

# **Language Beyond Language**

**Comics as verbo-visual texts**

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## Abstract

The investigation proposed in this study is based on the consideration that the nature of "text" is currently undergoing a change whereby verbal components are increasingly being accompanied by visual components, and the two modes of expression co-exist side by side in the same texts. The Internet is symptomatic of this change, with its multi-modal texts, where words, pictures, and sometimes even sounds, interact with one another.

One of the main issues that this thesis aims to address is that although the relationship between the verbal and the visual is not an entirely new area of study, what characterises traditional approaches is the fact that *the two components have fundamentally been considered as separate entities, while the combination of words and pictures has generally been regarded as having the function of aiding comprehension.*

This thesis is based on the main hypothesis that the combination of verbal and visual components is *a true interaction which creates a type of 'language' that is more than a simple sum of the two codes.*

This type of verbo-visual interaction characterises media as old as film and comics, both of which came into existence around a century ago. However, while film studies has become an established discipline, *comics have never enjoyed much scholarly attention, their expressive potentials having gone largely overlooked, and the publications that deal with them having being essentially socio-historical accounts.*

This thesis aims to investigate *the complex and sophisticated type of interaction between verbal and visual elements that takes place in comics*, and suggests that a close scrutiny of this medium enables the researcher to understand better the way in which the verbal/visual interaction works.

In doing so, it recognises *the necessity for linguistics to expand the notion of 'language' beyond the traditional verbal boundaries* and to incorporate other types of codes which exhibit 'language-like' properties.

The theoretical discussion is guided by an eclectic approach as it draws from the fields of semiotics, text-linguistics and stylistics. Accordingly, rather than developing one single main analytical model, this study proposes smaller frameworks, one in each of the areas of study drawn from.

Finally, the thesis also suggests ways of applying the theoretical finding for pedagogical purposes.

## Introduction

### Theoretical background

#### A preliminary consideration

The interest that first led me to embark on this study was based on the general constation that, as Gunther Kress, Regina Leite-García and Theo van Leeuwen very eloquently explain,

...the communicational and representational landscape, the *semiotic landscape*, has changed in far-reaching ways over the last 40 years or so in the so-called developed countries. The visual is now much more prominent as a form of communication than it has been for several centuries, in the so-called developed world at least. This change is having effects on the forms and characteristics of texts. Not only is written language less in the centre of this new landscape, and less central as a means of communication, but the change is producing texts which are strongly *multi-modal*.

(Kress, Leite-García and van Leeuwen, 1997: 257)

and that, despite such change in the 'semiotic landscape',

The common-sense notion that language is *the* medium of representation and communication is still deeply entrenched in Western literate societies [and] the academic disciplines founded on language or concerned with its investigation ... resist even now considering non-language materials as essential sources and materials for their activities.

(1997: 257)

Consequently, a relatively unexplored area of potential research is evidently delineated. An area, however, which precisely because of its being little known, may generate some anxiety and some inevitable hesitation as regards methods, terminology and frameworks for investigation.

Within the scenario depicted by Kress, Leite-García and van Leeuwen the principal discipline imputed with this type of resistance is, clearly, linguistics. However, accusing linguistics of disregarding "non-language materials" i.e. materials which are, by definition, *not* part of its object of study is, perhaps, not entirely fair.

The problem, as I see it, can be resolved by a reconsideration of the term 'language'.

### Languages and codes

The existence of multi-modal texts entails the fact that there exist other modes of representation and communication *besides* and *alongside* language:

...without doubt verbal language is the most powerful semiotic device that man has invented; but ... nevertheless other devices exist, covering portions of a general semantic space that verbal language does not. ... in order to be so powerful [verbal language] must often be helped along by other semiotic systems which add to its power. ... In this sense a broader semiotic inquiry into various equally legitimate types of signs could also help a theory of reference, which has so frequently been supposed to deal with verbal language, as the privileged vehicle for thought alone.

(Eco, 1976: 174)

The adjective *verbal* used here to describe 'language' is of crucial significance, since it implies that there are *other types* of language in addition to the verbal one. This idea poses a terminological problem, in that the expression 'verbal language' might seem a tautology, if language is intended in the sense that is normally attached to it, that is as a means of communication made up of words, sentences and texts, which can exist either in spoken or written form.

This notion of language is so established and accepted that linguistics is normally less concerned with *defining* language than it is with describing *aspects*

of it, like its sounds, its historical development, its morphology, its syntax, its sociological implications, etc. Furthermore, another reason why linguistics rarely feels it necessary to define language is probably that its perspective of investigation is entirely *within* the domain of such common notions of language and not outside, or *above* it enough so as to abstract itself from that domain and look at it from, as it were, a more objective point of view.

Semiotics, on the other hand, considers language from an external point of view, i.e. as *one* of the systems of signs capable of semiosis (signification). Within a semiotic description of human communication, language is defined as *code* and becomes subject to a more systematic and accurate definition. A code, according to John Fiske, is

...a system of meaning common to the members of a culture or subculture. It consists both of signs (i.e. physical signals that stand for something other than themselves) and of rules or conventions that determine how and in what contexts these signs are used and how they can be combined to form more complex messages.

(Fiske, 1990: 19-20)

Language fits this definition nicely, and can therefore be seen as a *verbal code*, in which lexical items are its signs, and grammar its rules and conventions. Of course other codes exist, like the Morse code, the 'sign language' or Braille, but also less formalised systems, like 'body language', facial expressions (see Streeck and Knapp, 1992, for an exhaustive discussion on the importance of gestures and "facial action") and even clothing or furniture can be considered codes.

The idea of language as being one of a multitude of other codes has been central to semiotics since its beginning. Ferdinand de Saussure, who is considered, together with Charles Peirce, the father of semiotics (or *semiology*, as he called it), made it clear that

Language is a system of signs which express ideas and, therefore, comparable to writing, to the alphabet of the deaf-dumb, to symbolic rites, to forms of politeness, to military signals, etc. It is only the most important of these systems.

(de Saussure, 1931: 33, my translation)

Indeed, this idea was developed and refined further in the decades that followed. Umberto Eco includes a variety of fields within the domain of semiotics: zoosemiotics, olfactory signs, tactile communication, codes of taste, paralinguistics, medical semiotics, kinesics and proxemics, musical codes, formalized languages, written languages, unknown alphabets, secret codes, natural languages, visual communication, and others (Eco, 1976: 9-12). Similarly, Émile Benveniste claims that we utilise "several systems of signs concurrently at every moment: first the signs of language ...; graphic signs ... the signs regulating vehicular movement ... the signs of art in all its varieties (music, images, figurative reproductions)" (Benveniste, 1986: 233-4).

All these systems share common characteristics, namely "their signifying property, or *meaning*, and their composition into units of meaning, of *signs*" (Benveniste, 1986: 234). And it is these similarities which attract the interest of semiotics. As John Lyons observes:

It is equally legitimate to stress either the striking differences, both of degree and of kind, between language and non-language or the no less striking similarities. The linguist, the psychologist and the philosopher may tend to emphasise the former; the ethologist, the zoologist and the semiotician would probably stress the latter.

(Lyons, 1981b: 24)

At the same time, the emphasis either on the differences or on the similarities between language and other systems of signs ultimately depends on what one means by 'language'. Which brings the discourse back to the apparent redundancy of the expression 'verbal language' and to the necessity to resolve it. A terminological reconciliation is needed between the common notion of language as implicitly assumed by linguistics and the notion of language as

semiotic code.

Referring to the American Sign Language, Charles Fillmore wrote that

...either the scope of linguistics must reach *beyond* language strictly defined, or the concept language must be extended to include the rich and powerful symbolic system of the kind we see here.

(Fillmore, 1977, cited in Rauch, 1980: 329, my emphasis)

I believe that this observation remains entirely valid if it refers to other codes too. I also believe that the key word here is *beyond*: if the notion of Language (with a capital 'L') becomes general enough as to expand beyond its verbal boundaries, other systems of signs can come to being considered as other languages (with a small 'l'), and consequently subject to the same type of enquiry that is presently devoted to verbal language.

Therefore, I propose that the general term 'Language' can designate the semiotic concept of code, while different attributes (+ 'language') can be used to describe the various sub-codes, or *types* of language. It is within this hierarchical system (Table 0.1) that the expression 'verbal language' used by Umberto Eco in the citation above acquires full significance, and 'other devices' can then be read as 'other types of language'.

LANGUAGE				
verbal language	body language	sign language	visual language	etc.

Table 0.1

I believe that the advantage of the word 'language' as the principal constituent of the nomenclature of this hyponymic system is that it emphasises the similarities among the various 'languages' and, at the same time, creates a theoretical premise for analysing them from a 'linguistic' point of view, i.e. in



terms of lexis, grammar, syntax, and so on.

## Comics as multi-modal verbo-visual texts

For the purposes of the present study, I will concentrate on two types of language, the verbal and the visual, and the interaction that obtains between them.

LANGUAGE	
verbal language (words)	visual language (pictures)

Table 0.2

As Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) note, verbal and visual modes of expression coexist today in an increasingly vast number of texts. Advertisements, newspapers, films and the Internet all employ verbo-visual combinations of various kinds, but it is in comics that the interplay between words and pictures reaches the highest level of sophistication and complexity. As Joseph Witek explains very well,

...contemporary semiotics takes as its defining project the reading of images and other nonverbal structures as texts.

...[comic books and comic strips] display a highly developed narrative grammar and vocabulary based on an inextricable combination of verbal and visual elements. More completely than illuminated texts or illustrated novels, Hogarthian picture sequences, or medieval and Renaissance icons, comic books and comic strips integrate words and pictures into a flexible, powerful literary form capable of a wide range of narrative effects. ...an obvious place to start unraveling the relations between word and image is in the complex semiotic process embodied in the comics page...

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

(Witek, 1989: 3)

The enterprise proposed by Witek, to unravel the relations between word and image, is very daunting. Scholars like E. H. Gombrich (1960), Nelson Goodman (1969), Roland Barthes (1977), Perry Nodelman (1988), W.J.T. Mitchell (1994) have provided very useful insights into the issue, but a comprehensive analytical framework is far from having been established.

### **Aim and outline of the study**

In the absence of such a framework, what I aim to do in this study is to provide some critical considerations of existing models developed within the field of linguistic studies and to attempt to apply such models to the analysis of comics texts. This in the conviction that

- visual language and, in particular, the peculiar language of comics, can be part of a beneficial expansion beyond the traditional verbal boundaries set around the concept 'language' by linguistics,
- and
- the application of linguistic analytical tools to comics can produce not only a better understanding of comics texts themselves, but the results can reflect back to the study of verbal texts and, ultimately, to the study of texts in general.

The thesis is hence meant as an "exploration into unknown territory equipped with known tools". Each one of the five chapters that form the thesis is, to an extent, autonomous from the others, since each chapter is concerned with distinct aspects of this exploration of the multi-modal language of comics.

Chapter One provides an account of the formal constituents of comics, and includes a discussion on the issue of genre and its implications for a definition

of comics.

Chapter Two takes into account the semiotic similarities between words and pictures in comics, and theorises the existence of a *semiotic blend* between the two modes of expression.

Chapter Three considers the issue of cohesion in verbal texts and in wordless comics, and proposes the notion of *relatedness*, based on a scale of textual and cognitive forces.

In Chapter Four, some aspects of narratology, namely point of view and speech/thought presentation, are investigated in relation to comics texts, and the two categories are seen as contributing to *narratorial weight*.

Chapter Five provides some indications of pedagogical applications of the analysis of comics, in the light of what is discussed in the preceding three chapters.

## Chapter One

### Comics defined

#### 1.1 A definition of comics

Definitions constitute a crucial element of any theoretical study. It is important, that is, to clarify exactly the sense in which one uses the key terminology of the study itself. The reason for this is twofold:

- a) technical terms (e.g. *theme*, *coherence*, *style*, *point of view*, etc.) often have a very established meaning in every-day language, i.e. outside the scope of the field of study in which they are used;
- b) in addition, it often happens that different scholars attach different senses to the same terms (e.g. *cohesion*, *point of view*, *text*, etc.), thus inevitably creating a certain amount of fuzziness and overlapping to the expense of clarity.

At the same time, however, the benefit of definitions may conceal potential drawbacks. The very intent of dispelling fuzziness and overlapping may sometimes lead to dangerous positions if it seeks to set clear-cut boundaries always and at all costs:

By forcing a marine mollusc in continuous physical evolution to remain imprisoned inside its shell, we obtain either the breaking of the shell or the flee of the animal. Similarly, to attempt to contain evolving ideas within immobile conceptual structures is equivalent to creating shells which will always be too small and will risk breaking at any time and remaining empty.

(Pezzimenti, 2000; my translation)

This is especially true if one tries to define general terms like *art* or *literature*, for which things are further complicated by the fact that subjectivity plays too

important a part to be disregarded. But even less general terms like *novel* and *short story*, for example, defy precise definitions that aim at crystalline separations.

Etymologically speaking, "to define" means "to put a limit at something" ("fine" = "end"), which is conceptually equivalent to "to delimit". So to define XYZ is to establish the boundaries inside which things can be classed as XYZ and beyond which things *cannot* be classed as XYZ.

However, when trying to define art-forms I think one should do so from a different perspective. Namely, I believe that rather than pursuing *category* definitions, one should develop *prototype* definitions. In other words, the objective should not be that of cataloguing items into rigid categories, but that of establishing which features typically characterise a particular art-form and constitute its prototype. Such prototypes can be globally conceptualised as nuclei placed along an analogic continuum, with no preset boundaries, but with shades and intermingling light irradiated by each nucleus. To use a visual simile, this continuum can be compared to a rainbow, where each colour gradually merges into the next one.

Thus, to use this approach, a definition of comics entails first of all stating their prototypical features. These are:

<i>function</i>	mainly narrative
<i>material</i>	printed, either as a) inserts in newspapers (comic strips) b) collections and books of various sizes (comic books)
<i>principal formal characteristics</i>	(1) concurrent employment of both verbal and visual codes; (2) texts organised into sequential units, graphically separated from each other.

Table 1.1

The most important and interesting features are those which I have called *principal formal characteristics*.

Although the simultaneous utilisation of words and pictures, as such, is not a unique characteristic of comics, the way in which the two systems of signs *interact* with each other certainly is. Significantly, Robert C. Harvey considers it the most prominent feature of comics, and indeed elevates it to a criterion against which to measure the quality of works of comic art (Harvey 1979, 1994, 1996). The way in which words and pictures combine to create meaning will be discussed thoroughly in Chapter Two, while here I will concentrate on a description of the elements that constitute and characterise comics.

In doing this, I will for the moment separate the verbal constituents from the visual constituents. However, this is only a convenient and temporary separation, since these two systems of signs – words and pictures – often "blend" into one another in comics, as will be seen more in depth in Chapter Two.

The arrangement into sequences of panels is the other fundamental characteristic of comics, so much so that Will Eisner (a very important comics artist throughout the second half of this Century and, more recently, also a critic) proposes the use of *Sequential Art* to refer to comics (Eisner, 1985). The textual organisation of comics will be investigated in Chapter Three.

Another distinction which can be proposed for the constituents of comics is that between *functional components* and *content components*<sup>1</sup>. So, the result is a quadripartite classification:

---

1. This reflects the distinction that is generally suggested in lexicography between functional (or grammatical, or empty) words and content (or lexical, or full) words.

### The constituents of comics

	<i>functional</i>	<i>content</i>
<i>verbal</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• spatio-temporal indicators (e.g. <i>meanwhile...</i>)</li> <li>• sound effects (e.g. <i>boing!</i>)</li> </ul>	all other verbal elements which are not functional (dialogues and captions)
<i>visual</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• panel borders</li> <li>• balloon shapes</li> <li>• balloon tails</li> <li>• lettering</li> <li>• motion lines</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• all other visual elements which are not functional (characters, landscapes, etc.)</li> <li>• various symbolic elements (e.g. light bulbs to represent brilliant ideas, skulls to represent extreme anger, saws to mimic the sound of sleep, etc.)</li> </ul>

Table 1.2

I will now briefly describe the main components of comics.

## 1.2 The components of comics

A comics page will typically be formed of six panels, as shown in Figure 1.1.

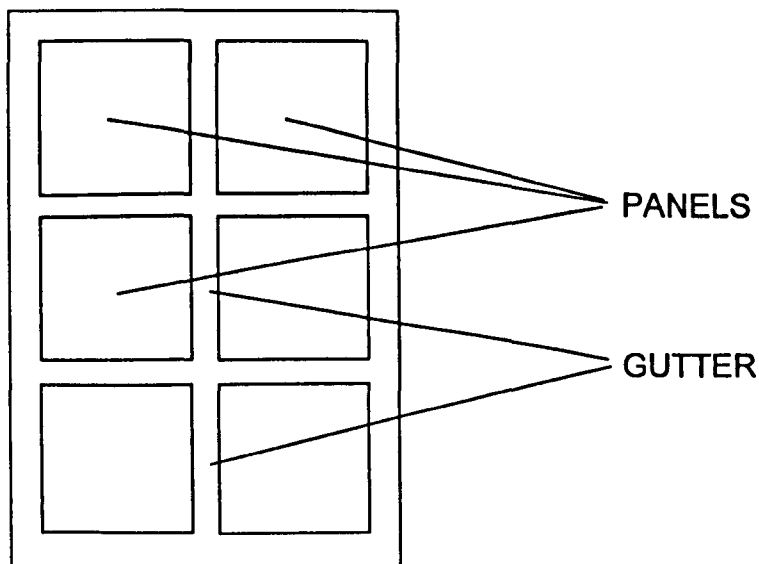


Figure 1.1: the layout of a comics page

Each panel is separated from the others by a border and this separation is reinforced by a blank space which, in comics jargon, is called "the gutter".

### 1.2.1 The panel

Comics texts are broken down into units called panels, which are graphically represented as rectangular bordered frames<sup>2</sup>. Usually, panels display segments of action or "stills" and, although they are often referred to as "frozen moments" and compared to photographs, their contents are actually much more varied. It is in fact very rare for a panel to represent only an instant of the story. Principally, that is because comics panels typically contain pieces of dialogues whose duration exceeds that of a camera shot. For this reason they are perceived as fundamentally different from photographs, for example. The reader of comics, therefore, considers the panel not as a single instant but as a real portion, of varying dimension, of the narrative, where something actually takes place and takes time.

In Figure 1.2, for example, a runner is overtaken by an opponent, and the panel represents the *whole* event, not just a point in time.

In Figure 1.3 the presence of the onomatopoeic sounds indicates four steps, and therefore a duration well beyond a single instant.

The duration of panels is not only determined by the verbal components, but also by visual elements, like, for example, by motion lines, as in Figure 1.4. In each panel of this short sequence a swirling line signifies the fluttering movement of a piece of paper, which, in turn, implies stretches of time rather than single moments.

---

2. Panels are sometimes referred to as *frames*.





Figure 1.2: Osamu Tezuka, *Adolf*

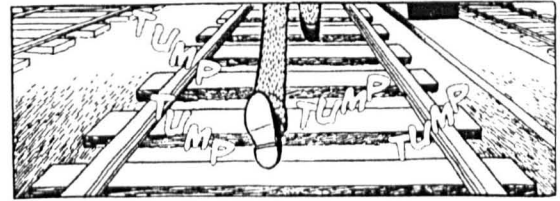


Figure 1.3: Osamu Tezuka, *Adolf*

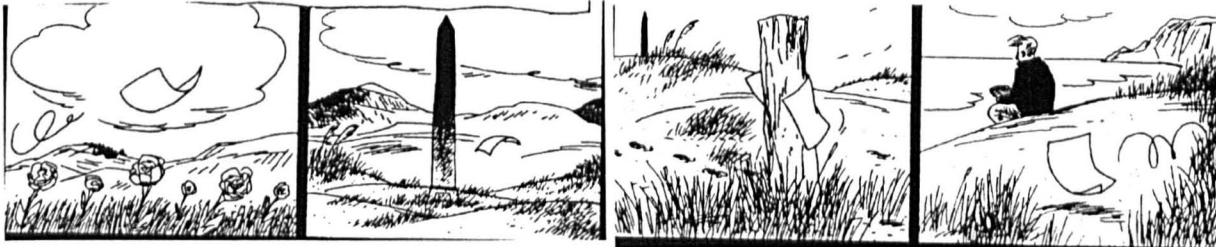


Figure 1.4: Dylan Horrocks, *Hicksville*



Figure 1.5: Jason Lutes, *Jar of Fools*

Sometimes the duration of panels is also represented by their width. In the short extract of Figure 1.5, the second panel is considerably wider than the others, while the third one is much narrower, which reflects the different duration of the events shown: in the second panel a marble is thrown with force, its route indicated by a long motion line across the sky, while the following panel shows the precise moment in which the marble falls in the water with a splash.

Modifications of the panel border are sometimes used in order to convey the idea that the panel portrays the memory or the dream of a character, as in Figure 1.6, while other times the unconventional panel shape may have a function not immediately apparent (Figure 1.7).

### 1.2.2 The "gutter"

A comic strip is typically composed of three or four panels, while in each page of a comic book there are normally between four and nine panels (with exceptions, of course, beyond either limit).

The blank space between one panel and the next is called *gutter*. As will be seen in Chapter Three, the gutter is a very important element, in that it is the space which contains all that happens between the panels, and which the reader has to infer in order to reconstruct the phoric flow of the narrative. It should be stressed that what is important is not so much the amount of actual physical space that divides the panels as the division itself. Some authors of comics, for example, prefer to draw panels adjacent to one another, with no blank space between them: this is only a stylistic choice, which does not diminish the conceptual value of the gutter by any means. Such comics are sometimes referred to as "gutterless". However this is misleading, because it only takes into account the physical space, rather than the separation, between panels.



