of works such as *Maus*, the adaptation of *City of Glass*, or *Jimmy Corrigan* demonstrates how it can be. We should not think of graphic novels as fundamentally distinct in kind from other comics (or *bandes dessinées*, or mangas), but as an umbrella term for works possessing both the literary aspect and the sequential art aspect. "Hybrid" is however an infelicitous appellation for them, because even the putatively "pure" or "non-hybrid" works of literature are also plural in the values they can afford, artistic or otherwise. The ontology of art forms should perhaps follow the model of Mendeleev's periodic table of elements rather than erecting borders between the nation-states of Literature and Comics.

Awards and accolades have attracted scholarly and popular attention to the quality works produced in the medium of sequential art. More criticism is however needed to further refine our understanding of what kind of artistic achievement a work like *Jimmy Corrigan* constitutes. In this respect, the problem is similar to the one faced by photography: the talent of someone who creates a picture by pressing a shutter release is often said to pale in comparison with that of those who spend months of effort in painting a canvas. Likewise, an

artist who makes works of literature without appearing to agonize painstakingly over the meaning of words by drawing pictures instead may seem like someone who takes shortcuts. The "woodcut novels" of Lynd Ward or Frans Masereel constitute an excellent terrain for exploring this question. Practically wordless, these works are series of woodcuts or wood engravings telling a continuous story. The familiar elements of plot, character, and themes are applicable therein, and approaching them from a literary point of view may yield exciting insights for the theory of literature.

Because literature as defined by Lamarque and Olsen is a practice, it follows that empirical studies could inform their theory. They uncover the logic of production and appreciation of literary works, but a host of contingent factors also influence the critical decisions of the parties involved. Ideological criticism has long argued against the importance of certain canonical literary works as resulting from biases held by those in positions of power. It must be considered whether the logic of literary value is in fact consistent independently of who canonizes which works. The critical importance of particular literary works has varied over time, and the masterpieces of an era sometimes act as foil to the subsequent era. One possible and recently very popular conclusion, as Terry Eagleton reminds us, is to discredit the entire notion of literature as inexorably contingent. Another conclusion is to argue that the disagreement rests on the value of individual works, but not on the logic of valuation. In this thesis, I have argued for the latter thesis, by exemplifying the continuity between apparently disparate works possessing literary value. *Maus* and other similar works force us to make sense of literature and organize it in a meaningful way, for their understanding is deficient without a proper concept of literature. More extensive evidence on the behaviour of involved parties could thus refine further this analysis, and give a more complex picture of the practice of literature, its governing conventions, and adopted stances.

Although conventions govern and orient appreciation of sequential art, the study of its cognitive underpinnings is an equally fertile area of scholarship. Because of the importance of literacy, a considerable amount of scientific

literature has studied the acquisition of reading abilities. But as the second chapter has shown, the same impetus has also discredited the consumption of comics as harmful for literacy. Revisiting this debate is necessary as we change our attitudes towards comics. Moreover, little is known about the cognitive processes involved in creating a unified understanding of conjoined pictures in comparison to the amount of research devoted to single depictions. Likewise, the special case of understanding in a unified way sequences of pictures with text merits similar attention.

Finally, we should not see the graphic novel movement of the recent years as a watershed separating the old and non-literary comics from the new literary ones. Historical and archival research can guide us in exploring the various forms in which the medium of sequential art embraced literary practice.

—Michael Kupperman, from
Tales Designed to Thrizzle #1

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