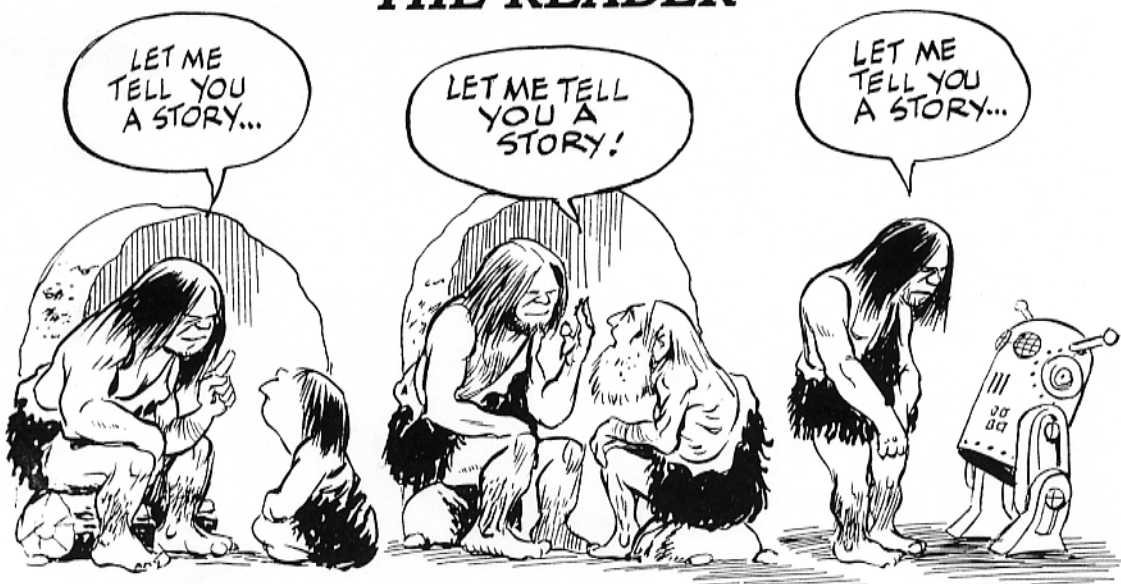


THE READER



To whom are you telling your story?

The answer to this question precedes the telling because it is a fundamental concern of delivery. The reader's profile — his experience and cultural characteristics — must be reckoned with before the teller can successfully narrate the tale. Successful communication depends on the teller's own memory of experience and visual vocabulary.

EMPATHY

Perhaps the most basic of human characteristics is empathy. This trait can be used as a major conduit in the delivery of a story. Its exploitation can be counted upon as one of the teller's tools.

Empathy is a visceral reaction of one human being to the plight of another. The ability to "feel" the pain, fear or joy of someone else enables the storyteller to evoke an emotional contact with the reader. We see ample evidence of this in movie theaters where people weep over the grief of an actor, who is pretending while in an event that is not really happening.

The wincing with vicarious pain when observing someone being hit is, according to some scientists, evidence of fraternal behavior, the work of a neural psychological mechanism developed in humanoids from very early on. On the other hand, researchers argue that empathy results from our ability to run through our minds a narrative of the sequence of a particular event. This not only suggests a cognitive capacity but an innate ability to understand a story.



There is a whole body of clinical studies to support the conclusion that humans learn from infancy to watch and learn to interpret gestures, postures, imagery and other non-verbal social signals. From these, they can deduce meanings and motives like love, pain, and anger, among others.



The relevance of all this to graphic storytelling becomes even more apparent with the claims by scientists that the evolution of hominids' ability to read the intentions of others in their group involves their visual-neural equipment. This was possible, they contend, because as the visual system evolved it became more connected to the emotional centers of the brain. It helps, therefore, for an image maker to understand that all human muscles, in one way or another are controlled by the brain.

Based on the understanding of empathy's cause and effect, we can then come to the fashioning of a reader-teller contract.

THE "CONTRACT"

At the outset of the telling of a story, whether oral, written, or graphic, there is an understanding between the teller and the listener, or reader. The teller expects that the audience will comprehend, while the audience expects the author will deliver something that is comprehensible. In this agreement, the burden is on the teller. This is a basic rule of communication.

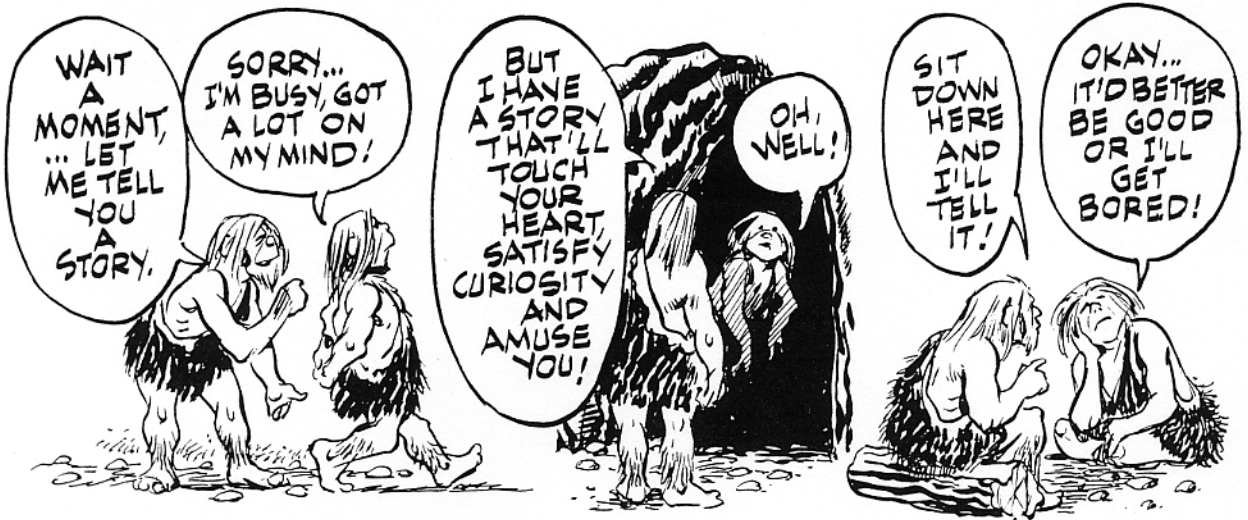
In comics the reader is expected to understand things like implied time, space, motion, sound and emotions. In order to do this, a reader must not only draw on visceral reactions but make use of an accumulation of experience as well as reasoning.



CONTROL OF READER

A major element in the reader-teller contract is the struggle to maintain reader interest. The devices used in the telling bind the reader to the storytelling.