Figure 1.6: Jason Lutes, *Jar of Fools*

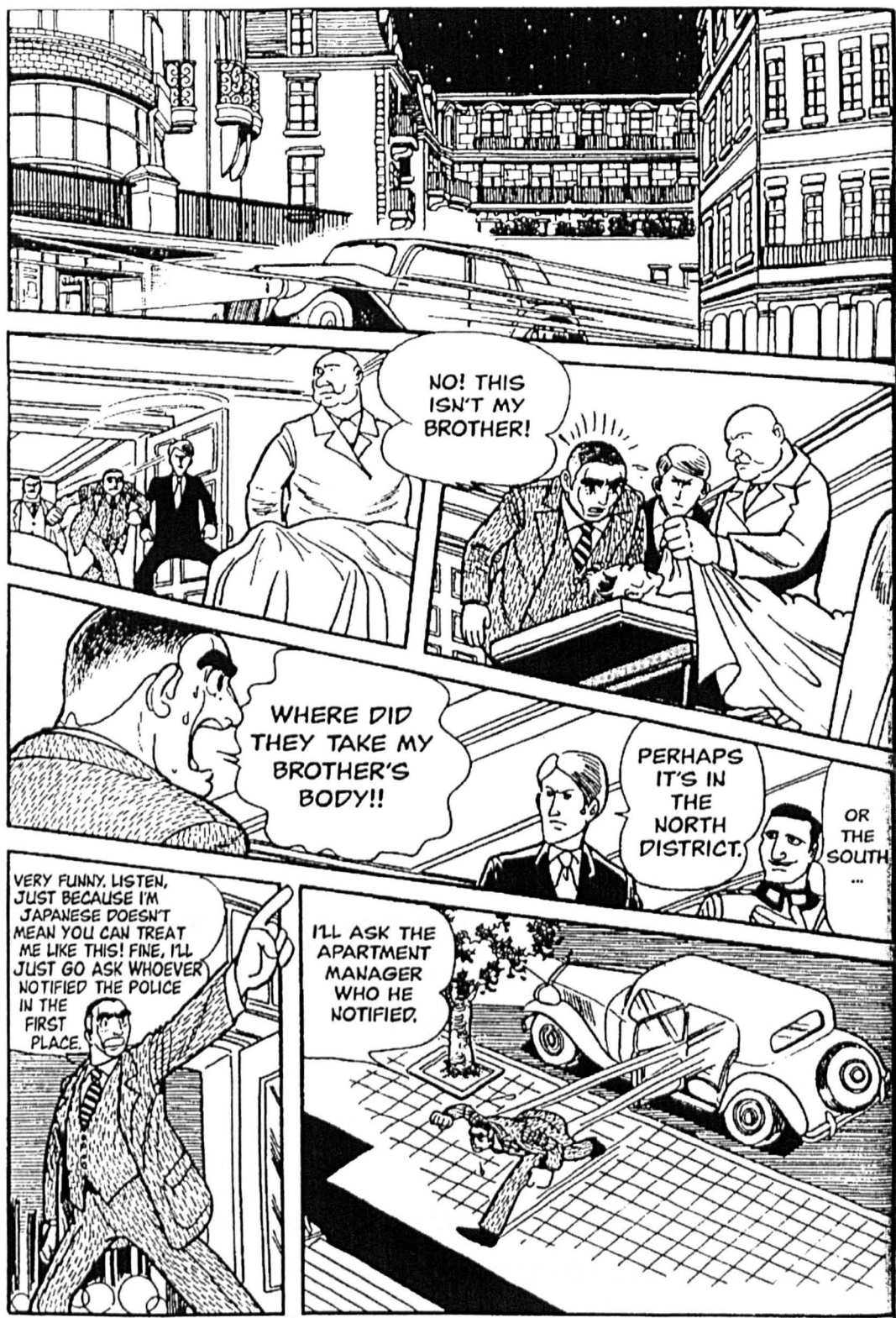


Figure 1.7: Osamu Tezuka, *Adolf*

Another point worth a mention is the fact that because of their particular textual structure, comics are often described as a highly elliptical medium, where each gutter represents an ellipsis. I think that this is only partly true: comics are elliptical, but I do not think they are more so than other forms of narrative, since all narratives are necessarily composed of events and scenes intertwined with "blank spaces". The elliptical nature of comics is perhaps more evident because of its being graphically represented but, as such, it is only so on a superficial level.

### 1.2.3 The balloon

The balloon is probably the element that is most immediately associated with comics<sup>3</sup>. It is the space in which most of the verbal text is contained. Balloons are used to report speech or thought, hence the terms *speech balloon* and *thought balloon*. An in-depth analysis of how speech and thought are reported in comics is provided in Chapter Four, while for the moment I will describe some formal aspects of the balloon.

Typically balloons are of oval or cloud-like shape, but variations are possible and sometimes significant. In the case of adaptations of classics of literature into comics, for example, the shape of the balloons is often square, and this deliberately unusual shape is used in order to confer a higher degree of respectability to the publication (see Chapter Five for a fuller discussion).

The tail of the balloon indicates the character to whom the speech (or thought) belongs to. Normally the tail looks like a small pointed projection, but it can sometimes be a simple line. An important variation is when the tail is formed of

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3. Significantly, the Italian word for comics is the same as balloons: literally, *fumetti* means "little clouds of smoke".

a series of small bubbles, which indicate that the balloon is a thought balloon (Figure 1.8).

Effectively, the function of the tail is equivalent to that of introductory clauses like "he said..." or "Ann thought..." in reported speech/thought.

#### 1.2.4 The caption

The caption is the other element of comics which contains verbal text. Normally such text represents the narrator's voice, which, fundamentally, has the function of adding information to the message conveyed by the rest of the panel. Unlike the balloon, the caption is not positioned among the visual elements of the panel, but is always situated as a separate entity, often on the top of the panel, but also at the bottom or on the left side.

In its simplest form, a caption is a mere indicator of space and/or time (Figure 1.9).

In other cases the caption has the function of providing information to help the reader reconstruct the continuity between panels, thus effectively filling the gap represented by the gutter (Figure 1.10).

Sometimes captions have a fundamental importance in the narrative, in that they contain most or all of the verbal components of the text. It is in these cases that the captions can really be said to represent the narrator's voice (Figure 1.11).

Because of their graphical separation, captions may be more independent from the rest of the panel, to the point that their content may seem totally disjoined from the content of the rest of the panel. In such cases the interaction between words and pictures can be very imperceptible or even absent, with the effect of

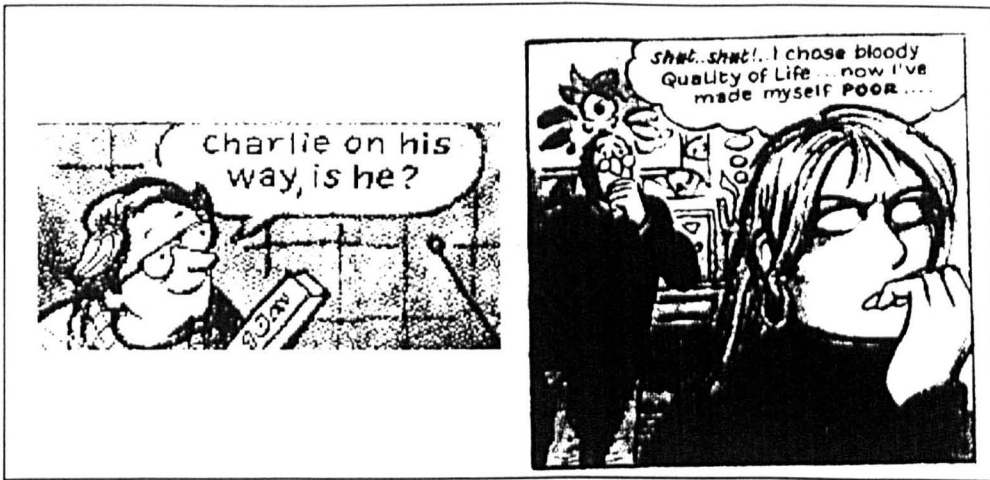


Figure 1.8: Posy Simmonds, *Gemma Boverly*



Figure 1.9



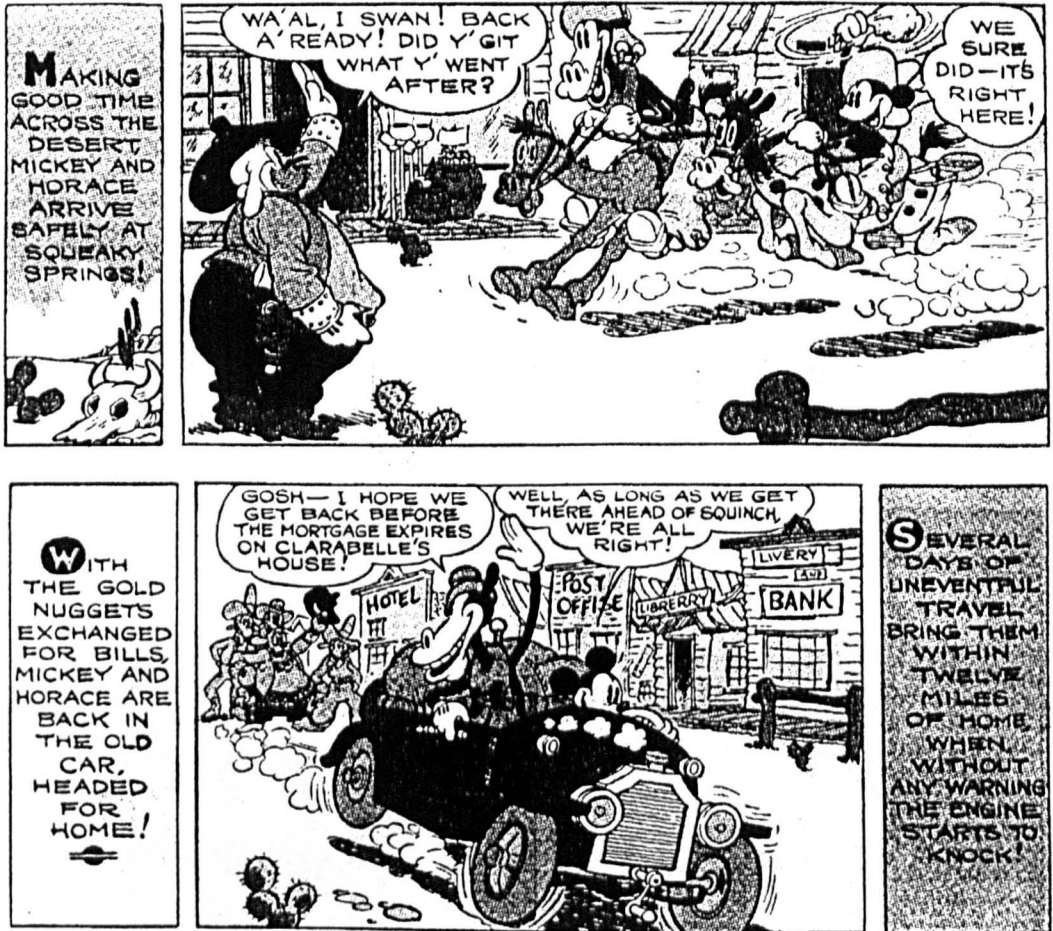


Figure 1.10: Floyd Gottfredson, "Race for riches"



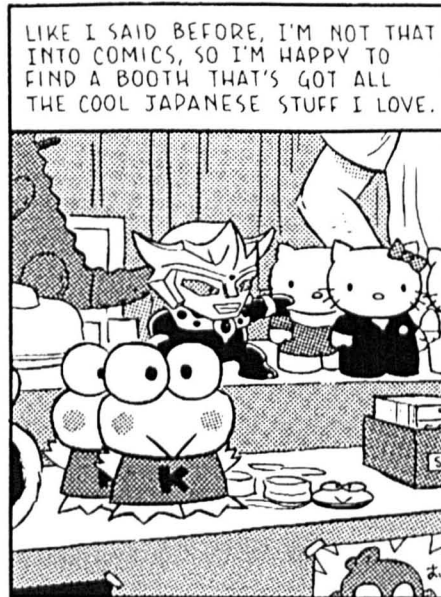
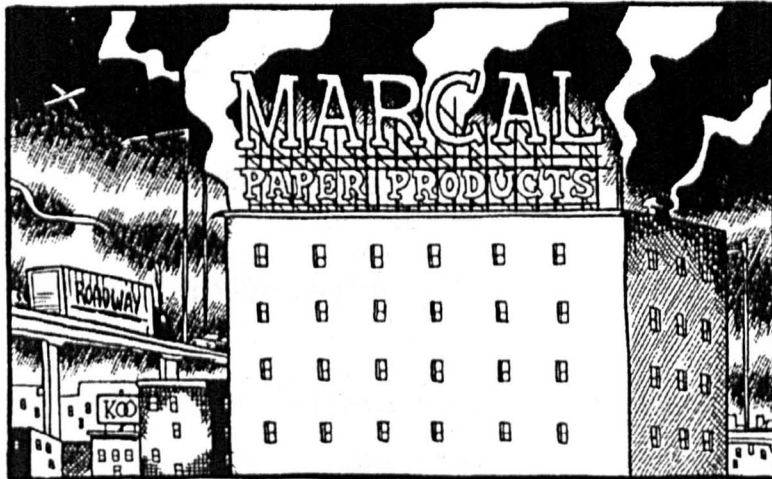


Figure 1.11: Adrian Tomine, "Dylan & Donovan"

IN MY YOUTH, I HAD NEVER BEEN A GOOD STUDENT. I SUPPOSE THAT'S WHY NOW ~ AS AN ADULT ~ I AM NOT A GOOD TEACHER. RECENTLY, I'VE BEEN SHOWING MY YOUNGER COUSIN, ABIGAIL, "THE RAPES" OF MY CHOSEN PROFESSION AND WAS SURPRISED TO FIND OUT JUST HOW FAST SHE WAS SOAKING UP THE INFORMATION! I THOUGHT SHE WAS SO GREEN, BUT, SHE'S ACTUALLY PRETTY SWIFT.



IT SEEMS TO ME THAT WHEN YOU'RE TEACHING SOMEONE, IN WHATEVER CAPACITY, YOU FIRST HAVE TO KNOW JUST WHO IT IS YOU'RE DEALING WITH...

SOMETIMES, THE STUDENT CAN CATCH ON TO THE IDEAS YOU'RE EXPRESSING FASTER THAN YOU EVER EXPECTED.

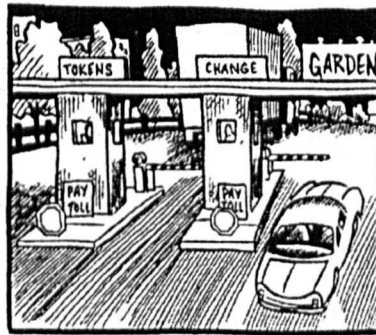


Figure 1.12: Richard Tommaso, *Clover Honey*

two parallel and seemingly different stories being told at the same time (Figure 1.12).

Sometimes authors of comics break the graphological limits of the caption and include portions of verbal text more freely within the layout of the page. In *A Contract with God* (considered the first "graphic novel" to have been published) by Will Eisner, for example, there are no captions, but pieces of verbal texts are inserted among the panels in a freer manner (Figure 1.13).

Probably an extreme case is represented by *Gemma Boverly* by Posy Simmonds, where verbal text often occupies the greater part of the page, intermingled with scattered panels (Figure 1.14). According to the prototype definition of comics proposed earlier, this particular book, with its varied and complex nature, would be placed in the fuzzy area between comic book and novel.

### 1.3 How comic are comics?

#### 1.3.1 Comic books and graphic novels

The hypothesis of an indistinct area between comics and novel, leads to another aspect of the definition of comics, namely their respectability, which represents a cause for a certain anxiety for many scholars interested in comics. This self-consciousness derives principally from the semantics of the term "comics" itself. It was presumably this type of uneasiness that led Will Eisner to coin the more dignified expressions "sequential art" (Eisner, 1985) and "graphic novel" as alternatives respectively to "comics" and "comic book".

While "sequential art" has never really become an established expression, "graphic novel" has found comparatively much wider acceptance. The fortune of



And  
that night  
in the cold  
forest, he  
wrote  
the contract  
on a small  
stone.



Figure 1.13: Will Eisner, *A Contract with God*

**B**y the fifth day of Gemma and Hervé's liaison I remember thinking *ça suffit!* I didn't know why, but it really depressed me, I couldn't stand to see her disappear up the track to the chateau. I had a strange pang, as if a tiny rodent was gnawing my diaphragm.



Was it because it seemed such a cold-blooded business? Was it the chewing gum? Was it the tracksuit? I mean, really! A French woman for a *rendez-vous d'amour* makes herself a little perfumed, a little sexy, *non*? But Gemma, she might have been going to rub down a horse.

**I** turn to her diary, where one might expect everywhere to see her lover's name and to find a confession or at least a debriefing of the day's romantic activity.

It's her husband she writes about most of all: how, shut away in his workshop, Charlie never notices her absences. Consequently, she never has to tell him lies. When she returns from her trysts she feels quite fond of him, feels like doing something to please him, "I made him bubble and squeak," she writes cryptically. She also feels so energised she wants to please other people. Even Wizzy Rankin, for whom at the *manoir* she carries out several decorative commissions.

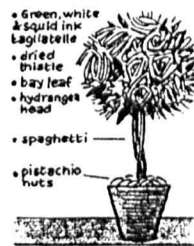
**Mural for Guestroom**  
£500 (cheque)



**Punchin'Judy cabinet**  
for children's bathroom  
850 francs (cash)



**Pasta Table Topiary**  
£25 (cash)



Of Hervé she writes only this: *Still don't know much about him - nor he me, beyond where I live & my name - or rather, my maiden name. Thought it safer, he thinks I'm Mme Tate. It's great not talking - no lies, no stupid things to regret saying. We meet, we collapse on the carpet & it's fantastic!*

**J**oubert, can hardly bear to read this now. At the time I was merely impatient for the grubby little business to end - as end it would, as soon as Hervé went back to Paris. A holiday shag with a married *anglaise* would be something he'd want to draw a line under, something to crow over with his *copains*. But something also to feel a little soiled by, something he wouldn't care his girlfriend to discover.



**T**he next morning Hervé came into the shop...



... and bought two *pains au chocolat*. Very casually I remarked how time flew, September already. Wouldn't be long before he had to get back to Paris, *non*? Obligingly, he revealed he was on his way there now.



\*OFF YOU GO, YOU LITTLE TICK... THAT'S THAT...END OF ROMANCE

Figure 1.14: Posy Simmonds, *Gemma Boverly*

the terms has depended principally on the commercial benefits that it has produced. Significantly, Roger Sabin observes that the use of "graphic novel" in place of "comics" was part of a marketing strategy:

The term had several advantages from a publicity perspective. First, it was used as a device to mark [graphic novels] out as something new, to distance them from the childish connotations of the word 'comic'. By the same token it hopefully elevated them to the status of novels.

(Sabin, 1993: 93)

This view is indeed confirmed by Chris Couch (editor in chief of an important American publishing company), who explains: "the term 'graphic novel' made it possible for comics to be sold in book shops since they could finally have their identifiable space alongside other types of books." (Couch, 2000).

Given the fundamentally commercial reasons for which the expression "graphic novel" has become established, I feel I should dissociate myself from its use. Furthermore, since "graphic novel" has by no means replaced "comic book" and both names are adopted almost interchangeably, there is always the potential risk of one being used to refer to works of more elevated artistic value, and the other to refer to low-brow, popular productions. And such a terminological distinction would be an entirely unfounded one:

...the interminable polemic which tends towards a definite and preventive separation between cultured and popular in comics seems to me a rather negligible one. Any prejudicial act aimed at such a separation is absolutely arbitrary and could only have a sense, at the most, if intended as an intellectual challenge

(Ambrosini, 1999: 9-10, my translation).

The divide between "comic books" and "graphic novels" is indeed nothing more than a matter of labels, and it has barely anything to do with content or with any other formal feature.

As I mentioned earlier, the problem with the expression "comic book" and,

indeed, with the word "comics" itself, is represented by the adjective "comic". It is certainly difficult to imagine any meaningful use of such a word in association with – for example – a book like Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, which deals with the horrors of the Holocaust, or with Joe Sacco's *Palestine* and *Šoba*, respectively about the problems of the Palestinian people and of the people of war-torn ex-Yugoslavia. These are just a few examples, but countless more could be cited whose themes are hardly comical at all<sup>4</sup>.

However, in my opinion the solution and, with it, the justification, of this seemingly paradoxical use of the word "comic" lies precisely in its total delexicalisation in the terms "comics" and "comic book". The detachment from its literal meaning is so profound and complete that whether or not comics are really comic stops being an issue, and "comics" and "comic book" become expressions that designate a type of narrative based on its *formal* characteristics rather than on a particular property of its content.

#### 1.4 Comics as a genre?

Closely related to this point is the matter of whether or not comics should be considered a genre. Although a full investigation of the theories which deal with genre classification and definition would be well outside the scope of this study, especially given that the issue is an extremely problematic and controversial one, in order to answer the above question convincingly it is nevertheless necessary to have available a viable definition of the notion of genre.

Perhaps a useful starting point is the one adopted by Montgomery *et al.* (1992:

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4. In fact, even in the super-hero comics, which are probably the most prolific in terms of number of publications, there is little trace of comical elements.

169-74), who approach the issue by going back to the etymological roots of the word 'genre' as 'type' and, based on that, identify various ways in which texts are normally classified (170-1):

- on the basis of formal arrangement;
- on the basis of theme or topic;
- on the basis of mode of address;
- on the basis of attitude or anticipated response.

Such diverse criteria clearly cannot *all* be used to define *one* way of categorising texts, and therefore call for some distinctions to be made. The complex semantics of the word *genre* emerges from the following observation by Gunther Kress:

There is a problem in using such a term [genre] with a meaning which is relatively uncontrollable. In literary theory, the term has been used with relative stability to describe formal features of a text — epitaph, novel, sonnet, epic — although at times content has been used to provide a name [e.g.] epithalamion, nocturnal, alba. In screen studies, as in cultural studies, labels have described both form and content, and at times other factors, such as aspects of production. Usually the more prominent aspect of the text has provided the name. Hence 'film noir'; 'western' or 'spaghetti western' or 'psychological' or 'Vietnam western'; 'sci-fi'; 'romance'; or 'Hollywood musical'; and similarly with more popular print media. (Kress 1993: 31-2)

From the above quote, as well as from the types of generic classification listed earlier, it is possible to evince the presence of two fundamentally different criteria for possible definitions of genre: one based on form and one based on content. Therefore, even without going into the details of the various genre theories, I think that a distinction between the two should be made. A clear move towards such a distinction is made by Douglas Biber, who separates text-types, determined by what he calls internal (formal) criteria, and genres, "determined on the basis of external criteria relating to the speaker's purpose and topic; they are assigned on the basis of use rather than on the basis of form" (Biber, 1988: 170).

I find Biber's differentiation particularly valuable because not only does it make it possible to free generic categorisation from considerations of form but also, at the same time, it introduces the concept of *use* for the determination of genre. 'Use', in Biber's sense, is not too dissimilar, in my view, from the definition of genre put forward by the theorists of systemic functional linguistics, J. R. Martin in particular. According to Martin genres are "staged goal-oriented social processes" (Martin, 1992: 505; 1993: 142, Eggins and Martin, 1997: 243), and the "generic identity" of a text is "what task the text is achieving in the culture" (Eggins and Martin, 1997: 237). Besides, Martin also separates the notion of genre from that of register, which is seen as "reflecting metafunctional diversity in its expression form" (Martin, 1992: 495).

Even though Martin's theory of genre is in fact more complex than a differentiation between genre and register, what is particularly useful for the present study is the fact that the determination of the genre of a text is ultimately based on *what the text does* rather than on *how the text is*. Thus, the distinction that I suggest is between genre and *medium*, which can be intended as the physical mode of communication in which a text is actuated:

The medium is basically the technical and physical means of converting the message into a signal capable of being transmitted along the channel. ... The technological or physical properties of a medium ... determine the range of codes which it can transmit

(Fiske, 1990: 18)

If comics are defined based exclusively on their physical properties, it follows that such a definition is entirely extraneous from considerations of genre. As goal-oriented social processes, genres can be expressed in different media. The fact that most comics can be classified under the narrative genre does not make comics a genre itself. The social process of narrative is expressed in prose form (novels and short stories), in filmic form, in theatrical form, etc.



Even if a particular genre happens to be expressed significantly more often in one medium than in others the conceptual separation between medium and genre remains unaltered. So the super-hero type of science fiction which is almost entirely found in comics form, for example, should not be considered a sub-genre of comics, but a sub-genre of science fiction, which, in turn, exists in novels, films and so on.

The next chapter will provide an in-depth discussion on the first fundamental characteristic of the medium of comics: the combination and interaction between the verbal and the visual.

