

CHAPTER 2

IMAGERY

'Comics' deal with two major communicating devices, words and images. Admittedly this is an arbitrary separation. But, since in the modern world of communication they are treated as independent disciplines it seems valid. Actually, they are derivatives of a single origin and in the skillful employment of words and images lies the expressive potential of the medium.

This special mix of two distinct forms is not new. Their juxtaposition has been experimented with from earliest times. The inclusion of inscriptions employed as statements by the people depicted in medieval paintings was generally abandoned after the 16th century. Thereafter the efforts by the artists who sought to convey statements that went beyond decoration or portraiture were confined to facial expressions, postures, and symbolistic backdrops. The use of inscriptions reappeared in broadsheets and popular publications in the 18th century. Now the artists who dealt in story-bearing art for the mass audience sought to create a gestalt, some cohesive language, as the vehicle for the expression of a complexity of thoughts, sounds, actions, and ideas in a sequenced arrangement separated by boxes. This stretched the capabilities of simple imagery. In the process the modern narrative artform, which we call comics (and the French call *Bande Dessinee*) evolved.

IMAGERY AS A COMMUNICATOR

Comprehension of an image requires a commonality of experience. This demands of the sequential artist an understanding of the reader's life experience if his message is to be understood. An interaction has to develop because the artist is evoking images stored in the minds of both parties.

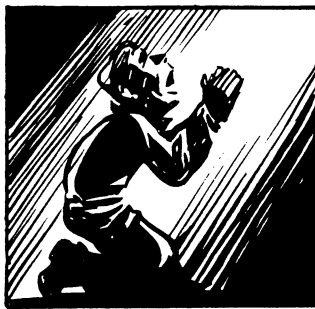
For the purposes of illustration let us follow the progression of a single expression from ancient usage to the modern comic strip. The ancient Egyptian hieroglyph for the idea of worship was the symbol shown below and which the Chinese similarly depicted.

Egyptian Chinese

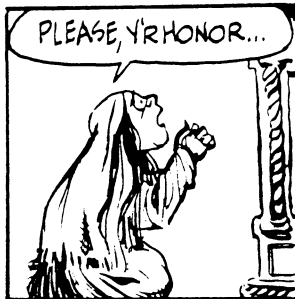


A rough example of the effect that 'calligraphic' style has on the basic worship symbol as might be used in comics.

In the modern comic strip the 'pictograph' for worship would be conveyed with calligraphic style variations. Through lighting or 'atmosphere' it could be modified in emotional quality. Finally, coupled with words, it would form a precise message to be understood by the reader.



Here the use of 'atmospheric' lighting subtly alters the emotional nuance of the 'worship symbol' in each panel.



... The underlying symbolic posture is given verbal and visual amplification. Dialogue, visually familiar objects (such as spears, architectural elements and costume) and facial expressions, convey precise emotional messages.

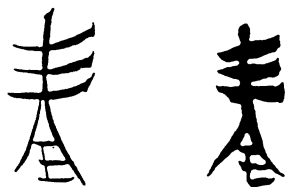
The success or failure of this method of communicating depends upon the ease with which the reader recognizes the meaning and emotional impact of the image. Therefore, the skill of the rendering and the universality of form chosen is critical. The style and the appropriateness of technique become part of the image and what it is trying to say.

LETTERS AS IMAGES

Words are made up of letters. Letters are symbols that are devised out of images which originate out of familiar forms, objects, postures and other recognizable phenomena. So, as their employment becomes more sophisticated, they become simplified and abstract.

In the development of Chinese and Japanese pictographs, a welding of pure visual imagery and a uniform derivative symbol took place. Ultimately, the visual image became secondary and the execution of the symbol alone became the arena of style and invention. The art of calligraphy emerged from this simple rendering of symbols and ascended to become a technique which, in its individuality, evoked beauty and rhythm. In this way, calligraphy added another dimension to the use of the pictograph. There is here a certain similarity to the modern comic strip if one considers the effect the cartoonist's style has upon the character of the total product.

In Chinese calligraphy the style of the brushstroke confines itself to beauty of execution. This is not unlike the style of a ballerina executing the same choreography as her predecessor but in a style that is, at once, unique and expressive of greater dimension. In comic art, the addition of style and the subtle application of weight, emphasis and delineation combine to evoke beauty and message.



