Comics and Sequential Art Study Guide

Comics and Sequential Art by Will Eisner

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Plot Summary

Comics & Sequential Art shares Will Eisner's decades of experience producing comic strips and books and teaching this neglected subject.

Comic strips and books are "a successful cross-breeding of illustration and prose," both visual and verbal interpretive skills in the reader/viewer. Because the sequential artist and the reader must share life experiences to communicate, the artist must recognize and render universal forms. The sequential artist deals with space and time. Balloons frame speech to make sound visible and measure time. Their shapes convey the character of sound and lettering reflects character and emotion. Panels (or boxes) are used to move a reader/viewer through time, suggesting the duration of events by how symbols and images are presented. The number and size of panels contribute to story rhythm and the perceived passage of time. The creator must "see" how the reader/viewer will recognize his/her intent, control his/her perspective, limit his/her vision, orient him or her, and stimulate emotion. The artist must understand and be able to render a wide range of postures and the emotions they reflect. Skill is required to select the proper postures and gestures. The face is the most important part of the body.

While ideally the writer and artist should be one, the two functions are now regularly segregated, and while artwork first gets the reader/viewer's attention, writing must control the project. There is no absolute ratio in comics, but visuals - images that replace descriptive passages - should predominate. The story is "broken down" according to fit the space available and from this point onward, the artist contributes to the "writing" by innovating composition and employing visual devices. Intermediate mock-ups, called "dummies," allow editor, writer, and artist to review the project before the expensive final product is produced.

Sequential art can be instructional or entertaining, with overlap allowed. The emergence of the "graphic novel" could move the industry beyond the cliché of the 1940s through early 1960s that comics are for a "10-year old from Iowa" - provided artists and writers risk trial and error to create a market. Instructional comics can be divided into "technical" and "attitudinal" types. Sequential artists must develop technical skills, including an understanding of how objects work in order to portray them skillfully and the ability to render work reproducible by the publisher's specifications. Computers save time by producing backgrounds, lettering, and shading instantly. Screen presentation may change demands on the level of art and move the creative emphasis to generating unique ideas and mastery of narrative style.

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Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

"Comics as a Form of Reading" is a philosophic introduction to the modern form of sequential art. Daily comic strips, first appearing circa 1934, are the main forums for sequential art in today's world. Comics began as short features but evolved into "graphic novels" and become part of the "early literary diet" of young people. "Reading" includes written words but also pictures, maps, circuit diagrams, and musical notes. The reader must have both visual and verbal interpretive skills. Fortunately, the structures of illustration and of prose are similar.

The repetitiveness of comics form a language with its own grammar. Eisner analyzes one of his Spirit stories in which the hero wishes he could fly, is struck by a stray bullet, and achieves his goal en route to the earth. The panel can be diagrammed like a sentence. It breaks the left-to-right convention by having the body plunge down the right-hand margin in an air stream, through a half tone of an angelic Shnobble midway. Knowing how gravity works, the reader naturally follows the action. The text is lettered in a style consistent with the sentiment of the scene. Lettering often serves as an extension of imagery. In a graphic novel, Contract with God, the text is lettered partly in Hebraic style and framed by a stone tablet suggesting the Ten Commandments. A second example shows rain drenching the typeface for a work about a rainy day in the Bronx, and a third has blood dripping from heavy lettering above a clutching ghoul.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

"Imagery" examines the juxtaposition of words and imagery. After the 16th century, artists depended on expressions, postures, and backdrops to put across their ideas. Inscriptions reappear in 18th-century broadsheets, and as artists tell stories to mass audiences, they use boxes to arrange complex thoughts, sounds, actions, and ideas. The sequential artist and the reader must share life experiences for communication to occur.

Letters are symbols devised from familiar objects, then abstracted. Asian pictographs weld pure visual imagery and "uniform derivative" symbols. Calligraphy symbols are rendered with beauty, rhythm, and individuality. It is analogous to changes in inflection and sound levels in speech.

The "codification" of expression becomes an alphabet bringing out deeper meanings and complexities. Stories can be told through imagery alone. This is illustrated by the Spirit story "Hoagy the Yogi, Part 2" (1947). Postcards hold the whole together through changes of scenery. The speed of the action forces the reader to supply dialog. Familiar images convey the action and close-ups are used when facial expressions are critical, but exaggerated gesture is the mainstay. Speed lines indicating motion are part of the "visual language." Images without words require extra sophistication in the reader/viewer. The artist is technically limited in the number of images s/he can present (unlike in film). There is little room for ambiguity.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

"'Timing'" examines how the sequential artist must deal with humans immersed in space and time. People learn to measure distance by sight and sound, but time is more illusory. In comics, time produces immediate results, while timing arranges illusions and symbols to stretch time and enhance emotion. Balloons frame speech and make sound visible. The earliest use of balloons is in Mayan friezes. The balloon's shape has meaning. Lettering reflects character and emotion as well as the artist's style.