## **Chapter Two**

### **The semiotic blend**

#### **Visual words and verbal pictures in comics**

"Semiotic systems are not "synonymous"; ... In other words, two semiotic systems of different types cannot be mutually interchangeable" (Benveniste, 1986: 235).

#### **2.1 Introduction**

In Chapter One I defined comics in terms of their formal characteristics, of which the two fundamental ones are the coexistence of verbal and visual elements, and the sequential structure of the text. In this chapter the focus will be on the first one of these properties: the combination of words and pictures and the way in which the interaction between the two codes creates meaning.

The main tenet of this chapter, and indeed of this whole thesis, is that such a close relationship between the verbal and the visual code forms the essence of a new type of language in its own right, beyond the traditional idea of language as a verbal entity.

This "language beyond language" (which Robert Horn (1998) calls "visual language") is the language of comics, but not only: advertisements, newspapers, the Internet, children's books, TV, film, all utilise a mix of verbal and visual codes to convey meaning. What may change between one medium and the other, as well as within the same medium, is the type of relationship which is at play between words and pictures. In comics such a relationship is particularly pervasive and, at the same time, extremely varied in its forms. It is precisely such

a relationship that this chapter is concerned with.

Words and pictures have been usually studied separately: on one hand, language has been the research field of linguistics, and on the other hand, visual forms of expression have been studied by various arts disciplines. The combination of language and image has not been paid the same attention. As Sharon Goodman notices, "The development of a theoretical academic framework for exploring the links between visual and verbal language is still in its infancy" (Goodman, 1996: 38).

This is probably due to the fact that "Something in [pictures] is linguistic, propositional, systematic, or otherwise semiotic. The rest ... is 'silence' (Elkins, 1999: 81) and that linguistics tends to only take into account the "silent" part of pictures.

In this chapter, I will attempt, both theoretically and through the analysis of some comics texts, to argue the following two points:

- 1) when verbal and visual codes coexist in the same text, it is not necessarily the verbal code that 'leads' the signification process but, more often than not, their inseparable interaction;
- 2) words, as well as pictures, are not necessarily to be considered semiotically 'pure', i.e. pertaining to only one system of signs, but the two often acquire the characteristics of each other.

## 2.2 Review of the literature: the visual vs. the verbal

### 2.2.1 'Anchorage' and the supremacy of the verbal

It is agreed that the main parameter characterising the difference between the way in which words and pictures convey meaning is precision. Specifically, pictures are thought to be rather vague and their meanings open to interpretation, while language is believed to convey meaning much more precisely. Such a notion is expressed very clearly by John Corner, who, talking about the cinematic language, states that

...the type of capacity to articulate particular meanings which is available in the English language has no direct equivalence in the visual 'language' of film-making. It would be extremely difficult to make a wordless film sequence which was the meaning equivalent of the sentence preceding this one, though a number of suggestive indications might be attempted. If one moves to an even more particularistic level, sentences draw on a vocabulary and a range of syntactic possibilities simply beyond a purely visual articulation. How would one construct a silent TV news broadcast for example? What would be its level of informational precision?

(Corner, 1983: 270)

The higher degree of semantic precision attributed to verbal language represents, according to Corner, the reason for "The reliance on notions of verbal 'anchorage' and 'relay' in the development of a visual semiotics" (270). Such notions were first theorised by Roland Barthes in his famous essay "Rhetoric of the Image". However, before examining Barthes' principles, it is opportune to observe that their origins can perhaps be traced back to an earlier and equally famous study, Nelson Goodman's *The Language of Art* (1969), which offers a particularly illuminating explanation of the different signification processes that are pertinent to images and verbal language.

Goodman sees the difference between non-linguistic systems and language in terms of an analogical/digital opposition. Essentially, he argues, the way images

and words are perceived/read is fundamentally different: the former can be said to belong to an analogical system in that there is no pictorial expression that can be uniquely associated with one definite meaning, whereas language is composed of non-continuous discrete units, each with a precise meaning.

To illustrate this concept, Goodman uses, in comparison, an example of the contrast between a graduated and an ungraduated thermometer. In the former, each position is always associated with one of the marked values, whereas with an ungraduated thermometer the number of different potentially meaningful levels of the mercury is infinite, and each position cannot have an absolute meaning but only a relative one within the context in which it occurs. Similarly, the units that compose language (words), for example, are distinct entities which can be associated to specific meanings independently from the context, whereas the contiguous elements of a painting have a particular significance only in relation to the whole painting itself (Goodman, 1969: 159-164).

The ability of words to be associated with precise meanings implies that in texts where they coexist with pictures, they can help these to be interpreted correctly. Such is the view which Roland Barthes expresses in "Rhetoric of the Image", an essay included in *Image, Music, Text* (1977). Here Barthes explains how pictures can be "read". First of all, he points out that very often images contain verbal elements, like captions, titles, legends, etc.; so, clearly, these elements already provide part of the "textuality" of images. But the "reading" can go beyond the purely verbal message, to find further (iconic) messages in the image, in a signification process that depends very much on the viewer's experience of the world. What is shown in the image, as well as *the way* it is shown, can be associated, in the mind of the viewers, to various ideas according to their cultural knowledge. In the example used by Barthes (an advertisement of some grocery products of a supposedly Italian brand), for example, the objects displayed may convey ideas of freshness, of *Italianicity*, and of "total culinary service", while

their arrangement in the scene may be associated with many "still life" paintings, thus adding an aesthetic value to the image.

This kind of associations, however, is rather intuitive and depend very much on the knowledge of the world that each individual has. In order to be correctly interpreted, Barthes maintains, pictures need words: the verbal message directs the viewer/reader to the right interpretation. This is what the French scholar calls the "anchorage" function of language: because images can be open to a proliferation of different interpretations, often a verbal element is included, which helps the viewer/reader choose some signifieds and ignore others (Barthes, 1977: 39). That is what Barthes indicates as the reason why "it appears that the linguistic message is indeed present in every image" (40).

The same view is essentially shared by Perry Nodelman in *Words about Pictures* (1988). Concentrating his attention on children's picture books, the author aims at showing "the different ways in which words and pictures contribute to the total effect of a picture-book narrative" (Nodelman, 1988: 193). He agrees with Barthes' idea of "anchorage" and insists on it repeatedly, although he re-elaborates it slightly: "pictures can communicate much to us, and particularly much of visual significance – but only if words focus them, tell us what it is about them that might be worth paying attention to" (211).

The same line of thought is also present in some works which deal specifically with comics. In "Comic Art: Characteristics and Potentialities of a Narrative Medium", for example, Lawrence Abbott regards the relationship between words and pictures as a complementary one, but he also sees a predominant role of the verbal elements: "...the text influences the perception of the panel image and exerts (or at least has the right to exert, for not all panels are alike) a limiting or guiding factor in deducing the picture's meaning" (Abbott, 1986: 159). Similarly, Bianchi and Farello (1997) claim that "Normally, the relationship between words

and pictures in the creation of the narrative can be one of selection, when the words direct the reader towards the relevant aspects of the scene, or one of compensation, when the words say what is not represented" (Bianchi and Farello, 1997: 16, my translation)

### 2.2.2 Different views

An explicit criticism of this idea, that in mixed-code texts the verbal elements function as guiding factors for the interpretation of the pictorial elements, comes from Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, the authors of *Reading Images* (1990, 1996). Kress and van Leeuwen directly criticise Barthes' notion of 'anchorage function': ". . .we have to move away from the position which Roland Barthes took in his essay 'Rhetoric of the Image'. . ." (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996: 16). Their main argument, which forms the basis of the whole book, is that ". . .the visual component of a text is an independently organised and structured message – connected with the verbal text, but in no way dependent on it. . ." (17). Therefore *Reading Images* proposes a model with which to analyse the way images convey meaning. The authors' main objective is to formalize such a model into what they call a "grammar of visual design".

The chapter which is most relevant to my study is the one dedicated to "narrative representations", which discusses "the ways in which images can represent the world narratively". In doing so, the authors essentially follow Halliday's model of functional grammar and arrive at a categorization of visual narrative structures which is based on the principles of that same model. However, Kress and van Leeuwen do not simply transpose an existing linguistic model to the field of visual communication. Rather, they use Halliday's framework as a theoretical basis on which they construct their own "grammar of visual design".

Their principal proposition is that visual narrative structures always have *vectors*,

which "are formed by depicted elements that form an oblique line, often a quite strong, diagonal line . . . [they] may be formed by bodies or limbs or tools 'in action' . . ." (57). Vectors are visual equivalents of verbs, and link the participants of the depicted action: the Actor and the Goal. The former "is the participant from which the vector emanates, or which itself, in whole or in part, forms the vector" (61), the latter "is the participant at whom the vector is directed, hence it is also the participant *to whom* the action is done, or *at whom* the action is aimed" (62).

According to the kind of vector employed, Kress and van Leeuwen distinguish various types of narrative processes, such as action processes, reactional processes, and speech/mental processes. This third kind of processes is, according to the authors, the one found specifically in comics, where the vector is represented by "the oblique protrusions of the thought balloons and dialogue balloons that connect drawings of speakers or thinkers to their speech or thought" (67).

*Reading Images* offers a valuable and new approach to the analysis of images and of their internal syntax. However, precisely because of the authors' rejection of Barthes' notion of 'anchorage' and because of their core assumption that images convey meaning independently from language, the study does not fully explore the relationship between images and language when the two are combined together.

The authors suggest that our culture is currently experiencing a shift from an old kind of literacy, in which language is by far the most important form of communication, to a new one, where "language exists side by side, and independent of, forms of visual representation ..." (21).

This is true, but perhaps only in part, since I do not think that visual communication is growing independently from language. Rather, I think that the main



implication of the shift mentioned above is that language is becoming increasingly intermingled with visual elements, and mixed-code texts are becoming more and more common and important. Significantly, the most rapidly growing form of communication, the Internet, is based on mixed-code texts.

It is precisely in connection with this second point that Susan Hassall (1994, 1998) criticizes *Reading Images*: "it does not examine how visual and verbal narratives combine to create meaning" (Hassall, 1998: 2). "The relationship between written text and the visual image", she says, "is a relatively recent area of study" (2). A crucial part of her research, which investigates "the different ways in which words and pictures work together to create narrative" (1), is a categorization of five types of word/picture relationship (11ff.):

- 1 *pictures only*, when the story is told entirely through the pictures;
- 2 *mirroring*, when the verbal and visual texts reinforce each other and can operate independently to tell the story;
- 3 *interlocking*, when the pictures fill gaps in the texts and represent words which complete sentences;
- 4 *intertwining*, when words and pictures work together to produce a complete text
- 5 *diverging*, when the written text and the pictures tell different stories.

All five types are found in comics too, with the intertwining type being probably the most characteristic. Therefore, although the article focuses on children's picture books, Hassall's discussion is very valuable for a study of comics.

One further very important category that should be added for comics could be called *semiotic blend*, where the verbal and the pictorial elements acquire some of the characteristics of each other: the words are 'seen' as pictures and the pictures are 'read' as words (see next section for a fuller discussion). This concept will be developed further in the next section, while for the moment I will describe the way in which W.J.T. Mitchell, in his *Picture Theory: Essays on*

*Verbal and Visual Representation* (1994) provided useful and important insights.

Mitchell criticises what he calls the "comparative method", by which, as is traditionally the case, different media are simply compared to one another in order to find similarities and dissimilarities. He argues that a full investigation of the relationship between image and verbal expression should not stop at a comparison level, because there exist "other forms of relationship, [such as] metonymic juxtapositions, incommensurability, and unmediated or non-negotiable forms of alterity" (87). Consequently, rather than comparing literary texts to visual and/or plastic works of art, Mitchell finds it more useful to analyse what he calls mixed media, where images and verbal language are concurrently present.

According to Mitchell, the finest examples of works of art which employ both images and words are William Blake's illuminated books, which "elicit the full range of relations between visual and verbal literacy" and "tend to exhibit flexible, experimental, and 'high-tension' relations between words and images" (91). Other mixed media, instead, offer more "normal" relations, which "follow more traditional formulas involving the clear subordination and suturing of one medium to another, often with a straightforward division of labor" (91).

Interestingly, Mitchell mentions comic strips as a perfect example of this latter type of media. In his very brief description of the constituents of comics he emphasises how words and pictures occupy their own assigned spaces and how the relation between the two can be simply described as "word is to image as speech (or thought) is to action and bodies" (91-2). However, rather than dismissing comics as an inherently simple medium, Mitchell must be credited with the merit of recognising possibilities of "experimentation and complex deviations from the norm" (93), and it is interesting that in this respect he cites Art Spiegelman's *Maus* as one of the best examples of such experimentation.

However, *Picture Theory* is not about comics (although, indirectly, it is very much so) and is not specifically concerned with any particular medium. Instead, the author's main claim, which forms the basis of the whole book, is that "all arts are 'composite' arts (both text and image); all media are mixed media, combining different codes, discursive conventions, channels, sensory and cognitive modes" (94-5). Mitchell rejects the idea of "pure" media (purely visual or purely textual) in favour of a notion according to which all images contain textuality and all texts contain visuality.

To support this claim he offers two arguments. The first one is immediate: visual expressions often physically incorporate some textual elements, the same way as printed text is itself a visual expression for the precise reason that it is visible. The second argument is more profound and almost philosophical. It is accepted that the viewers of a painting do not just passively perceive the colours, the shapes, the tones etc. but that they also "read" something in it. Similarly, the readers of a novel "see" what is narrated. But the verbs "read" and "see" are commonly said to have a figurative sense in such cases. Mitchell's point, in this regard, is that the figurative status of "seeing" and "reading" does not deny their actual occurrence:

That images, pictures, space, and visuality may only be figuratively conjured up in a verbal discourse does not mean that the conjuring fails to occur or that the reader/listener 'sees' nothing. That verbal discourse may only be figuratively or indirectly evoked in a picture does not mean that the evocation is impotent, that the viewer 'hears' or 'reads' nothing in the image.

(Mitchell, 1994: 96)

The analytical approach offered by Kress and van Leeuwen, Hassall, and Mitchell is undoubtedly new, in that it rejects the notion of the 'supremacy' of words and, instead, examines the two codes on the same level. However, these studies seem to concentrate principally on individual pictures. Kress and van Leeuwen, in particular, express the originality of their work in linguistic terms:

while previous studies have sought to analyze 'lexis' i.e. the individual elements of images, their own concentrates on the 'grammar', that is on how these elements are interrelated to form meaning, their argument being that the previous approach, although a valid one, does not "tell the whole story" (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996: 1).

However, although a move from the word level to the sentence level certainly represents a much needed step forward in the study of images as conveyors of meaning, the whole story is still not told. For communication, be it visual or verbal, normally occurs in *texts* rather than in individual sentences. If visual texts are only considered within individual images, the necessary consequence is that the potentiality of images as constructors of narratives is not fully analyzed. In fact, it could be said that although a single image can be regarded (and analyzed) as a text, the narrative possibilities of visual communication are *mainly* expressed when several images are arranged sequentially.

Susan Hassall's study partly addresses this issue; yet, her categorisation of different types of word/picture relationship is still based on individual narrative units, rather than on the overall story taken as a whole. My own analysis seeks to examine the interaction between words and pictures also on the level of the story; it tries to understand what elements are there, both on the verbal and on the visual plane, that make a certain text interpretable in a certain way.

Most of the studies reviewed so far are not concerned (or not explicitly, at least) with comics, although in many of them (Barthes, Nodelman, Kress and van Leeuwen, Hassall, Mitchell) comics are mentioned as an instance of medium in which the word/picture relationship can be found. However, the reference to comics is, in those cases, extremely cursory. Given that it is precisely and primarily in the medium of comics that the tension between text and image reaches its peak, such brevity is hardly justifiable. In this sense, among all the

scholars who have discussed the word/picture relationship there seems to be a gap between those who are directly involved with comics and those outside the field.

In *Comic Books as History* (1989), for example, Joseph Witek explains that

[comics] display a highly developed narrative grammar and vocabulary based on an inextricable combination of verbal and visual elements. . . . comic books and comic strips integrate words and pictures into a flexible, powerful literary form capable of a wide range of narrative effects. As literary criticism works to develop a visual poetics, an obvious place to start unravelling the relations between word and image is in the complex semiotic process embodied in the comics page. . .  
(Witek, 1989: 3)

Alan Moore expresses a similar view:

What it comes down to in comics is that you have complete control of both the verbal track and the image track, which you don't have in any other medium, including film. So a lot of effects are possible which simply can't be achieved anywhere else. You control the words and the pictures – and more importantly – you control the interplay between those two elements in a way which not even film can achieve. There's a sort of 'under-language' at work there, that is neither the 'visuals' nor the 'verbals', but a unique effect caused by a combination of the two.  
(quoted in Wiaters and Bissette, 1993: 171)

Alan Moore is a famous author of graphic novels, and, in fact, as of now (March 1999), the only three books which investigate in depth the qualities of comics and provide detailed analysis of the medium are written by comics artists: Will Eisner, the author of *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985) and *Graphic Storytelling* (1995), and Scott McCloud, the author of *Understanding Comics* (1993).

Besides those three titles, *The Art of the Funnies* (1994), by Robert Harvey, also provides some insight into the characteristics of comics, although its main concern is the history of the comic strip. In his brief theoretical analysis of the medium Harvey essentially repeats what he wrote in an article published in 1979: "The Aesthetics of the Comic Strip". His main axiom is that "Comics are a blend

of words and pictures—not a simple coupling of the verbal and the visual, but a blend, a true mixture" (Harvey, 1994: 9). Indeed he elevates the relationship between words and pictures to a criterion for evaluation: "...a measure of a comic strip excellence is the extent to which the sense of the words is dependent on the pictures and vice versa" (Harvey, 1979: 642; 1994: 9). Harvey bases all his aesthetic theory on this criterion, which he uses to critique some popular daily comic strips. However, his analysis of the medium is not very detailed nor particularly technical. He does not investigate *how* words and pictures cooperate to convey meaning, but simply to which extent either code contributes to the understanding of any particular comics text.

The works by Will Eisner and Scott McCloud are much more thorough. About the relationship between words and pictures, they both stress the fact that in comics the difference between the two codes is not necessarily so clear-cut. However, both authors are primarily comics artists, not semioticians or linguists, and therefore their claims are not supported by a solid theoretical basis. Nevertheless, their studies are extremely valuable because the conclusions drawn there *can* be given a theoretical support and can therefore be considered as a starting point for further analysis. Paradoxically, such a starting point has perhaps been best expressed in an essay which with comics has nothing to do at all, by J.L. Lemke, who claims that "Meaning-making . . . cannot be adequately understood in terms of any one semiotic modality, such as language. . . .writing and drawing . . . share common ancestry; . . . Writing is not merely the annotation of speech, as drawing is not simply the inking of images" (Lemke, 1998: 87-8).

## 2.3 Theory

The idea of "language beyond language will be pursued from the point of view of semiotics, which, as Umberto Eco explains,

...aims to study the entire range of sign systems (of which verbal language is the most important) and various processes of communication to which these systems give rise. Such a study also involves the demonstration of the existence of sign systems even where they may be least immediately apparent or expected  
(Eco, 1997: 55).

At the basis of semiotics is the concept of sign, which was first theorised by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Peirce. While Saussure was more concerned with language, Peirce's studies embraced communication more in general. The core of his model is the classification of signs into three main categories: symbol, index and icon. According to this model,

- a sign is an *icon* when "there is a topological similarity between a signifier and its denotata" (Sebeok, 1994: 28). The iconic sign, therefore, signifies by resemblance, that is by virtue of a similarity (e.g. visual or acoustic) to what it denotes;
- a sign is an *index* when the signifier bears a direct existential link to its signified as, for example, smoke is an index of fire;
- a sign is a *symbol*, finally, when the link between the signifier and the signified exists by virtue of a shared convention and is therefore completely arbitrary.

Within this tripartite classification, icons and symbols are the signs more relevant to this study, given that, in general and rather simplified terms, images can be considered iconic signs and words symbolic signs (on the symbolic nature of language, see, for example Sapir, 1921: 8; Bloch and Trager, 1942: 5; Hall, 1968: 158).

In fact, as the rest of this chapter will discuss, between iconic and symbolic signs there is no clear-cut divide but rather a continuum along which signs possess, at one time and in varying proportions, iconic as well as symbolic features. Therefore, I prefer to use the terms *iconicity* and *symbolicity* to refer respectively to the iconic and the symbolic properties of any sign.

### 2.3.1 Iconicity and symbolicity

No picture is pure image; all of them, still and moving, graphic and photographic, are 'talking pictures', either literally, or in association with contextual speech, writing or discourse.

(Hartley, 1992: 28)

Discussing iconic signs, Jonathan Bignell writes that

...a photograph of a cat looks recognisably like a specific cat. ... In a photograph, the signifier is the colour and shape on the flat surface of the picture. The signified is the concept of a cat which the signifier immediately calls up.

(Bignell, 1997: 15)

Such an idea, however, is seen as problematic by many. In particular, what has been questioned is whether or not drawings and photographs can be convincingly regarded as pure iconic signs. Umberto Eco (1976: 191-217; 1982: 32-38), for example, totally rejects this idea and theorises that rather than resembling their objects, photographs reproduce some of the conditions under which the objects that they represent are normally visually perceived (Eco, 1982: 32). Thus, according to Eco, there are certain similarities in the way a photograph and its real object are perceived which make it possible for the former to be considered the signifier of the second. But the existence of *some* similarities implies the existence of differences, and that is the reason why Eco suggests that the iconicity of images is a matter of degree, rather than absolute qualities. A water-colour painting and a photograph have different degrees of iconicity, but neither is purely iconic.



In this respect Guy Cook observes that "For a sign to be truly iconic, it would have to be transparent to someone who had never seen it before – and it seems unlikely that this is as much the case as sometimes supposed" (Cook, 1992: 70). Even signs with a high degree of iconicity like photographs cannot be said to be analogues of reality, since their recognition is not natural but derives from training (Eco, 1982: 33; Fiske, 1990: 56; Goodman, 1996: 42-43).

John Fiske defines this varying degree of iconicity in terms of convention: "Convention is necessary to the understanding of any sign, however iconic or indexical it is" (Fiske, 1990: 56). Therefore, rather than separate categories, he suggests a scale, at whose opposite ends he places the symbol and the icon: the more a sign needs convention to be interpreted, the more it is closer to the symbol end of the scale, and vice versa.

Such a scale would look like this:

icon ←————→ symbol

In the next two sections I will take this scale as the theoretical basis which supports the ideas that pictures can be read as words and words seen as pictures.

### 2.3.2 Pictures read as words

where at the icon end are natural, motivated and analogical signs, and at the symbol end are conventional, arbitrary and digital signs.

A scale of degrees of symbolicity/iconicity necessarily presupposes the idea that most signs are, in varying proportions, both symbolic *and* iconic. So, for example, the interpretation of a stylised drawing relies more on convention than does the

interpretation of a realistic painting, and therefore the former is closer to the symbol end than the latter:



It is not by chance that, as far back as 1845, Rodolphe Töpffer, who is by some (e.g. Horn, 1998) considered the inventor of the comic strip, defined the nature of his own drawings as "purely conventional symbolism" (reported in Gombrich, 1960: 339).

Because the most conventional, arbitrary and digital code is verbal language, saying that any given sign is closer to the symbol end of the scale is equivalent to saying that the sign is closer to verbal language. That is precisely why the high degree of stylisation of most comics allows Will Eisner to affirm that

In its most economical state, comics employ a series of repetitive images and recognizable symbols. When these are used again and again to convey similar ideas, they become a language - a literary form, if you will. And it is this disciplined application that creates the 'grammar' of Sequential Art.