Chinese letter or pictograph rendered in two styles of brushstroke.

Letters of a written alphabet, when written in a singular style, contribute to meaning. This is not unlike the spoken word, which is affected by the changes of inflection and sound level.

It is here that the expressive potential of the comic artist is in the sharpest focus. After all, this is the art of graphic story-telling. The codification becomes, in the hands of the artist, an alphabet with which to make an encompassing statement that weaves an entire tapestry of emotional interaction.

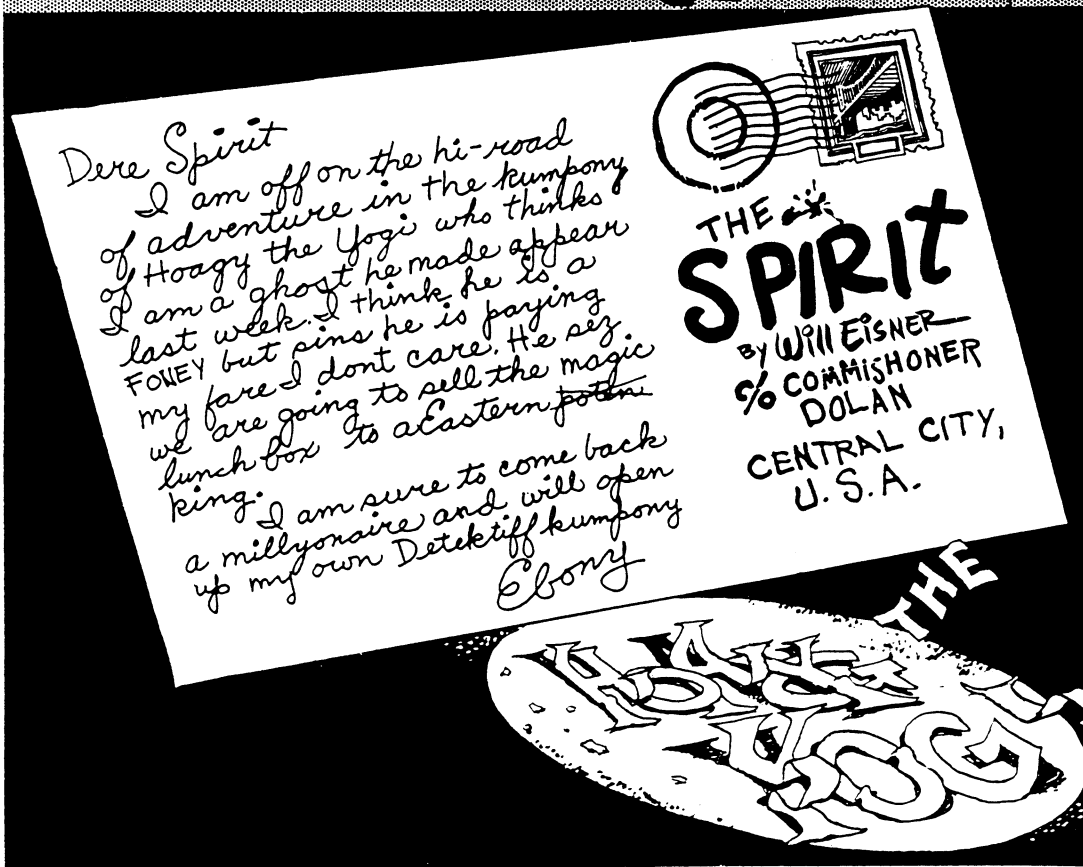
By the skilled manipulation of this seemingly amorphous structure and an understanding of the anatomy of expression, the cartoonist can begin to undertake the exposition of stories that involve deeper meanings and deal with the complexities of human experience.



This basic symbol, derived from a familiar attitude, is amplified by words, costume, background and interaction (with another symbolic posture) to communicate meanings and emotion.

