Understanding Comics Study Guide

Understanding Comics by Scott McCloud

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

In Understanding Comics, author Scott McCloud examines comics as an art form. Understanding Comics is truly a comics book written about comics as a literary and artistic medium. McCloud believes that comics have been in existence for centuries, although many great works of art are erroneously categorized as other art forms instead of comics. He explains the fundamentals of the genre, including the passage of time, depiction of motion, and broad interpretation by the reader as elements unique to comics.

McCloud also provides a detailed history of the medium, along with examples of various styles and strategies used. He peppers the book with examples of the works of some of the most well-known comics artists in the world, along with the techniques that make them notable in the evolution of comics. McCloud provides plenty of visuals in order to demonstrate each concept he introduces. McCloud contrasts the work of both Eastern and Western artists, and points out the influences of many non-comics artistic masters, including Picasso and Monet.

McCloud also introduces the concept of closure, or the means by which comics readers interpret the events that invisibly occur within the gutter, or space between individual panels in a comic. McCloud is actually so passionate about the subject that he essentially dedicates an entire chapter to this topic. Ample examples of each transition type, panel shape, and line style show the reader how each feature potentially adds a different element to the images portrayed.

The six steps involved in creating any art form are examined in detail. Although McCloud insists that all artists will follow some variation of this formula, he also makes the argument that only creators choosing to focus on ideas and concepts over form will actually elevate the medium to a higher level. McCloud briefly discusses the pros and cons of using color to illustrate images, especially by means of the traditional four-color process used in the United States.

The influence of Expressionism on comics is also reviewed. McCloud shows examples of ways in which different comics artists convey mood and appeal to the readers' senses. Emotion through use of different images is analyzed, either with or without the addition of word balloons and sound effects. McCloud would like to see the art of comics taken more seriously. He believes that more adult readers and literary critics would accept comics as an art form, similar to the written word, film, music, and theater, if it were made more sophisticated and appealing. The book is a theoretical examination of the steps necessary to move comics into a realm of greater appreciation and respect.

Chapter 1, Setting the Record Straight

Chapter 1, Setting the Record Straight Summary and Analysis

As a child, Scott knows exactly what comics are. They are bright, colorful magazines filled with "bad art, stupid stories, and guys in tights." He prefers to read "real" books, considering himself far too old for comics. Scott becomes hooked on comics, however, when a friend convinces him to give comics a second chance. Scott becomes totally obsessed, and in the tenth grade, he begins practicing to be a comics artist.

Scott understands that comic books are usually "crude, poorly-drawn, semiliterate, cheap, disposable kiddie fare," but he believes they do not have to be. Scott thinks that comics contain some kind of hidden power. He feels that people fail to appreciate comics as an art form because they try to define them too narrowly. Scott insists that the potential of comics is "limitless and exciting". He explains that the world of comics is "huge and varied', although not broad enough to include anything which is clearly not comics. Scott explores the correct answer to the question, "What are comics?"

"Comics," Scott explains, is the word for the medium itself, not a specific object like a comic book or comic strip. Scott describes comics as "a vessel which can hold any number of ideas and images". The content is determined by the individual tastes of each comics creator. The trick, he says, is "to never mistake the message for the messenger". Unlike other forms of great media, like the written word, music, film, and video, comics is rarely critically examined as an art form. Scott would like to change that.

Scott discusses several ways to potentially define comics. For example, master comics artist William Eisner uses the term "sequential art" to describe comics. When pictures are displayed in a sequence, even a sequence of only two images, they become more than just pictures. After exploring the subject further, Scott eventually decides that the word "comics" is best described as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer."

Scott also reveals that the art of comics is much older than most people realize. He discusses early Mexican examples of comics discovered as early as 1519, and French versions depicting the Norman conquest in England. These renderings are written as one long story, with no panel borders separating the artwork. Yet, the passage of time is still clearly illustrated as events unfold.

Scott dispels the idea that Egyptian hieroglyphics are early forms of comics, however, since the glyphs represent only sounds, not unlike the alphabet. Scott categorizes them as a form of written word rather than comics. He is intrigued by Egyptian painting, since examples depict action sequences that appear similar to modern comics.

Scott does not wish to speculate where or when comics actually originated. Instead, he points to the invention of printing as a significant event in the history of comics. Prior to this time, comics are merely a diversion for the rich and powerful. Printing allows everyone to enjoy it. Early "picture stories" are crude, but as time progresses, the artwork in comics also becomes more sophisticated. In 1731, William Hogwarth's six-plate picture-story entitled "A Harlot's Progress" is published. It is first exhibited as a series of paintings and later sold as a portfolio of engravings. Both the paintings and the engravings are designed to be viewed side-by-side, in sequence. Hogwarth's sequel, "A Rake's Progress," is so successful that new copyright laws are created to protect this new form of art.

The father of modern comics is Rudolphe Töpffer. In the mid-1800's, Töpffer's light satiric picture stories employ cartooning and panel borders. They also feature the first interdependent combination of words and pictures seen in Europe. Although Töpffer regards comics as merely a diversion, his contribution to the understanding of comics is considerable, if only for his realization that "he who was neither artist nor writer, had created and mastered a form which was at once both and neither." It is a language all its own.

Although comics continue to thrive through the work of British caricature magazines, the medium does not receive much critical attention. Even in this century, the word "comics" carries such a negative commutation that many comic artists prefer to be known as illustrators, commercial artists, or cartoonists. Many artists' work is classified as something other than comics, so some of the best "comics" created are not generally recognized as comics at all. The definition of comics is too narrow. Scott lists the works of Frans Masereel and Max Ernst as other early comics examples that are considered great works of art, but not comics, even though they employ similar sequential storytelling techniques.

If comics are briefly defined as sequential art, then photography, stained glass windows, Monet's series paintings, and even car owner's manuals could all be considered comics. Since the "sequential" aspect of the definition is so important, however, that also means that some art forms widely considered comics are not. Scott displays a single image similar to those found in the Comics section of the newspaper as an example. This, Scott says, is not comics, because a sequence cannot be composed of only one image. This type of art is not sequential, so it fails to meet Scott's definition of comics. These images are cartoons, which are not the same as comics.

Chapter 2, The Vocabulary of Comics

Chapter 2, The Vocabulary of Comics Summary and Analysis

Scott opens this chapter with a description and example of the Magritte painting, "The Treachery of Images." Although the subject of the painting is a common pipe, the artist's message reads, "This is not a pipe." As Scott explains, this really is not a pipe, nor is it a painting of a pipe. It is actually ten copies of a drawing of a painting of a pipe, when one considers that each panel on the two opening pages depicting the painting actually represents one copy. Scott uses this example to demonstrate one of the many uses of icons, or images used to represent a person, place, thing, or idea. Scott explains that there are three different types of icons. Symbols, including peace signs, company logos, and the like, are one type. The letters of the alphabet, mathematical signs, and musical notes are examples of the second type. Pictures, or images designed to actually resemble their subjects, comprise the third type.