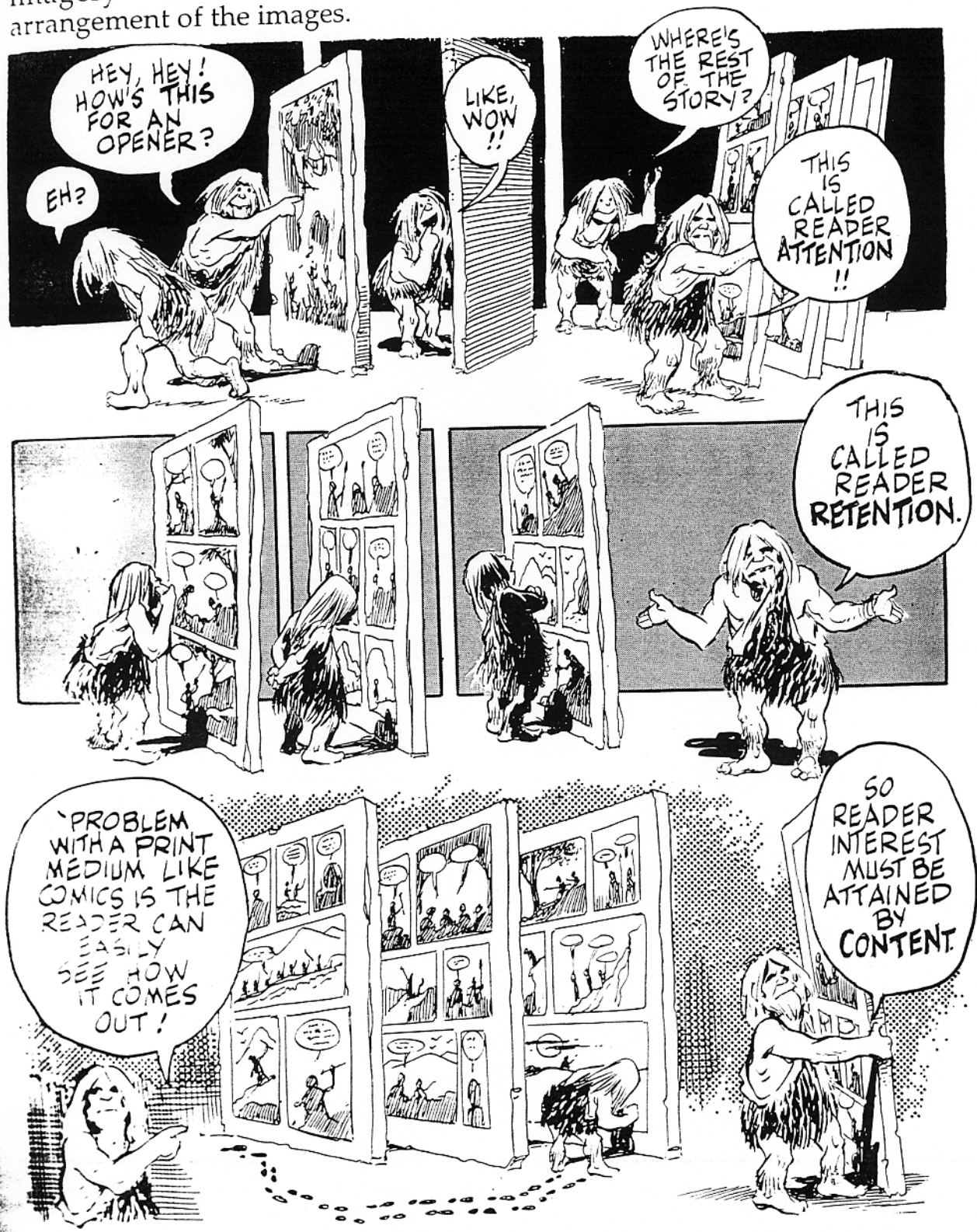
For the storyteller this is a matter of control. Once the reader's attention is seized it cannot be allowed to escape.



The key to reader-control is relevance to his interest and understanding. There are a few fundamental themes (of which there are hundreds of permutations) which can be called universal. These include stories that satisfy curiosity about little known areas of life; stories that provide a view of human behavior under various conditions; stories that depict fantasies; stories that surprise; and stories that amuse.



In comics, reader control is attained in two stages — attention and retention. Attention is accomplished by provocative and attractive imagery. Retention is achieved by the logical and intelligible arrangement of the images.



SURPRISE, SHOCK AND READER RETENTION

Surprise is an often used element in all storytelling. In the graphic language, the use of surprise requires stagecraft. In film it is achieved by a sudden and unexpected happening or appearance, usually unforeseen. This is reasonably easy to do because the audience is a spectator that can see only the events shown exactly in the order in which they are displayed. For example, sudden appearance is a commonly used device to achieve surprise or shock.

In comics, because the reader is in control of the acquisition, it is more difficult to surprise, shock or retain his interest. Sometimes a comic teller may try to use the turning of a page to achieve a surprise. But unless the reader is disciplined (does not skip ahead), he can elude the teller's grasp and "see what happens next." Aside from unexpected turns in the thread of a story, surprising the reader on a visual level remains a major problem.

In comics, the solution is to *surprise the character* with whom the reader is involved.