IMAGES WITHOUT WORDS

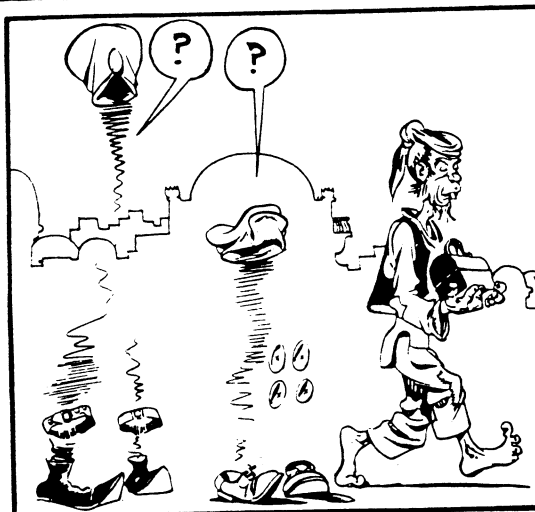
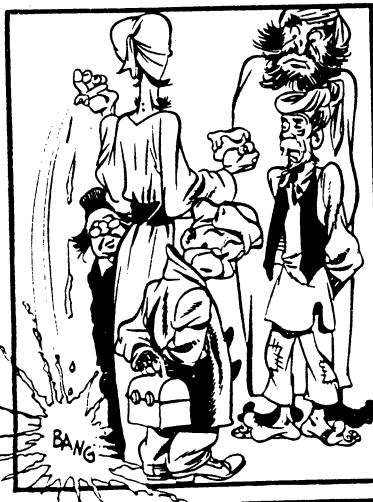
It is possible to tell a story through imagery alone without the help of words. The following *Spirit* story "HOAGY THE YOGI, Part 2" (first published March 23, 1947), executed entirely in pantomime, is an attempt to exploit imagery in the service of expression and narrative. The absence of any dialogue to reinforce action serves to demonstrate the viability of images drawn from common experience.



The postcards used here are meant to convey an element in the story that is as "visual" as the images of people. They are only peripherally narrative.



Words like "BANG" are used to add sounds, a dimension not really available to the printed medium.



Symbols like \$ and ?? are used as thoughts rather than speech

The post card and the text on it is at once a symbol and a narrative bridge. It is important here because it is necessary that the rhythm of pantomime, a visual language, flow undisturbed.



The changes of scenery serve to convey location.

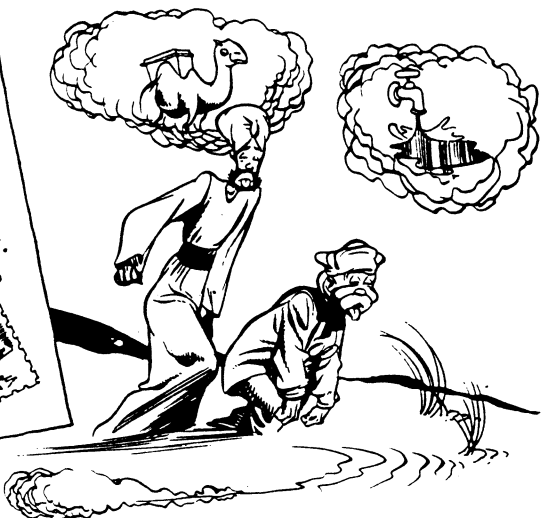



The rate of speed at which the action moves 'forces' the reader to supply the dialogue. It is a phenomenon of comic strip reading that seems to work well.



Balloons, here, are confined to thoughts which are conveyed by images inside them.

Dave Spirit
I guess you are surprised to find this comes from Arabia. We are on our way to the Shiak of Arabee to sell him the box.. He advertized in the papers that he will pay 1 million pezozas for it. We are entering the desert which is full of mirages.
Ebony
P.S. EIERMENS HIS KINDA WATGE
DON'T BELIEVE THAT WE AINT SEEN ONE FOR A WEEK.



Commonly recognized images taken out of familiar experience convey action (footprints) and time (the moon).





Facial expressions affecting the narrative require close-ups



The door label and the position of the hat suspended in the speed stream are narrative devices. The clock on the wall fixes the lapse of time.





In any pantomime, expression and gesture must be exaggerated in order to be read.



Speed lines
indicate
motion.
They are
part of the
visual
language.



Background
art is more
than mere
stage set-
ting, it is a
part of the
narration.