Panels (or boxes) are used to move a reader/viewer through time. Panels measure time much as Morse code and musical notation do. Framing with lines acts as punctuation. Balloon and symbols help the storyteller involve the reader/viewer. Eisner analyzes a long Spirit story, "Foul Play," to show how time is realized through the sequence of events. The number and size of panels contribute to rhythm and passage of time. The shape of panels is significant. Timing and rhythm are "interlocked." Long, narrow panels set up a staccato rhythm and speed time, whereas a wide panel stretches time. Perspective can be altered to add time lapse without altering rhythm. Conventional square panels slow the beat, while a wide panel creates comfort at the ending.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

"The Frame" gets down to technical specifics. Communicating ideas involves moving through space and encapsulating events by sequenced segments. Bridging gaps in the action is more a visceral than an intellectual activity. Freezing a moment in an uninterrupted flow of action is related to peripheral vision. The creator must render the elements from the reader/viewer's point of view. The artist must seize attention and dictate the sequence through the narrative. The tendency of the eye to wander is an obstacle. Film and theater have the advantage of an audience forced to view the action as presented. Comics rely on the conventions of reading. The artist creates a frame by selecting elements needed for the narration, the perspective from which the reader/viewer will see it, and the portion of each symbol or element to include. Much of the emotion and "intuitiveness" depends on the artist's "style." Different renderings require lesser or greater memory and deduction from the viewer. The viewer's assumptions can be wrong in an extreme close-up.

The basic panel layout is a rigidly prescribed usually because of space constraints. The panel border can itself be significant. Backgrounds shown in earlier pages can be left out, allowing the reader/viewer to fill them in. The frame's shape (or absence) can convey the sound and emotion of the action and contribute to the atmosphere of the larger page. Conventional container frames keep the reader/viewer at bay or out of the picture, while unusual ones pull him or her in. Six examples show 1) jagged outline suggesting explosive action; 2) a long panel creating the illusion of height, with small square inset panels emulating a fall; 3) a figure bursting out of the confines of a panel creating the illusion of power; 4) the absence of a panel suggesting unlimited space and serenity; 5) turning a doorway into a panel suggesting confinement; and 6) using an cloudlike enclosure to suggest thought or memory. Another Spirit story varies the darkness of outline to indicate distance and staging for two concurrent tracks of time.

The novelty of using doorways or windows to frame a panel can suggest dimension and involve the reader/viewer better than a regular container. Widening the gutter between panels also heightens awareness. The artist's choice of outline is limited only by the narrative requirement and constrictions on page dimensions. The outlines are determined after the artist decides on the action. The first page of a story functions as its introduction, a launching pad for the narrative. Often, a setting reference can be left out in subsequent panels.

A chapter from Life on Another Planet shows how pages are laid out as "meta panels." The conventional panel is used sparingly, as Eisner synthesizes speed, and layers action. When actors are displaying sophisticated emotions and correct interpretation is critical, hard frames are a liability. Still, using a full-page frame requires breaking down the plot and action into segments. Groupings of action and events often do not break up evenly, so pages vary in the number of scenes. When the reader/viewer turns the page,

a pause inevitably occurs. This is the creator's opportunity to change time and/or locale and both retain and refocus the reader/viewer's attention. Eisner pays no heed to "page interest," for "what goes on INSIDE the panel is PRIMARY!"

Small close-ups of a man eating spaghetti float above and in front of a large panel setting the story in a pre-election period. Background information is shown without frames, while critical plot turns are boxed. Elements are included to control the flow from page to page and plot the tempo at which a page is viewed. On several pages, time and location are juxtaposed so the over-all page is first examined, and then the details. The size and placement of images used to lodge detail in the reader/viewer's mind. When necessary, individual panels are used to focus attention. The final page is designed to be "swallowed whole," before newspaper headlines tell the story.

Super panels that purport to be pages are useful for telling parallel narratives simultaneously. The reader/viewer is expected to read each according to the normal "reading track." The Spirit story "Two Lives" is reproduced to show how this works. Carboy T. Gretch is incarcerated; Cranfranz Qwayle is henpecked. They lament their fate in identical words and gestures on the first page. Over the next two pages, they each are made to clean the sewer and discover a way to escape. By how, close-ups have made it clear they resemble one another closely. As the hunt for them begins, a series of blank "false" panels is inserted to control the frame of reference as the focus shifts to the police commissioner's office. A normal layout is used as Officer Klink is assigned to investigate both escapes, Gretch and Qwayle meet, exchange identities, and are captured. Another bridge leads to the two men shown in their new lives: Gretch henpecked by Mrs. Qwayle and dejected and Qwayle thoroughly content undergoing solitary confinement.

Composing a comic strip panel is like designing a mural, illustration, painting, or theatrical scene. The chosen action has to be set in perspective and the elements to be included arranged to serve the flow of narrative and conform to standard conventions. Mood, emotion, action, and time are then considered. Eisner illustrates this with four drawings of splitting a diamond, from a close-up over the center to an eye-level layout of the use of implements, to a perspective rendering of someone's hands wielding the implements, to secondary elements like an onlooker. In each case, the center of interest is unaltered.

The panel functions as a stage, controls the reader/viewer's perspective, limits his/her vision, orients him or her, and stimulates emotion. The artist can cause viewing from various altitudes. Each manipulates the reader/viewer's orientation. Eye level is used to impart detail. Overhead clarifies the setting and how events will unfold. Ground level involves the reader and makes him/her feel the action. Worm's eye creates even greater involvement. Looking down on a scene creates psychological detachment, while looking up from below evokes smallness and sensations of fear. Perspective works together with the shape of a panel to heighten reactions. Narrow panels give a feeling of confinement, while wide ones suggest freedom to move - or escape. These deep-seated primitive feelings can be used quite effectively. Eisner shows the same action from worm's eye and bird's eye to illustrate the complete difference in emotional impact.