(Eisner, 1985: 8)

The readers of comics learn how to associate certain repetitive pictorial elements with specific meanings, effectively treating them as linguistic units. In this sense, to adopt Goodman's terminology, the image ceases to be defined as an only analogical system and acquires the characteristics of a digital system, organised into discrete units associated to precise ideas.

Will Eisner is not a semiotician, so his observation regarding the affinity of comics drawings and verbal language comes entirely out of his experience as a comics artist. Scott McCloud, another comics artist, has also discussed the effects of the stylisation of comics drawings and has reached similar conclusions (McCloud,

1994: 24-59). Like Eisner, he is not a semiotician, and his speculations are not accompanied by theoretical underpinnings. One issue that he addresses is: how can the reader understand the meaning of highly stylised drawings?

In his critique of the iconic sign, Umberto Eco provides an answer when he discusses the existence of *codes of recognition*, which "list certain features of the object as the most meaningful for purposes of recollection or future communication" (Eco, 1982: 33). These codes of recognition are not universal but arbitrary and conventional, given that in the production of a stylised visual sign, a drawing for example, they "preside over the selection of the conditions of perception that we decide to transcribe into an iconic sign" (33).

This leads the discussion to the issue of the "supremacy of words". If stylised pictures are closer to the symbol end of the scale, and therefore to verbal language, one could question the whole notion of "anchorage": in comics, pictures cease to be "floating chains of signifieds" and, precisely because of their stylisation, acquire the characteristics of a digital code. Therefore they no longer need another digital code in order to be properly interpreted.

Nodelman, for example, argues that "If the shape of a woman's nose is important to the meaning of a story, then the words in the story about her will mention the shape of her nose; looking at a picture of her, we might be so interested by the curtains on the window behind her that we do not even notice the nose" (Nodelman, 1988: 198). This idea can be challenged on two levels. From a more general point of view, it can be shown that pictures are always spatially structured so as to precisely focus the viewer's attention more prominently on certain details rather than others: "In our visual representations, we certainly also have means and conventions by which to indicate how important an element should be seen to be (Saliency, or visual Importance)" (J.L. Lemke, 1998b)

On the particular level of comics, on the other hand, the stylisation of the pictures prevents the readers from focusing their attention on unnecessary details. In fact, one of the most common features of this type of pictures is, for example, the extreme simplicity or total absence of backgrounds, so as to ensure the maximum foregrounding of the elements that should receive the focus of attention. If something is important for the meaning of the story, it is bound to have a spatially prominent position within the picture in which it is shown.

Thus, the following conclusions can be drawn:

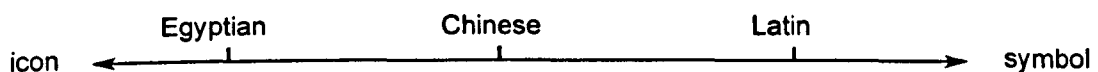
- (1) purely iconic signs do not exist: photographs, paintings, drawings etc. are all, to varying degrees, also symbolic, and therefore conventional and arbitrary;
- (2) this allows one to establish a scale of symbolicity/iconicity;
- (3) stylised pictures, like those which characterise most comics, are close to the symbol end of the scale since their interpretation relies very much on codes of recognition, which need to be acquired and are highly conventional;
- (4) their proximity to the symbol end of the scale, makes comics pictures also close to verbal language, which is the most symbolic, arbitrary and conventional system of signs.
- (5) the stylisation of pictures and their closeness to verbal language, removes the leading role of the latter and makes it possible to suggest a more collaborative type of relationship.

### 2.3.3 Words seen as pictures

In the previous section I stated that verbal language is the most symbolic system of signs. Such an affirmation needs however to be refined and rendered more precise. First of all, this study is not concerned with oral verbal language but only with the written variety, and therefore, it is perhaps better to talk about *writing* rather than verbal language in general.

The first consequence of this refocusing is the ability to observe that writing is ultimately a graphic representation of verbal language and, as such, not necessarily purely symbolic. Again, it is a matter of degrees, rather than absolute categories. The Latin alphabet, which is employed by most Western written languages, is generally considered to be a highly conventional and arbitrary code and so are the Cyrillic and the Greek alphabets, but other languages use different kinds of written signs which may not be so arbitrary. Chinese writing, for example, represents an instance of a symbolic code which simultaneously possesses evident iconic properties. This difference is due to the fact that Latin, Cyrillic, Greek and many other alphabets are employed in "sound writing", whereby "an idea has to be translated first into the sounds of a particular word or sentence in a particular language, then those sounds have to be made visible in the form of ... signs which more often than not bear no relation to the content of the original thought" (Gaur, 1984: 15). Whereas Chinese adopts "thought writing", which "transmits and idea directly; the drawing of a leg means 'leg' or 'to go', the drawing of a tree means 'tree' ... the drawing of two trees can mean 'forest' and so forth" (14-15). The scripts of the ancient Egyptians, where the iconic nature of the signs is even more evident, also belong to the category of "thought writing".

Thus, Latin, Chinese and ancient Egyptian writing can be placed on different points along the icon/symbol scale:



Apart from the intrinsic iconicity of different alphabets, the sole fact that it is a graphic representation grants written language with *iconic potential*. That is to say, the semantic value of any written language, including those that belong to the category of "sound writing", is not necessarily entirely contained within the verbo-linguistic meaning, but is also expressed by the visual aspect of writing. Besides, Hervé Fischer interestingly observes that although "our present

alphabet ... does not have any figurative character ... its degree of abstraction allows greater ease of manipulation" (Fischer, 1986: 225, my translation).

Indeed the importance of the visuality of writing is evident in virtually all media where written language is employed, such as newspapers, advertising, the Internet, television, etc.

One elementary visual aspect of writing which is used extremely commonly is size, which is normally directly associated with importance. Road signs, posters, newspaper headlines etc. all utilize different sizes of lettering in order to render different degrees of importance. Other devices are also commonly employed (sometimes in conjunction with size) to convey stress and/or emphasis, like italics and bold letters. Another visual aspect of writing which is sometimes exploited is typeface. As Susan Goodman observes, "the typeface in which a text, or part of a text, is set can convey vast amounts of connotative meaning – it can convey a mood, signal clues as to content or even suggest a point of view" (Goodman, 1996: 45).

In Britain, for example, the 'Old English' or 'Gothic' typeface is normally associated with the idea of tradition, which, in turn, can be exploited for various purposes. An 'Old English' sign for a pub or restaurant conveys the idea of good, old, traditional food/drink and atmosphere. In newspaper headers the association with tradition generated by the 'Old English' typeface may be an index of a conservative point of view.

Other visual aspects, like colour, for example, are also widely employed, which extend the meaning of written expressions. Not so in literature, or at least in what is canonically regarded as literature, where the graphical appearance of writing is not normally considered to be particularly important. The underlying notion is that in literature writing should be visually as neutral and abstract as possible, so as to ensure that the artistic value is entirely and purely verbal. In *The Discourse*

of *Advertising*, Guy Cook significantly observes that "Ads and literature ... differ in the degree to which they exploit the potential for paralinguistic meaning in sounds and letters. Literature makes so little use of the paralinguistic potential of writing that exceptions are both striking and well known" (Cook, 1992: 75).

Indeed advertising is perhaps the medium in which the importance of the visual aspects of writing has been best studied. In advertisements, as Angela Goddard simply but effectively explains, "the verbal language can suggest particular qualities as a result of how it appears: in other words, writing is another form of image-making, too" (Goddard, 1998: 16). The same notion is shared by Greg Myers, who approaches the issue from a semiotic perspective (Myers, 1994: 135-151).

Guy Cook offers perhaps the most comprehensive analysis: "The number of ways in which advertising exploits the paralinguistic of writing is staggeringly large" (Cook, 1992: 77). He distinguishes eight different ways in which language acquires iconic features (78-85):

- (1) iconicity with words;
- (2) iconicity by letter shape;
- (3) connected icons and symbols;
- (4) connected icons and arbitrary signs;
- (5) writing which provokes iconic behaviour;
- (6) indexical graphology;
- (7) writing imitating another writing system, creating an index of another culture;
- (8) mood evocation through typeface

These categories are all found in comics too, with the second and the sixth being the most common. Again, it is Will Eisner who claims that in comics, "lettering, treated graphically and in the service of the story, functions as an extension of the imagery" (Eisner, 1985: 20). Similarly, Fischer notes that in comics "...typography acquires a new freedom, unknown in history. It is drawn by hand, unlike the traditional uniform typography, and it progressively becomes image" (Fischer, 1986: 225, my translation). Precisely because of its being handwritten,

comics writing has always *at least* a conscious graphical significance since "we are likely to read handwriting as more to do with human agency ... than machine-produced typeface" (Goddard, 1998: 16).

Thus, in the icon/symbol scale, the position of comics writing can be variable, but has the icon end as its attracting pole. In other terms, its iconicity, which can vary from author to author, is present in any case and is therefore the measure by which the semiotic position of comics writing is determined:



This means that comics writing is, to a certain extent, semiotically closer to pictures, since these, ideally, are the most iconic types of signs.

#### 2.3.4 The semiotic blend

In the previous sections I concluded that

- c) stylised comics drawings possess a high degree of symbolicity which renders them semiotically close to language;
- d) comics writing is, because of the importance of its graphic aspects, a very iconic form of written verbal language, and therefore semiotically close to pictures.

Since in both cases I have used the same symbol/icon scale, it would be interesting to determine the position that words and pictures occupy when they are placed on the scale at the same time:





As the diagram shows, if comics writing and comics drawings are put on the scale simultaneously, there occurs a partial overlap between the two codes. The actual amount of overlap varies according to the style of each individual author; some comics artists do not exploit the visuality of writing as much as others, but what is important is that in comics the overlap is always at least potential. Thus, this semiotic blend makes it possible to suggest that instead of considering comics writing and comics drawings separately, it may be more proper to talk about a *comics language*, which incorporates the verbal and the pictorial aspects of comics.

In section 2.3.3 I compared the writing of the Chinese and the ancient Egyptian to comics writing, but it is extremely significant that Will Eisner compares the same two systems of signs to comics drawings instead:



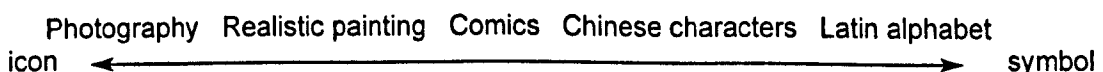
Egyptian

Chinese

Comics

(Eisner, 1985: 15)

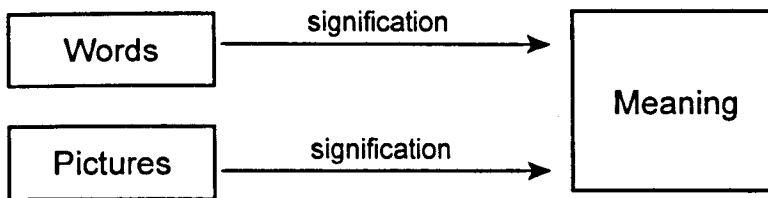
The semiotic blend that occurs in comics, which allows the theorisation of a comics language, leads one to reconsider the whole issue of the relationship between words and pictures. Comics is where words and pictures meet:



### 2.3.5 The interaction between words and pictures

Comics are thought to have a higher level of comprehensibility than conventional literature thanks to the fact that "Illustration and prose, interacting within each panel, provide a redundancy of information that aids understanding" (Wright and Sherman, 1994: 45).

According to this notion, the message, in comics, would be conveyed by two parallel and concurrent signifiers which refer to the same signified:



Theoretically, the presence of two processes of signification would enable one to remove any one of the signifiers without the conveyance of the meaning being affected. Figure 2.1 is an extract from an illustrated version of *Gulliver's Travel*:

As can be seen, the words say exactly what the pictures show, in a relationship of perfect redundancy: the removal of either words or pictures would not cause any loss in meaning. Because the story is targeted at primary school pupils, the redundancy of information is meant to effectively aid understanding. In cases like this, the function of the pictures is to provide a sort of visual definition for the words, so that the child can improve his vocabulary and reading skills.

In comics the signification process can be much more complex. Roger Sabin observes that

Words and pictures do not have to refer to the same thing, and creators can play with juxtaposition to create a variety of dramatic moods. . . . the permutation of [words and pictures] are almost endless – limited only by the imaginations of the creators  
 (Sabin, 1993: 9)

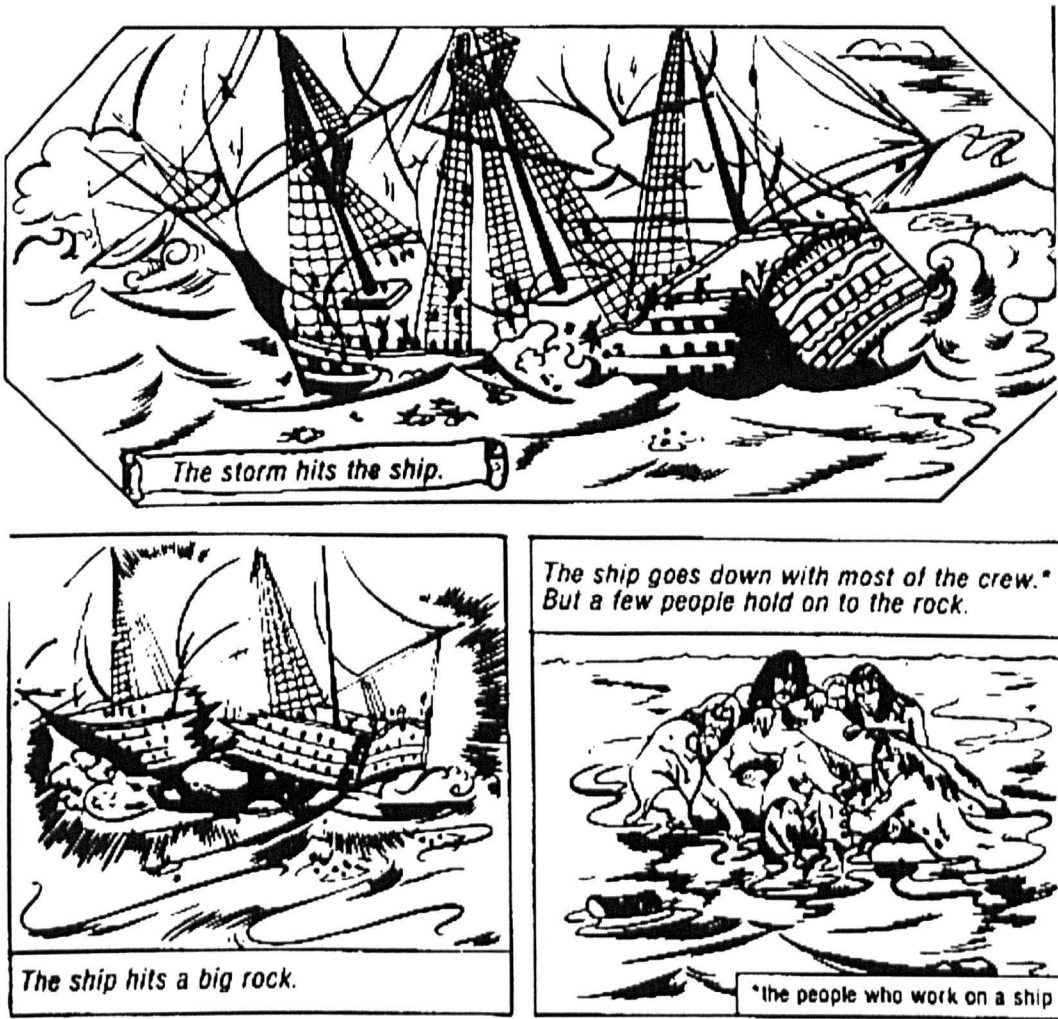


Figure 2.1: *Gulliver's Travels* (Regent Illustrated Classics)

Indeed, what I will try to show is that in comics words and pictures do not normally refer to the same thing but, rather, they contribute different information towards the interpretation of the text.

In the following section I will analyse some comics texts in order to show the way in which the visual and the verbal codes blend and interact to form the essence of the verbo-visual language of comics.

## **2.4 Analysis**

### **2.4.1 Art Spiegelman's *Maus***

#### **2.4.1.1 *Background***

*Maus* is a comic book<sup>5</sup> by Art Spiegelman, an American Jew. It was published in the magazine *Raw* between 1980 and 1991. In book format *Maus - A Survivor's Tale* was published into two volumes: the first one appeared in 1986, with the subtitle "My Father Bleeds History", and the second one in 1991, with the subtitle "And Here my Troubles began".

From the point of view of the medium employed, the appearance of *Maus* represented a very strong statement against the idea that comics could only have light-hearted themes:

*Maus* is the use of a traditionally "low" genre — the comic strip or book — for serious, grave material. It is a conscious, intentional inversion of a norm, a hierarchy, a cultural order. It is a very "strong" (in the Bloomian sense) rereading of one survivor's tale and the transmission or testimony of this tale to the son; it is at the same time a strong revamping or reconsideration of the generic possibilities of the "comic" itself.

(Anonymous, "<http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/holocaust/spiegelman.html> ")

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5. For a discussion of the appropriacy of the term "comic book" see Chapter One.

In *Maus* there is not just one story, but at least three: the story of Vladek, a Polish Jew who survived Auschwitz; the story of the relationship between Artie (the author) and Vladek (his father); and the story of how the novel itself was created. The first two stories are closely interconnected, and this relationship is built on and revolves around the third, which constitutes a relatively simple narrative thread – Vladek tells his story of the Holocaust to Artie, who records everything on a notepad.

On a superficial level, *Maus* is a book about the horrors of the Holocaust, recounted by one of the few who survived it, therefore not too dissimilar, for example, from Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo*. This initial reading is reinforced by the cover graphics and by the subtitle – *A Survivor's Tale*. In this regard, *Maus* certainly belongs to a category of extremely important historical accounts, of which there could not be enough. However, from a purely stylistic point of view, the novel would not have been so original and interesting if the "survivor's tale" had been its only component.

For one thing, a more in-depth reading reveals that in *Maus* the survival is not only that of Vladek from Auschwitz but also that of Artie from Vladek himself. Indeed, the word 'survivor' acquires a more metaphorical sense, in a novel where metaphor is a key element for its reading(s). The experience of the lager had irreparably transformed Vladek into a man it was almost impossible to live with. His wife Anja survived the concentration camps but did not survive Vladek – she committed suicide. His son Artie, instead, despite the psychological problems, was stronger: he is the second survivor in *Maus*.

#### 2.4.1.2 *The cover page*

The title of the novel has, for its size and position, a very prominent place in the cover (Figure 2.2). Indeed, this is common for most cover pages: the title attracts the reader's attention thanks to a careful and studied layout. However, in



Figure 2.2: Art Spiegelman, *Maus*

conventional literature the two factors that are normally at play are precisely only size and position. In comic books, instead, the productive cooperation between language and graphics, which begins from the very cover page, allows for more possibilities.

The title of *Maus* conveys its meaning on different level. In semiotic terms, it could be said that the title incorporates various signs which pertain to different codes. The verbal plane itself can be divided into two separate levels:

1) The phonology level: the word 'maus' is the equivalent of the English word 'mouse'.

2) The orthography level: the unusual, German-like, spelling already loads the word with some extra potential meaning.

Here, though, it is not only these considerations that must be taken into account, since in comics words are not printed, but *drawn*. The visual plane is equally important and can also be dissected into sub-levels:

1) The level of the typeface: it can be observed that the style of the lettering mimics that of the 'SS' emblem. So, the general sense of *germanicity* given by the spelling of 'maus' becomes much more precise once the analysis moves from the purely verbal plane to the graphic plane: the relation is not with Germany in general any more, but with a very specific historical and ideological aspect of Germany.

2) The pictorial level: apart from a well identifiable typeface, the letters that compose the word mouse also contain pictorial elements, which render the meaning even more precise. The letters are coloured in red and are drawn in such a way as to depict blood stains, so that the whole title of the book looks as if it has been written with blood. It is at this point that the idea of the Holocaust comes about.

So the title of *Maus* constitutes a sign whose signifier is composed not only of a

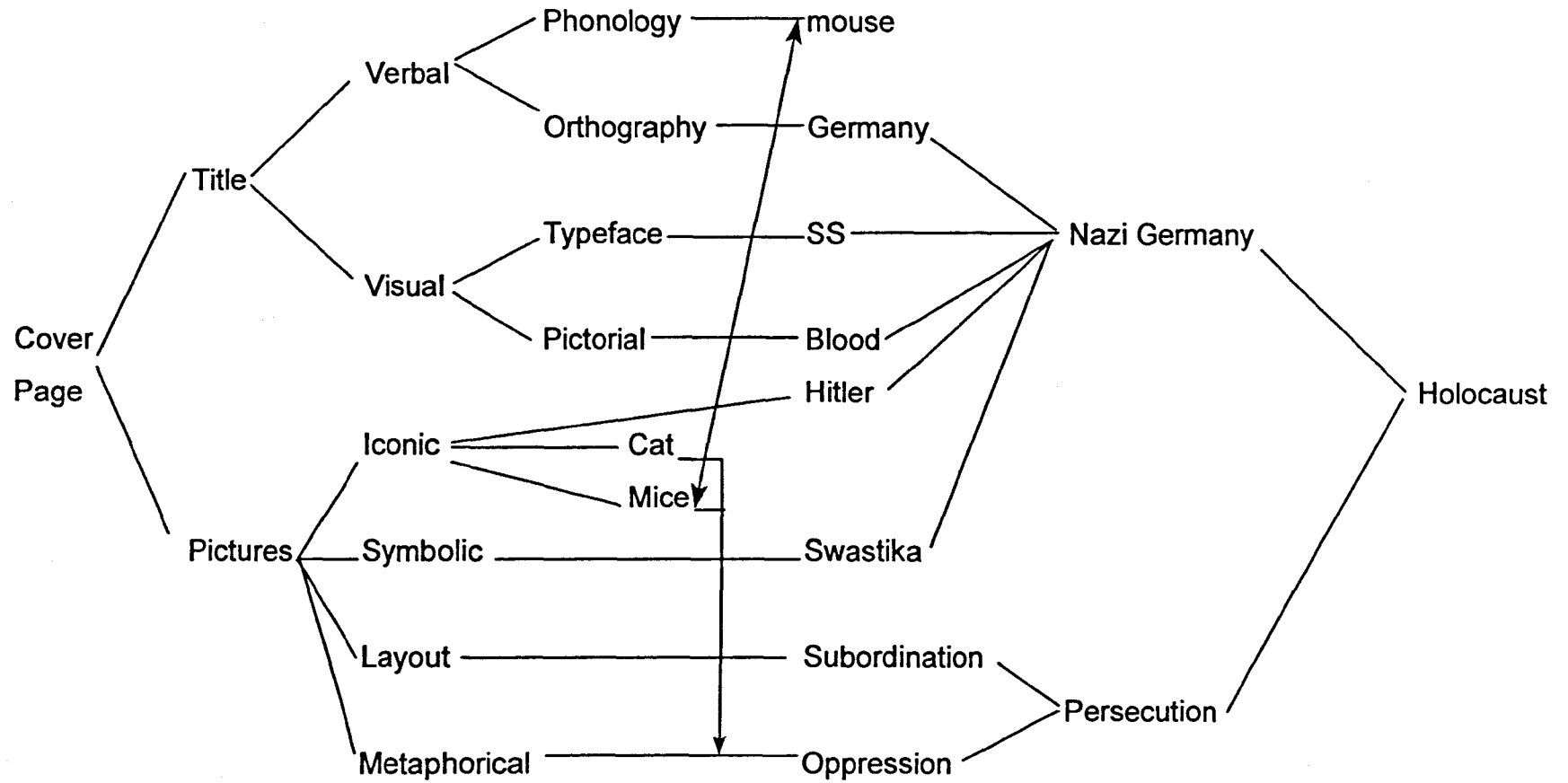
mere succession of m-a-u-s, but also of a graphic component, without which the link to the signifier would not be properly established.