Scott demonstrates the difference between various icons. Unlike non-pictorial icons, the meaning behind an individual picture is "fluid and variable". Some are more realistic than others are. Comics often employ a more abstract style that is not very realistic at all. As pictures become less realistic, they eventually devolve into cartoons. Scott does not attempt to identify what makes a cartoon as opposed to a picture, but he does examine cartooning "as a form of amplification through simplification."

Artists can use this technique to "amplify" an image's meaning. The more abstract an image, the more focus is placed on the image's specific details. Film critics often describe live-action films as cartoons to acknowledge the "stripped-down intensity" of a simple story or visual style. Cartooning is used in comics as an effective storytelling technique. Cartoon imagery is universal with no distracting details that could detract from the storyline. Scott uses several images of the human face to demonstrate the way in which the human mind interprets a cartoon face. The more simple the drawing of the face, the more universal it becomes. Readers begin to see themselves in the cartoon. In theory, readers will accept more of the message if they are not distracted by a complex messenger who interests them. Scott explains that this theory is the reason why he appears as a cartoon in the book instead of a more realistic storyteller.

Scott also explains that everything that people experience in life can be separated into two realms, a conceptual realm and a sensory realm. Personal identity is simply a concept, an idea, but personal experiences are interpreted by the senses. By turning people into cartoons, comics artists deemphasize physical appearance in order to enter a conceptual world. If they portray the characters more realistically, they can only portray the "world without." If they use cartoons to tell the story, however, they can more accurately depict the "world within". Drawing inanimate objects as cartoons gives them special qualities that they would not otherwise have. However, cartoons cannot portray the beauty and complex nature of the physical world.

Scott explains that although most artists employ cartooning techniques to draw faces and figures, backgrounds can be drawn more realistically, since there is no expectation or need for readers to be able to relate to a wall or a landscape, only to the individual characters themselves. Scott provides visual examples of this style. He also shows the reader how Japanese comics often portray certain objects and characters in a very realistic style in order to make them stand out in comparison to the other elements of the story. Scott indicates that this is just one way in which Japanese comics have evolved differently than comics in the United States. Scott points out that the work of artists who use a more "cartoon-y" style may appeal more to children than adults, since the images omit much of the "ambiguity and complex characterization which are the hallmarks of modern literature".

In the comics industry, writers and artists are considered "separate breeds". They are engaged in different disciplines, yet "good" comics are those in which the two work together harmoniously. Scott believes that comics need its own language in order to receive the "unified identity it needs". In order for comics to develop its own language, artists and writers must learn to combine their talents together. This is difficult, because pictures are "received" information, while writing is "perceived" information. Reading requires mastery of a language, so it has to be learned, whereas the interpretation of a picture happens automatically. Bold, direct words require only low levels of perception, and are received faster, much like pictures. Scott explains that determining the best language for comics requires finding the best balance between the most easily perceived words and those that are more sophisticated and pleasing to adult readers.

Scott also demonstrates how artists use non-iconic forms of abstract expression in comics. He explains that abstract images are drawn without any attempt "to cling to resemblance or meaning". They are open to interpretation. Scott displays a diagram of the Picture Plane, which demonstrates where different characters fall between the extremes of reality and meaning. Scott also provides examples of different artists' work and explains where each image falls on the Picture Plane.

According to Scott, each artist's position on the chart reveals some of his/her values and loyalties in art. Those approaching the lower left, or realistic side, for example, may be very attracted to the beauty they discover in Nature, while those at the top draw more abstract images and may be more inspired by the "beauty of art" itself. Artists on the right of the diagram whose style is more cartoonish may be most interested in the "beauty of ideas".

Chapter 3, Blood in the Gutter

Chapter 3, Blood in the Gutter Summary and Analysis

In this chapter, Scott discusses the idea that one relies on sensory perception in order to experience the outside world. Scott says that one's perception of reality is an act of faith based upon mere pieces of the world. Scott introduces the concept of closure, the "phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole". Closure allows film and television viewers to "transform still pictures into a story of continuous motion". Scott explains that the space between panels in a comic is known as "the gutter." Closure allows readers to connect the events occurring in each panel in order to form a story.

Scott points out that although the closure of electronic media is "continuous, largely involuntary, and virtually imperceptible...closure in comics is far from continuous and anything but involuntary". Readers must use their imagination to fill in the blanks. As he explains, "Closure in comics fosters an intimacy surpassed only by the written word, a silent, secret contract between creator and audience. How the creator honors that contract is a matter of both art and craft."

"Scott describes six different types of panel-to-panel transitions. The first, called "moment-to-moment", assumes very little passage of time between panels and therefore requires very little closure. The "action-to-action" type, however, describes transitions depicting a single subject in distinct action sequences. Scott notes that "subject-to-subject transitions", in which the subject changes from one panel to the next, makes a greater "degree of reader involvement necessary to render these transitions meaningful". Scott adds, "deductive reasoning is often required in reading comics." This is especially the case when "scene-to-scene transitions" are used, as these often transport the reader "across significant distances of time and space".

Scott also introduces "aspect-to-aspect" transitions, which generally bypass time and instead invoke different aspects of a place, idea, or mood. The final transition type, known as the "non-sequitur", "offers no logical relationship between panels whatsoever". Scott explains that although these types of transitions may not initially make sense, comics readers can inevitably "find meaning or resonance in even the most jarring of combinations".

Scott again mentions the influence of comics master Jack Kirby and examines one of Kirby's Fantastic Four comics from 1966. Sixty-five percent of the panel-to-panel transitions in the book are action-to-action. Scott explains that comics artists around the globe consistently tell stories by using mostly action-to-action sequences. The second and third most commonly used transition types are subject-to-subject and scene-to-scene, respectively.

Japanese artist Osamu Tezuka, however, uses nearly as many subject-to-subject transitions as action sequences. Tezuka, like other Eastern artists, also uses aspect-to-

aspect transitions, unlike most Western artists. Japanese artists traditionally adhere to this style. Scott explains that Japanese artists generally create much longer works than Western artists do, so they may feel that they have more time to develop the concepts and ideas involved in the story. Japanese art and literature is also not as goal-oriented as Western art and literature. Scott describes a rich tradition of "cyclical and labyrinthine works of art" in Japanese culture. Japanese comics emphasize "being there" over "getting there."