Comics largely emulate real experience and, therefore, require realistic perspective. Sometimes the artist is confronted with a conflict between the impact of a page and the needs of the story. Publishers need to attract buyers in a bookstore at a single glance, even if this cover compromises the story. The artist can be tempted to compromise because his/her style, quality, and draftsmanship are on the line. Where the writer and artist are not the same person, each has a professional reputation and earning power at stake. Art and words can end up unrelated to one another. Realistic science fiction stories are often at risk. A Spirit story, "The Visitor," illustrates this. Eisner approaches it throughout with a head-on perspective to avoid it appearing to be fantasy. There is a temptation in the final three panes to go "hog wild," but this would falsify the surprise ending. Only once is a bird's eye view shown, to establish the setting in an alley. Close-ups, even through a keyhole, are still shown head-on. A series of close-ups is used to charge the emotion. The actual strip is followed by two alternative treatments of the final panels, showing they do the story a disservice by destroying the sense of normalcy.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

"Expressive Anatomy" examines the most universal image in sequential art, the human body. The body and gestures and postures are stored in the artist's memory as a non-verbal vocabulary. Images can trigger both recall and emotion. The artist's skill determines how successfully the commonality of the human body is conveyed. Early on, repetitive glyphs are created to create code that can be memorized and deciphered. Eisner illustrates by showing early cave drawings, Egyptian friezes, and finally hieroglyphics, which become a usable, written language. "Body language" is a modern attempt at codifying the wide range of postures and the emotions they reflect. Comic book artists draw on an inventory of gestures readers understand. Skill is required to select the proper posture or gesture. Body posture and gesture have primacy over text in comics. Gestures are "almost idiomatic" to specific regions or cultures, are generally subtle, and do not involve a wide range of movement. The final position of the gesture is usually the key to its meaning. Postures, by contrast, are movements "frozen" in time. Extremely subtle movements flow together over short periods and must be captured to convey what has happened before and what will follow upon.

Sometimes an action must be broken into several panels to clarify the action sufficiently. When the artist chooses the proper moment to freeze, the reader can picture the context and make the follow-up unnecessary unless the next panel depends on the outcome of the action. The frozen moments must convey both time and emotion. Posture and gesture can give insight into a character's lifestyle and allow sociological observations.

The face is treated as "an appendage," but is the most important part of the body as it reveals the personality. Four drawings demonstrate how contortions reveal inner emotions of pain, discomfort, comfort, and readiness to fight or flee. Most humans understand the face as "a window to the mind." Faces are the most individual part of the body and people make important daily judgments by them. Eisner believes if animals' faces were more flexible, humans would kill fewer. Artists frequently render postures and expressions and frequently fail. When words are used, the task of rendering body and face adequately grows more difficult. Eisner illustrates this by "Hamlet on a Rooftop," his 1981 attempt at illustrating Shakespeare's famous soliloquy in the person of a modern ghetto youth. Eisner keeps Shakespeare's words intact as he breaks up the soliloquy into balloons. He uses classical portrayals of emotion. The drawing must be true not only to Shakespeare's portrayal in words, but also to the urban figure he has cast as Hamlet.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary and Analysis

"Writing & Sequential Art" focuses on writing, already shown to be an essential part of the interweaving that characterizes sequential art. Writing for comics is a unique skill, most closely related to playwriting. It consists of conceiving an idea, creating an order of telling the story, constructing narration, and composing dialog. In writing words alone, the author directs the reader's imagination, but in comics, the readers imagine and interpret on their own. Words when welded to images do not describe but add sound, dialog, and connections.

Comic writers follow this procedure: 1) create a written script of their idea and story/plot, including narrative and dialog (balloons), and 2) expand and develop the concept in words, giving the illustrator instructions on page and panel content. Writer and artist both "pledge allegiance" to the integrated whole. The segregation of writing and drawing is widespread (as in cinema and theater) but historically the same person has done both parts. Teamwork is often demanded by publishers to fit publication schedules and other editorial concerns, including the perception that artists lack "writing" skills - or choose not to exercise them. This creates an amusing dilemma for publishers, who must decide to whom to return the "originals" of a work written by one person, penciled by another, and inked by still others.

Artwork dominates the reader's initial response, and this tempts artists to dazzle the eye through style, technique, and other graphic devices. The result is "stunning art held together by almost no story at all." In comics oriented toward a simple superhero or other cases where a visually oriented audience demands little from writers, the "weave" is lost. This also happens when the writer gives the artist only a bare plot summary, waiting to receive panels into which s/he will enter dialog and connecting narrative. The writer often then overwrites the space allotted.

That words and image are inseparable in comics Eisner demonstrates by three panels showing two goldfish in a bowl. Without dialog balloons in the first and last panel, the series is meaningless. The deliberate omission of words in the middle panel adds power to the punch line. The key words - believe, God, and who - are boldfaced to help the reader sound the dialog internally as the writer intends.

Eisner next shows a segment of script in which an escaping fugitive falls down a manhole. First, it is shown as a "pure" visual without text. It produces humor. Next, dialog is added that fits the humorous drawing. A third example uses realistic drawing with only sounds added as text; the artist shoulders the whole burden of communication. In the fourth example, balloons are used liberally to reinforce the theme, and in the fifth, narrative is added, reinforcing what the images try to tell.

Writing is primary and must control the project start to finish. Typically, this means the creator of an idea developing words and imagery before handing it over to graphic development. From the start, the concept and writing must accept the limitations of the medium. For this reason, simple, obvious stories have dominated the comics, which have limited space and low-quality reproduction. The art form can, however, deal with subject matter of great sophistication.

Action and scenery are most easily rendered visually, often abstracted. Dialog gives voice to thoughts and gives meaning to action. "Meanwhile" is perhaps the most useful and most-used word in comics, because it points to the passage of time and/or changes in location.