However, in the signification process the reference to the Holocaust is not yet sufficiently clear. The decoding continues in the rest of the cover, which contains two completely pictorial elements. The first one shows a Hitler-like face on a swastika background. Both the Hitler face and the swastika are signs which strongly reinforce the reference to Nazi Germany, and the idea of the Holocaust becomes more apparent. The second picture shows two creatures with an expression of fear on their faces.

Various other elements indicate that the kind of relationship that exists between the subjects of the two pictures is one of oppression. First of all, the positioning: the Hitler-like face is above the two beings, which conveys a sense of subordination. Secondly, both pictures contain signs which refer to specific animals: the shape of the Hitler face, of its ears, and its eyes, plus the presence of whiskers are all clear signs which refer to the idea of 'cat'. The two beings in the second picture, instead, have evident mouse-like features. The signs 'cat' and 'mouse', in turn, exploit the well-known metaphor of 'cat and mouse' and serve to establish the relationship between the subjects of the two pictures. Also, the mouse-features with which the Jews are depicted explain the choice of the word 'maus' for the title. The signified 'Holocaust' is now much more manifest and visible.

It is significant that manifest and visible (and all their synonyms) are words that pertain to the plane of the visual. Indeed, this analysis of the cover page of *Maus* could represent an argument against the notion of "anchorage" theorised by Roland Barthes and taken up and re-elaborated by others. Here it is the visual elements, rather than the verbal ones, that focus the meaning and direct the reader/viewer towards the right interpretation. The complex signification process at play in this cover page can be shown in a diagram:





As the diagram shows, the verbal element plays only a marginal role and much of the signification process relies on the visual plane.

The cover page also contains two subtitles at the bottom. The first one is A SURVIVOR'S TALE, which, unlike the main title, is not visually significant, in that its semantic value is purely verbal. Its meaning reinforces the reference to the Holocaust, but its relevance is much greater in relation to the story as a whole than to the details of the cover page.

The second sub-title, MY FATHER BLEEDS HISTORY, seems to have a stronger connection with the main title. Indeed, it would be difficult not to see a link between the stains of blood which form the word MAUS and the verb 'bleeds'. The meaning of such a link, which is somewhat blurred in the cover page, becomes clearer as soon as the reader realises that the main story of *Maus* is told by the author's father Vladek. So, the blood with which the main title appears to have been written acquires another significance: it symbolises the fact that the story is told by Vladek, who 'bleeds' it because of the excruciating pains narrated.

#### *2.4.1.3 The metaphors and possible worlds of Maus*

This analysis of the cover page of *Maus* already gives an idea about the importance of the pictorial element in comics, and how it is all but a redundant code in the complex network of the signification process. In fact, the word-picture relationship is the precursor of the complexity of *Maus*.

As mentioned above, the main story is the autobiographical narration of Vladek's experience immediately before and during his deportation to Auschwitz, which makes *Maus* an historical account, rather than a work of fiction. Yet, its faithfulness to reality seems, at least on a superficial level, to be marred by the partial zoomorphication of the characters. People are portrayed with different animal faces according to their nationalities: Jews have faces of mice, Germans

of cats, Poles of pigs, Americans of dogs, and so on. Technically, this represents a problem of classification: is *Maus* a fictional or non-fictional work? Very significant is an incident recounted by Art Spiegelman himself:

I had an entertaining moment with the New York Times Book Review when MAUS was given a spot as a bestseller in the fiction category. I wrote a letter saying that David Duke would be quite happy to read that what happened to my father was fiction. I said I realized MAUS presented problems in taxonomy but I thought it belonged in the nonfiction list. They published the letter and moved MAUS to nonfiction. But it turns out there was a debate among the editors. The funniest line transmitted back to me was one editor saying, let's ring Spiegelman's doorbell. If a giant mouse answers, we'll put MAUS in nonfiction.

Yet, the undoubted reality of Vladek's account is not enough for the problem to be dismissed. As a starting point towards a more thorough analysis I will take an article published in *Semiotica* by Peter Trifonas (1998). In this article the author carries out a semiotic analysis of *Effie*, a picture book in which the characters are insects who have some human faculties, like, for example, the ability to speak. This allows Trifonas to state that

...the reader is alerted to the fact that the story is fictional and not realistic, since ants do not possess the human faculty of speech and it is extremely doubtful that in the history of the world there has ever existed an ant named Effie with anthropomorphic features of the kind objectified in the visual text

(Trifonas, 1998: 9)

Strictly speaking, the same statement could be applied to *Maus*. It becomes evident how this poses a very serious problem: the fact that people with animal faces never existed in the history of the world could justify statements against the non-fictional nature of the story, and, by extension, even against the historicity of the Holocaust. Consequently, Spiegelman's stylistic choice merits a very attentive analysis. Trifonas' article itself indicates the theoretical basis for such an analysis. First of all, he claims that

... semiotics offers a highly developed epistemological, theoretical, and methodological framework for 'deconstructing' the structure of lexical (and visual) signs

embodied within picture books as communicative sign systems or codes that function to convey meaning, thus affording the researcher the opportunity to examine the total text as a medium for exchanging and disseminating knowledge. (Trifonas, 1998: 3)

So, in order to properly comprehend the information conveyed by the total text it is necessary to deconstruct it into signs and see how the various systems of signs interact with each other. Secondly, another important concept should be considered from the field of semiotics: that of 'possible worlds'. In fact, to be precise, such a notion does not derive exclusively from the field of semiotics, but finds its roots in a wider area of thought, which embraces philosophy, logic and semantics. However, the semiotic approach is the one that I find most suitable to describe the particular 'possible world' of *Maus*. Umberto Eco (1979) explains that the world created in a novel or in a fairy tale, for example, is a possible world, in that it has certain properties which readers take as parameters for a comparison with the real world; the properties of the real world, in turn, will depend on the encyclopaedia (world knowledge) of each individual reader, who will assess the degree of 'possibility' of the world portrayed in the text (Eco, 1979: 122-173).

Given these two notions, it is first of all possible to observe that on a macro level, *Maus*, being a graphic novel, is composed of two main codes: language and images. As the analysis of the cover page has already shown, however, these two codes can be dissected into sub-codes, so that, in this case, the animal faces could be regarded and analysed as a sub-code of the visual code.

Besides, the animal-face sub-code also represents one of the properties of the possible world of *Maus* and, precisely, one that does not match the real world. However, the encyclopedia of the average readership of *Maus* (which is unlikely to include young children) will make it possible to recognise the 'reality' of other such properties as geographical names and historical events. For example,

Poland, New York, Auschwitz and Manhattan are all known to exist also in the real world by the average reader, and so are the Second World War and the Nazi regime in Germany.

The concurrent presence of properties that exist in the real world and properties that in the real world do not exist necessarily generates a sense of disbelief in the reader, and it could allow one to liken *Maus* to the picture book *Effie*. But there is a substantial difference. In *Effie*, as Trifonas observes,

...the total text, both lexical and visual, works toward the suspension of disbelief by narcotizing any ideological disjunctions which may be created between extratextual paradigms derived from the reader/viewer's encyclopaedic knowledge and the internal paradigms of the possible world portrayed in the picture book that would impinge upon and mar the vicarious aesthetic experiences promulgated by the artistic text.

(Trifonas, 1998: 9)

In *Maus*, instead, nothing works towards the narcotization of the discrepancies between extratextual and internal paradigms. In the verbal text there are no references to any animal-like feature of the characters. The text as a whole does not contain any element that would attempt to suspend the reader's disbelief about the animal-face property. Everything has a meticulous realistic accuracy (reinforced by the inclusion of maps, diagrams, real photographs and other faithfully reported information) *except* the animal faces. In fact, in *Maus* rather than narcotization there occurs the opposite phenomenon: the coincidence of properties between the possible world of the text and the real world is so regular and precise that, in this sense, the animal-face property represents a deviation from the norm and is therefore foregrounded. Consequently, the animal-face sub-code attracts the reader's attention and calls for an interpretation.

Talking about comics, Walter Moro claims that "One relevant difference between images and writing is that words refer to abstract concepts, whereas images represent a concrete reality" (Moro, 1991: 54; my translation). Such a statement

should be taken cautiously. Images do indeed represent concrete realities, but the meaning of 'concrete' and 'reality' can vary greatly depending on the context analysed. In a purely denotative signification, the picture of a mouse face is related to the animal "mouse". In the context of *Maus*, instead, this denotative meaning does not seem to be a valid one, since the characters possess no other features whatsoever to indicate that they are mice; on the contrary, they show all the characteristics of human beings. Therefore, if the denotative meaning is suppressed by the context of the whole text, it is legitimate to believe that there must be connotative meanings as more credible options

In a connotative signification process there are at least two signifier/signified relationships, where the signified of the first relationship becomes the signifier for the second (Eco, 1976: 55, 85).

Analogously, the animal faces in *Maus*, signify "mouse", "cat", and so on denotatively, but something else connotatively. One particular type of connotative signification is the metaphor. Although, as Winfried Nöth (1985) shows, a precise and exhaustive definition of metaphor has proven to be very complex theoretical task, for the purposes of this study it will suffice to use Jakobson's (1956) definition, which was later taken up by Eco (1976), according to which a metaphor is a substitution of a word or expression with another word or expression when between the two there are common semantic markers.

In the analysis of the cover page I have already mentioned the "cat and mouse" metaphor, which is a well established one and does not require particularly complex interpretative efforts: mice are hunted and killed by cats. Another interpretation arises from the fact that, mice are also generally considered to be a plague that everyone wants to get rid of. Both those connotations emphasise the animal-like features of the faces and derive from Hitler's declaration that "The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human", which is also the epigram

of the book.

However, the foregrounding of the animal-face sub-code, in an otherwise totally realistic context, makes the following interpretation, provided by Joshua Brown (1988), the most convincing one:

Why not portray the Jews, the Poles, and the Germans as human beings? It has not often been noticed that in fact Spiegelman has done just that: the Jews are *not* mice, the Poles are *not* pigs, the Germans are *not* cats. The anthropomorphic presentation of the characters should make that eminently clear. . .

Through the metaphor *Maus* palpably confronts the reader with the social relations of Eastern Europe of nations divided by nationalities and by culturally-constructed, politically-exploited stereotypes.

By drawing people as animals, Spiegelman evokes the stratification of European society that had seemed dormant but soon exploded into an orgy of racism. When you read *Maus*, you don't tend to identify the characters as animals. You decipher human beings, and then the metaphor takes hold. You are disrupted, upset.

. . .

Spiegelman tackled Hitler's metaphor to undermine it. The horror of racial theory is not rationalized or supported by the metaphor; it is brought to its fullest, tense realization.

(Brown, 1988: 7-8)

The conclusion drawn by Brown, which derives from the observation that the reader does not identify with the characters as animals, is clearly the result of the foregrounding of the animal-face property discussed above. So, finally, as a metaphor aimed at rebutting and discrediting Hitler's own metaphor, the portrayal of animal faces no longer constitutes a threat to the historical validity of *Maus*.

From a stylistic point of view, what is important about this metaphor is the fact that it is realised completely on the visual plane and that it would hardly have been as effective if it had been used in a conventional novel. If attempted in written form, it would turn out to be rather bizarre and awkward, since its verbalisation (something like "the Jews had faces of mice and the Germans had faces of cats") would render the metaphor explicit and therefore completely spoil its efficacy.

At a certain point in the novel (Figure 2.3), in the second chapter of volume II, the author is portrayed in the present (the end of the Eighties), and the story becomes a meta-story. Hence, the text realises two possible worlds, one on the level of the story, the other on the level of the meta-story. Also, although those worlds are both possible worlds for the reader, within the text one actually represents the 'real' world.

It is very significant that, as a confirmation of Brown's interpretation, in the 'real' world of the story the author himself is drawn wearing a mouse mask, and so is everyone else.

If, on one hand, it partly reveals the animal-face metaphor, on the other hand this 'real' world offers other interesting elements that stimulate the reader's interpretation. The title of this chapter is "AUSCHWITZ (TIME FLIES)", where "time flies" is syntactically ambiguous. One possibility is that "time" is a noun and the subject of the verb "flies", in which case the title is a very common metaphorical expression. Indeed, the first few panels of the chapter show Art Spiegelman who, while at his drawing table, reflects upon some events in his parents' lives and puts them in a parallel comparison with the present times. The quick succession of dates and events, which are forty years apart, conveys the idea of the time that flies.

The second possibility is that "time" is an attribute of the noun "flies", in which case the expression finds a justification on the visual plane of the same page. The flies that buzz around the artist come from the past, from his own parents' past, from the dead bodies that were piled up in huge pits outside the concentration camps and which are now amassed on the floor of his studio. In this sense, they are the flies of time.

'Real' world (where the author is portrayed in the present)

Possible world of the meta-story



Time flies...



Figure 2.3: Art Spiegelman, *Maus*

Thanks to the collaboration of words and pictures, both syntactic renderings of the chapter title are explicated in the text. However, the one in which "time" is an attribute of "flies" seems to be preponderant. This interpretation is already indicated in the title page of the chapter by the presence of some flies drawn around the main picture. In fact, after reading the whole chapter, it becomes clearer that the flies that come from the corpses symbolise the constant and very uncomfortable thought of the horrific events his parents went through that keeps tormenting the present life of Art Spiegelman. It is very significant that the last panel of the chapter shows Art using an insecticide to kill the bugs that are "eating [him] alive".

The pile of corpses in the artist's studio is, again, foregrounded against the 'reality' of the context. Similarly, in the next page (Figure 2.4), the author is portrayed 'shrunk' to the size of a child. This happens in a situation in which he feels particularly helpless, namely when literary critics and film producers overwhelm him with questions and offers that he cannot handle. It is a very original way to portray the image of the pure artist who does not want to be questioned about his work or, worse, to adapt it into a commercial production.

Finally, the metaphors discussed so far occur on a micro level or, to use a linguistic equivalent, on a sentence level. However, metaphors may also exist on a macro level, in that the whole story can be interpreted as a metaphor, which Paul Werth defines as "extended metaphor" (Werth, 1987: 79-101). In *Maus* the story is, as the subtitle reads, "a survivor's tale". From a literal point of view, the survivor is quite obviously Vladek: it is he who survived the Holocaust. But this literal meaning could be considered the signifier for a new, metaphorical signified: the other survivor of *Maus* is Art Spiegelman himself, who goes through the experience of a very difficult relationship with his father: Art, unlike his mother Anja, survives Vladek.



Figure 2.4: Art Spiegelman, *Maus*

#### 2.4.1.4 Further considerations

It is very important to underline that, as in the case of the animal-face property, both the mass of corpses and the temporary transformation of Art Spiegelman into a child are exclusively rendered on the visual plane, with no references whatsoever on the verbal plane.

As I have discussed in the theory section, pictures, in comics, can simultaneously possess iconic and symbolic properties. On one hand, because of their iconic nature, pictures are generally perceived as portraying a concrete reality. As Trifonas observes, "The major criterion for the evaluation of form is *vraisemblance*, or a direct visual correspondence to reality, where the viewer's experience of naturalistic forms in the real world is necessarily the determinant for recognition" (Trifonas, 1998: 43).

That is precisely the reason why comics artists can turn the iconic nature of pictures to their advantage: they can use pictures to create possible worlds which are portrayed as 'real' and therefore convey their message more effectively. In fact, it should not be forgotten that the concrete reality represented by pictures is always a reality which has been created or, at least to some extent, manipulated, by the author, and never completely neutral and objective. Even with photographs, the author has to make certain choices, like angle, depth of field, focus etc., which inevitably affect the way the subject is portrayed and, consequently, the overall meaning of the image. From this point of view, comics artists have an enormous advantage, because the possibilities that they can exploit to create 'realities' are virtually endless.

On the other hand, the importance of the symbolic nature of comics drawings is perhaps more subtle. In fact, the stylisation of pictures that occurs in most comics is often regarded as an indicator of simplicity, which, in turn, is seen either as a quality, because it assures comprehensibility (for children for example), or as a

defect, since the very ease with which comics can be read is considered a mark of "low" literature or "sub" literature, and so on.

In *Maus* the drawings are very stylised but, as the analysis shows, the reading is not particularly easy, since it requires interpretative efforts. This consideration alone would be enough to prove that simplicity of drawing style does not necessarily result in better comprehensibility. But the issue merits more attention.

I will argue that not only does stylisation not mean easy reading, but also that between the two there is no causal link whatsoever. The association of stylised pictures with ease of comprehension is based on the common assumption that pictures are always iconic, i.e. that they signify by analogy. Consequently, the interpretation of any given picture is often aimed at discovering what the picture *is* rather than what it *means*. But, as I have discussed in the theory section, such an assumption has been proven unsustainable by Eco and other scholars, who have suggested that pictures always possess some symbolic properties. The degree of symbolicity is greater as pictures become more stylised. In turn, stylisation tends to emphasise certain elements (called "codes of recognition" by Eco), which to some extent affect recognition, in that the more a picture is stylised, the more it can be associated with abstract concepts rather than with concrete objects. A photograph of a particular cat, for example, will be associated with that cat only, but a stylised drawing which emphasises such elements as pointed ears and whiskers, will be associated with the abstract concept of 'cat'. The ease with which such codes of recognition are interpreted depends on convention and are often culture-specific. Besides, even assuming that, within a certain culture group, a given stylised picture is easily associated with a particular concept, the interpretation of what that concept *means* in the context where it occurs (e.g. a book) depends on variables which are completely foreign to its being more or less stylised. In *Maus*, for example, all the Jew characters have mouse faces, which are all virtually identical: the drawings are stylised

enough to convey the concept of 'mouse', but the interpretation of such concept within the story is far more complex than its mere visual recognition.

Thus, the fact that the faces of the characters are easily identified as mice, cats, pigs and so on can in no way be an indicator of comprehensibility. In this respect, another graphic novel, *Sands* by Tom Hart (1998), could be taken into consideration, where the drawings are extremely stylised (Figure 2.7), to the point of appearing almost childish, but the interpretation of the story itself, instead, is remarkably difficult. The total disregard for any pictorial detail or precision shown in *Sands* is interestingly similar to the reluctance with which modern novelists provide physical descriptions of their characters. In modern literature exterior details are generally not considered important, and the same goes for many comic books.

## 2.4.2 Adrian Tomine's short stories

### 2.4.2.1 *Background*

Adrian Tomine is a young comics artist who has come to be known internationally only very recently thanks to the small but very active Canadian publishing house Drawn & Quarterly. Rather than graphic novels, he is the author of comics short stories, which deal with moments in the lives of various characters, and are characterised by a high degree of introspection. Most of Tomine's stories, especially the more recent ones, have recurrent themes, like loneliness, difficult or broken relationships, and incommunicability.

### 2.4.2.2 *"Layover"*

As a short story written in the medium of comics, "Layover" distinguishes itself for the particular way in which words and pictures interact. Most notably, the verbal element, which, in comics, is normally for the most part included in speech or thought balloons, is almost entirely contained in the captions. This generates

an apparent greater disjunction between words and pictures, as the two are kept spatially separated within the panels.

Formally, this is what happens in many illustrated stories (although the spatial arrangement is usually different, in that the narrative unit is the page rather than the panel). Normally, in this type of stories words and pictures convey the same core meaning, even though, at the same time, each of the two codes may provide some extra information. For example, in the children's book *Good Morning Postman Pat* (Figure 2.5), each page contains a picture and some written text, and the meaning conveyed by the two virtually coincides. The redundancy of information provided by the visuals serves the purpose of helping children understand the story better, since their reading skills are still not developed enough. Also, as a consequence, in the pictures all the subjects and their actions are portrayed in the clearest possible way, so as to avoid any risks of ambiguity. The aim of aiding comprehension is even more apparent in books for younger children, like, for example, *Postman Pat's Garden*, where such simple actions as "Postman Pat waters the flowers" and "Postman Pat mows the grass" (Figure 2.6) are illustrated by extremely clear pictures. For an adult reader, the removal of the pictures would not undermine the comprehensibility of the story in any way.

In "Layover", on the other hand, the spatial disjunction between words and pictures warrants a potential different type of relationship between the verbal and the visual. Namely, Tomine seems to exploit the formal methods of the illustrated story, where words and pictures occupy different spaces, and, paradoxically, he does so in order to attain a higher degree of interdependence, which is quite the opposite of what happens in illustrated stories. The analysis that follows will seek to unravel the mechanisms of such interdependence.

Pat sets off on his delivery round, meeting lots of friends along the way. They all wave hello to Pat and Jess. "Good morning, everyone!" says Pat.