In Japan, comics are "an art of intervals". Eastern artists traditionally believe that "elements omitted from a work of art are as much a part of that work as those included. Scott presents examples of Japanese art in which great focus is placed on figure/ground relationships and the concept of "negative space." Eastern art has influenced Western art so that now less attention is paid to "foreground subjects and continuousness of tones." Western artists now use the concept of "fragmentation" and incorporate a new awareness of the picture plane into their work. Scott provides Picasso's paintings as an example of both the utilization of negative space and fragmentation.

Scott also explains that artists must make assumptions about their readers' experiences. For example, artists assume that readers generally read from left to right. Arranging panels in the way that the reader is most likely to read is critical to the storytelling process. Although comics is strictly a visual medium, Scott says that readers engage all five senses in order to interpret the unseen action that occurs in the gutter that separates the panels from each other. Scott believes that it is harder for readers to obtain closure if realistic images are used. As Scott explains, if readers are particularly aware of the art in a given story, closure is probably "not happening without some effort." No other art form demands as much interpretation from its audience. For this reason, Scott believes that it is wrong to view comics as a "hybrid of the graphic arts and prose fiction".

Chapter 4, Time Frames

Chapter 4, Time Frames Summary and Analysis

Scott opens this chapter with an example of a single frame in which the unusual passage of time in comics is accurately represented. Although the reader's eyes view the panel as a snapshot of a single moment in time, the conversation depicted in the word balloons makes it clear that the events occur over several moments. Scott explains that people have been well-trained by photography and "representational art" to see any single continuous image as a single instant in time, but time in comics is actually more like a rope. Each inch of the rope represents a second. Scott winds the rope through the image to demonstrate the analogy on page ninety-six.

Sound in comics consists of two elements: word balloons, and sound effects. According to Scott, "Both types add to the duration of a panel, partially through the nature of sound itself, and by introducing issues of action and reaction." Silent panels appear to depict a single moment in time, but once sound is introduced into the story, time can then become distorted based upon the choice of sounds used. Wording in the past tense, for example, can actually "hold" a moment in time. Scott provides examples of this phenomenon.

Scott also explains that the panel itself is important in the passage of time. He believes that panels are often overlooked as comics' most important icons. Panels indicate the division of time or space in comics. The duration of time and/or the dimensions of the space being divided are defined more by the contents of the panel than by the panel itself. Readers have to examine the action in order to interpret and quantify the passage of time for themselves within the context of the story.

Some artists also use multiple panels depicting similar or identical images in order to emphasize the passage of time, even as no action occurs in the story. Sometimes, artists stretch a panel horizontally in order to imply the passage of time, as Scott demonstrates with examples on page 101. By changing the shape of the panels, reader are subtly persuaded that more time has passed than they would perceive if the panels had been displayed in a more typical shape.

Panel borders can also lend a "timeless" feel, as when no border is used at all (see page 102). Scott believes that this type of panel is unexpected, since readers are so accustomed to viewing panels in a rectangular format. "Because of its unresolved nature," Scott explains, "such a panel may linger in the reader's mind, and its presence may be felt in the panels which follow it." If an artist incorporates a "bleed," or panel that runs off the edge of the page, the timeless effect is compounded. These types of images are most often seen in Japanese comics, since the technique was only recently adopted in Western countries. Panels such as the one portrayed in the example on page 103 can help set a mood or sense of place based upon their timeless quality.

Any unexpected change in format can affect the reader's perception of the story. Certainly, placing the panels in a way that forces the reader to read in a direction other than left-to-right would be considered very odd. Scott believes this may occur because of the influence of other forms of media like film and television in which viewers do not really have a choice in the matter. Although Scott points out that comics readers may be conditioned to expect a linear progression, he does not believe that comics must be done that way. He predicts that viewer participation is about to become an enormous issue in other forms of media, and believes that the way in which the comics industry addresses it could play a crucial role in determining the role of comics in the future.

Just as Scott has pointed out the relationship between time and space in the world of comics, he also says that the correlation between time and motion bears examining as well. As previously discussed, motion in comics is created by the reader's mind as he or she imagines the action that takes place in between the panels in a process that Scott calls closure. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, much attention is paid to the idea of capturing motion through science. Thomas Edison files the first patent on the use of film, and some painters, including Futurists in Italy and Marcel Duchamp in France, begin attempting to depict motion as a single image on canvas. Scott presents a few examples of this practice on page 108.

Eventually, artists begin using what is now commonly referred to as a "motion line" in order to show the path of an object moving through space. Also called "zip-ribbons," these lines are originally drawn very crudely, but now they are far more refined and stylized. Examples of motion lines used by heroic fantasy artists Bill Everett and Jack Kirby are displayed on page 111. The lines are considered an American specialty, due to their ability to depict action with drama. Some artists, like Marvel's Gene Colan, begin incorporating a streaking effect into their motion lines during the 1960's and 70's. Japanese artists take the concept one step further and actually depict action sequences from the reader's perspective. Polyptychs, or scenes in which a moving figure or figures is imposed over a continuous background, are also commonly used by artists as a way to depict motion.

Chapter 5, Living in Line

Chapter 5, Living in Line Summary and Analysis

In this chapter, Scott discusses the ways in which comics artists appeal to readers' senses and emotions. He believes that emotions can be made visible, even when just portrayed as ink on paper. Scott explains that the idea that a picture can evoke an emotional or sensual response in the viewer is vital to the art of comics. The classic painting, "The Scream" is provided as an example. Emotions and senses can be portrayed either within or between individual panels in comics. Scott explores the history behind expressionistic art in comics.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, artists like Wassily Kandinsky begin studying the power of "line, shape, and color to suggest the inner mind of the artist and stimulate the five senses". As Scott explains, Kandisnky is searching for an art "that might somehow unite the senses, and in doing so, unite the different art forms which appealed to those different senses." Scott calls this concept synaesthetics. Scott points out that synaesthetics is rarely seen in Western comics. Most artists have a fairly straightforward style that does not openly appear expressionistic in nature. Scott believes, however, that all comics have some expressive potential, no matter what the style. All lines "characterize" their subject in some way.

On page 126, Scott provides multiple examples of the line work used by various comics artists. Each depicts a unique style and set of emotions. On page 128, Scott uses a series of panels to depict the use of lines as language. By consistently using certain lines that appeal to the senses, comics artists create symbols that can then be used by other artists to portray a universal concept. Once a set of lines is commonly used for this purpose, it becomes part of the language of comics. Scott provides many examples of this on page 129. As comics continue to evolve, it accumulates more and more symbols that can be easily understood by its readers. Scott believes that this "visual vocabulary" has an unlimited potential for growth.