IMAGES WITHOUT WORDS

Images without words, while they seem to represent a more primitive form of graphic narrative, really require some sophistication on the part of the reader (or viewer). Common experience and a history of observation are necessary to interpret the inner feelings of the actor.

Sequential art as practiced in comics presents a technical hurdle that can only be negotiated with some acquired skill. The number of images allowed is limited, whereas in film an idea or emotion can be expressed by hundreds of images displayed in fluid sequence at such speed as to emulate real movement. In print this effect can only be simulated.



SHE: " Stop sitting at the TV day after day. You do nothing!! Nothing! "

SHE: "Listen, I'm telling you I'm not going to take much more of this. "

This sequence from *Life on Another Planet* is yet another example of the narrative use of the image commonly experienced. Here, particularly because of the theme, with its demand for 'real' emotion and sophisticated interaction, there is little room for ambiguity in art. As in calligraphy the rendering of the line and the style of application attempt to combine a sense of character with the appropriate emotional ingredients.

The intention in this sequence is to let the viewer supply the dialogue which is evoked by the images. The precise language is not important.

For example:

SHE: "Oh, how my life is spent — ruined by living with you."

HE: (. . . No answer)

SHE: "You stupid fool . . . look at you! A weak nobody."

HE: (Thinking.) I can't stand it anymore . . . her damn nagging.

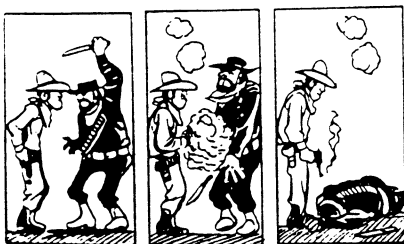
CHAPTER 3

“TIMING”

The phenomenon of duration and its experience—commonly referred to as ‘time’—is a dimension integral to sequential art. In the universe of human consciousness time combines with space and sound in a setting of interdependence wherein conceptions, actions, motions and movement have a meaning and are measured by our perception of their relationship to each other.

Because we are immersed throughout our lives in a sea of space-time, a large part of our earliest learning is devoted to the comprehension of these dimensions. Sound is measured audibly, relative to its distance from us. Space is mostly measured and perceived visually. Time is more illusory: we measure and perceive it through the memory of experience. In primitive societies the movement of the sun, the growth of vegetation or the changes of climate are employed to measure time visually. Modern civilization has developed a mechanical device, the clock, to help us measure time visually. The importance of this to human beings cannot be underestimated. Not only does the measurement of time have an enormous psychological impact, but it enables us to deal with the real business of living. In modern society one might even say that it is instrumental to survival. In comics it is an essential structural element.

TIME



A simple action whose result is immediate . . . seconds.

TIMING



A simple action wherein the result (only) is extended to enhance emotion

Critical to the success of a visual narrative is the ability to convey time. It is this dimension of human understanding that enables us to recognize and be empathetic to surprise, humor, terror and the whole range of human experience. In this theater of our comprehension, the graphic story teller plies his art. At the heart of the sequential deployment of images intending to convey time is the commonality of its perception. But to convey 'timing,' which is the manipulation of the elements of time to achieve a specific message or emotion, panels become a critical element.

A comic becomes 'real' when time and timing is factored into the creation. In music or the other forms of auditory communication where rhythm or 'beat' is achieved, this is done with actual lengths of time. In graphics the experience is conveyed by the use of illusions and symbols and their arrangement.

FRAMING SPEECH

The balloon is a desperation device. It attempts to capture and make visible an ethereal element: sound. The arrangement of balloons which surround speech—their position in relation to each other, or to the action, or their position with respect to the speaker, contribute to the measurement of time. They are disciplinary in that they demand cooperation from the reader. A major requirement is that they be read in a prescribed sequence in order to know who speaks first. They address our subliminal understanding of the duration of speech.



Steam from warm air expelled during conversation can be seen.