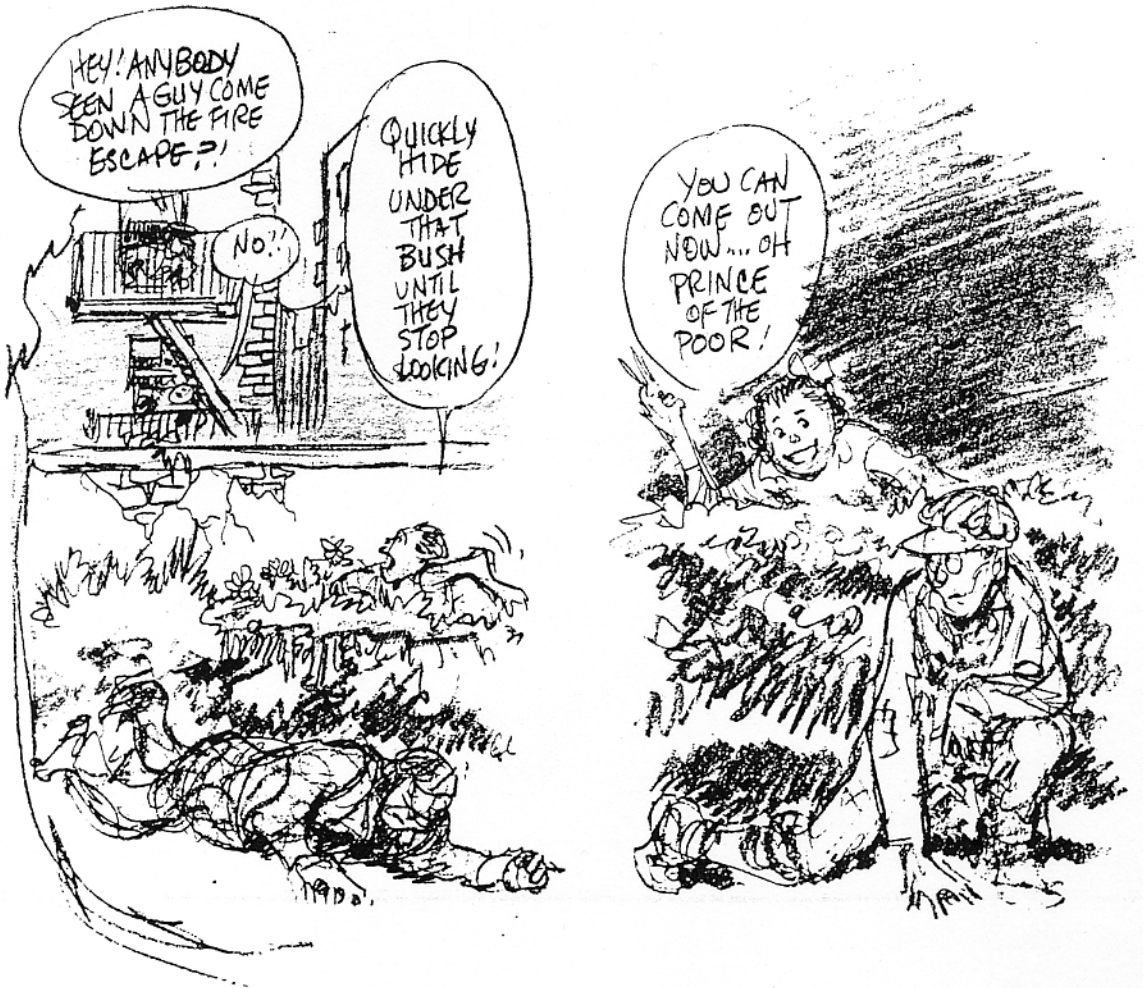


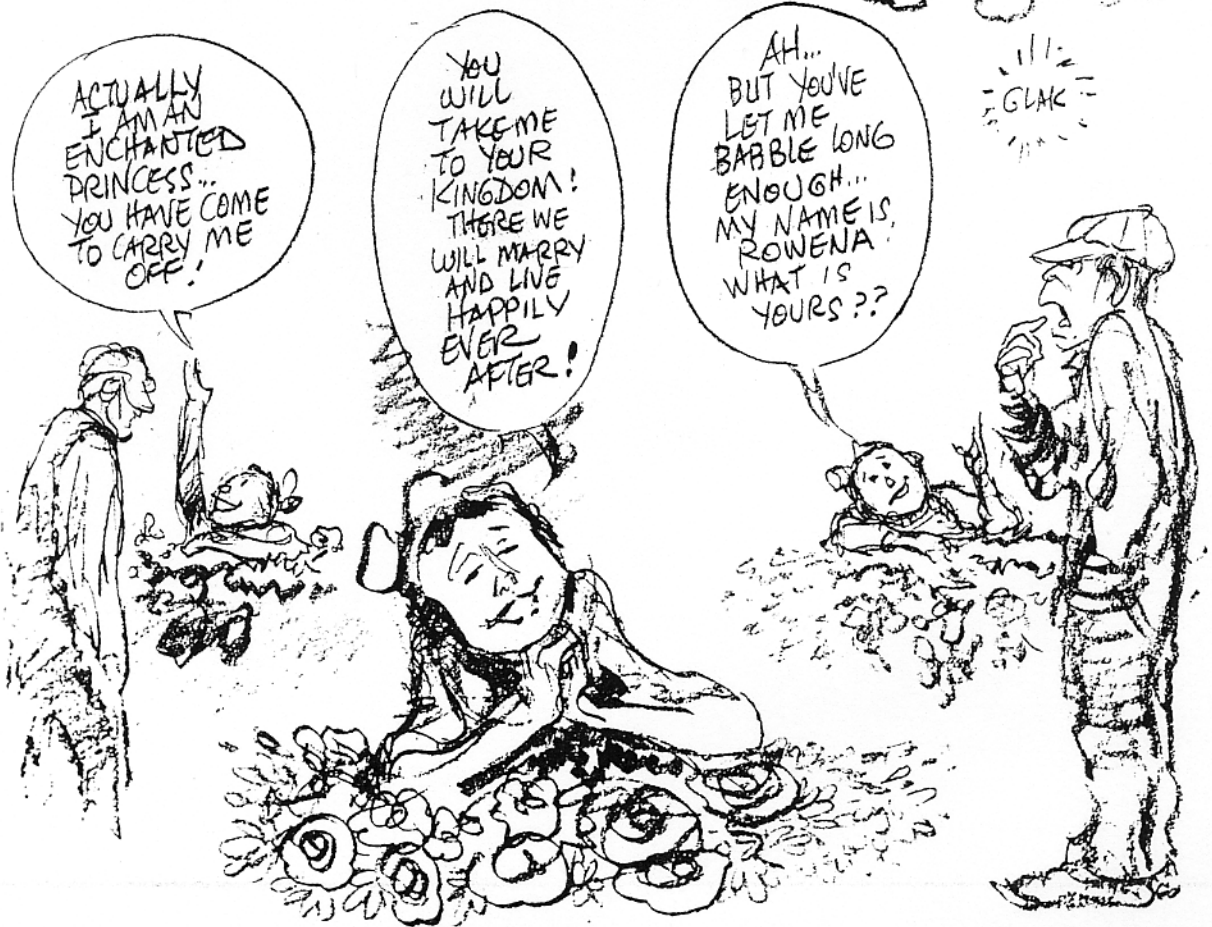
An example of an attempt to surprise the reader is demonstrated in the following sequence. The reader is led to expect a normal exchange between two unimpaired people over several pages. Of course, there is still the possibility that by "flipping" ahead, the surprise will be mitigated. So no attempt is made to surprise the reader with a "shock" graphic. It is left to the characters to act it out.