Scott also demonstrates how backgrounds can be another valuable tool for indicating invisible ideas, particularly emotions. Certain patterns can invoke an emotional response in the reader. Scott points out that this style is commonly seen in European color comics and Japanese romance comics, where expressionistic effects "have been devised for almost any emotion imaginable". Scott cautions, however, that creators employing these effects may need to clarify their message. They may accomplish this through expanding the content of surrounding scenes or adding words that describe the scene.

Scott feels that "the most widely-used, most complex, and most versatile of comics' many synaesthetic icons is the ever-present, ever-popular word balloon". Balloons come in many shapes and sizes. They contain both verbal and nonverbal symbols. Lettering styles also play a role in determining the overall feel of each scene depicted.

Comics creators can use words to add depth to even the most neutral image. While non-verbal cues may stimulate the readers' imaginations, only words can bring a specific meaning to the story.

Chapter 6, Show and Tell

Chapter 6, Show and Tell Summary and Analysis

In this chapter, Scott details the history of the written word and pictures. Young children are expected to read books with lots of pictures, but they are also expected to grow out of this habit as they mature. Traditional thinking holds that truly great works of literature and art are best appreciated when viewed separately. Works that combine pictures and words together are looked upon as simple diversions or examples of commercialism. The idea that combining words and pictures together is somehow "base or simplistic" really upsets Scott. He believes that comics would be more highly respected if people did not have this attitude toward combining the two art forms.

Evidence of drawings exists before evidence of written words, yet pictures are somehow considered less important than words. Scott explains that the earliest words are actually "stylized pictures". Eventually, most modern writing begins to represent only sounds. It loses any resemblance to the objects it depicts. Once printing is invented, written words become more visible than ever before, but pictures are now rarely seen together with words. Even when words and pictures are combined in the first comics, word balloons are not used. The text is kept separate and displayed outside of the picture frame. Pictures become less abstract and more realistic.

With the birth of Expressionism, however, art becomes more abstract, and artists grow interested in the meaning of art and ideas. At the same time, writing is changing, too. Poetry and other writings become simpler, and incorporate more modern language. Soon, Rodolphe Töpffer is creating comics, as words and pictures come together to form art. Scott believes that comics are incorrectly viewed as a modern form of media, even though it has been in existence for centuries. People are more likely to respect older works that are more "classic" in nature. Books that contain fewer pictures are considered more appropriate for adults. Scott also complains that many comics creators seek only to "match the achievements of other media". They view any opportunity to work in these other fields as a step up in their careers.

As time progresses, the eventual combination of words and pictures together has a huge influence on the growth of the comics industry. McCloud explains that an enormous range of human experiences can be portrayed in comics through either words or pictures. There is virtually no limit to the number of different ways in which words and pictures can be combined in comics to tell a story.

Beginning on page 153, Scott describes and illustrates several of the most common ways in which words and pictures are often combined in comics. The first category is "word specific". Word specific combinations include pictures "that illustrate, but don't significantly add to a largely complete text". "Picture specific" combinations have words that "do little more than add a soundtrack to a visually told sequence". "Duo-specific" combinations include words and pictures that generally carry the same message, with

each reinforcing the other. "Additive" combinations allow words to "amplify or elaborate" the apparent meaning of an image. "Parallel" combinations incorporate words and pictures that seem to be largely unrelated to each other. "Montages" treat words "as integral parts of the picture". "Interdependent" combinations are the most common. In these cases, the words and pictures work together to send a unified message.

Scott compares words and pictures to partners in a dance. If each one takes turns leading the dance, beauty and harmony can be achieved through cooperation between the two. Both partners must relinquish the lead at some point in order to be successful. As long as each knows their roles, and supports the other, a great result can be obtained. Scott explains, "When pictures carry the weight of clarity in a scene, they free the words to explore a wider area." When words carry the bulk of the meaning in the story, the pictures can be radically changed. Scott provides vivid examples of each of these scenarios. He believes that the unison of these two elements can bring comics to the level of any other art form.

Chapter 7, The Six Steps

Chapter 7, The Six Steps Summary and Analysis

Previously in the book, Scott explains the ways in which comics differs from other forms of communication. In this chapter, however, Scott explains that all art has certain characteristics in common. Many critics ask, "Can comics be art?" Scott believes it can, partly due to his use of a very broad definition for the word "art". Scott defines art as "any human activity which doesn't grow out of either of our species' two basic instincts: survival and reproduction!" Using a series of panels to display a day in the life of early Man, Scott explains how the pursuit of art serves three evolutionary purposes. Scott provides an image of a prehistoric male chasing a female as the first example. The man is intensely driven by the need to reproduce. The woman, however, is just as driven by her need to survive. Afraid, she finds a place to hide. As the man searches for her, he encounters a dangerous wild animal. Suddenly, all of his energy is focused on his own need to survive. He flees as quickly as he can.

Scott explains that people today cannot just spend their day having sex and eating, however. Their free time is spent in the pursuit of art in all of its various forms. The next set of images displays what early Man does to pass the time. An old woman draws lines in the sand with a crude stick. She is ill today. Yesterday, she felt better, so her drawings were "open and curved," but today her lines are "tight and angular." Another man uses stones to make a drumming sound. Although he is unsure why he does this, he is aware that the resulting sound is pleasing to him. A young boy, upset about losing a fight with his brother, kicks his foot and raises his fist in the air in a primitive dance. Yet another young girl sings.

Scott lists the three ways in which all "art", including the examples cited above, serves an evolutionary function. First, art serves as a form of mental and physical exercise, since it provides external stimuli. Second, in allowing people to express their emotions, art ultimately ensures man's survival. Scott believes that "art as self expression" transforms artists into heroes. According to Scott, many believe this is art's highest purpose. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the pursuit of artistic expression often leads to the discovery of useful concepts and ideas. "Art as discovery" forms the basis for exploration in many areas, including modern art, language, science, and philosophy. To emphasize this point, Scott depicts the discovery of fire as accidental, occurring only because of early man's attempt at music.

Scott believes that modern Man is still driven by the two primal needs of reproduction and survival, but art can be seen in even the smallest act. Examples include singing and dancing, making music, and even the way in which a person signs his/her name. Scott disagrees with people who view something they do not understand and complain, "That's not art!' Scott believes that "rare is the person in any occupation who expresses nothing." According to Scott, a "pure" artist is one who does not pursue art for practical purposes, but for the pursuit of art itself. Scott explains, "the creation of any work in any

medium will always follow a certain path." There are six steps involved: idea or purpose, form, idiom, structure, craft, and surface. The artist begins with the idea or purpose, which is to say, the content. This includes the purpose of the work, the ideas, and the emotions involved. Second, the artist must decide which form to use. Examples include books, drawings, songs, and even comic books.