There is no absolute ratio of words to picture in comics. Images can be either "visual" or "illustration," with visuals being a sequence of images that replace a descriptive passage and illustrations reinforcing or decorating a descriptive passage - essentially repeating the text. Because comics mix letters and images, the visual approach predominates. The creator decides on the nature of the story, expounds on the idea, and decides on the solution to the problem raised based on what s/he hopes is common experience with the reader/viewer. Style - humorous or realistic - is a basic consideration, often predetermined by the nature of the story.

The story is next "broken down" according to how much space is available and what technology is to be used to reproduce it. This determines the size and number of pages and colors. Where author and artist are not one, the author prepares a script from this initial breakdown and then hopes and prays the artist will follow the instructions and produce visuals that correspond. The artist must deal with space limitations and his/her own rendering skills to decide when abbreviations or omissions are required. Neither wordless pantomime nor "talking heads" are adequate treatments. When writers can provide preliminary sketches with the script the problem is less severe.

Even when the writer and artist are one, the thinking process must be followed completely. A simplified two-page script is shown, showing how it serves as an agreement between artist and writer. It proceeds panel-by-panel, providing narrative and dialog text and describing the scene (place, time, props, lighting, mood, movement, etc.). A flowchart is then shown, advancing from single-page scrip t to pencil drawing ready for final inking.

Eisner declares flatly that the writer and artist should be one. Failing that, they should have a formal prior agreement. Failing that too, the artist must dominate. S/he is obligated to serve the writer's story but free to innovate composition and employ visual devices, thus contributing to the "writing" aspect. Eisner illustrates this by showing how an artist modifying a script to remove the exclamation, "Gad! I've been shot in the back!" from a panel that can be interpreted in no other way strengthens the panel. He next shows how breaking two scripted panels into three improves the drama and reinforces the intent of the author. Eliminating the suggested narrative further improves the panels by making them flow without interruption. It is very much a case of "story-telling by the artist."

Eisner next reproduces a story written by Jules Feiffer for a Spirit story that is never produced. It shows how a skilled writer/artist can provide visual stage directions to the final artist. Eisner next reproduces three pages from a typical script from which an artist would be expected to innovate page layouts and panel composition.

The graphic arts all utilize an intermediate mock up that allows editor, writer, and artist to review the project before the final product is produced. In comics, it is called a "dummy," while in advertising, it is a "layout" or "mechanical," and in filmmaking, it is a "story board." It is an indispensable tool for verifying that the reader's attention will be held. It saves time and money. Eisner reproduces several pages from his graphic novel To the Heart of the Storm, followed by a close-up pencil dummy page that is comprehensive enough for both editor and artist's needs, and the final inking, which shows various refinements in posture and layout.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary and Analysis

"Application (The Use of Sequential Art") begins by considering how sequential art is generally divided into two types of applications: instruction and entertainment. Periodical comics and graphic novels are generally entertainment-oriented, while manuals and storyboards are intended to instruct or sell. There is considerable overlap, as when an entertainment piece needs to explain how to open a safe, assemble parts, etc. This is imbedded into the story. Purely instructional comics often use humor - especially exaggeration - to show relevance.

Entertainment comics deny to the reader/viewer much of the freedom s/he would enjoy in pure prose. The creator relies on the reader/viewer to supply from his or her own experience "in-between" actions, but in general, passages are rendered quite precisely. This encourages participation rather than voyeurism. Comic book artists are most challenged in selecting the particular moment in a chain of motions that s/he wants to portray and in portraying such "amorphics" as the pain or glow of love and other inner conflicts. The artist may try to depict them and risk failure or avoid subjects in which these are present and for which no "clichés" have yet developed.

The emergence of the "graphic novel" in recent years provides a new horizon to the industry. There is no audience prepared for them and the distribution system used by comic books is ill equipped to market them. Comic books from the 1940s to early 1960s assume the typical reader is a "10-year old from Iowa." Only unintelligent adults would read them, and publishers support no innovation. Early forms of sequential art including applications in the Middle Ages - tapestries, friezes, etc. - speak to broad audiences lacking formal education. The art serves as stereotypical "shorthand." The sophisticated, meanwhile, learn to read words and gain access to subtler, more complex forms. The future of the graphic novel depends on choosing worthwhile themes and innovating in the exposition. Artist and writers must risk trial and error, with publishers acting only as catalysts. This could provide communications at a level never before attained as an audience develops for relevant material in a proven style.

Instructional comics can be divided into "technical" and "attitudinal" types. The former show a reader/viewer how to do something from his or her point of view: procedures and processes for assembling or repairing devices. Such tasks are by nature sequential, so they lend themselves to this art form. Panels, balloons, and explanatory text are arranged to involve the reader/viewer. In theory, the reader/viewer already knows how to understand sequential art.

Attitudinal comics dramatize or act out how the reader/viewer should relate to a task. They help link people to a new action without the time pressure felt in motion pictures and animation. The format allows large amounts of information to be digested and imagined. Exaggeration helps make the point and influence the reader/viewer. Career

booklets, for example, stress the value and dignity of work, introduce many job opportunities, and whet interest and curiosity.

Storyboards are "still" scenes used to bridge the gap between movie scripts and final photography on motion pictures. They employ major elements of sequential art but dispense with balloons and panels. Comic book artists are frequently hired to produce these.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary and Analysis

"Teaching/Learning (Sequential Art for Comics in the Print and Computer Era)" concludes Eisner's book. As the sequential art of comics is intended for reproduction, technical skills are mandatory. These are all teachable and are drawn from many disciplines, including psychology, physics, mechanics, design, language, and draftsmanship (a simplified chart makes this point). A command of drawing and writing are an obvious prerequisite. The artist must be able to produce recognizable imagery, and so should study anatomy, perspective, and composition. They should also read steadily, particularly short stories, to learn hot to create plot and narration, and to stimulate the imagination. The artist must "imagine" for the reader/viewer. Reading provides a ready bank of facts and information about many subjects that the artist can utilize on demand.