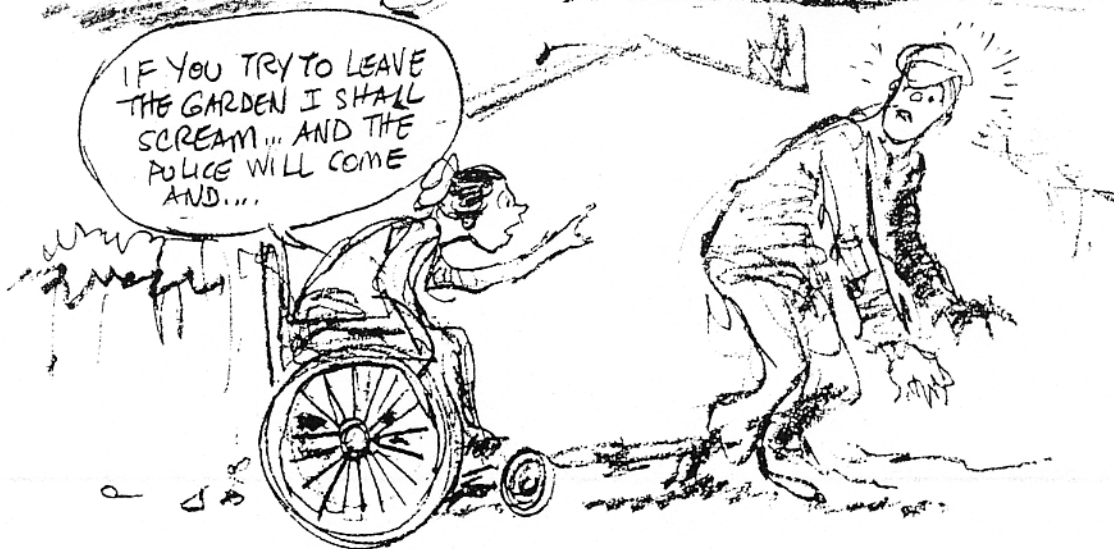
In this case, we have two surprises. One, we present a seemingly active, even athletic, man and reveal only later his infirmity (speechlessness). Two, we reveal the girl as crippled only after allowing her to react to his speechlessness in the manner of a "normal" person.

While the contrivance is choreographed, the reader is involved by the reaction of the characters. Without those reactions, the surprise would fail.





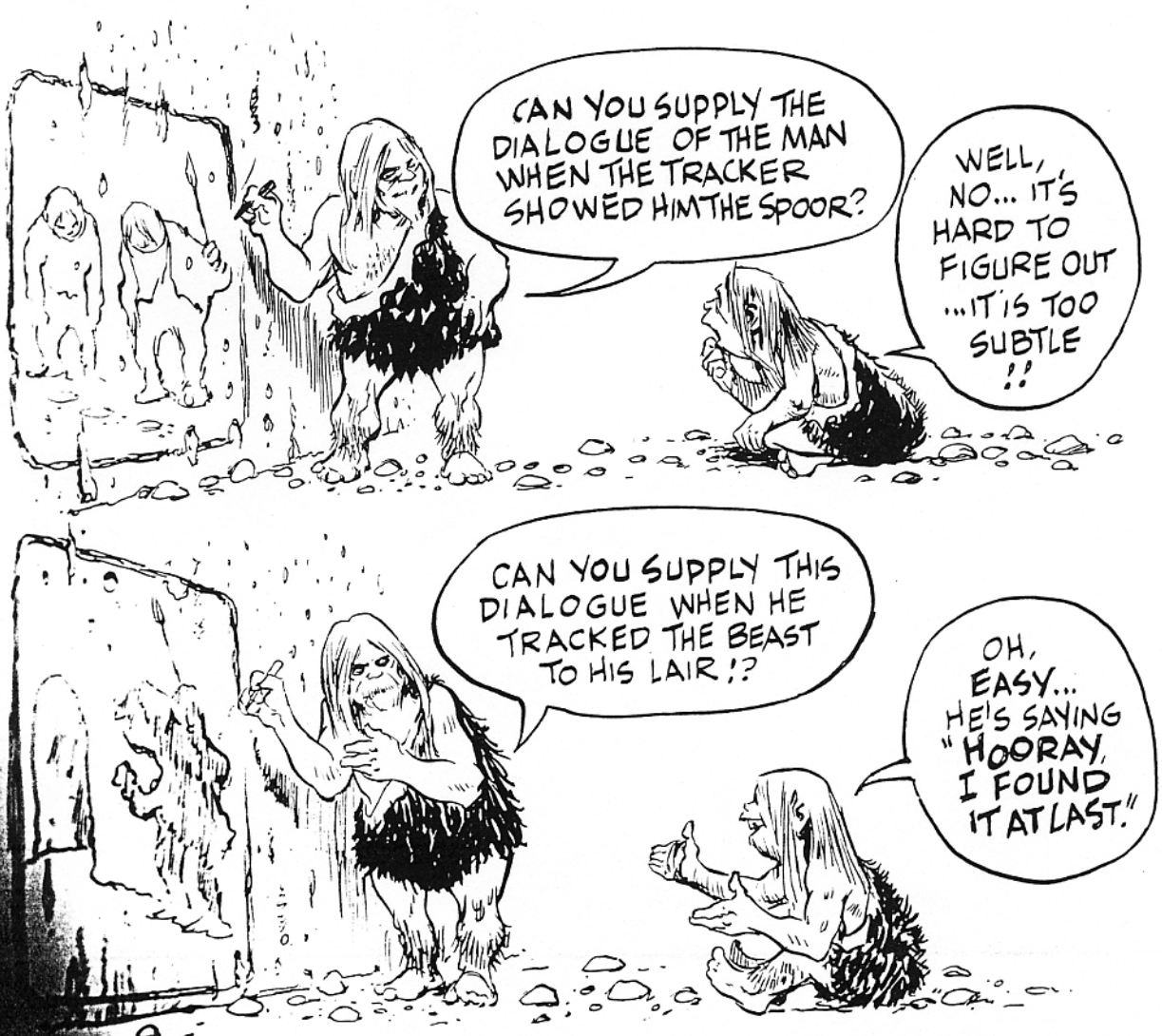




DIALOGUE THE READER AS ACTOR

The comics medium does not have sound, music, or motion so this requires readers to participate in the acting out of the story. The dialogue, therefore, becomes a critical element. Where dialogue is not furnished, it requires that the storyteller depend on the reader's life experience to supply the speech that amplifies the intercourse between the actors.

In depicting a silent sequence of interaction, the comic teller must be sure to employ gestures and postures easily identifiable with the dialogue being played out in a reader's mind.