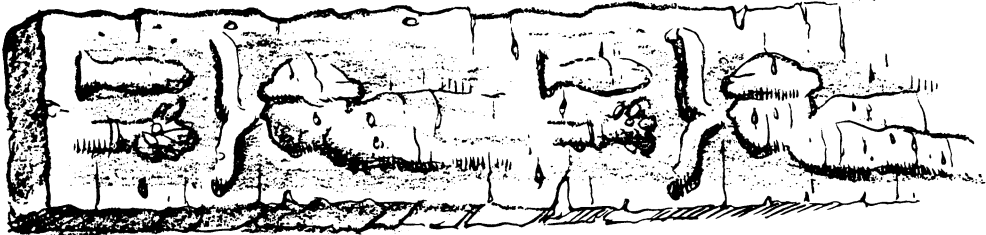
It is logical to combine that which is heard within that which is seen resulting in a visualized image of

the act of speaking.

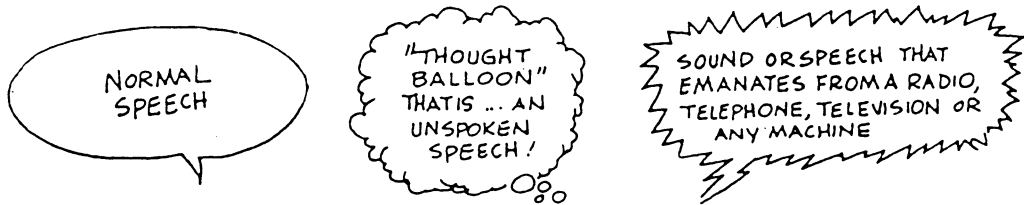
Americans call this a "balloon." Italians refer to speech clouds as 'FUMETTI,' thus, giving a generic name to their comics.

Balloons are read following the same conventions as text (ie: left-to-right and top-to-bottom in western countries) and in relation to the position of the speaker.

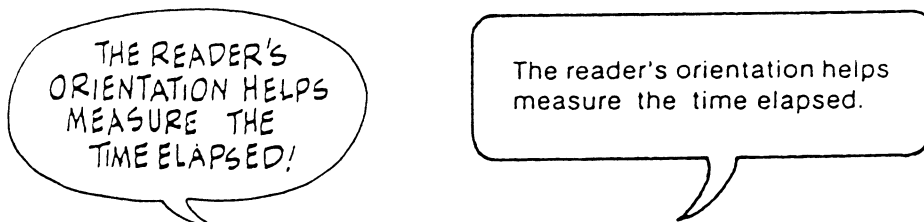
The earliest rendering of the balloon was simply a ribbon emerging from the speaker's mouth — or (in Mayan friezes) as brackets pointing to the mouth. But as the balloon form developed, it too, became more sophisticated and its shape no longer just an enclosure. It took on meaning and contributed to the narration.



As balloons became more extensively employed their outlines were made to serve as more than simple enclosures for speech. Soon they were given the task of adding meaning and conveying the character of sound to the narrative.



Inside the balloon, the lettering reflects the nature and emotion of the speech. It is most often symptomatic of the artist's own personality (style), as well as that of the character speaking. Emulating a foreign language style of letter and similar devices add to the sound level and the dimension of the character itself. Attempts to 'provide dignity' to the comic strip are often tried by utilizing set-type instead of the less rigid hand lettering. Typesetting does have a kind of inherent authority but it has a 'mechanical' effect that intrudes on the personality of free-hand art. Its use must be carefully considered because of its effect on the 'message' as well.

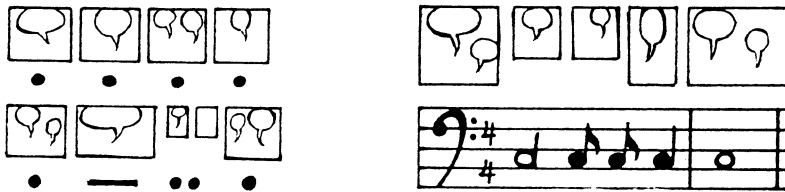


A hand-lettered balloon conveys personality that is quite different from that of a typeset letter. It also has an effect on sound and style of speaking.