Eisner covers eleven points he feels an artist must understand about how objects work in order to portray them skillfully. They must realize how the body (human or animal) works as a mechanical device with limited ranges of movement. They must understand perspective and be able to render three dimensions on a flat surface. They must understand light and shade and be able to render the flow of light over objects in its path, causing thrown shadows that conform to the shape of things they fall upon; they must also understand that light implies safety while shadow evokes fear. They must understand that every object has an anatomy and limited range of operating capability, which must be respected. They must realize that even casual props like door hinges must be rendered accurately, lest the reader/viewer object (this applies in both realistic and exaggerated cartoons). They must know that everything on earth responds to the force of gravity and and take advantage of reader/viewers' familiarity with its effects. They must know that cloth always responds to gravity and the shape of the gravity-defying objects beneath. They must know that realism incorporates detail while cartooning simplifies and exaggerates. They must know how to arrange each panel with a clear purpose, paying particular attention to the area's natural focal point. They must deal effectively with balloons, treating the text they contain as thought being acted out in the reader/viewer's head; selective use of boldface to allow skimming—telegraphing the message—is essential; splitting a dialog into several balloons and having too many balloons in a single frame are both detrimental. They must understand the difference between visuals and illustrating and accept that the comic artist is a visualizer—replacing text rather than repeating it. These eleven points deserve close study and consideration, particularly of the accompanying drawings.

A comic artist's work must be reproducible by the publisher's specifications. Early strips are limited to black line art because halftone engraving in newspapers is crude. Only with the advent of offset printing can more delicate drawings be used. Rotogravure printing never becomes widespread in comic printing. Color comes to be added by "hand separation" overlays; this requires artists to "trap" colors and avoid vignettes. The

artist is at the mercy of the engraver's shop. When color process engraving by electronic scanning method arrives, artists can render color directly over line work. Another method, "blue line," requires production of a paperboard with colors added to transparent overlays. This is then color separated and black is added as a fourth color. Balloons are handled as part of the line art. Crisp line art remains essential, no matter what technology is employed.

Computers let artists include backgrounds, lettering, and shading at the tap of a button or wave of a mouse. This increases their productivity. In the future, screen and printer may deliver comics. Production now consists of scanning completed artwork into a digital format or creating artwork on tablets using paint programs that utilize either one or multiple overlays of color. Electronic comics may come to the Internet as an alternative to print, and the difference in feel may result in differences in presentation. Screen presentation may eliminate the page layout and go directly to the individual panel, which restricts the reader/viewer's attention. Posture and gesture may have to be more obvious as reader/viewers hurry more from scene to scene. As resolution sharpens, drawings may have to become more detailed.

Traditionally, comic books and strips have allowed artists of singular ability to show their personality. Style is "a form of imperfection." Technology historically has expanded the artists' reach and challenged their individuality. Computers generating artwork rather than simply reproducing it will have an impact on individuality. Technical perfection in perspective, geometry, and color are available to anyone who has the proper equipment. Personality and individuality may in the future depend on the generation of unique ideas and mastery of narrative style.

Characters

Norman Cousins

An influential journalist and editor, Cousins is quoted as saying, "sequential thought is the most difficult work in the entire range of human effort," Cousins suggests the care the creator of a comic must exercise in foreseeing how the reader/viewer will react to his/her work.

Leonardo da Vinci

The original "Renaissance man," artist, scientist, and inventor, da Vinci is held up by Eisner for his "vain" efforts to make a science of art.

Albert Einstein

A nuclear physicist whose Special Theory (Relativity) declares that time is not absolute but relative to the position of the observer, is used by Eisner to explain how panels (or boxes) are used to move a reader/viewer through a comic strip.

Will Eisner

The author of Comics & Sequential Art, Will Eisner, is an acknowledged master of comic book art and one of its earliest creators. He studies under the anatomist George Bridgman and painter Robert Brachman, packages comic books for various publishers, and in the late 1930s publishes a weekly comic book insert for newspapers, The Spirit, which influences a generation of famed cartoonists. Much of the impact of Comics & Sequential Art is in the artwork reproduced from Spirit strips accompanied by brief notes in the gutters explaining why Eisner does what he does on the given page and what impact he expects ton reader/viewers.

In 1952, Eisner switches his attention to the new field of educational comics, producing training manuals for the U.S. Army and producing teaching materials for art schools. He discusses this use of comics briefly in the book. Later, in the mid-1970s, Eisner pioneers a new genre, the graphic novel, whose future he also discusses in the book. He illustrates several points with drawings from A Contract with God, the first of his eight graphic novels.

The book is an outgrowth of a popular course he teaches for fifteen years at the New York School of Visual Art and first serialized in The Spirit. It distills his ideas, theories, and advice on an art form that has generally been ignored as a scholarly topic, although each of its component elements has been deemed worthy of examination. He finds that many elements that have been considered "instinctive" can be organized into an

exposition on the "art of communication." Eisner offers the book as a guide to the serious student, to practicing cartoonists, and to serious teachers. In the "Forward" [sic], Eisner explains that sequential art deserves to be properly analyzed by a practitioner.

Jules Feiffer

A famous humorist who creates a rough story for a Spirit story, which is never executed or published, Feiffer is to Eisner an example of how someone skilled at both writing and drawing can provides ample visual stage directions to the final drawer of a comic strip or book.