Third, the idiom, or "school" of art, must be considered. Specific vocabulary and styles suitable for a particular genre will be used. Step four is structure. In determining the work's structure, the artist must decide which aspects to include, which to leave out, and the overall arrangement of the material to be presented. Step five is the craft. As Scott explains, this is "getting the job done." This step involves constructing the work by applying skills, using practical knowledge and invention, and problem solving. Step number six is the surface. This is what is referred to in the comics industry as the production value. It includes all aspects that readers will notice upon first inspection. The surface of the work is what makes the initial impression upon readers and determines their level of interest. All artists will use each step, although the order in which they use them may vary. Scott says, "The more a creator learns to command very aspect of his/her art and understand his/her relationship to it, the more 'artistic' concerns are likely to get the upper hand."

Scott provides a series of case studies into the lives of potential comics creators. As children begin reading comics, some begin paying attention to the format of the story, not just the story itself. They realize that comics are simply drawings, and that they might be able to learn the skills required to create comics as well. Once he/she decides to pursue an interest in comics creation, he/she may begin focusing on a certain type of comics, but many young people begin practicing the "craft" part of the industry instead. They purchase all of the necessary tools - the right brushes, pens, and paper, and begin to practice drawing. Eventually, they show their work to their peers. People viewing their work may be impressed by their ability.

The young artist first portrayed by Scott, however, decides to show a sample of his work to a comics professional at a local convention. The professional is very critical. He focuses on the inaccuracy of the anatomy in the artist's drawings, and makes the artist feel inadequate and embarrassed. The artist buys books on his craft and tries to hone his skills even further by studying the art. He eventually loses his motivation to pursue his goal, and he stops drawing. The next person portrayed is a hardworking female student. She studies her craft throughout high school and college, but she encounters a similar experience when she shows her work to a comics professional. The professional criticizes her storytelling abilities and layout choices. She is skilled enough to find work in the comics industry, but only as an assistant. This may be enough for her, Scott explains, but others will hunger for more.

The next artist depicted can hardly sleep, since he spends "every waking hour working out the difficult principles of comics composition and storytelling, the kind they don't teach in books!" He is disappointed once he realizes that the artists he admires are not bringing any new ideas to the industry. They are simply copying the concepts used by their predecessors. Eventually, the young artist masters all of the comics concepts that

he needs to know. He gets his own comic book, and he is confident in his abilities. Although he does not receive much attention from the critics, he makes "a decent living" and seems content.

The next artist shown reaches the same level of accomplishment, yet she remains unsatisfied. She longs to establish a uniqueness that will set her apart from others who are doing the same thing. She begins to introduce innovative new concepts to the field. She creates her own "idiom" of comics, and changes her work completely. She becomes financially successful and gains her peers' respect. Young artists admire her and her work. She appears satisfied with her achievements.

Another creator, however, reaches the same pinnacle in his career, yet feels unfulfilled. He feels like something is missing. He searches for meaning in his work and questions his motivation. As Scott explains, all comics artists must determine what their goals are. They must decide whether the work is merely a job or a means to achieving social status, or if they would like to bring fresh ideas to the medium as a whole. As Scott explains," Does the artist want to say something about life through his art, or does he want to say something about art itself?

If an artist focuses on form over ideas, he/she will become an "explorer," or someone who tries to maximize the potential of the art form. Examples of this type of artist include Stravinsky, Picasso, Virginia Woolf, and Orson Welles. Artists who choose to focus on ideas first instead of form will be choosing to tell the story rather than bring new ideas to the genre. Examples of great comics storytellers include Schulz, Barks, Herge, Eisner, and Nakazawa. Examples from other art forms include Capra, Dickens, Woody Guthrie, and Edward R. Murrow. Scott believes that artists must focus on ideas over form in order to advance the relevance of comics across the globe. Scott provides an apple as a metaphor, since creators stressing form over substance may find their work artificial at the core, like a seedless fruit.

Chapter 8, A Word about Color

Chapter 8, A Word about Color Summary and Analysis

In this brief chapter about color, Scott discusses the stormy relationship between color and comics throughout history. He explains that throughout art history, color is a "powerful, even predominant concern" of all good artists, no matter where they live. Georges Seurat is listed as an example, since he devotes his life to the study of color. Kandinsky believes that color can have "profound physical and emotional effects on people". Although Scott admits that color can be a "formidable ally" for artists in any visual medium, he stresses that comics and color do not always go together.

Scott blames the prevailing forces of commerce and technology for comics' failure to use color to its highest potential. In 1861, Scottish physicist Sir James Clerk-Maxwell isolates what are called the three "additive primaries". The three additive primaries are the colors of red, blue, and green. When projected together on screen in combinations, these three colors can reproduce every color in the visible spectrum. They are called additive because all of the colors together add up to pure white light. Eight years later, French pianist Louis Ducos Du Hauron devises the idea of three "subtractive" primaries. The colors of cyan, magenta, and yellow can also be mixed together to create the other colors of the spectrum. They are called subtractive primaries because they create additional hues by filtering out the light.

The introduction of color comics to American newspapers is very popular. As Scott explains, "color comics hit the newspaper industry like an atomic bomb!" Sales increase, but the coloring process is very expensive, so newspapers begin using a four-color process that includes concentrations of 100%, 50%, and 20% of the shades of cyan, magenta, and yellow for the pictures, along with black for the line work. The look of the colors applied to cheap newsprint does not legitimately improve comics' artistic value, in Scott's opinion.

Scott mourns the absence of the emotional impact of single-color saturation in the work, since no one color is dominant over the others. Applying color makes the reader more aware of the form of the images and less focused on the ideas and concepts being used and presented. Color comics, however, do gain "iconic power", since they enable readers to recognize characters by the color of their costumes. Scott prefers the subtler tones used in Hergé's European compositions. Scott states that the comics printing in Europe is superior to that used in the United States. Some American artists are learning to adopt the European style and take more chances with the color, but so far without much success. Scott points out that color is still an expensive option that is made available to only the larger, more conservative comics publishers. Scott feels that the ideas behind the art are communicated more directly when comics are printed in black and white only. When flat colors are used, the images themselves take on more significance than the ideas.