FRAMING TIME

Albert Einstein in his Special Theory (Relativity) states that time is not absolute but relative to the position of the observer. In essence the panel (or box) makes that postulate a reality for the comic book reader. The act of paneling or boxing the action not only defines its perimeters but establishes the position of the reader in relation to the scene and indicates the duration of the event. Indeed, it 'tells' time. The magnitude of time elapsed is not expressed by the panel *per se*, as an examination of blank boxes in a series quickly reveals. The imposition of the imagery within the frame of the panels acts as the catalyst. The fusing of symbols, images and balloons makes the statement. Indeed, in some applications of the frame, the outline of the box is eliminated entirely with equal effect. The act of framing separates the scenes and acts as a punctuator. Once established and set in sequence the box or panel becomes the criterion by which to judge the illusion of time.

A MEASURE OF TIME



Morse Code or a musical passage can be compared to a comic strip in that it employs the use of time in its expression.

In the modern comic strip or comic book, the device most fundamental to the transmission of timing is the panel or frame or box. These lines drawn around the depiction of a scene, which act as a containment of the action of segment of action, have as one of their functions the task of separating or parsing the total statement. Balloons, another containment device used for the entrapment of the representation of speech and sound, are also useful in the delineation of time. The other natural phenomena, movement or transitory occurrences deployed within the perimeter of these borders and depicted by recognizable symbols, become part of the vocabulary used in the expression of time. They are indispensable to the story teller, particularly when he is seeking to involve the reader. Where narrative art seeks to go beyond simple decoration, where it presumes to imitate reality in a meaningful chain of events and consequences and thereby evoke empathy, the dimension of time is an inescapable ingredient.

The time lapse here is predicated on the knowledge of how long it takes for papers to ignite and burn.

This extract from a *Spirit* story ("PRISONER OF LOVE" first published Jan. 9, 1949) deals with 'timing'. Here, the human action and a concurrent phenomenon (burning paper) are 'timed' to create suspense. The 'time' allowed to the fight is related to the time it presumably takes for the papers in the basket to burn. The shape of the frames also contribute to rhythm.



TIME ELAPSE!



One minute



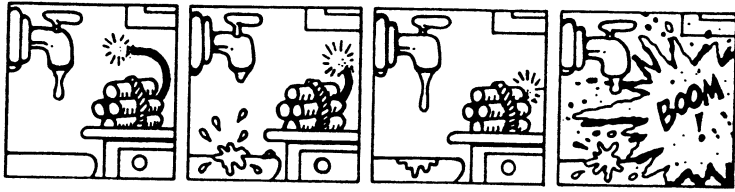
Three minutes



Seven minutes



Both of these critical devices, panel and balloon, when enclosing natural phenomena, support the recognition of time. J.B. Priestley, writing in *Man and Time*, summed it up most succinctly: “. . . it is from the sequence of events that we derive our idea of time.”



The reader's orientation, the knowledge of how long it takes a drop of water to fall from the faucet, modified by the number of panels, helps measure the time elapsed. This reinforces the burning down of the fuse. In fact, one could even comprehend the time element without depicting the fuse.

In the following *Spirit* story, "FOUL PLAY" (first published March 27, 1949) time is critical to the emotional elements in the plot. It was necessary to frame a period of time that would encompass the plot. The problem was that a simple statement of time would not suffice. It would be too specific. It would mitigate the reader's involvement. A 'time rhythm' that is very believable had to be employed.

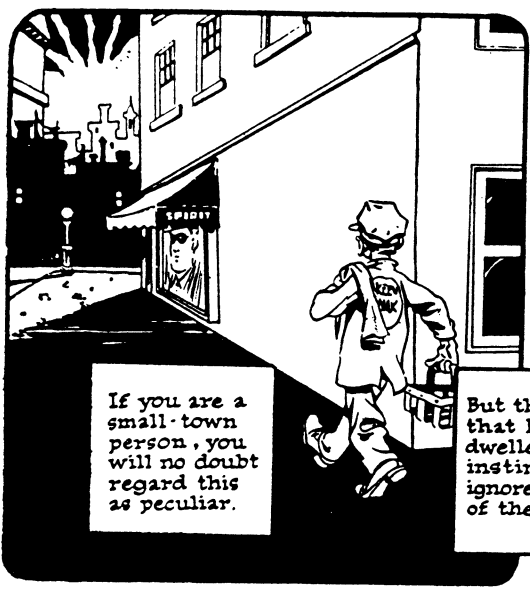
To accomplish this, a set of commonly experienced actions are used: a dripping faucet, striking a match, brushing teeth, and the time it takes to negotiate a staircase.