J. B. Priestley

The author of Man and Time, Priestley is a writer quoted by Eisner as saying that it is "from the sequence of events that we derive our idea of time."

Hans Prinzhorn

The author of Artistry of the Mentally Ill, Prinzhorn is quoted about how postures can serve as carriers of "the expressive process."

Hamlet

One of the most effective parts of the book comes when Will Eisner presents the classic story of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, in a modern setting. Eisner declares, "This wedding of Shakespearean language with a modern denizen of the ghetto may not be appropriate but the exercise serves to demonstrate the potential of the medium because the emotional content is so universal."

Shakespeare's brooding, tormented royal hero becomes a long-haired character in torn muscle shirt and jeans and running shoes in "Hamlet on a Rooftop." It opens with a bird's eye view of an urban wasteland, the Brooklyn Bridge recognizable in the distance. Hamlet leans against a brick chimney. Two narrow columns of text set the scene: Hamlet's father is mysteriously dead, and his mother marries his uncle within a month. This suggests murder and cries out for revenge on both for violating Hamlet's moral code. If he summons the courage to kill them, he will forfeit the love of Ophelia, his betrothed.

Hamlet then delivers the famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy verbatim. Shakespeare's words remain intact, but broken up and enclosed in balloons. Eisner uses classical portrayals of emotion - contemplation, bravado, exhaustion, wishing, withdrawal, candor, resolution, and hesitation. The drawing must be true not only to Shakespeare's portrayal in words, but also to the urban figure that Eisner has cast as Hamlet; his world must be shown realistically for the universal content to be accepted coming from him.

The Spirit

The fictional hero of Will Eisner's newspaper cartoons from the 1930s to 1952, the Spirit is a detective always wearing a hat and mask. Most of the illustrations for the book are drawn from his adventures.

Tom Wolf

Writer in the Harvard Education al Review (August 1977), Wolf is quoted by Eisner on how reading must be considered more broadly as the decoding of symbols and integration and organization of information from not only written words but pictures, maps, circuit diagrams, and musical notes.

Objects/Places

Balloons

The container used for text dialog spoken or thought by a character, balloons emanate from the character by tails. Their arrangement contributes to the measurement of time - if the reader/viewer cooperates and reads them in order (left-to-right and top-to-bottom). Balloons' shapes convey the character of sound - normal, unspoken, electronic. Lettering reflects character and emotion as well as the artist's style. It is poor practice to break thoughts over several frames in separate balloons or to break a thought into multiple balloons in a given panel.

Border

The outlines of a panel, borders can be thick or thin - or not existent - to organize the action of a comic in time and space.

Gesture

Human movements of expression, gestures are "almost idiomatic" to specific regions or cultures (although "a surprising number are universal"), are generally subtle, and do not involve a wide range of movement. The final position of the gesture is usually the key to its meaning. Ultimately, the reader/viewer decides whether the artist has chosen a gesture appropriately and portrayed it adequately.

Gutters

The white space between panels, gutters can affect the way reader/viewers perceive the speed at which the action occurs.

Page

The leaf of a publication or total area of the work, the page is normally divided into panels that are conventionally read left-to-right and top-to-bottom. The first page in a comic books is called the "splash page," which functions as an introduction, a launching pad for the narrative and, often, a frame or reference for the setting that can be left out in later panels. The artist usually designs this "splash page" as a decorative unit.

Panel

A box or frame that contains a given scene, panels (or boxes) are used to move a reader/viewer through time, suggesting the duration of events by how symbols and images are presented. Panels measure time much as Morse code and musical notation do. Within panels, balloon and various recognizable symbols help the storyteller involve the reader/viewer empathize. The number and size of panels contribute to story rhythm and the perceived passage of time. Panels are usually organized on the page in tiers.

Perspective

The vantage point from which scenes are viewed, perspective can be head-on, from above, or from beneath. Each manipulates the reader/viewer's orientation. Eye level is used to impart detail. Overhead clarifies the setting and how events will unfold. Ground level involves the reader and makes him/her feel the action. Worm's eye creates even greater involvement. Looking down on a scene creates psychological detachment, while looking up from below evokes smallness and sensations of fear. Perspective works together with the shape of a panel to heighten reactions.

Posture

The body's attitude, postures are movements from which the artist must select an instant to "freeze" in time. Extremely subtle movements flow together over short periods and must be captured to convey what has happened before and what will follow upon. Sometimes an action must be broken into several panels to clarify the action sufficiently. When the artist chooses the proper moment to freeze in time, the reader/viewer can use his/her imagination to picture the context and make rendering the follow-up unnecessary unless the next panel depends on the outcome of the action. The frozen moments must convey both time and emotion in order to serve the narrative.

Style

The manner in which an artist draws is called style.

Technique

The manner in which art is rendered is called technique. Early techniques are crude, which determines that bold black lines mark cartoons. Later enhancements allow the use of halftone and color.

Themes

Cooperation

Cartooning is of its very nature a cooperative effort between the creator of the strip or book and the reader/viewer. As in all communications, they use the conventions of their shared humanity. To be able to use effectively the "dictionary" of human behaviors, which begins to be assembled from childhood, the creator should read extensively, particularly short stories, and observe closely.

Some gestures and postures are culturally specific, but a surprising number are universal, particularly in the modern, technological age. The final position of a given gesture is usually definitive, but with postures, the artist must choose that moment in a continuum of motion that epitomizes what s/he intends. Control is then turned over to the reader/viewer who, from his or her own experience in interpreting gestures and postures, fills in what has come before the frozen moment and what logically follows.