Chapter 9, Putting It All Together

Chapter 9, Putting It All Together Summary and Analysis

In this final chapter, Scott asks the question, "Why is this medium we call comics so important? Why should we try so hard to understand comics?" Scott believes that the answer "lies deep within the human condition." He explains that "we all live in a state of profound isolation," and "all forms of communication are "by-products of our sad inability to communicate directly from mind to mind." No one can ever really know or understand what another person is thinking or feeling. Each "medium" attempts to bridge the gap between one person's mind to another's. Scott believes that only the "power of understanding can break through the wall which separates all artists from their audience".

Scott explains that a conversion must happen between ideas in a person's mind and the final result. In comics, Scott explains, "The conversion follows a path from mind to hand to paper to eye to mind." Ideally, the creator's vision will remain unaltered, but this is not usually the case. Most creators, including those who write, make films, or paint, claim that no more than thirty percent of their vision actually survives the conversion process. Scott believes that comics are one of the very few forms of mass communication in which individual voices can still be heard. Artists wanting to enter the world of comics may face many difficulties, but they do not face the pressures encountered by burgeoning filmmakers or playwrights. Comics welcome all writers and artists with an artistic vision to create.

Scott explains, "The wall of ignorance that prevents so many human beings from seeing each other clearly can only be breached by communication. And communication is only effective when we understand the forms that communication can take." Scott believes that the first step on the journey requires readers to clear their minds of all preconceived notions about comics. They must learn to separate comics' form from its contents, which even Scott admits are often inconsistent. Scott says that people must stop defining comics so narrowly in order for it to be fully appreciated.

Scott also feels that the ancient comics masters must be studied. It is important to fill the gap in comics history and show the true age of this medium. More early works must be examined and properly recognized as comics. Only then will comics receive the critical analysis that Scott is seeking. Although Scott fears that comics will always be subject to ignorance and bad business practices, he encourages the reader to begin the debate about comics as an art form. The future of the medium depends upon it.

Characters

Scott McCloud

Scott McCloud is the author of Understanding Comics. As a comics creator/artist/writer, McCloud has very specific concerns about the future of comics as a medium. He is disappointed that comics are still treated as a new genre, even in light of the discovery of early comics dating back thousands of years. McCloud feels that comics should be realistically compared to other works of art, including the written word, film, music, and theater.

McCloud uses the book to stimulate a debate about the changes necessary in comics in order to move it into the future. He casts a disparaging eye toward industry leaders that treat comics as a business rather than an art form. He cites the works of the early masters and documents their influences on modern artists. He implores the reader to join the cause and dispel any previous misconceptions about comics so that it can receive the critical acclaim he believes it deserves.

Comics Readers

The author believes that comics readers play a huge role in interpreting the action that occurs between each panel in a comic. This concept, known as "closure," places the reader in the driver's seat, with only his or her imagination to determine the limits of the storyline. Only comics readers can help determine the future of the medium. They need to promote the evaluation of comics as an art form, and inspire the creators to use innovative, fresh approaches to their work. As comics continue to evolve, especially in the United States, McCloud believes that it will gain a higher readership among adult audiences and possibly art critics and literary experts as well.

McCloud describes comics readers as children who initially respond to comics as a trivial diversion. As they become "hooked," or obsessed, as McCloud describes himself, they may explore opportunities in the industry. For this reason, McCloud believes that the readers of today represent the future, either good or bad, of the industry. They will determine what is acceptable in the comics market today, and will potentially shape the content directly in the years to come.

Will Eisner

Described as a master comics artist, Will Eisner is referred to several times in the book. Eisner is the one credited with coining the term, "sequential art," as an accurate way to describe comics as a medium. This definition will prove critical in McCloud's analysis, since a singular image in the newspaper, even in the Comics section, for example, does not fit into the definition. McCloud points out that a sequence of one is no sequence at all.

Rodolphe Töpffer

In Chapter 1, McCloud calls Töpffer the father of modern comics. Töpffer's light satiric picture stories, created in the mid-1800's, employ some of the first known examples of cartooning and panel borders. They also feature the first interdependent combination of words and pictures seen in Europe. Töpffer, unfortunately, treats the work as a mere hobby, and his work is considered frivolous by some critics. His influence on the medium, however, is significant.

Jack Kirby

McCloud often refers to Jack Kirby as a modern comics master. In the mid-sixties, Kirby, along with Stan Lee, "staked out a middle ground of iconic forms with a sense of the real about them, bolstered by a powerful design sense," according to McCloud. Examples of his work are shown in relation to his position as an artist on the Picture Plane. His coloring style is also referred to as a positive influence.

William Hogarth

Hogarth's Hogarth's landmark six-plate picture-story from 1731, entitled "A Harlot's Progress," is hailed by McCloud as a sign of sophistication in the growth of comics. McCloud is especially interested in the fact that Hogarth is not considered a comics artist, yet his stories are first exhibited as a series of paintings and later sold as a portfolio of engravings that are all designed to be viewed side-by-side, in sequence. This unusual feature allows McCloud to fit this work of art into his definition of comics as sequential art. landmark six-plate picture-story from 1731, entitled "A Harlot's Progress," is hailed by McCloud as a sign of sophistication in the growth of comics. McCloud is especially interested in the fact that Hogarth is not considered a comics artist, yet his stories are first exhibited as a series of paintings and later sold as a portfolio of engravings that are all designed to be viewed side-by-side, in sequence. This unusual feature allows McCloud to fit this work of art into his definition of comics as sequential art.

Hergés Tintin

McCloud first refers to this Belgian artist's "clear-line" style, which combines very iconic characters with unusually realistic backgrounds. This allows readers to mask themselves in a character while safely entering a sensually stimulating world. McCloud refers to the artist's style several times in the book, specifically in comparison with more traditional American artists.

Thomas Edison

Thomas Edison is mentioned in Chapter Four, Time Frames, as the man who obtains the first patent on "a process using strips of clear plastic photos." McCloud effectively credits him for the birth of moving pictures and film's subsequent influence on comics artists who begin portraying characters in motion as a result.

Wassily Kandinsky

As Expressionism grows popular, Wassily Kandinsky is one of the artists who takes great interest in the power of line, shape, and color to suggest the inner state of the artist and provoke the five senses. He and his peers begin searching for an art that might somehow unite the senses and the different art forms which appeal to those senses, a concept called synaesthetics.

Gene Colan

A Marvel artist, Colan begins incorporating photographic streaking effects with some intriguing results in the sixties and seventies as motion lines become more common. Colan uses his knowledge as a film buff to demonstrate how images become blurred when an object is moving too quickly to be clearly captured by a camera's shutter speed.