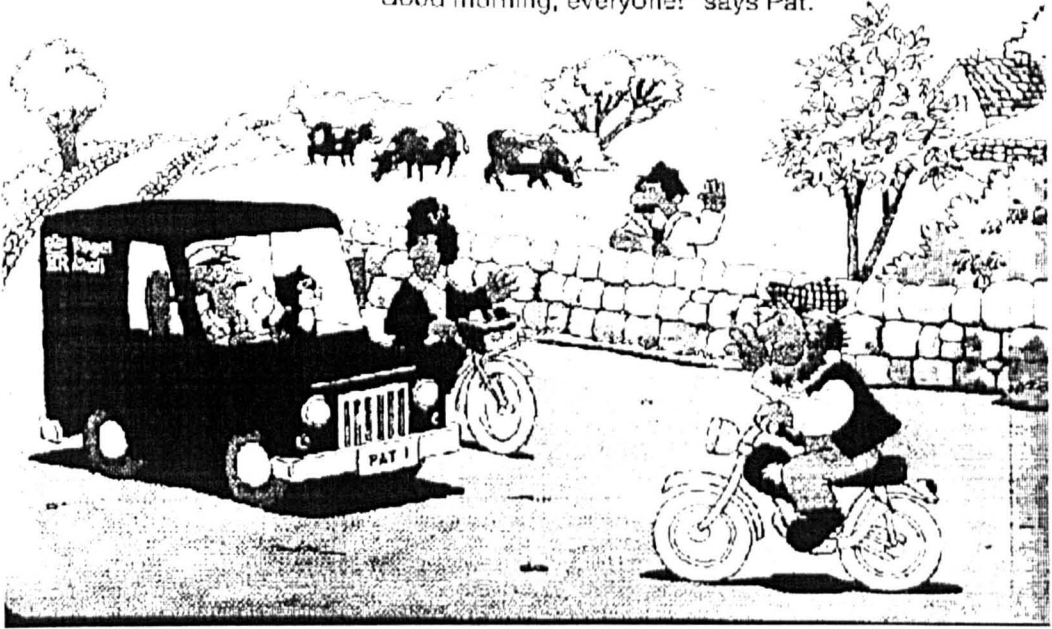
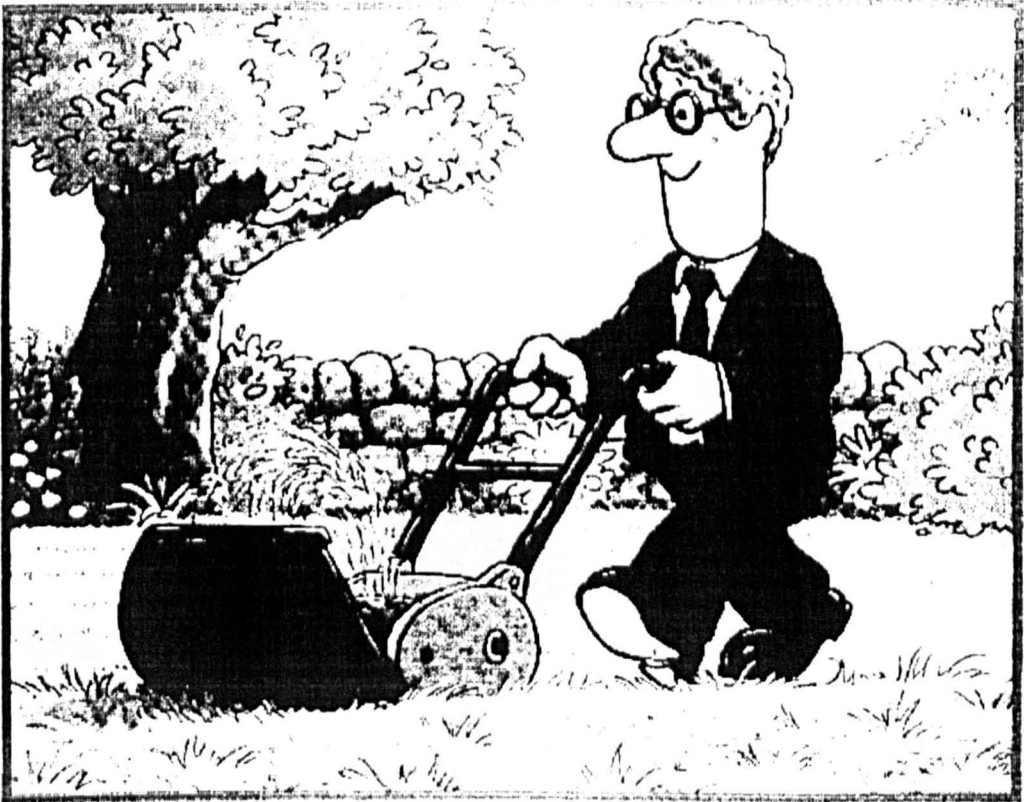


Figure 2.5



Postman Pat mows the grass.

Figure 2.6





Figure 2.7: Tom Hart, *The Sands*

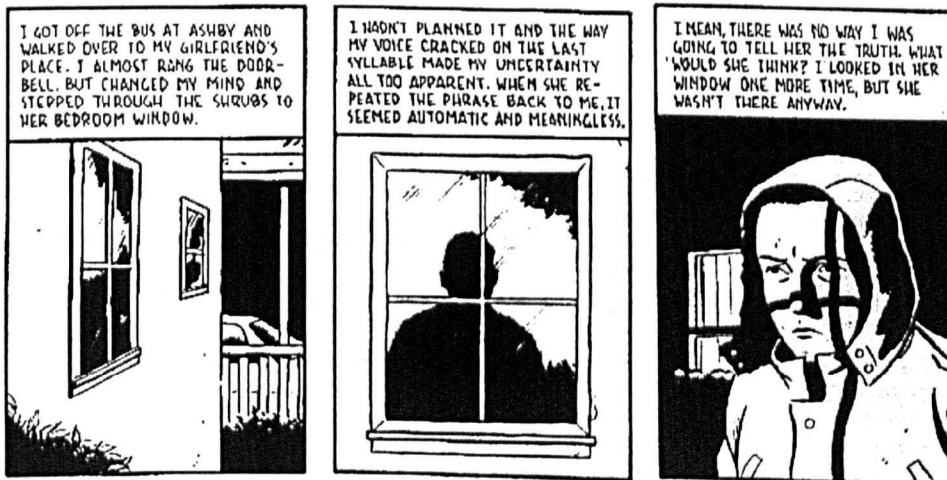


Figure 2.8: Adrian Tomine, "Layover"

As mentioned, "Layover" is a story with hardly any speech, and, apart from a few balloons at the beginning, the language is contained entirely in captions. Therefore, each panel holds a certain amount of text which is kept neatly separated from the pictures. On the surface, therefore, "Layover", as mentioned above, seems to mimic the same formal structure, whereby the pictures have the simple function of illustrating the story. Here too, if the pictures were completely removed, the story would still be comprehensible. A closer analysis, however, will show that the dynamics are profoundly different.

While, on one hand, an hypothetical removal of the pictures would not hamper the comprehensibility of the story, on the other hand, it is possible to demonstrate that the function of the pictures is not one of simple illustration. First of all, it is important to observe that there does not exist the same exact correspondence between what the words narrate and what is depicted in each panel. The verbal parts of the story are very descriptive and have the function of telling the reader what happens both outside and inside the protagonist's mind. The pictures, instead, show only particular aspects, or moments, of the narration, the significance of which is therefore left for the reader to interpret.

On a macro level, it could be said that the pictures of "Layover" set the mood of the whole story. A sense of sadness is conveyed by the panels which show the protagonist's expression, especially panels 6, 8, 14, 16, 25 and 28. Similarly, the fact that nearly all the panels portray only one character transmits a feeling of loneliness. But a more detailed analysis is needed.

The first basic question that an interpretation of any piece of narrative aims to answer is "what is it about?" At first sight "Layover" seems to be about someone who has missed a flight and wanders around the town in annoyance. Indeed, the narrative, as in all of Tomine's stories, is not particularly eventful and, yet, there undeniably are certain moments whose significance grants them a prominent role

within the story. One parameter that can be considered as an indicator of narrative importance is the space, measured in terms of both words and panels, dedicated to each one of these moments. The panelisation of the narrative employed in comics certainly facilitates such "measurements", since the amount of space and time allotted to the different scenes is graphically very defined and therefore more easily quantifiable. In the particular case of "Layover", it is possible to notice that there are scenes that last longer than others, namely when the protagonist is outside his own apartment, his girlfriend's flat, and his friend Paul's house:

outside his apartment:	3 panels and 126 words
outside his girlfriend's house:	5 + 2 panels and 176 + 80 words
outside his friend's house:	3 panels and 72 words

A total of 13 panels and 454 words represents more than one third of the whole story. Such a simple calculation makes one very suspicious of the first interpretative hypothesis: "Layover" *cannot* simply be about someone missing a flight and being upset about it. In fact, the panels that are directly concerned with the missed flight are only seven, and the number of words totals to 305, which is comparatively much less than the figures of the other scenes.

Apart from their length, there is a very recognisable pattern that occurs in all the "outside" scenes, namely the hesitance of the protagonist to enter any of those familiar places. Such reiterated hesitance is expressed quite clearly in the verbal part of the narrative and is also graphically shown by the pictures. However, apart from visualising the character's hesitance, the pictorial component also reinforces and highlights another pattern, which is referred to by the words without any particular emphasis: the windows. Windows are the only subject in three panels, and appear to have a certain significance in at least five other panels (Figure 2.8, page 83). From a rather voyeuristic perspective, windows

represent an access *into* a house without being physically *in* it. And this is precisely what the protagonist of "Layover" does: he does not want to enter his girlfriend's place or his friend's house, but, instead, tries to look inside through the window. What is even more unusual, is that the "victims" of his apparent voyeurism are not strangers, as is the case in another story in the same collection, but the people who are closest to him. So, those windows become symbols of his need for human contact but also of his inability to communicate with people, especially with those nearest to him, as is confirmed when he admits his inadequacy in expressing love for his girlfriend.

As already mentioned, rather than tangible events or actions, Tomine's stories are more concerned with the characters' states of mind, and "Layover" is no exception.

#### 2.4.2.3 "Happy Anniversary"

In "Happy Anniversary" the verbal text, which is more "canonically" contained in dialogue balloons, tells a fairly simple story of a young couple celebrating their anniversary:

"Hey, honey!"

"Hi there. Happy anniversary. These are for you."

"Eeps! We said no presents! I didn't..."

"Don't worry about it! Oh... this goes with it."

"Tsk! C'mon in."

*Jeannette, On the occasion of our third year together ... looking forward to many more.*

*I love you!*

"Aw... Thanks, hon. I love it when you give me drawings!"

"Eh... It's nothing big."

"But now I feel bad that I didn't get you anything."

"Hey... Forget it!"

"Well, have a sit, mister. Dinner's just about ready."

"Hey, you sure you don't wanna go out to a fancy restaurant or something? It is a special occasion and all..."

"Yes, I'm sure. I've made a very nice meal for us, okay?"

"Really... I'm stuffed. That was absolutely delicious!"

"Did everything taste okay to you?"

"It beat any ol' restaurant in town."

"Well, the chicken was a little over-cooked..."

"Nah... It was perfect. Just the way I like it."

"Ha-ha... You're just easy to please."

"Hon, can I ask you something?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Are you happy?"

"What do you mean about that?"

"I don't know... About me. With the relationship."

"Why? I mean, what's the matter?"

"I don't know. I was just wondering."

"But *why*? What the *fuck* are you saying? If you're trying to say you wanna... break up, or..."

"I don't know what I'm trying to say. Is that what *you* want?"

"No... Not at all... Why would I want that? I love you... C'mon... Let's not wreck our anniversary."

"Okay, baby. I'm sorry."

"You know, I think a lot of times you don't say what's on your mind. You keep a lot inside. I just wanted to know. I mean, sometimes people stay together out of habit... or indifference... both of them afraid to say anything. Sometimes I just think maybe..."

"Listen... You're about the most important thing in my life right now. I guess I should show it more. I don't know what I'd do if we ever... I'm sorry I got mad tonight, but you scared me."

"It's okay, I know."

What can be evinced from the verbal text is: in a relationship where everything is seemingly fine, the girl wonders whether the bliss is actual or only apparent, that is, whether her boyfriend is hiding unspoken discontent within himself; the boyfriend, on his part, reassures her that there are no problems. The girl's final statements, "It's okay, I know", is not necessarily a happy ending. It may be interpreted as a way to close the conversation without causing any further trauma and to keep pretending that everything is really fine. However, such an interpretation is, and can only be, purely intuitive, since it is not based on any specific supportive evidence within the text, but only, perhaps, on world knowledge external to the text.

Again, the words alone "do not tell the whole story". The visual text provides the reader with significant further elements for interpretation. It is important, however,

to stress the fact that such indications are not at all explicit and an interpretative effort is always required from the reader. Indeed, the presence of *some* indications, implicit as they may be, to support a particular interpretation, is essential for the interpretation itself to be acceptable.

The visual text contains certain elements that could be considered as indications for the fact that the expression "It's okay, I know" may have simply a discursual function of ending the conversation on a mitigating tone, and that the girl does not actually use it in its literal sense. As in "Layover", one of the purposes of the visuals is to set the general atmosphere or mood of the story. In "Happy anniversary" there can be perceived a distinct sensation of tidiness, uniformity and straightforwardness. The title itself is placed on a background neatly divided in two sections, one white one black; the pictures contain an abnormally great quantity of straight lines (Figure 2.9), which are drawn on walls, clothes and furniture; the squares on the boyfriend's shirt, especially, look unnaturally regular.

The sensation of absolute regularity is actually reinforced in the verbal text by the presence of such lexical items like "a nice meal", "absolutely delicious", "it was perfect" etc., and also by the highly conventional card that the boyfriend gives the girl. Besides, there are numerous expressions aimed at reassuring, like "Don't worry about it", "Hey, forget it" and "Yes, I'm sure". It is therefore significant that when this sense of certainty is undermined by the girl's question "Are you happy?", the boyfriend feels threatened and reacts in a very irritated way.

From this perspective, then, the girl's final statement of reassurance sounds more like a way to restore the apparent certainty which was temporarily lost. Such an interpretation is supported by the last speechless panels, which focus on the girl's sad facial expression. Again, this is an implicit indicator: talking about television (but the same applies to comics), John Fiske observes that



Figure 2.9: Adrian Tomine, "Happy Anniversary"



Figure 2.10: Adrian Tomine, "Happy Anniversary"



The reader of a novel is often told in great detail of the interior feelings and motivations of a character. The viewer of television has to infer all of these from a raised eyebrow, a downturn at the corner of the mouth, or the inflection of the voice as it speaks the cliché.

(Fiske, 1989: 122)

A further very significant visual clue occurs at the very end of the story, when the girl looks outside the room's window. To do that, she needs to slightly open the blinds, which represent a graphical reiteration of the "straight-lined-ness" that permeates the whole story. Hence, the straight lines themselves could be interpreted metaphorically as a symbol of the artificial surety of the life that the two partners lead. By looking out of the window, the girl unstraightens a few of those lines and tries to get a gaze of what a different life might be like outside the house and, by extension, outside their life (Figure 2.10).

## **2.5 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have dealt with the core issue of word/picture relationship, which, in comics, is characterised by two main aspects:

- (1) the interpretation is never based on one code individually, but on a true interaction between words and pictures;
- (2) the two codes have some semiotic properties in common, so much so that I have suggested using a unifying term, *comics language*.

Both aspects manifest themselves in the analysis of comics texts, although the second needs a theoretical basis that supports it. In this respect, I have adopted a semiotic perspective and, in particular, I have taken the stance of such scholars as Umberto Eco, Guy Cook and John Fiske, according to whom no sign can be defined as entirely iconic and, as a result, all icons are to varying degrees, symbolic as well. Therefore, throughout my theoretical discussion, I have used a symbol/icon scale along which different forms of expressions

(written, drawn, painted or photographed) can be placed according to their semiotic properties. I have thus shown that in comics words and pictures share some "space" on the scale, which, in more practical terms, means that

- apart from their verbal semantic value, the meaning of words can also be derived from their visual (i.e. iconic) properties;
- apart from their visual meaning, the interpretation of pictures can also be based on their symbolic (i.e. language-like) properties.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Comics texts:**

#### **The issue of relatedness in visual texts**

All signifying practices can engender text: the practice of painting pictures, musical practice, filmic practice, etc.

(Eco, 1981: 41)

### **3.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter provided an illustration of the principal semiotic characteristic of the medium of comics, namely the relationship between the visual and the verbal. It was suggested that such a relationship constitutes a language 'beyond' the sense that is commonly attached to the term 'language'. The postulate of what can be called 'visual language' entails the existence of 'visual texts'.

Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), whose study on the grammar of visual design I have already mentioned, have developed a framework whereby existing notions of grammar can be applied to the analysis of images, and thus demonstrated that syntactic and semantic rules apply to images too. They have been the first to convincingly move the imaginary boundaries of the comparison between verbal language and images from the lexis plane to the sentence plane. However, it is undeniable that language productions normally occur in texts rather than in isolated sentences, so those boundaries need to be moved even further, from the level of the sentence to that of the text.

Given that comics are one of the main media that employ visual texts, the present chapter offers some reflections on the ways in which the various panels

that compose a comics text are related to one another so as to form, and be perceived as, a unified whole.

## 3.2 Theory

The issue of text-connectivity has been primarily studied in text-linguistics, and it is therefore mainly in that field that the theoretical underpinnings for this chapter are grounded. Besides, I am convinced that the application of linguistic analytical tools to comics can produce results which reflect back to the study of verbal texts and, ultimately, to the study of texts in general.

The two main points that will be put forward are that

- 1) within the general hypothesis of the present work, I aim to show in this chapter that models of text-connectivity (commonly referred to as cohesion and/or coherence) do not necessarily apply to verbal texts only, as it is possible to demonstrate that they have validity for visual texts too;
- 2) the way in which text units (sentences or panels) are related to one another is determined not only on the basis of textual properties but also, and concurrently, on the basis of the reader's perception.

### 3.2.1 Preliminary considerations

#### 3.2.1.1 *Sentence and panel: a parallel*

The idea itself of text unity implies the corollary idea that texts can be broken down into identifiable smaller units. In the light of this obvious but important consideration, I propose a parallel between sentence (in verbal texts) and panel (in comics texts). Since this study is carried out from a linguistic perspective, this poses important structural and semantic problems. Obvious questions could be raised, regarding, for example, the internal syntactic organization of a comics

panel, or the way the reader understands the meaning of drawings.

Essentially, I see the parallel between sentence and panel in terms of text organisation: sentences and panels represent the most identifiable units into which verbal texts and comics texts are respectively arranged. First of all, an obvious element of comparison between sentence and panel is of a graphical nature, in that in an extremely simple definition, the sentence could be regarded as a portion of text delimited by two full stops, whose function is then similar to that of panel borders in comics: they represent a graphical boundary for the unit. Although there exist other linguistic units such as the phrase and the clause, neither of them is as easily identifiable as the sentence.

Besides, it is after all significant that the most frequently quoted work on text connectivity, *Cohesion in English* (Halliday and Hasan, 1976), makes it clear, from the very beginning, that it regards the sentence as the basic text unit:

If a speaker of English hears or reads a passage of the language which is more than a *sentence* in length, he can normally decide without difficulty whether it forms a unified whole or is just a collection of *sentences*.

(Halliday and Hasan, 1976: 1; my italics)

Thus, the statement that "a text is formed out of a sequence of sentences" (Cha, 1985: 6) can be accompanied by a similar statement that "a comics text is formed out of a sequence of panels", and this clarifies the analogous functions that sentences and panels have as text-forming units.

The reasons why the sentence is the linguistic element closest to the panel could be summarised in the following table:

linguistic element	in favour	against
paragraph	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• it is a graphical unit easily identified and isolated;</li> <li>• it can contain variable amounts of information.</li> </ul>	unlike the panel, it is not a necessary component.
sentence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• it is an easily identified and isolated unit (thanks to punctuation);</li> <li>• it can contain variable amounts of information.</li> </ul>	
clause	it is a formal element that can be isolated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• unlike the panel, the information is limited to one subject and one process;</li> <li>• it is not as easily recognisable as the panel.</li> </ul>
phrase	it is a formal element that can be isolated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the amount of information never equates with that of a panel;</li> <li>• it is not as easily recognisable as the panel.</li> </ul>

Table 3.1

### 3.2.1.2 Cohesion, coherence and relatedness

As regards verbal language, the domain of text has been the main interest of text-linguistics. More specifically, this branch of linguistics has been concerned with one fundamental question: what is it that makes a collection of sentences a text? Accordingly, a great many of this type of studies have sought to find criteria for 'textness' (see, especially, Halliday and Hasan, 1976 and 1985; van Dijk, 1977; de Beaugrande and Dressler, 1981; Lyons, 1981; Cha, 1985; Hoey, 1991; Martin, 1992, Sinclair, 1993).

The main notion that has been developed in these studies is that of *cohesion*, which has been regarded as the main property that a string of sentences should possess in order to be considered a text. As Rosamund Moon very succinctly puts it: "Cohesion makes texts into texts" (Moon, 1998: 278). Essentially, cohesion has been described as a set of lexico-grammatical features which tie sentences together. From this perspective, therefore, the way in which the various sentences are bound together has been seen as a property of the text itself.

If a passage of English containing more than one sentence is perceived as a text, there will be certain linguistic features present in that passage which can be identified as contributing to its total unity and giving it texture.

(Halliday and Hasan, 1976: 2)

While this has been the predominant view, other scholars have proposed different ideas. Most notably, Brown and Yule (1983) rejected the idea that the theoretical concept of *text* should meet precise criteria of "textness". In particular, they argued that cohesion is not at all a necessary property of texts and stressed the importance of the *reader's perception* of text as such:

We do not see an advantage in trying to determine constitutive formal features which a text must possess to qualify as a 'text'. Texts are what hearers and readers treat as texts.

(Brown and Yule, 1983: 199)

Despite it being so radically different from the notion of cohesion, the validity of this idea has been recognised in virtually all studies which have dealt with text connectivity, and has been given the general name of *coherence*. However, text-linguistics literature does not offer consistent definitions of coherence and, although it is generally accepted that

- (a) cohesion and coherence are not the same thing, and
- (b) cohesion is not a sufficient condition for a text to be coherent (see for example Halliday and Hasan, 1976, 1985; de Beaugrande and Dressler, 1981; Lyons, 1981; Brown and Yule, 1983; Martin, 1992),

the notion of coherence has been given comparatively much less emphasis and a kind of ineffable status. As Michael Hoey summarises,

...cohesion is a property of the text, and ... coherence is a facet of the reader's evaluation of a text. In other words, cohesion is objective, capable in principle of automatic recognition, while coherence is subjective and judgements concerning it may vary from reader to reader....

(Hoey, 1991: 12).

Thus, according to this distinction, cohesion is constituted by a set of lexico-

grammatical *textual* properties, whereas coherence is based on *cognitive* criteria. In my view, the textual and the cognitive are interacting forces which contribute to the realisation of the same phenomenon, which I prefer to call *relatedness*. The choice of such a term derives from the consideration that, as far as the unity of text is concerned, the fundamental question that the reader has to answer at each point in the text is: how does this passage *relate* to the rest of the text? In order to find an answer to this question he or she will have to look both in the text and in their mind.

To me the interdependent nature of the cooperation between textual markers and reader's input is of fundamental importance: a text is not a text by itself (i.e. without the reader's intervention) while, at the same time, its cognitive perception is necessarily based on the text as a physical entity.

Consequently, it is my belief that the textual and the cognitive forces that bind texts together cannot be considered in isolation *in any case*, that is neither in assertions suggesting the self-sufficiency of one or the other, nor in claims aimed at proving the insufficient role played by one or the other for the realisation of textness. Brown and Yule, for example, report the following passage in order to demonstrate that cohesive markers alone are not enough to guarantee the perception of a text as a unified whole:

I bought a Ford car. A car in which President Wilson rode down the Champs Elysées was black. Black English has been widely discussed. The discussion between the presidents ended last week. A week has seven days. Every day I feed my cat. Cats have four legs. The cat is on the mat. Mat has three letters.  
(1983: 197)

The two linguists define this collection of sentences as a "convincing example of the inadequacy of cohesive ties across sentences as a basis for guaranteeing 'textness'" (197). But my contention is that although the above sequence *may* be incoherent, no definite conclusions can be drawn based on the text's own



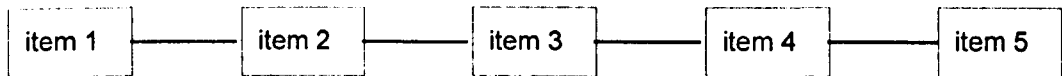
evidence. If it were possible to assert with certainty that the above passage does not constitute a text, such certainty would contradict the very argument that it aims to prove, i.e. that textual, objective, markers alone are not sufficient to guarantee textness.

Besides, the choice of the above passage as an exemplary incoherent text is marred by two important flaws: (1) the passage is an invented one; (2) there is no indication that it may be part of a larger text. As far as the first point is concerned, I believe that between text and analysis, the former should always come first. In other words, I do not think it is methodologically correct to develop a theoretical model first and construct texts to suit that model later. I therefore disagree that any conveniently made-up example can be convincingly used to prove an assertion. On the contrary, the deliberate choice of *not* analysing a real text has the effect of making one doubt the validity and the applicability of the theory that is being elaborated. As for the second point, before providing conclusive assertions on the coherence of a given sequence of sentences, I think it is necessary to see whether that sequence forms a complete text or it has been extrapolated from a larger text. In the second hypothesis, even if the sequence seems to be incoherent in itself, its various components may well cohere with other parts of the total text.