The reader/viewer also must cooperate in following the strip or book in the conventional manner: right-to-left and top-to-bottom. Accepting that jumping ahead to see the ending is natural and inevitable, the creator nevertheless assumes the reader/viewer will return to the beginning and follow in order. The artist frames the story in such a way as to keep the reader/viewer moving at the proper pace. The shape, spacing, and outline of frames affect pace and emotion, as do the perspective from which the reader/viewer is shown the action. Dialog, captured in balloons, plays a major role in moving the action forward.

When the ideal of a single person writing and drawing the cartoon is impossible, the writer and artist must cooperate closely in bringing the writer's original idea to fruition, with neither person's ego overwhelming the project. The writer must have primacy in setting out the original vision, but the artist has a responsibility for presenting it in the way most likely to gain the reader/viewer's full cooperation and appreciation.

Symbolism

There exist from prehistoric times symbols that are instantly recognizable, which a sequential artist can call upon to communicate effectively with reader/viewers. Eisner shows this from prehistoric cave drawings of the hunt through Mayan and Egyptian friezes (early examples of sequential art) and down to the Egyptian hieroglyphs and the Asian pictographs that mark the beginning of useable written languages.

Eisner shows how a hieroglyph and pictograph for "prayer" can both be recognized as a kneeling figure with hands extended. Rendering this in realistic cartoon style does not change the essence, nor does the introduction of various "atmospheric" effects, although they add emotional nuances. Introducing costumes, props, backgrounds, and causing the praying figure to interact with other human beings, however, can turn

praying into other forms of asking. The introduction of dialog in the form of balloons most radically affects the basic symbolism.

Culturally significant symbols can be used to create a mood. Lettering a title in Hebraic style and placing it on a stone tablet instantly suggests Moses and the Ten Commandments, more so than using Hebraic lettering on a scroll would. Familiar elements in nature can be added to suggest atmosphere or as "shorthand" to indicate action. A quarter moon in the sky unambiguously says it is nighttime. Footprints in snow or sand show someone has passed by recently. The movement of air as someone or something passes rapidly by can be rendered graphically by lines; adding a hat that has blown off the runner's head or papers scattered in his or her wake suffice to relay many details to the savvy reader/viewer.

Some gestures and postures are culturally specific, but a surprising number are universal and useable as symbols. The final position of a given gesture is usually definitive, but with postures, the artist must choose that moment in a continuum of motion that epitomizes what s/he intends.

Time

Humans being exist in space and time. Depicting space graphically is far easier than illusory time. When the comic book artist depicts time, s/he can either show a series of frames, each containing an immediate results (like one figure stabbing threatening another, being shot by that other figure, and dropping dead) or arranging illusions and symbols to stretch time and enhance emotion - capturing the original assailant's staggering last moments, for instance.

Sequential artists use panels (or boxes) to move a reader/viewer through time, suggesting the duration of events by how symbols and images are presented. Panels measure time much as Morse code and musical notation do. Framing with lines separates or parses the total statement and acts as punctuation. Omitting the outline of a box is also significant. The number and size of panels contribute to story rhythm and the perceived passage of time. Using more panels segments the action and compresses time. Perfect squares suggest deliberate action; using an entire tier connotes suspense and threat; long, narrow panels set up a staccato rhythm and speed time, whereas a wide panel stretches time. Perspective can be altered to add time lapse without altering rhythm.

Including common details of life, which the reader/viewer can be expected to intuit, helps parse time and draw the reader/viewer into the story. Examples include a dripping faucet, the striking of a match, brushing one's teeth, and climbing a staircase. Because so much of human life revolves around talking, framing speech is an excellent way to help the reader/viewer measure the passage of time. Balloons are used to make sound visible (and, incidentally to convey the character of sound - normal, unspoken, electronic).

Style

Perspective

The author of Comics & Sequential Art, Will Eisner, is an acknowledged master of comic book art and one of its earliest creators. He studies under the anatomist George Bridgman and painter Robert Brachman, packages comic books for various publishers, and in the late 1930s publishes a weekly comic book insert for newspapers, The Spirit. It influences a generation of famed cartoonists. In 1952, Eisner switches his attention to the new field of educational comics, producing training manuals for the U.S. Army and producing teaching materials for art schools. In the mid-1970s, Eisner pioneers the graphic novel with A Contract with God. He has since produced eight graphic novels.

The book is an outgrowth of a popular course he teaches for fifteen years at the New York School of Visual Art and first serialized in The Spirit. It distills his ideas, theories, and advice on an art form that has generally been ignored as a scholarly topic, although each of its component elements has been deemed worthy of examination. He finds that many elements that have been considered "instinctive" can be organized into an exposition on the "art of communication." Eisner offers the book as a guide to the serious student, to practicing cartoonists, and to serious teachers. In the "Forward" [sic], Eisner explains that sequential art deserves to be properly analyzed by a practitioner.

The major impact of Comics & Sequential Art is in the artwork, much of it reproduced from Spirit strips. Brief notes in the gutters explain why Eisner does what he does on the given page and what he expects the impact will be on reader/viewers.

Tone

In Comics & Sequential Art Will Eisner is both a subjective champion of comic book art as a serious form of communication and important art form and an objective analyst of the component parts and underlying psychology. He is at his best in the brief notes in the gutters beside reproductions of his comics, which explain why he does what he does on the given page and what he expects the impact will be on reader/viewers. The student or practicing artist can glean much valuable information from the notes and from a minute study of the drawings.