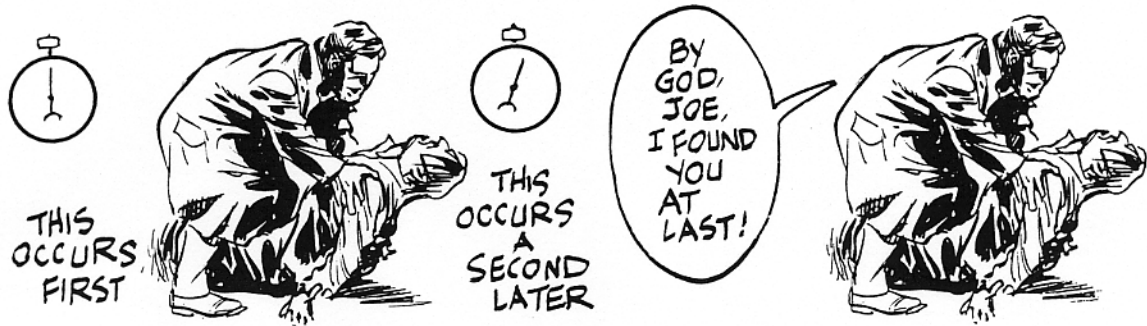
READER VS. DIALOGUE

In this sequence, the reader is forced to participate by supplying unspoken dialogue. In this case, the last panel supplies all the words needed. Used often in films, this device has the effect of compressing a sequence which might otherwise lose rhythm and credulity. In cases like this, the reader with some life experience can supply the dialogue.



DIALOGUE VS. IMAGE

In reality, action precedes words. In comics, therefore, the dialogue is actually conceived after the action is devised.

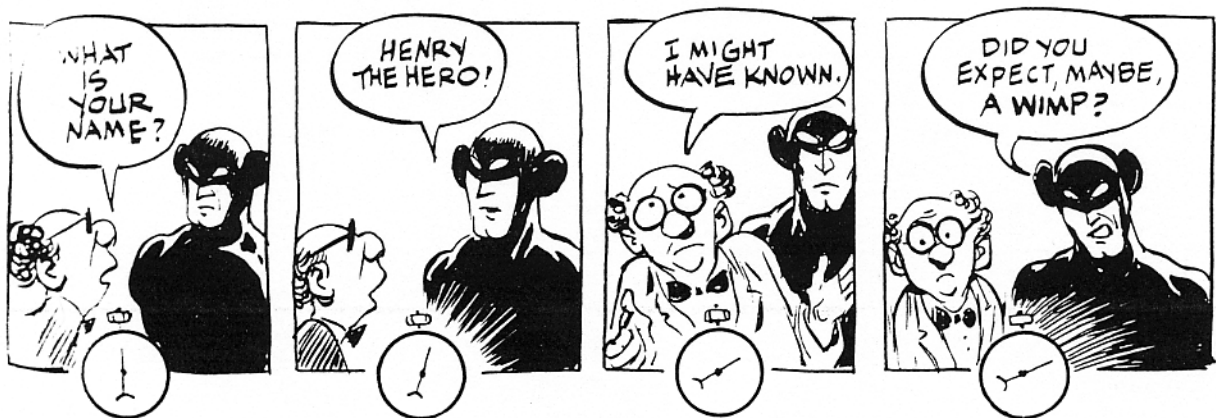


In comics, no one really knows for certain whether the words are read before or after viewing the picture. We have no real evidence that they are read simultaneously. There is a different cognitive process between reading words and pictures. But in any event, the image and the dialogue give meaning to each other -- a vital element in graphic storytelling.

DIALOGUE VS. ACTION

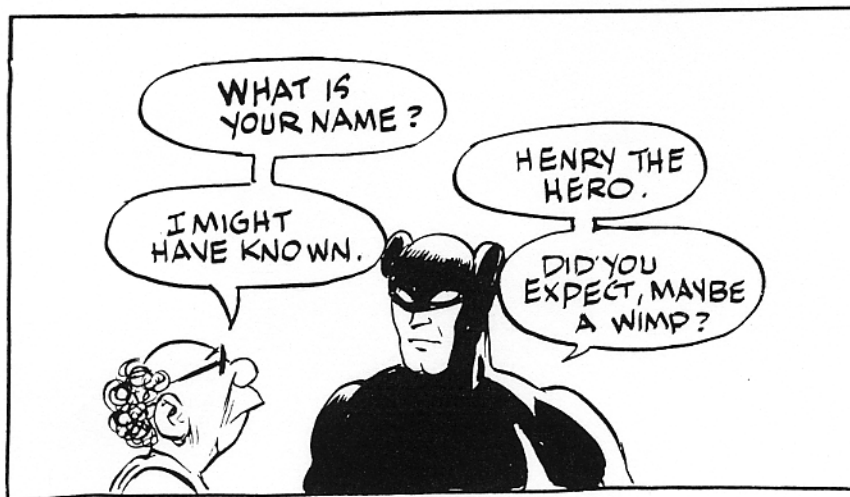
Because a flow of action immediately takes on a rhythm, the dialogue must accommodate the pageantry. Balloons can impede flow by making unreasonable demands on the reader's sense of reality -- and the storyteller's credibility.

There is a demand on the reader to maintain a sense of time. When there is an exchange of dialogue, time passes. Here is an "exchange" timed in seconds.



There is an almost geometric relationship between the duration of dialogue and the endurance of the posture from which it emanates. In this exchange, there is a perceived time lapse between the dialogue and the action. An actor gets into position and speaks his line. The other actor assumes a posture before responding. All this takes place in a matter of seconds.

Here is what happens when the comic teller allows an exchange of dialogue to emanate from the same image. There is a saving of space but it is at the expense of credibility.



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If there is an applicable formula, it would be to ordain that the dialogue terminates the endurance of the image. The logic of this is that a protracted exchange of dialogue cannot be realistically supported by unmoving static images.

DIALOGUE AND THE READER

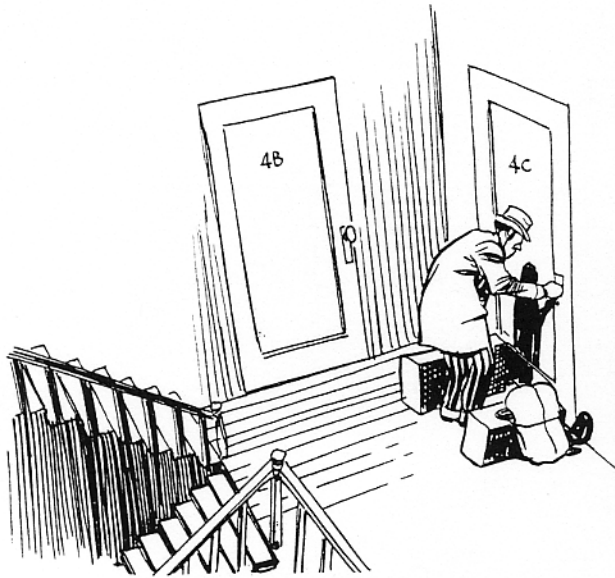
Given the absence of sound, the dialogue in balloons acts as a script to guide the reader in reciting it mentally. The style of lettering and the emulation of accents are the clues enabling the reader to read it with the emotional nuances the comic teller intended. This is essential to the credibility of the imagery. There are commonly accepted lettering characteristics which imply sound level and emotion.