This last observation introduces another point that I wish to raise, namely that many text-linguistics studies insist on the fact that cohesion is a phenomenon whereby one sentence is connected to its immediate predecessor or, in the case of cataphora, to its immediate successor. This idea that sentences are connected linearly to those in their near neighbourhood is expressed in a particular explicit way in, for example, Halliday and Hasan (1976), Lyons (1981) and Sinclair (1993). The concept of *cohesive chain*, developed by Hasan in Halliday and Hasan (1985: 83-96), represents a move further, in that it considers connections across the whole length of a text. However, in cohesive chains "distant"

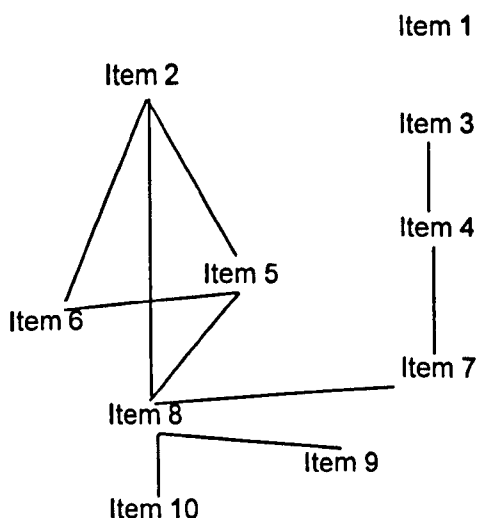
connections are only indirect ones, since they obtain only via a series of direct connections with neighbouring items.

This is best shown in diagrammatical form:



The linear nature of cohesive chains presupposes that, taking the above diagram as reference, direct connections occur only between subsequent items, i.e. between items 1 and 2, 2 and 3, 3 and 4, 4 and 5, while the connection between items 5 and 1, for example, is only indirect. This means that although it takes into account connections that involve more than two items, the concept of cohesive chain still entails a prominent role of those connections that occur between immediate neighbours.

Another important step forward is represented by the model developed by Michael Hoey (1991), who sees the connections between different parts of a text as a network rather than as a set of chains. A diagrammatical representation of an example of what can be defined as *connection network* in Hoey's model looks like the one below:



(adapted from Hoey, 1991: 32)

As the diagram shows, Hoey's model does not have the shape of a linear path, but different items are directly connected with others regardless of the distance that exists between them. At the same time, the number of connections between items is variable, so that in the diagram above item 8 is connected to five other items, while item 1 is not connected with any.

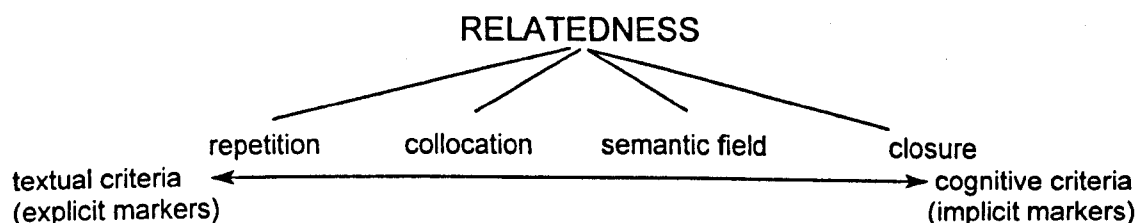
### 3.2.2 Towards a model for relatedness

Before attempting an analysis focussed on relatedness, it is necessary to devise a theoretical framework that warrants the analysis systematicity and makes it capable of being replicable. This will not be done *ex novo*, but a framework will be developed based on notions pertaining to various existing models.

Broadly speaking, the framework that I aim to devise is based on textual criteria (which I will call *explicit markers of relatedness*) as well as on cognitive ones (which I will call *implicit markers of relatedness*), the two constituting the polar ends of a continuum, along which four broad 'constituents of relatedness' are located:

- REPETITION
- COLLOCATION
- SEMANTIC FIELD
- CLOSURE

which, graphically, can be represent as



In the sub-sections that follow, I will review some of the main existing models of text-connectivity in order to see how the ideas therein developed can be used and/or adapted for the framework above outlined.

### 3.2.2.1 *Halliday and Hasan's model*

One of the most authoritative and influential treatises on cohesion is that developed by M.A.K. Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan in *Cohesion in English* (1976). The quote in section 3.2.1.2 (page 98) makes it very clear that cohesion is seen entirely as a set of properties of the text, and is defined in the following terms:

Cohesion occurs where the INTERPRETATION of some element in the discourse is dependent on that of another. The one PRESUPPOSES the other, in the sense that it cannot be effectively decoded except by recourse to it. When this happens, a relation of cohesion is set up, and the two elements, the presupposing and the presupposed, are thereby at least potentially integrated into a text.

(4)

The above statement, which is the central idea on which the whole of their model is based, presupposes that cohesion is not only based on textual properties, but is also primarily a matter of grammar, since the dependency of one element on another is realised precisely through grammar. Indeed, although Halliday and Hasan claim that cohesion can be of two types, grammatical and lexical, it is not surprising that in *Cohesion in English* 240 pages are dedicated to grammatical cohesion, but only 20 to lexical cohesion.

Halliday and Hasan repeatedly insist on the fact that they consider cohesion a matter of meaning relations: "The concept of cohesion is a semantic one; it refers to relations of meaning that exist within the text, and that define it as a text" (4). Yet, such an assertion does not seem to be clearly supported in the actual elaboration of their theory. In all the subtypes of grammatical cohesion, meaning does not seem to be taken into account very much. They review aspects of English grammar, like pronominalisation, ellipsis and substitution which all

involve an economical use of the language: essentially, such devices allow the language user not to repeat words and/or clauses so as to avoid redundancy. If it is true that in such cases certain elements can only be interpreted in relation to others, these relations are not semantic in nature.

A rather harsh criticism of the ideas proposed in *Cohesion in English* comes from an essay by Morgan and Sellner (1980). They argue that cohesion is a matter of content, (179), and reject the possibility that cohesion could in any way be based on linguistic properties of the text: "As far as we can see, there is no evidence for cohesion as a linguistic property, other than as an epiphenomenon of coherence of content" (181). Therefore they claim that Halliday and Hasan are guilty of finding the source of coherence in what is instead a consequence of it (179).

I do agree with Morgan and Sellner when they stress the importance of content for cohesion, but I disagree with their presupposition that content has nothing to do with language. Although they indicate it as the basis of cohesion, they do not in fact provide any positive definition of "content", but only a negative one, i.e. content is *not* a linguistic property of a text.

However, even if in brief, Halliday and Hasan do discuss lexical cohesion, which, as the term suggests, is based on relations involving vocabulary items, and therefore on content. Of this type, they distinguish two subtypes, *reiteration* and *collocation*. Reiteration involves the repetition, within the text, of such lexical items as (a) the same words, (b) synonyms or near-synonyms, (c) superordinates and (d) general words<sup>6</sup>. Collocation has to do with the presence of lexical items that regularly co-occur in language use. In the way that Halliday and Hasan illustrate it, however, collocation involves various types of word pairs, like

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6. Halliday and Hasan define the class of *general noun* as "a small set of nouns having generalised reference within the major noun classes, those such as 'human noun', 'place noun', 'fact noun' and the like" (Halliday and Hasan 1976: 274).

opposites, complementaries, antonyms, converses, hyponyms and others which do not fall into any precise category. In fact, the concept of collocation is not defined in any precise manner, but simply as involving "all lexical cohesion that is not covered by what we have called 'reiteration'" (Halliday and Hasan, 1976: 287). Put in these terms, there does not seem to be a great deal of difference between the notions of reiteration and collocation, as "There is always the possibility of cohesion between any pair of lexical items which are in some way associated with each other in the language" (285).

I agree entirely with this very last statement, and I believe that, despite the brevity with which they treat it, the most useful part of Halliday and Hasan's model is indeed the concept of lexical cohesion. However, I feel the necessity to make an important observation. Lexical cohesion seems to me not to respond to the definition of cohesion cited above, according to which a cohesive relation occurs when the interpretation of one item depends on that of another. Lexical items have their own meanings, which exist, and can be interpreted, *independently* from other items. Halliday and Hasan, however, insist on the notion of reference even in the discussion of lexical cohesion, so that a lexical cohesive relation is established when one lexical item "refers back" (278) to – and therefore depends on – another lexical item. It is exactly this idea of reference that I disagree with. I do not think that any part of a text can "refer back" (or forward, in the case of cataphora) to a previous (or subsequent) part, except in cases of explicit textual deixis (e.g. *above, in Chapter X, in the following section, etc.*). Rather, what two or more parts of a text more often do is to refer to the same thing, person, event, phenomenon etc. or to two or more correlated ones.

Seen from this perspective, the categories of cohesion which Halliday and Hasan have put together under the label of "grammatical cohesion", *reference*,

*substitution* and *ellipsis*<sup>7</sup>, can be considered to be special cases of co-reference in which one of the items involved realises its reference through devices of grammar rather than through lexis.

One first conclusion that can be drawn from the above discussion of Halliday and Hasan's models is that if relatedness is a matter of meaning relations, and therefore of content, it follows, as a consequence, that

- 1) it must be primarily based on lexis, and
- 2) only in special cases does it rely, partly, on grammar.

### 3.2.2.2 *Hasan's revised model*

Given that it has been an extremely influential work, *Cohesion in English* has not been free from criticism and revisions, and one of the linguists who has revised that model is Ruqaiya Hasan herself. In Halliday and Hasan (1985) she addresses some of the issues discussed in the previous section. The modification to the previous framework can be summarised on the following two main points:

- lexical cohesion is given more space and importance;
- cohesive relations are considered across the whole length of texts.

Of course many concepts illustrated in *Cohesion in English* are reiterated in this more recent work, one of the most important being the definition of cohesive device, which, again, is seen as being established when the interpretation of one item depends on that of another (75). However, Hasan has abandoned the idea that this happens when the second item "refers back" to the first and, in its place,

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7. The category of *conjunction*, which Halliday and Hasan also include under "grammatical cohesion" is a case apart, in that it involves the explicit markers of cohesion that a language provides, and therefore represents the only case in which the relatedness between two or more parts of a text can be considered to be an objective fact *a priori*.

she proposes such notions as *co-referentiality*, *co-classification*, and *co-extension* (73-81), which imply that *both* items refer to the same or correlated thing. While the first two categories are described as being based on the same grammar relations taken into consideration in *Cohesion in English*, i.e. reference, substitution and ellipsis, the third one is based on lexical relations and, for some aspects, represents a significant element of innovation compared to the earlier model.

First of all, Hasan states explicitly that when between two or more items there exists a cohesive relation based on lexis, "neither of the [items] is implicit; we do not need to refer to anything else in order to interpret [them]" (79-80). This statement is already of remarkable importance, because, essentially, it contradicts the core concept of cohesive device, i.e. the dependency of one element on another. What this means is that, effectively, even more than in *Cohesion in English*, lexical cohesion is set quite apart from grammatical cohesion (where the dependency does exist). In fact, while in their earlier work Halliday and Hasan claimed that between grammatical and lexical cohesion there is no clear-cut boundary (Halliday and Hasan, 1976: 6 and 279), here Hasan gives no indication that this might be the case. Hasan stresses that "In a typical text, grammatical and lexical cohesion move hand in hand, the one supporting the other" (Halliday and Hasan, 1985: 83), but this does not eliminate the fact that, in the terms in which she describes them, grammatical and lexical cohesion are phenomena profoundly different from each other. This gives rise to a conceptual discrepancy that undermines the validity of grammatical and lexical cohesion being two aspects of the same phenomenon.

My position is based on the presupposition that the dependency of the interpretation of one item on the interpretation of another does *not* constitute a cohesive device. This is simply a particular linguistic phenomenon that occurs when certain categories of words or clauses are used *instead of* previous ones;



pronouns, ellipses and substitutions are precisely typical instances of such categories. I do not believe that their presence contributes in any way to the determination of the relatedness between different parts of a text. I postulate that what I call *explicit relatedness* between two or more parts of a text is marked by what they have in common in terms of content, and therefore it relies on content words, rather than functional words.

That is the reason why I think that the most useful part of Hasan's revised model is precisely the one in which she discusses lexical cohesion. She divides lexical cohesion into five subtypes: *synonymy*, *antonymy*, *hyponymy*, *meronymy*<sup>8</sup> and *repetition* of the same lexical item (Halliday and Hasan, 1985: 80-1). One of the noticeable differences from *Cohesion in English* is the fact that the concept of collocation has been dropped completely, since the types of cohesive relations that had been grouped together under the label of collocation are here covered by the categories above, which define what Hasan calls "general field of meaning".

The role of collocation for the notion of relatedness will be discussed in section 3.2.2.5 below, but for the moment suffice it to note that a great many relations are in fact left out from the five categories of lexical cohesion indicated by Hasan. Just to give an example, "snow" and "winter" would not be considered as forming a cohesive relation of any kind, since the two words are not synonyms, antonyms, hyponyms, meronyms, or, even less, the same lexical item.

One of the most important innovations that Hasan has introduced is the concept of *cohesive chain*, which permits the analysis of cohesive relations across the whole length of texts rather than only in isolated pairs of sentences. This is

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8. *Meronymy* is a term coined by Hasan herself to indicate "a part-whole relation as in the case of *tree*, *limb* and *root*, where *limb* and *root* are co-meronyms, naming parts of the superordinate *tree*" (Halliday and Hasan, 1985: 81).

because, as the name implies, cohesive chains take into consideration not just two items but all those, within the text, that enter into the same cohesive relation. Hasan distinguishes two kinds of cohesive chains: *identity chains* and *similarity chains*, the former being composed of items which co-refer "to the same thing, event, or whatever" the second of "items which refer to non-identical members of the same class of things, events, etc., or to members of non-identical but related classes of things, events, etc." (84).

The notion of cohesive chain also forms the basis for Hasan's formulation of the concept of coherence, which can be outlined as follows:

- 1) the tokens that are part of the various cohesive chains of a text are called *relevant*, and those that fall outside *peripheral*;
- 2) within the same text, cohesive chains interact with each other given the condition that "at least two members of one chain should stand in the same relation to two members of another chain" (91);
- 3) the tokens that are part of chain interactions are called *central* and those that do not *non-central*;
- 4) given the above definitions, coherence is determined by the following three factors:
  - a) the proportion of relevant tokens to peripheral ones;
  - b) the proportion of central tokens to non-central ones;
  - c) the number of breaks in the set of interacting chains (91-4).

Without going into detail, what I think is important about the above definition of coherence is the introduction of two significant ideas:

- the first, that items belonging to one chain can form interactions with items belonging to other chains; and
- the second, that some items can be identified as more relevant/central than others.

In section 3.2.1.2 (page 101) of this chapter I mentioned the fact that cohesive

chains relate items one after the other, in sequences, and do not allow direct connections between "distant" members. The concept of chain interaction partly solves that problem, by considering connections between members of different chains. However, Hasan makes it clear that such relations are primarily based on grammar (91) and, therefore, not on content. For this reason, although I find it conceptually useful, I will not adopt the notion of chain interaction as such, since I have claimed that relatedness is a matter of content.

The idea of the existence of relevant and peripheral items is also very useful, because, at least intuitively, the concepts of relevance and relatedness are very similar. I said "intuitively" because *relevance* belongs to that class of terms that are not only used in academia with different senses, but are also common in everyday language, and therefore their meaning can be very vague if not defined precisely.

In the subsections that follow I will seek to go more into the details of the concepts of repetition, collocation, semantic field and closure, and of the way they contribute to relatedness.

### 3.2.2.3 *Repetition in Hoey's model*

Michael Hoey (1991) sees cohesion as obtaining primarily through repetition, which, in my framework, is considered an explicit marker of relatedness. Such explicitness, however, depends very much on what repetition is understood to involve. In Halliday and Hasan (1976 and 1985), for example, repetition is seen as involving the same lexical item; in this sense, it encompasses only a very limited range of cases. Hoey, on the other hand, expands the concept of repetition to include also the categories that Halliday and Hasan have grouped under grammatical cohesion, such as reference, substitution and ellipsis (Hoey, 1991: 6)

It is this 'expanded' view of repetition that I subscribe to. Indeed, it can be shown that pronominalisation, substitution and ellipsis are all devices that many languages offer in order to avoid repetitions of the same lexical items while keeping the repetition of content intact. So, for example, given the sentences

Mary loves Mark.  
Ann loves Mark too.

the English language allows one not to use some or all of the repeated lexical items in the second sentence, so that possible alternatives are

(a) Mary loves Mark.  
Ann loves him too.

where *Mark* has been replaced by the pronoun *him* (reference); or

(b) Mary loves Mark.  
Ann does too.

where *loves Mark* has been replaced by the auxiliary *does* (substitution); or even

(c) Mary loves Mark.  
Ann too.

where *loves Mark* has been replaced by nothing (ellipsis).

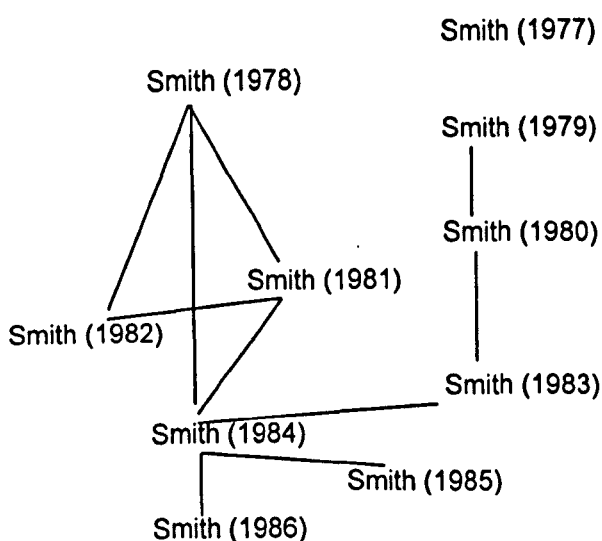
It can be noted that in (a), (b) and (c) the avoidance of repeated lexical items is essentially a matter of form, of style, while in terms of content they all convey the same amount of repetition as the initial pair of sentences.

Hoey's theoretical framework is based on the following two main tenets:

- 1) the sentences that constitute a text are "interrelated but separate packages of information" (Hoey, 1991: 31); and
- 2) the relations between these packages of information is primarily a matter of lexical repetition.

These two postulates allow Hoey to suggest that the organisation of sentences within the text may be metaphorically comparable to the set of works produced by an academic writer. In other words, the connections between the sentences of a text are compared to those which exist between the works that compose an author's *oeuvre*. As it is normal for any academic work to include citations, quotes and/or to direct the reader to one or more earlier works by the same author, so it is for sentences to include pieces of information taken from earlier sentences from the same text. This means that the works of an author's *oeuvre* will share information in much the same way as do the sentences of a text.

This is a very useful comparison, since it allows the perception of a text as a *network* rather than as a linear string of units. At the same time, the idea of sequence is preserved by the fact that, as in an author's *oeuvre*, the sentences that compose a text come one after the other, and this affects the types of connections that can link the various sentences together. To clarify this last point, it is best to use Hoey's diagrammatical representation of an imaginary Jane Smith's *oeuvre*:



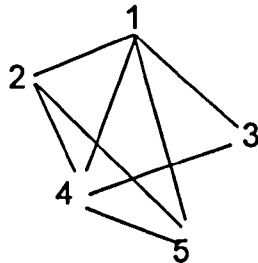
(Hoey, 1991: 32)

The chronological order means that any given work can be linked to other works via two types of connections: (a) it can refer to earlier works and/or (b) it can be referred to by later works. Hoey indicates these two types of connections by assigning to each work a two-member co-ordinate, where the first figure represents type (a) and the second type (b). So, for instance, Smith (1978) will have the co-ordinates (0,3), and Smith (1984) the co-ordinates (3,2). It follows that those works that only have connections of the second type can be considered as starting a new topic, whereas those that only have connections of the first type close a topic. Finally, the total number of connections that a work has indicates its *centrality*, or *marginality*, to the *oeuvre*.

To illustrate the *oeuvre* metaphor and its application to texts, it may be useful to consider a short example. Although Hoey himself does provide an example, I prefer to use a different one, in the conviction that the same concept can be shown to apply to virtually any text. The following passage is an extract from the first chapter of Hoey's *Patterns of Lexis in Texts* itself:

1. This **book** attempts to describe a new system of **analysis** based on the **study** of **cohesion**, particularly lexical **cohesion**.
2. What distinguishes **it** from previous **studies** of **cohesion** is that the attention is not primarily on itemizing **cohesive** features but on observing how they combine to organize **texts**.
3. The **analysis** allows us to say some significant things about the way we store and process language that is of some relevance to language teachers and applied linguists, as well as to theoretical and descriptive linguists.
4. Out of the **analysis** is developed a methodology for the production of readable abridgements of **text** that is capable of some degree of automation.
5. In short, I have tried to offer in this **book** fresh insight into **text**, and that, I hope, will be found sufficient reason for reading it.

Solely based on repetition patterns, a graphical representation of the relations that exists between the five sentences above is the following:



The whole of Hoey's model of text analysis can be said to be based on the *oeuvre* metaphor, the formalisation of which essentially consists of a more rigid definition of terms. Thus, the core terms are *link*, *bond* and *net*. Briefly,

- A link is the cohesive relation between two items. For Hoey, links are fundamentally of lexical nature, and based on repetition. Broadly, his categorisation covers, under different names, the same types of cohesion identified by Hasan.
- A bond is created when a sufficient number of links exists between two sentences. More precisely, Hoey claims that the minimum number of links that constitute a bond is three, because "if less than three repetitions are treated as establishing a significant connection, then virtually every sentence will be connected to virtually every other sentence, and that is not going to tell us anything interesting about the function of cohesion except that it is pervasive" (Hoey, 1991: 36). At the same time, three links may not be enough to define cases of repetition with text-organising function: "What we need is a degree of repetition high enough to distinguish significant pairs from insignificant pairs and low enough to leave us with something to investigate" (91). Therefore, the degree of repetition is considered high enough when it is above the average within the text being analysed. Thus, the number of links that constitutes bonds may differ in different texts.

- A net<sup>9</sup> is the system of bonds within a text.

The capacity to consider cohesion effectively as a network of relationships that link sentences across a whole text is what in my opinion is one of the two benefits of Hoey's model. The other is the great emphasis that it puts on repetition as a marker of cohesion since, repetition, as I outlined earlier, is the main constituent of what I have termed 'explicit relatedness'. It is already clear, however, that repetition is not the simple reiteration of lexical items across a text, but can be expressed in more varied forms. What this means is that the degree of explicitness markers of relatedness based on repetition can also vary. If the reiteration of the same lexical item is an entirely explicit marker, which can be identified even mechanically, the various forms of relexicalisation, like hyponymy, synonymy etc. are to some extent dependent on the reader's (re)cognition. Considering the diagrammatical representation of my model of relatedness (section 3.2.2, page 102), these forms, therefore, begin to be located slightly away from the 'textual' polar end of the continuum and slightly nearer the cognitive end.