In discussing the text a cartoonist includes in balloons, Eisner advises "telegraphing" the message using boldface to allow the reader/viewer to skim it and get the thrust of the dialog without reading the "normal" print. Unfortunately, when he attempts to describe his field academically, he forgets this advice, pretentiously overwrites the material, which confuses and annoys. Some of the historical tidbits are interesting, but too briefly mentioned to have impact. Quotations are included without context to allow the reader to weight their importance. By contrast, the two concluding chapters, "Application of Sequential Art" and "Learning (Print and Computer Era)" are skimmed

through too quickly, forcing the reader to consult other works on subjects at which Eisner no more than hints.

When discussing "timing," Eisner says the cartoonist must "freeze" the best moment in an action to represent the whole sweep and most easily allow the reader/viewer to fill in the blanks. One can assume that in the classroom, Eisner fills in many blanks through lectures and additional reading. The book would be stronger had a scholarly editor insisted on such a process, but twenty printings over fifteen years of Comics & Sequential Art speaks to the fact that it delivers solid, useful information despite its shortcomings.

Structure

Comics & Sequential Art consists of a Foreword, eight numbered and titled chapters, an index, and a brief glossary. The chapters deal with "1. 'Comics' as a Form of Reading," "2. Imagery," "3. 'Timing,'" "4. The Frame," "5. Expressive Anatomy," "6. Writing & Sequential Art," "7. Application (The Use of Sequential Art)," and "8. Teaching/Learning: Sequential Art for Comics in the Print and Computer Era." They deal throughout with the need to integrate word and picture in terms the reader/viewer can be expected to understand as the basis for a successful comic strip or book. Eisner says in the Foreword that he is trying to make up for a lack of scholarly consideration of comics as a serious art form. In the first chapter particularly, but scattered throughout, he allows his prose to become pretentious. The final chapter's musing about how computers will affect the art, shows an accomplished hand-drawing artist struggling to stay current. The space might better have been used by drawing out the discussion of "How to Look at Things."

The backbone of the book is the illustrative material, which successfully and delightfully takes the reader/viewer through all the basics of creating sequential art. Some of it is specially drawn to illustrate points Eisner is making in the text, but the lion's share consists of reproductions of The Spirit, a weekly comic book insert for newspapers from the mid-1930s until 1952. The most useful materials are found in brief commentaries sprinkled in the gutters around illustrations. In them, Eisner points out what he finds most important in the artwork and text: why he includes or excludes something, how he expects the reader/viewer to react, why a different approach might be less successful. Easily overlooked, these gems deserve special consideration and the features to which they point should be studied at length to get the most from Eisner's vast experience.

Quotes

"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 interpretive skills. The regimens of art (eg. Perspective, symmetry, brush stroke) and the regimens of literature (eg. Grammar, plot, syntax) become superimposed upon each other. The reading of the comic book is an act of both aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit." Chapter 1, pg. 8.

"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." Chapter 2, pg. 13.

"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." Chapter 3, pg. 25

"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." Chapter 3, pg. 26.

"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." Chapter 3, pg. 30.

"In visual narration the task of the author/artist is to record a continued flow of experience and show it as it may be seen from the reader's eyes. This is done by arbitrarily breaking up the flow of uninterrupted experience into segments of 'frozen' scenes and enclosing them by a frame or panel." Chapter 4, pg. 39.

"In the following example, each page is of unequal reading duration, time and rhythm. Each encompasses a different time and setting. Each page is a result of careful deliberation. Please note that there is no intention to create 'page interest' at the cost of subordinating the internal (story telling) panels. If a rule is possible, I would ordain that 'what goes on INSIDE the panel is PRIMARY!'" Chapter 4, pg. 63.

"A simple example of 'overkill' in layout and perspective is shown in the two alternate treatments shown below. Either of these are valid renderings of the action ... if taken out

of context. But, when examined in the light of their service to the story they are not useful." Chapter 4, pg. 99.

"If the skill with which an actor emulates an emotion is, in large part, the criterion for evaluating his or her ability, certainly the artist's performance at delineating the same on paper must be measured with the same yardstick. In comic strip art this property is widely employed." Chapter 5, pg. 104.

"This wedding of Shakespearean language with a modern denizen of the ghetto may not be appropriate but the exercise serves to demonstrate the potential of the medium because the emotional content is so universal." Chapter 5, pg. 121.

"I have always been strongly of the opinion that the writer and artist should be one person. Failing that, and in the absence of any prior agreement between artist and writer, then I come down in favor of the dominance of the artist. This is not to free him from the obligation to work in service of the story originated by the writer. Rather, I expect him to shoulder this burden with the understanding that with the so called 'freedom' will come a greater challenge - that of employing or devising a wider range of visual devices and composition innovation. He should contribute to the 'writing.'" Chapter 6, pg. 132.

"Keep in mind you are dealing with sound. Emphasis is dealt with by the use of bold face. Remember that the reader's first action is to scan the page, then the panel. If the pictorial value of the images is very exciting or filled with great detail - there will be a tendency to 'skim' the balloon text. So a wise defensive stratagem is to try to deploy the gold face not only in service of sound but to 'telegraph' the message. The reader should be able to get the thrust or sense of the dialogue out of the bold-face letters alone." Chapter 8, pg. 152.

Topics for Discussion

Why, ideally, should the author and artist creating a comic strip be one person?

How should separate writers and artists interact to produce a successful cartoon?

What are the emotional effects of looking down on a scene as opposed to looking up?

Why is a posture more difficult to portray than a gesture?

How does picturing an action differ from describing it?

Why is "meanwhile" the most frequently used word in comics?

How does the "splash" page function? What freedoms and liabilities does it put on the author and/or artist?

Do you consider the Hamlet series successful? What other "classics" could this technique apply to usefully?