Objects/Places

Comicsappears in non-fiction

McCloud defines comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer."

Closureappears in non-fiction

Closure is the process that readers use in order to interpret the invisible art that occurs within the spaces between panels in comics. McCloud explains closure as a phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole.

The Gutterappears in non-fiction

The gutter is the space between panels in comics. Readers must employ closure in order to determine what unseen action occurs within the gutter.

Panel-to-Panel Transitionsappears in non-fiction

Panel-to-panel transitions describe the artist's style and use of perspective in revealing the action in the story. The six types of panel-to-panel transitions discussed include moment-to-moment, action-to-action, subject-to-subject, scene-to-scene, aspect-to-aspect, and non sequitur.

Panelsappears in non-fiction

Also called frames, panels are the borders within which comics are generally portrayed. Panels can help display passage of time.

Japanappears in non-fiction

The author is very interested in the progression of the comics medium in Japan, especially since many Japanese artists utilize techniques that are uncommon in American comics.

Polyptychappears in non-fiction

A polyptych is the name for a moving figure imposed over a continuous background. McCloud provides an example of a polyptych on page 115.

The story of Tiger's Clawappears in non-fiction

This story, also referred to as the story of Ocelot's Claw, is discovered by Cortes around 1519. It is displayed as a thirty-six foot long, brightly-colored, painted screenfold that depicts the actions of a pre-Columbian political and military hero called Tiger's Claw. McCloud points to this example in Chapter 1 as an early example of comics.

The Bayeux Tapestryappears in non-fiction

Another early example of comics that is centuries old, the Bayeux Tapestry is a 230 foot long tapestry depicting the Norman conquest of England, beginning in 1066.

Color Printingappears in non-fiction

The invention of color comics printing is a controversial change in the history of comics. The use of traditional four-color printing is mainly used by larger, more conservative publishing firms.

The Screamappears in non-fiction

The famous painting entitled "The Scream" by Edward Munch is provided as an example of how artists can provide an image that appeals to the readers' senses and portrays a feeling, mood or emotion.

Themes

Comics as an Underappreciated Art Form

The purpose of Understanding Comics is to stimulate a debate about the inclusion of comics as an art form. McCloud believes that comics are much older than generally thought. He even provides evidence of pre-Columbian art as proof of the origin of comics, although he does not care to speculate as to the exact location and date that comics is born. McCloud explains that the word comics have such a negative connotation that many comics artists prefer to call themselves illustrators, commercial artists, or cartoonists. Many of the best examples of comics are not recognized as such, since the definition of comics used by many is far too narrow.

McCloud also points out that society does not readily accept the use of pictures and words together as art. Although children are encouraged to read picture books, the prevailing school of thought dictates that they must graduate to books with fewer pictures as they grow older. Eventually, they may begin reading "classic" works of literature that contain no pictures at all, or even cease reading altogether. Even early comics artist Rodolphe Töpffer treats comics as a hobby, a trivial diversion. His picture stories are generally considered frivolous in nature and expected to appeal to mostly younger readers and the "lower classes."

McCloud compares comics to other critically accepted art forms, including the written word, film, music, and theater. He points out the artistic similarities and promotes discussion about the manner in which comics should attempt to elevate itself to the level of the other media. McCloud believes that if more adults read comics, and the genre attracted more "pure" artists who create art for art's sake, the medium would be more highly respected. He decries the work of artists who focus solely on form rather than ideas and concepts, since he feels that subtracts from the genre.

The Invisible Art

McCloud considers so much of comics to be an invisible art that he included the phrase as the subtitle in the book itself. He devotes an entire chapter to the concept of closure. Closure is the process by which readers interpret the parts of comics that remains unseen. This refers to action that occurs within the gutter, or space between panels. McCloud discusses how the passage of time can be determined not only by the images presented, but also by the sounds as depicted by word balloons and sound effects. Often, the subject or event generating the sound is not seen within the panel.

McCloud believes that comics are the only art form that demands so much from its readers. He explains that comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a "jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments." Readers use closure to connect these moments together and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality. McCloud is

so convinced of the reader's active involvement in deciphering the invisible art that he believes that "every act committed to paper by the comics artist is aided and abetted by a silent accomplice...an equal partner in crime known as the reader."

As an example, McCloud displays a pair of panels in which a murder appears to take place. The reader does not actually witness the final blow, yet knows without a doubt that it occurs. The first panel portrays a menacing figure wielding an ax as the presumed prey screams in the foreground. The second frame is a view of a city skyline, with the following sound effect dramatically drawn, "EEYAA!!" McCloud explains that the reader commits the fatal blow in his or her mind. It is never actually shown in the comic. The production of this invisible art only occurs because of the collaboration between the comics creator and the reader.

Vocabulary of Comics

McCloud regularly refers to the language of comics. The longest chapter in the book, Chapter 2, is actually titled The Vocabulary of Comics. In a study of iconic symbols, McCloud displays many universal signs that are commonly used in comics. The symbols and lines are generally used to stimulate the reader's senses, as in the example of "stink lines" on page 128. This example, and the additional figures on page 129, demonstrate the idea that some symbols, icons, and discriminate markings can create a language that is unique to comics and universally recognized by creators, artists, and readers alike.

Panels, panel borders, and motion lines are all included in this special language. McCloud makes the argument that as a medium commanding its own language, comics deserve to be evaluated with the same critical regard as the written word. When this special code that is unique to comics is used, McCloud believes that the pictures stop being merely pictures. They become visual metaphors for shared human experiences. Although many symbols bear a resemblance to the images being portrayed, some do not bear any resemblance at all. Some of the symbols are merely an attempt by the creator to turn the invisible into the visible. McCloud explains that this type of transformation forms the basis for all written languages.

Comics continue to develop their own set of specific symbols and icons. McCloud believes that the capacity for language within comics is endless. Even more interesting is the fact that different languages will develop within different cultures. For example, the set of icons and symbols used in Japanese comics is not at all like the vocabulary of comics found within the United States.

Ideas over Form and Surface

Throughout the book, McCloud praises artists who bring new ideas and innovative styles to the comics medium. In Chapter 7, McCloud tracks the individual paths of several budding young comics creators. Each follows a different route, but McCloud's message is clear about which one is superior in their approach. On page 175, he begins

to describe an artist who spends nearly every waking moment studying every aspect of the craft until he is a master. This man's path is associated with the "structure" step in McCloud's six-step process of art creation. Although the young artist gets his own book and "makes a decent living," he is not the most successful artist portrayed in the chapter. His work is not very original, and the critics do not praise his work.