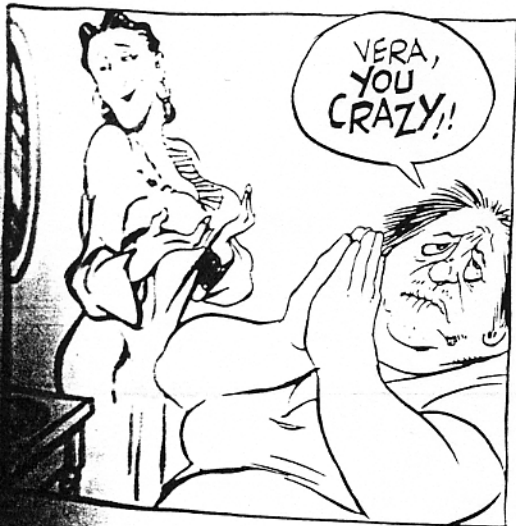


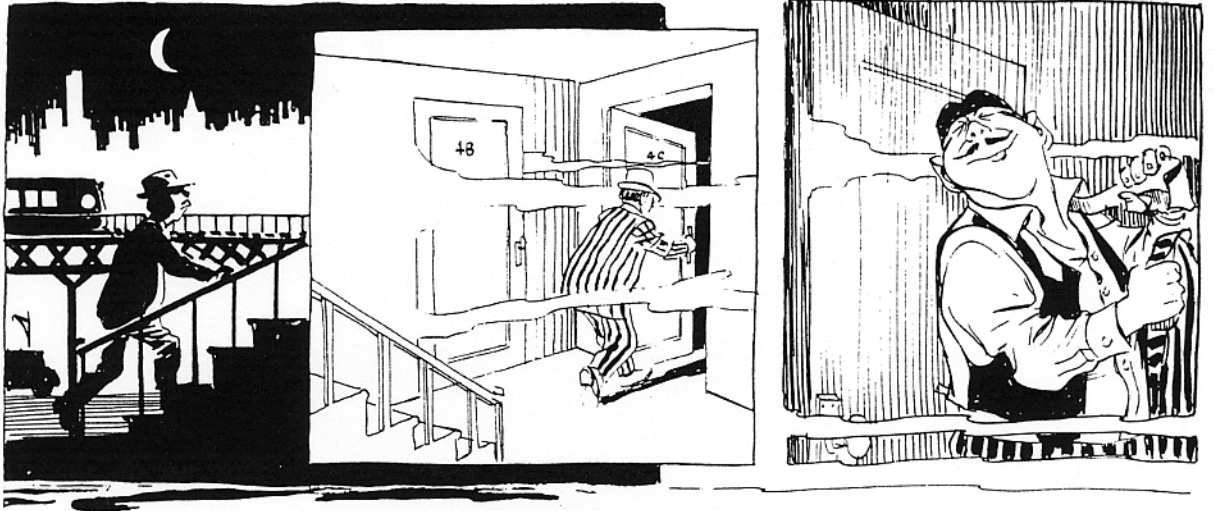
STORY MOMENTUM

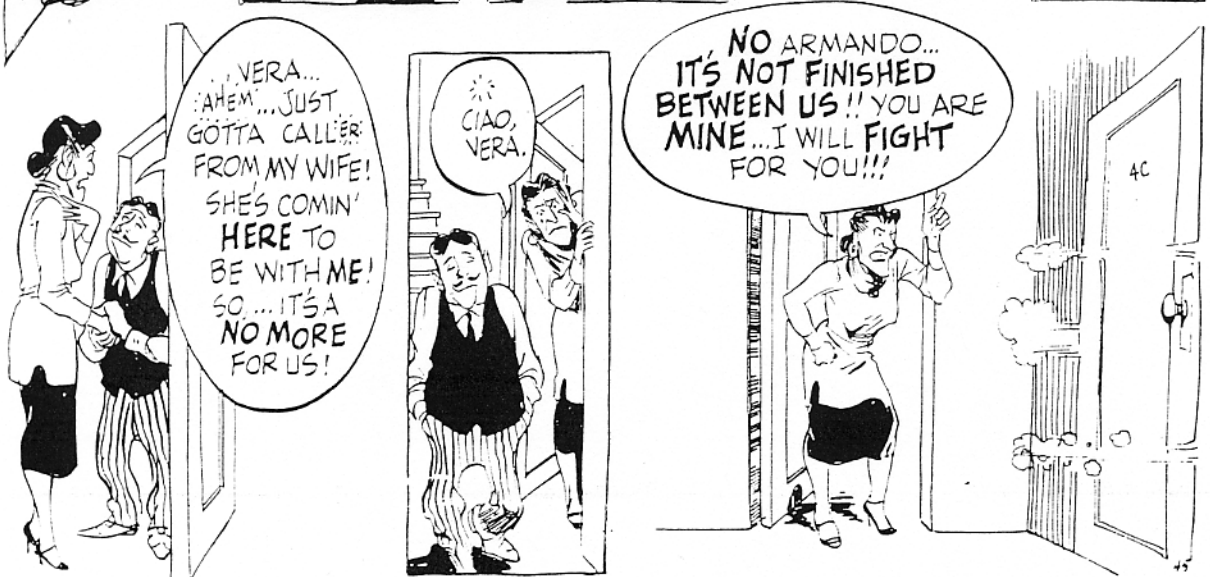
When the reader becomes involved with a story and is familiar with the rhythm and action, then his own contribution to the dialogue can be expected. The story's momentum enables the comic teller to employ wordless passages successfully.

In the following sequence, much dialogue is suspended (in order to accelerate the narrative) and the reader is expected to supply it.