The number and size of the panels also contribute to the story rhythm and passage of time. For example, when there is a need to compress time, a greater number of panels are used. The action then becomes more segmented, unlike the action that occurs in the larger, more conventional panels. By placing the panels closer together, we deal with the 'rate' of elapsed time in its narrowest sense.

The shapes of the panels are also a factor. On a page where the need is to display a 'deliberate' meter of action, the boxes are shaped as perfect squares. Where the ringing of the telephone needs time (as well as space) to evoke a sense of suspense and threat, the entire tier is given over to the action of the ringing preceded by a compression of smaller (narrower) panels.

In comics, timing and rhythm are interlocked.

FOUR P-AY



If you are a small town person, you will no doubt regard this as peculiar.

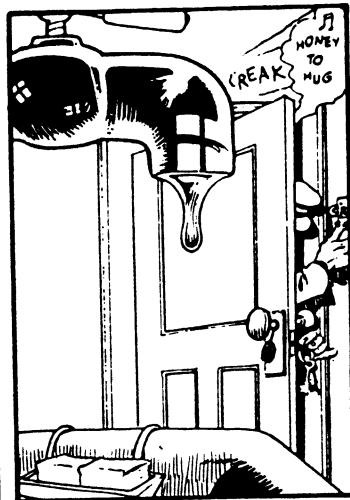
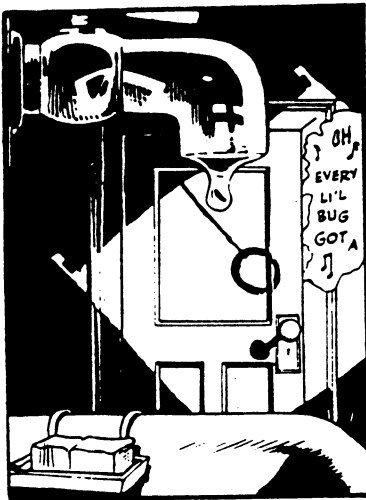


But the fact is that big-city dwellers instinctively ignore the affairs of their neighbors.

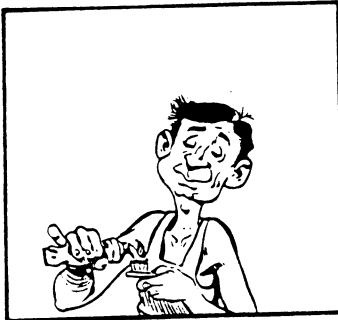
Indeed, nothing that might happen to his fellow citizen could sway the average city dweller from his code... "I mind my own business..."



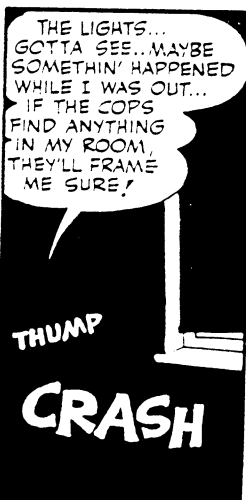
An example of timing.. Allowing two panels for the lapse of time prior to the dropping of the body, the element of shock, surprise and a bit of humor is introduced.



Here, the length of time it takes for a droplet to fall acts as a 'clock.'



Timing and rhythm are interlocked. For example, the sudden introduction of a large number of small panels brings into play a new 'beat.'



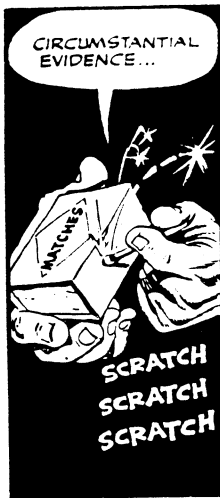
Long narrow panels that create a crowded feeling enhance the rising tempo of panic

The rhythm
is 'staccat-
to'



... follow-
ed by a
long-
stretched
out panel to
convey a
long ringing
time





Now, the
pace
quicken
and the
panels
crowd each
other.