It's the next artist portrayed, the female who decides to introduce innovative ideas to the medium, who not only enjoys financial success, but also achieves the respect of her peers. McCloud complains that the latest " fan favorite" may generate more interest than the old masters who "had the ideas and created the idioms, but were less interested in surfaces." In discussing the six steps that all artists must follow in furtherance of their craft, McCloud repeatedly uses the image of an apple's interior to display the different phases required for each project. One image portrays the shiniest apple, labeled "The New Kid," as symbolic of the surface, or final step in the process. This step is described as the one "that people appreciate most easily, like an apple chosen for its shiny skin". Another graphic portrays an artist as he looks on disapprovingly at one of his peers, thinking, "That guy's art is all about surface." McCloud sums up his beliefs about form, surface, and ideas at the end of Chapter 7. He explains, "When form rules the work, it may seem somewhat artificial at the core, like a seedless fruit. If ideas rule the work and determine its shape, comics can help plant those ideas far and wide."

Style

Perspective

Understanding Comics is a comic book about comic books. The author, Scott McCloud, addresses the reader directly. As a comics creator/writer/artist, Scott McCloud presents an anti-establishment view of the comics industry as a whole. With a clear bias against larger, more established comics publishing firms, McCloud presents an agenda and asks the reader to commit to making a change in the future of comics. McCloud promotes comics as an art form worthy of the type of critical acclaim generally reserved for other forms of media, including theater, the written word, film, and music. McCloud also casts a disparaging eye on artists who treat comics as a hobby, pastime, or job, instead insisting that it must be approached as a more noble profession. Art must only be created for art's sake. Only then does McCloud believe that comics will be respected in the artistic world.

In an attempt to elevate the medium, McCloud examines several technical elements in detail. The concept of closure is listed very prominently, as nearly an entire lengthy chapter is devoted to it. Another chapter addresses the passage of time, including the use of different panel drawing techniques to affect the perception of time passing. Line work is also covered, although McCloud barely discusses the use of a professional inker in comics since he prefers creators who create, write, and illustrate all of the concepts themselves. He shows clear distaste for the "assembly line" style of larger, unnamed comics publishing firms who use multiple artists of different disciplines for each book.

Tone

Understanding Comics is written in a very subjective tone. Although McCloud vaguely considers the fact that some of his core beliefs may be inaccurate, he does not waver very much in his adherence to them. Occasionally, he opens some topics up for constructive debate, and indeed in closing the book, he pronounces his intent to stimulate debate, not settle it. Yet the reader is left with the impression that the author's mind is fairly made up on the issues being presented.

The author is not at all objective about the concept of comics as an art form. It is doubtful that he would really consider any alternative finding. He is very personally involved in the subject, and notably defensive about his art. As he accurately notes, many comics artists prefer to be called "illustrators" or "cartoonists," due to the negative connotation associated with the comics industry. The author clearly does not support the idea of reading and/or creating comics merely as entertainment. He supports the notion of "pure" artists who create art solely for art's sake. He appears very opposed to the creation of comics as a commercial endeavor or pastime. The ideas presented here are definitely thought provoking, and most comics enthusiasts will probably have strong opinions about the subject matter in the book.

Structure

Understanding Comics is a comic book about comic books. Packaged as a graphic novel, the book is comprised of nine chapters totaling two hundred and fifteen pages. Some chapters contain substantially more information than other chapters, which can be a bit disconcerting for the reader who is expecting an even reading pace. For example, the concepts and examples provided in Chapter 3 (Blood in the Gutter) may take much longer to digest than the seven brief pages devoted to the comics coloring process in Chapter 8 (A Word about Color).

The format itself is entertaining, yet not quite as clear as it could be. The visuals are much more demonstrative than the text itself as depicted within word balloons. Although the author is very clever, his message can appear cloudy at times, perhaps due to his reliance upon the visual style of the book to reinforce his concepts. Some passages require re-reading in order to grasp the ideas that the author is trying to promote. The book is likely to promote some lively, potentially heated discussion once discovered by readers with an intense interest in the comics industry or the art world. Although the book lists and analyzes several of the key elements that make up all comics, it is not an instructional guide by any means. It is a theoretical discussion of controversial concepts and ideas. All readers are likely to have an opinion about the theories presented, and the book lends itself to discussion quite easily.

Quotes

"Comics were those bright, colorful magazines filled with bad art, stupid stories and guys in tights."
page 2, Chapter 1

"Space does for comics what time does for film!"
page 7, Chapter 1

"If for the future, he (Töpffer) would choose a less frivolous subject and restrict himself a little, he would produce things beyond all conception."
page 17, Chapter 1

"Words — are the ultimate abstraction."
page 47, Chapter 2

"To kill a man between panels is to condemn him to a thousand deaths."
page 69, Chapter 3

"Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible."
page 123, Chapter 5

"The richness of modern language is an irreplaceable commodity!"
page 161, Chapter 6

"The picture-story, which critics disregard and scholars scarcely notice, has had great influence at all times, perhaps even more than written literature."
page 201, Chapter 9

"...in addition, the picture-story appeals mainly to children and the lower classes..."
page 201, Chapter 9

"There's always room for a certain amount of "art."
page 182, Chapter 7

"We all live in a state of profound isolation."
page 194, Chapter 9

"Comics is a great balancing act. An art as subtractive as it is additive."
page 206, Chapter 9

"We humans are a self-centered race."
page 32, Chapter 2

"Closure for blood, gutters for veins..."
page 73, Chapter 3

"In the end, what you get is what you give."
page 137, Chapter 5

"The 'fine artist' — the pure artist — says to the world: I didn't do this for money! I didn't do this to match the color of your couches!"
page 169, Chapter 7

Topics for Discussion

What is your opinion of comics as a medium? Do you feel that it is an art form, or simply entertainment?

How do you feel about McCloud's condemnation of comics artists who view the profession as a job more than a calling? What do you think a pure artist really is?

Do you believe that the universal symbols and icons commonly used in comics should be considered a language, similar to the written word? Why or why not?

Do you agree with McCloud's definition of comics? Do you feel that all sequential art is a form of comics? What are the exceptions? Please provide examples.

Do you feel that comics still have a negative connotation in the United States? What impact do you think that film has had on promoting interest in comics? What films have you seen that are based on comic book characters? Do you feel that the films are forms of art? What about the comic books that the films are based upon? Discuss why or why not.

Did you have any difficulty understanding any of the concepts presented in the book? Which ones? Why?

What do you feel needs to be done in order to promote appreciation of comics as an art form? What is your solution?

Do you agree with McCloud that ideas are more important to the comics medium than mastery of form or surface? Why or why not?