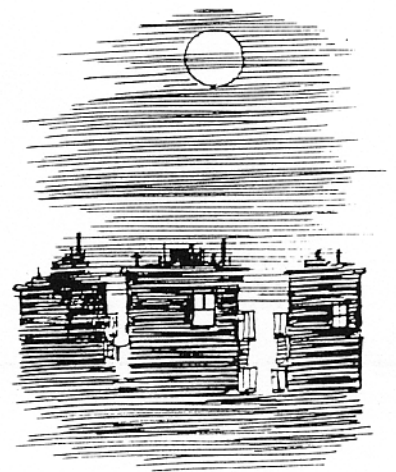
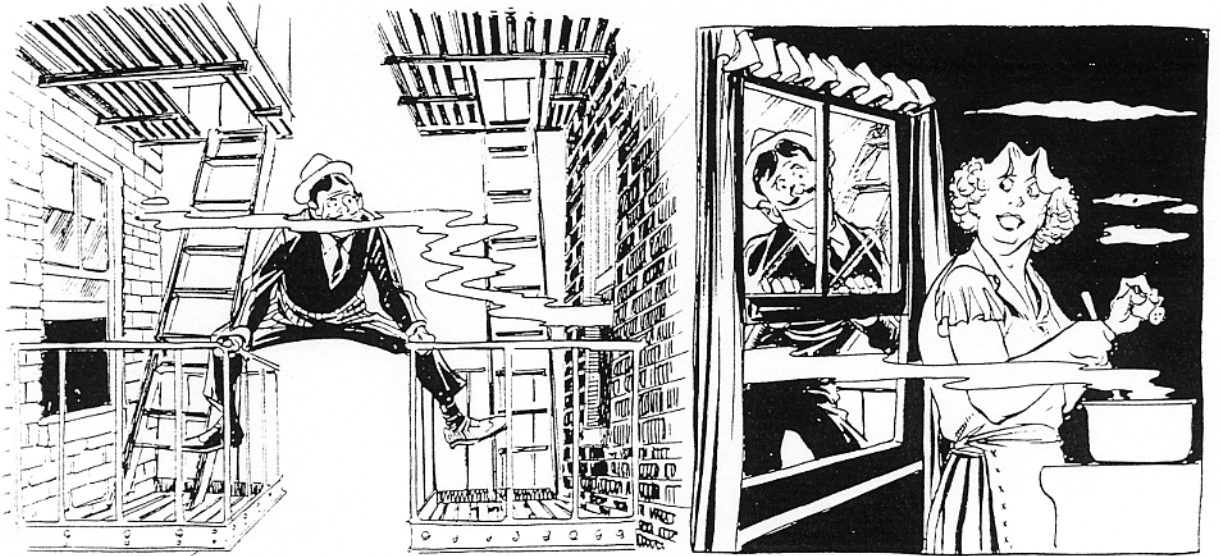






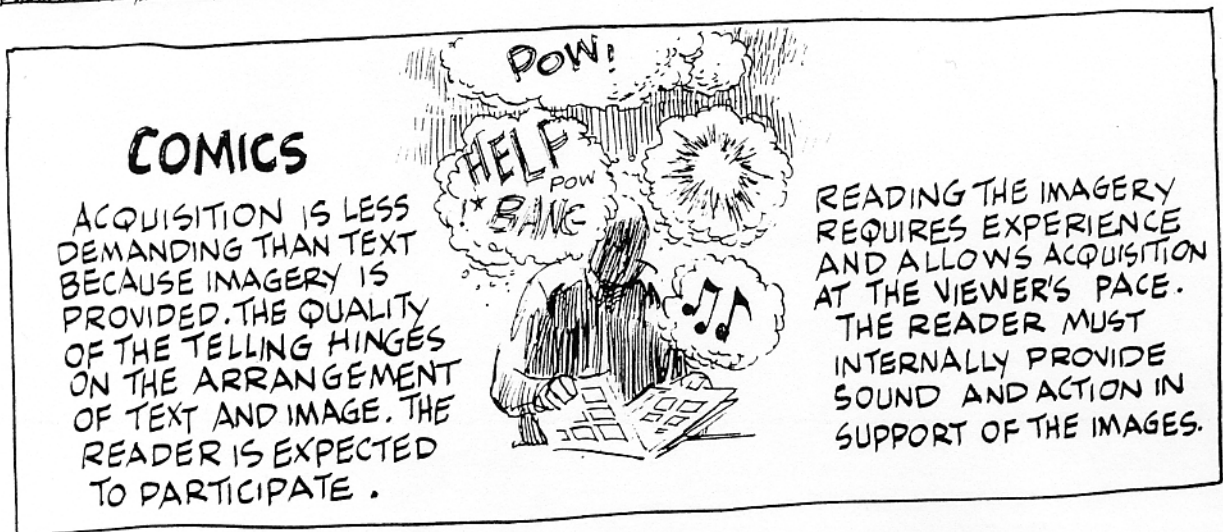
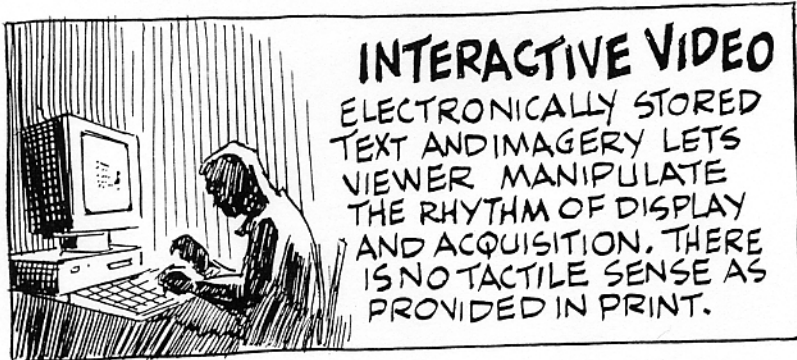
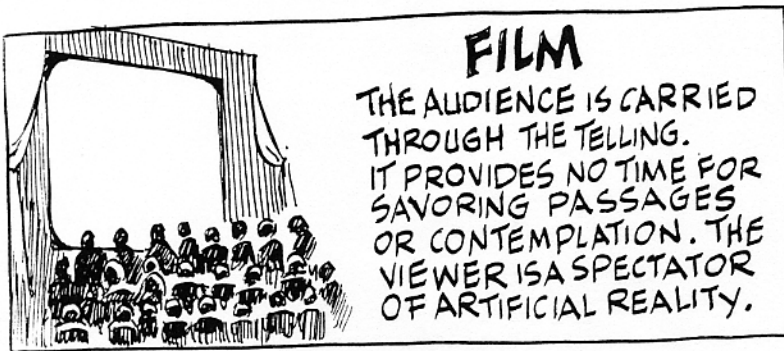






READER INFLUENCES

No storyteller should ignore the fact that the reader has other reading experiences. Readers are exposed to other mediums, each of which has its own rhythm. There is no way of measuring it, but we know that these different media influence each other.



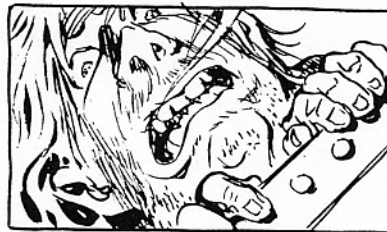
READING RHYTHM

Broadly speaking, and setting aside individual cognitive skills, a reader's rate of acquisition can be best described as a reading rhythm. While readers may adjust their expectations to the discipline and conventions of comics, there is a reflexive referral to other media just as there is to a memory of a real experience.