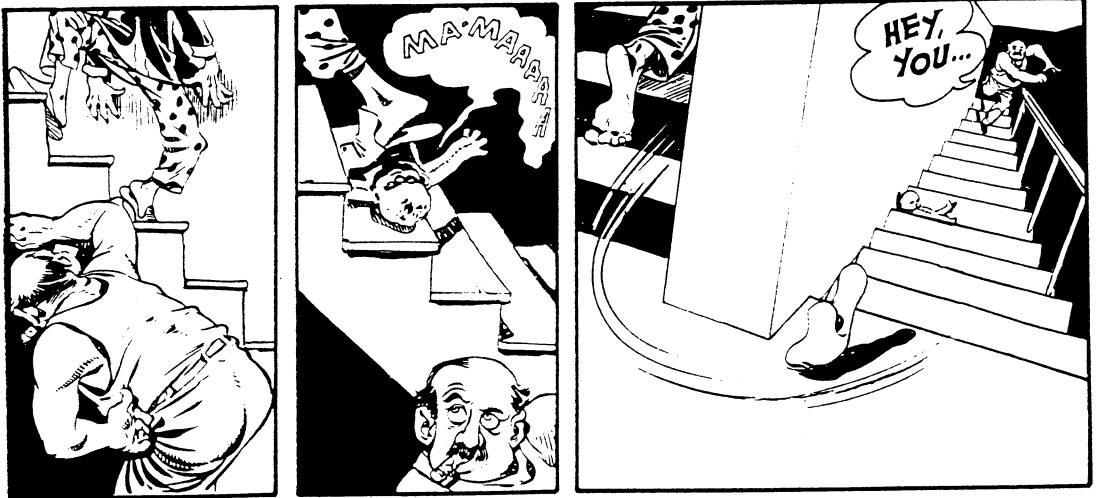


Perspective
is altered to
add time
lapse
without
altering the
rhythm.

The rhythm is maintained by the use of narrow panels of equal size

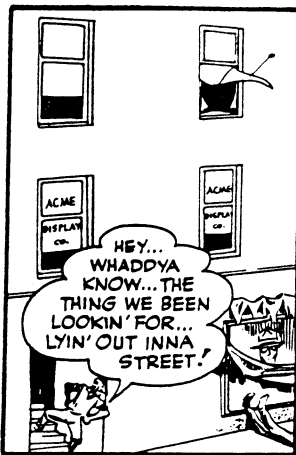
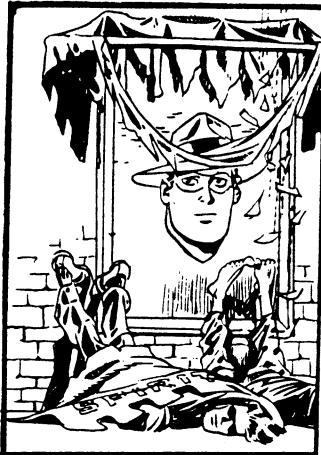


The last panel, here, is wider to permit the 'beat' to pause a bit

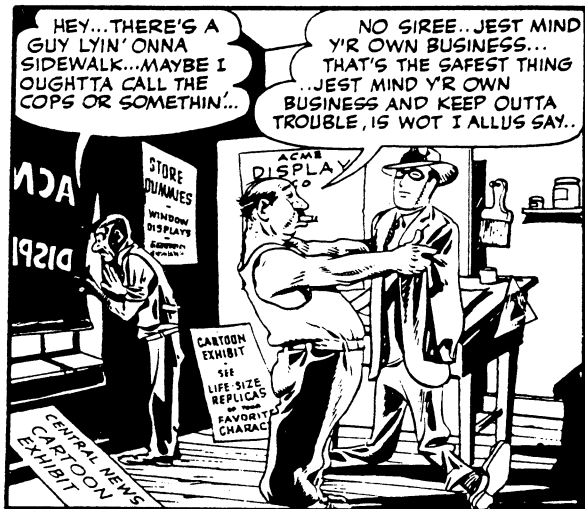


Then the panel frequency resumes until the actor leaps through the window.





Now the 'beat' slows. Panels are more conventional.



The rhythm is slowed to a conventional pace. The story ends with a comfortable wide panel.