Comics' readers will tolerate the emulation of another medium's rhythm of narration, but the comic teller must deal with the fact that the medium is still delivered through print. This brings into play physical factors, i.e., paper does not require machinery for transmission. The reader is in total control of the acquisition, free of any manipulation by either the machine or the rhythm of its output.

FILM RHYTHM IN PRINT

This emulates film rhythm as its camera 'pans' or sweeps from image to image.



PRINT RHYTHM IN PRINT



In print, the rhythm of reading requires images that truly connect in order to more clearly evoke the intervening action.

THE INFLUENCE OF FILM ON READING COMICS

While there seems to be an overt relationship between comics and film, there is a substantial and underlying difference.

Both deal in words and images. Film buttresses these with sound and the illusion of real motion. Comics must allude to all of this from a platform of static print. Film employs photography and a sophisticated technology to transmit realistic images. Again, comics is limited to print. Film purports to provide a real experience, while comics narrates it. These singularities, of course, affect the approaches of the film maker and the cartoonist.

Both are storytellers working through their mediums to make contact with an audience. But each has a different engagement with its audience. Film requires nothing more than spectator attention, while comics needs a certain amount of literacy and participation. A film watcher is imprisoned until the film ends while the comics reader is free to roam, to peek at the ending, or dwell on an image and fantasize.



But here is where the paths really diverge. Film proceeds without any concern about the literary skills or reading ability of its audience, whereas the comic must deal with both of these. Unless comics readers can recognize the imagery or supply the necessary events that the

arrangement of images imply, no communication is achieved. The comics maker is obliged, therefore, to devise images that connect with the reader's imagination.

The comic maker working in modern times must deal with a reader whose life experience includes a substantial amount of exposure to film.

Because film experience (despite the fact that it is contrived) tends to be retained, the comics narrator must deal with this experience as if it were real. It is therefore inescapable that the elements of storytelling — rhythm, problem resolution, cause and effect, as well as the more cognitive elements — relate to the reader's experience as a whole. There is an opportunity for reader contact here.

One cannot ignore the fact that the television "experience" can be aborted with the touch of a button. The influence of this on attention span and retention cannot be dismissed.

In comics, it is tempting to coopt film clichés that the cinema reader accepts viscerally. Film often uses the viewer's eye as the camera. In this device, the actors remain in position while the camera moves in and around their face or bodies. Another cliché is the presentation of what an actor sees after he is shown seeing something. Comic makers frequently are unsuccessful in emulating this because they underestimate the amount of space this requires in print.

In film, sound and dialogue do not occupy visual space, they are heard at another level. Imitating film in a comics sequence can make the sequence hard to read, as the following shows.

FILM SEQUENCE

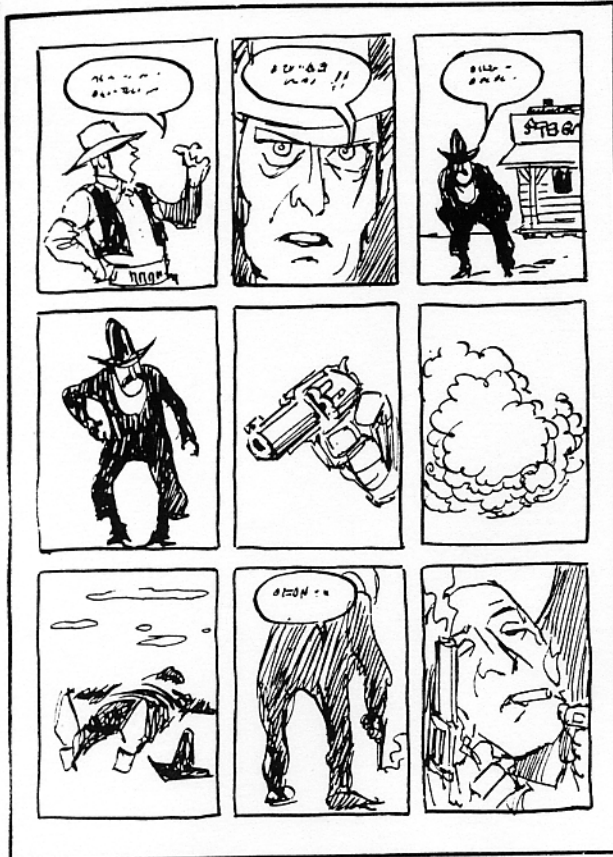


COMICS SEQUENCE

When a comic emulates film camera technique, it can lose readability.

The same event can be told more frugally, leaving room for the rest of the story.

EMULATING FILM



THE 'READING RHYTHM' OF FILM RIDES ON A FLOW OF CONNECTED CLOSE-UPS. THIS SATISFIES THE 'MOVIE-EXPERIENCED' WITH UNDERSTOOD ACTION.

COMIC-PRINT NARRATIVE



THE 'READING RHYTHM' OF COMICS IS SLOWER BECAUSE IT INVOLVES AN INTELLECTUAL INPUT OUT OF A READER'S REAL EXPERIENCE.

HOW COMICS INFLUENCE FILM

Film makers frequently find adaptable ideas in comics. The comic teller is not working with real time or motion, so he is not restricted in any way by the reality of his images. The comic teller is free to invent and distort reality by using caricatures and devised machinery which, in reality, could not possibly work. The use of costumed heroes, acceptable in comics was the result of the innovative freedom comic tellers enjoyed because they were unfettered by the confines of the realism in live theater or film.

NATIONAL INFLUENCES

Historically, American films, with their broad international distribution, helped establish global visual and story clichés. Comics benefited and rode on their acceptance.

After World War II, each country began to develop its own cadre of comic book talent. Comic books were soon published in individual countries for indigenous populations. French, Italian, Spanish, German, Mexican, Scandinavian, Japanese and a host of other artists and writers create comics to satisfy their own readers with stories, art and icons that reflect their own national culture. This has an influence on storytelling in comics; certain stereotypical images retain a national character.

FOR EXAMPLE



THE SUPERHERO IS A COMIC STEREOTYPE SINGULAR TO AMERICAN CULTURE. DRESSED IN A COSTUME DERIVED FROM THE CLASSIC CIRCUS STRONGMAN, HE IS EMPLOYED IN STORIES CENTERED AROUND VENGEANCE OR PURSUIT. THIS TYPE OF HERO USUALLY HAS SUPERHUMAN POWERS WHICH LIMITS THE PLOT POSSIBILITIES. AS AN ICON HE SATISFIES THE POPULAR NATIONAL ATTRACTION TO A SIMPLE, STRONG HERO WHO PREVAILS BY STRENGTH RATHER THAN GUILE.

There is a strong national influence on any comic teller which makes it difficult to produce images with a deliberate international intent. However, the fact that many images portray universal human posture and gesture does serve to maintain the viability of the visual language.