The discussion that follows will show how the importance of the reader's input is increased as the notion of relevance becomes a necessary component in the perception of relatedness.

Hoey clearly states that his model is only applicable to non-narrative texts, and not to narrative ones (188). This claim originates from the apparent incompatibility between the definition of bond and the fact that "Narratives are concerned with the reporting of shifts in space and time" (188). According to Hoey, this characteristic of narrative texts would, in the majority of cases, prevent bonds from being established. Since the present study is concerned with the analysis

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9. Hoey prefers not to use the term *network* because it is already used in systemic linguistics in a different sense.



of comics texts, which are a type of narrative texts, the above claim poses a problem that needs to be addressed.

In my opinion, while it is true that Hoey's model, in the terms in which it is illustrated, can be said to be unsuitable for the analysis of narrative texts, it is at the same time possible to suggest modifications that will render it more appropriate for this kind of texts; and this can be done without altering the fundamental principles of the model itself.

The crucial point is the definition of bond as depending on a sufficient number of repetition links. The problem is then to see whether it is at all possible to eliminate this strict criterion and allow the existence of bonds even in cases in which there is only one link. To avoid the problem foreseen by Hoey, namely the risk that bonds would exist between virtually all sentences, it is useful to bring into the picture the notion of *relevance*.

#### 3.2.2.4 A note on relevance

Relevance is a term that can be rather vague if not defined precisely. This is especially true if one considers that different authors use the term *relevance* in very different senses and purposes. Hasan's description of "relevant tokens", for example, is different from Hoey's definition of "relevant sentences", which, in turn, has little to do with the theory of relevance developed by Sperber and Wilson (1986). It is to the latter that I will now draw attention for a moment.

Although it is only indirectly concerned with text connectivity, one aspect of Sperber and Wilson's definition of relevance can be helpful at this particular point of the discussion, namely the notion of *contextual effect*. Essentially, this has to do with how, and to what extent, in any situation, the reception of new information affects existing information (Sperber and Wilson, 1986: 48-9; Wilson, 1994: 45-6). Without going into the details of the theory, what is useful here about this

concept is that, given a certain unit of information, it allows one to select certain items as more relevant than others.

In the case of relatedness between sentences, this principle may prove to be particularly valuable if applied to Hoey's notion of bond. That is to say, *bond* could be redefined as depending not so much on the *number* of links as on the *quality* of links. In other words, a bond can be said to exist between two or more sentences if they exhibit repetition of relevant items.

Sperber and Wilson's idea of *contextual effect* and its significance in my modification of Hoey's notion of bond can become clearer if considered on the basis of Halliday's idea of *information unit*:

The information unit is what its name implies: a unit of information. Information, in this technical grammatical sense, is the tension between what is already known or predictable and what is new or unpredictable. ... It is the interplay of new and not new that generates information in the linguistic sense. Hence the information unit is a structure made up of two functions, the New and the Given.

(Halliday, 1994: 296).

Although Halliday makes it clear that it has no precise equivalent to any syntactic unit, his idea of information unit is not fundamentally dissimilar to Hoey's notion of sentences as packages of information. Thus, sentences can be seen as packages of information in which certain elements will be Given and others New. Since the Given elements are, by definition, 'phoric', i.e. "referring to something already present in the verbal or non-verbal context" (Halliday, 1994: 296), it is among the New elements that the selection of relevant items must be made. In more practical terms, in the presence of New elements, readers will have to answer the question of if (and how) these New elements affect the perception and the understanding of Given elements. If they do, these elements have contextual effect, and can therefore be regarded as relevant. It is in this sense that the redefinition of bond as depending on the repetition of relevant items can

be explained.

Winter (1994), sees relevance as the main factor that guarantees successful communication in spite of the fact that communication itself is inevitably imperfect:

...communication is imperfect if only because *we cannot say everything about anything at any time*. Quite apart from the physical fact that neither we nor our listeners have unlimited energy, time and patience, very powerful forces prevent this perfection. We are forced to settle for saying less than everything by the need to produce *unique sentences* whose selected content has been in some way *predetermined* by that of its immediately preceding sentences or by the previous history of its larger message structure. The central discipline acting upon our production of sentences in a discourse structure is the need for relevance.

(Winter, 1994: 47)

For Winter, relevance forms the foundation for Clause Relation, which he defines as "the shared cognitive process whereby we interpret the meaning of a Clause or group of clauses in the light of their adjoining clauses or groups of clauses" (49).

The move towards the cognitive end of the scale is now much more evident. A further step rightwards is represented by the phenomenon of collocation.

### 3.2.2.5 *Collocation*

In his very detailed and comprehensive study of the organization of the English language into texts, J.R. Martin (1992) observes that one of the main differences between his model and Hasan's is precisely the inclusion of collocation as a text-forming resource. A very short but effective definition of collocation is given by the subtitle of the chapter of *English Text* concerned with it: "The company words keep" (Martin, 1992: 271-379). The concept of collocation is based on the assumption that words tend to keep the same company, which entails that the occurrence of a particular word generates in the reader/hearer a certain

expectancy for the occurrence of other words that belong to the same company (see Firth, 1957; Sinclair, 1987). That relations of collocation are distinct from those covered by Hasan's five categories of lexical cohesion mentioned above (*synonymy, antinomy, hyponymy, meronymy* and *repetition* of the same lexical item) is elucidated by the claim that in relations of collocation "lexical items enter into patterns which are not predicted by grammar and are to some extent independent of both grammatical structure and a lexical item's formal scatter" (Martin, 1992: 276).

Sinclair (1987) illustrates the significance of collocation by defining the *idiom principle*. According to this principle, "a language user has available to him or her a large number of semi-preconstructed phrases that constitute single choices, even though they might appear to be analysable into segments" (320). Sinclair opposes the idiom principle to the *open choice principle*, according to which "At each point where a unit is completed (a word or a phrase or a clause), a large range of choice opens up, and the only restraint is grammaticalness" (320-1). He then makes it clear that it is the idiom principle that dominates both the production and the interpretation of texts and that "whenever there is good reason, the interpretative process switches to the open choice principle, and quickly back again" (324).

Thus collocation can be considered to be the measure of the validity of the idiom principle, as it is concerned precisely with the co-occurrence of words in language use. Nowadays this can be attained by analysing, with the aid of computers, large corpora of texts (written and spoken) with the aim of determining the set of words which more frequently co-occur with any given word within a predefined span. Without going into the technical minutiae of corpus linguistics, suffice it to note that if a word is found to co-occur with another word much more frequently than with others, it means that the joint choice of the two words is precisely an instance of the idiom principle.

It should be clear now in what sense relations of collocation effectively complement such formal lexical relations as those identified by Hasan. To further demonstrate this point, I will use an example taken from Widdowson (1978), a study in which collocation is *not* regarded as contributing to relatedness.

Widdowson (1978) proposes to consider the following pair of short texts:

- I. A: What are the police doing?  
B: They are arresting the demonstrators.
  
- II. A: What are the police doing?  
B: The fascists are arresting the demonstrators.

He claims that in example I "the anaphoric item *they* signals a propositional link with the preceding sentence and we can provide the full reference *the police* without difficulty. The cohesion in II is rather more difficult to arrive at (and so we might say that it less cohesive)" (28). He then goes on to explain the cohesive link in the second example, and concludes that such a link is represented by the definite article *The*, which must refer to something previously mentioned, and therefore it becomes acceptable that *The fascists* refer to *the police*. In this brief analysis the focus is on the identity of *the fascists* and the approach adopted is to resolve the functional word *The*, without taking into consideration the content of the remaining text. If *The* were really the cause of cohesion, then even the sentences

What are the police doing?  
The oranges look very ripe.

would be cohesive. One of the uses of the definite article *the* is indeed to indicate something that has gone before in the text, but its mere presence by no means guarantees cohesion between two sentences.

In my opinion, what ensures the link between A. and B. above is the fact that *police* is the word that co-occurs most frequently with *arrest*<sup>10</sup> and it is this that makes *the fascists* and *the police* co-refer to the same entity. What is at play here is precisely the idiom principle, according to which the word *arrest* forms a semi-preconstructed pair with the word *police*, and this has a twofold result:

- 1) the two sentences are related to one another in content;
- 2) the words *fascists* represents a break of the idiom principle and a temporary activation of the open choice principle, so that a "slot" which is normally filled by *police* is in this case filled by another word, which, consequently, acquires the identity of *police*.

### 3.2.2.6 *Semantic field*

A further move to the right of the textual/cognitive scale is represented by semantic field, which is conceptually similar to Hasan's notion of "general field of meaning", with the difference that a semantic field encompasses a much wider range of lexical items.

This leads the discussion to the notion of *inference* as illustrated by Brown and Yule. Their general definition of inference is "the process which the reader (hearer) must go through to get from the literal meaning of what is written (or said) to what the writer (speaker) intended to convey" (Brown and Yule, 1983: 256). Within this general definition the two linguists identify what they call "Inferences as missing links", and provide a series of examples (quoted from various sources) in which the reader needs to infer the explicit connection between two sentences (257-60). In my view, the sentences are actually connected by collocation or by common semantic field.

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10. Based on searches carried out on the word "arrest" in the *Bank of English* corpus by Collins-COBUILD, publicly available on the Internet.

1. a. I bought a bicycle yesterday.  
b. The frame is extra large.  
c. *The bicycle has a frame.*
2. a. I looked into the room.  
b. The ceiling was very high.  
c. *The room has a ceiling.*
3. a. This afternoon a strange man came to my office.  
b. His nose was nearly purple.  
c. *The man has a nose.*
4. a. I got on a bus yesterday  
b. and the driver was drunk.  
c. *The bus has a driver.*
5. a. A bus came roaring round the corner  
b. The vehicle nearly flattened a pedestrian.  
c. *The bus is a vehicle.*
6. a. Draw a diameter in black.  
b. The line is about three inches.  
c. *The diameter is a line.*
7. a. She decided to sell the cow  
b. and buy a shop with the money.  
c. *Selling involves money.*
8. a. It was dark and stormy the night the millionaire was murdered.  
b. The killer left no clues for the police to trace.  
c. *Murdering involves a killer.*
9. a. Mary dressed the baby.  
b. The clothes were made of pink wool.  
c. *Dressing involves clothing.*

In each example, the sentences indicated with c. represent possible inferred connections between the sentences indicated with a. and b. In fact, I think that the relations between the sentences can be described as follows:

- |                        |                                  |
|------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. bicycle - frame     | common semantic field (meronymy) |
| 2. room - ceiling      | common semantic field (meronymy) |
| 3. man - nose          | common semantic field (meronymy) |
| 4. bus - driver        | collocation                      |
| 5. bus - vehicle       | common semantic field (hyponymy) |
| 6. diameter - line     | common semantic field (hyponymy) |
| 7. selling - money     | collocation                      |
| 8. murdering - killer  | collocation                      |
| 9. dressing - clothing | common semantic field            |

As Brown and Yule themselves suggest (1983: 260-4), this type of inferences can be more or less automatic, depending on the knowledge of the world that each individual reader possesses. I totally agree with this claim, and this is the reason why I place collocation and semantic field towards the middle of my scale of explicit/implicit relatedness.

The notion of semantic field is also illustrated by Teun van Dijk ("semantic space" in his terminology)

### 3.2.2.7 *Semantic space according to van Dijk*

As regards relatedness, van Dijk's main tenet is that "...the connection between propositions is determined by the RELATEDNESS OF THE FACTS denoted by them..." (van Dijk, 1977: 47). The immediate consequence of this assertion is the necessity to establish a formal criterion by which it is possible to determine whether or not, or to what extent, the facts expressed by different propositions can be said to be related. Van Dijk does this by introducing the notion of *topic of conversation* or, more generally, *topic of discourse*: "...the minimal condition for the connectedness of propositions expressed by a sentence or sequence is their connection with the same (or related) topic(s) of conversation..." (52). In turn, this makes it essential to define the concept of "discourse topic", which van Dijk does in purely semantic terms: "We may think of topics of conversation ... as abstract constructs delimiting certain areas or RANGES OF SEMANTIC SPACE from which individual and property concepts may be taken to form propositions (fact concepts)" (51). Later on, a more explicit and formal definition is provided: "...given a discourse sequence  $\Sigma_i$ , and a proposition  $\alpha$ ,  $\alpha$  is the TOPIC of  $\Sigma_i$  iff  $\Sigma_i$  ENTAILS  $\alpha$ " (134).

So, to summarise, for a given piece of discourse, van Dijk claims that

- 1) every sentence forming the piece of discourse expresses a proposition;
- 2) it is possible to determine which proposition, or sets of propositions, all of the



facts expressed in the sequence jointly imply;

3) such a proposition (or set of propositions) is the topic of discourse.

The crucial point, then, is: how can a discourse sequence be formally said to entail a topic? In this regard, van Dijk introduces the concept of *frame*, i.e. "a subsystem of knowledge about some phenomenon of the world" (135).

This suggests that for van Dijk the "relatedness of facts" is fundamentally a matter of world knowledge, since the discourse topic delimits "ranges of semantic space" and activates a "subsystem of knowledge". The idea of 'knowledge of the world' clearly transcends the mere 'knowledge of the text': the role of the reader becomes increasingly important for the recognition of relatedness. Such a role becomes a fully conscious process when the text offers no explicit clues as to the way in which different units are linked together. It is in these cases that the reader needs to input his or her own contribution in order to 'close the gap' between text units. This phenomenon is called 'closure'.

### 3.2.2.8 *Closure*

The quote by Winter seen above (section 3.2.2.4, page 115) suggests that communication is imperfect because of the inevitable incompleteness of information that can be conveyed at one time. This introduces an aspect of relatedness in which the links must be provided by the reader in order to fully reconstruct continuity.

The phenomenon whereby the determination of relatedness depends on such 'missing links' can be referred to as *closure*. Intended in this way, the term 'closure' is quite extraneous to linguistics and stylistics, since it is used more in studies of visual cognition. Arthur Asa Berger defines it as

the way our minds "complete" incomplete visual material that is given to us. We

fill in the blanks, so to speak. We also form a gestalt or "whole" out of bits and pieces of information that we have — unifying them into something that is more than the sum of the parts.

(Berger, 1989: 54)

Although this definition refers to visual material, I think that the fundamental concept can be applied to language-based texts too, and to narrative texts in particular. In fact, Brown and Yule (1983) express what is effectively the same idea when they state that "...although there may be no formal linguistic links connecting contiguous linguistic strings, the fact of their contiguity leads us to interpret them as connected. We readily fill in any connections which are required" (224). Similarly, Quirk et al. (1985) assert that "connection may be covert as well as overt", and that "Mere juxtaposition (parataxis rather than asyndeton) is an icon of connectedness, even where the juxtaposed parts have no grammatical or lexical feature in common" (1425).

If, in its simplest definition, a text is a sequence of discrete units, it follows that between every unit and the next, there occurs an interruption, of variable dimensions and significance, during which something is left out. The act of "filling in any connections which are required" is precisely what closure can be thought of when applied to linguistic texts. As Umberto Eco observes, a text "is intertwined with white spaces, with interstices to be filled" (Eco, 1979: 52, my translation).

What such claims imply is that relatedness does not depend exclusively on properties of the text, but also on the reader's own input to the text. The question is: to what extent do the two parameters, the textual and the cognitive, contribute to the relatedness of a text? The answer to this question cannot be given in absolute terms, but only in relative ones, namely that the two variables are indirectly proportional to each other. Generally, different types of texts will show different proportions of overt markers of relatedness. In academic writing, for

example, texts need to contain as much overt signalling as possible, including textual deixis, in order to convey meaning in the most precise manner possible. In literary texts, instead, overt relatedness is not a requirement, and typically there are many cases in which readers have to decide for themselves what is the relation between one particular unit and the rest of the text.

In fact, despite the extreme difficulty (and, perhaps, the impossibility) of defining what a literary text is in absolute terms, it is nevertheless possible to identify at least some general features which distinguish literary texts from other kinds of texts, one of such features being the higher degree of readers' active involvement. The importance of the role of the reader in literary texts has been stressed by many scholars, Roland Barthes above all, who repeatedly emphasised the productive nature of literature reading. One of the main aspects of narrative literary texts that generate the necessity for the reader to play an active role is precisely the fragmentation of the information provided.

One characteristic shared by most novels, for example, is the fact that the story 'as told' does not necessarily match the story 'as took place'. This happens so regularly that there arises the necessity to use two different terms: *story* to indicate 'what actually happened'<sup>11</sup>, and *plot* to indicate the way in which the story is told in the novel<sup>12</sup>. The plot only tells the reader *part of* the story, and not even necessarily in a chronological way or from the same narrator or point of view, and the reader needs to provide the missing or displaced parts of the story in order to reassemble what the author disassembled in the plot. The novels of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce represent in this respect a perfect example: there, in the plot, whole parts may be missing, others given more emphasis, the

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<sup>11</sup> It is very important to note that this does not necessarily refer to 'reality', since the *story* can either be real or fictitious; in the latter case the 'facts' are only in the author's mind but still considered as 'real' in the tacit agreement between author and reader.

<sup>12</sup> This is explained very clearly by E.M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel*.

chronological order of the 'events' may be changed, and/or the focus of attention may suddenly jump from one place to another and from one viewpoint to another. Consequently, the reader is required to establish the connections between different parts and/or to provide whole portions of the story in order to make sense out of the plot.

In non- or less literary texts, instead, the plot tends to follow the story more closely. Texts which can certainly be placed at the lower end of an imaginary scale of literariness, for example, are those that give instructions on how to carry out a particular task, in which the 'narrative' follows exactly the chronological order of the 'story', and none of the steps required is missing. Obviously in these cases the objective is to make sure the reader understand exactly how to carry out the task (e.g. assembling a chest of drawers) and that no steps of the procedure are skipped.

One of the scholars who do take into account cases in which relatedness exists even when it is not overtly signalled is Widdowson:

... the cohesion we have been considering can be described in terms of the formal (syntactic and semantic) links between sentences and their parts. The cohesion is overtly signalled. ... Although propositional development can be overtly signalled in this way, it is common to find instances of discourse which appear not to be cohesive at all.

(Widdowson, 1978: 27)

Yet, Widdowson only considers one very particular case: "It is at this point that we must turn our attention to illocutionary acts" (27). Essentially, illocutionary acts (studied within speech act theory, which, in turn, is a branch of pragmatics) are instances of (mainly spoken) discourse in which extra meaning is attached to certain utterances beyond their literal sense. Widdowson himself provides the following example:

"The phone is ringing"  
 "I'm in the bath"

where "Can you answer it?" could be attached to the first utterance, and "I can't answer it" to the second. These 'attachments' are provided by the hearer, and it is therefore in this sense that illocutionary acts can be incorporated within the concept of closure, of which, however, they only represent one very limited aspect. Essentially, every time a connection between two or more sentences is based not on what is overtly expressed by the sentences themselves but on what the reader/hearer fills in, there occurs an instance of closure: it is *closing* the gap between text units.

### 3.2.3 Relatedness in comics

As I mentioned earlier, in comics the equivalent of the sentence, as a text unit, is the panel. In Chapter One (page 18) is a representation of the typical layout of a comics page. Each panel is separated from the next by a border and this separation is reinforced by a blank space which, in comics jargon, is called "the gutter". In comics texts, therefore, explicit and implicit relatedness have their own well-defined spaces: inside the panels the former, and outside, in the gutter, the second.

#### 3.2.3.1 *Explicit and implicit relatedness in comics*

Because of the fragmentation of the narrative into panels, reading comics involves, to a large extent, the necessity to form a whole out of all the bits and pieces of information that are laid out in every page of a comic book. The presence of the gutter means that there is always a blank (literally and metaphorically) space that potentially needs to be filled by the readers every time they move from one panel to the next. It can be argued that the extent to which the reader's input is important depends on the type of markers of relatedness

that exist in the panels. The link between the two panels in Figure 3.1, for example, is easily established by the reader thanks to high degree of repetition exhibited by the panels:

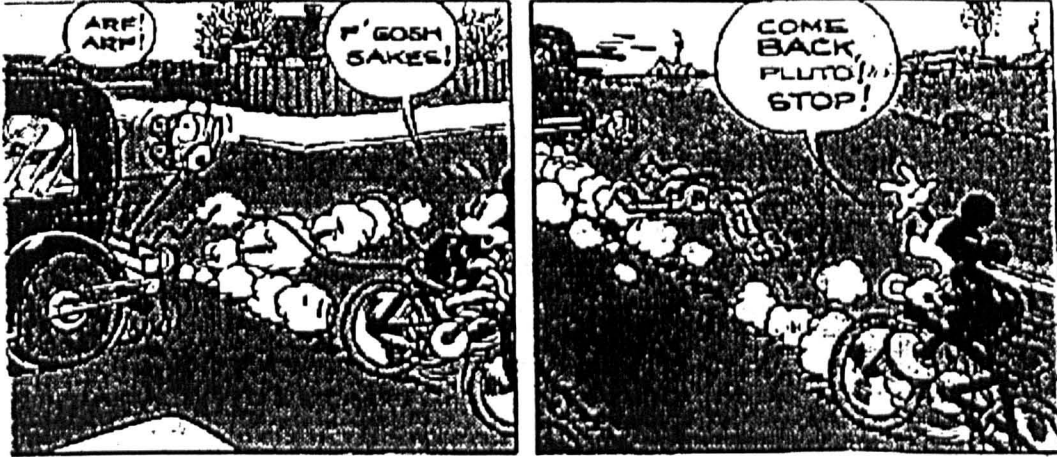


Figure 3.1: Floyd Gottfredson, "Mickey Mouse and Pluto the racer"

In this case, therefore, the reader does not need to engage in any speculations as to how to 'fill the gutter', which can be said to be an unconscious and almost instinctive psychological process. At other times, however, little or complete absence of explicit markers of relatedness can cause the necessity for the reader to actively contribute to the logical sequence of what would otherwise seem to be only a spatial left-to-right sequence (or right-to-left in the case of Japanese *manga*). The difficulty of such contributions can vary greatly. In the following sequence (Figure 3.2), for example, the connection between the two panels is not as immediate as the previous one: the panels have no repeated elements to help the reader establish a logical connection.

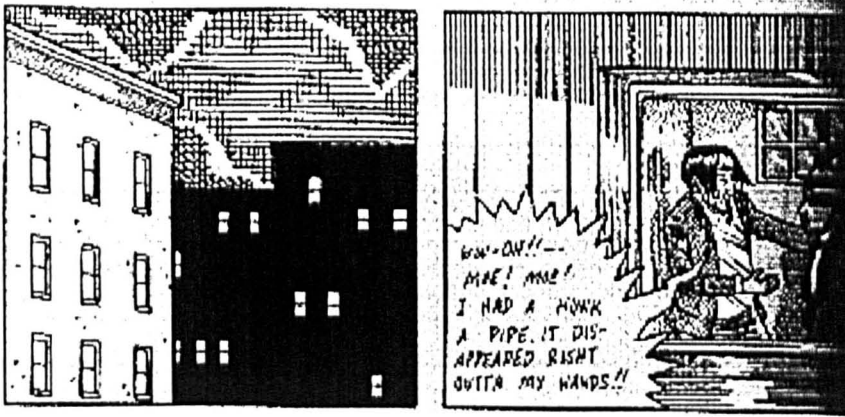


Figure 3.2: Richard Tommaso, *Clover Honey*

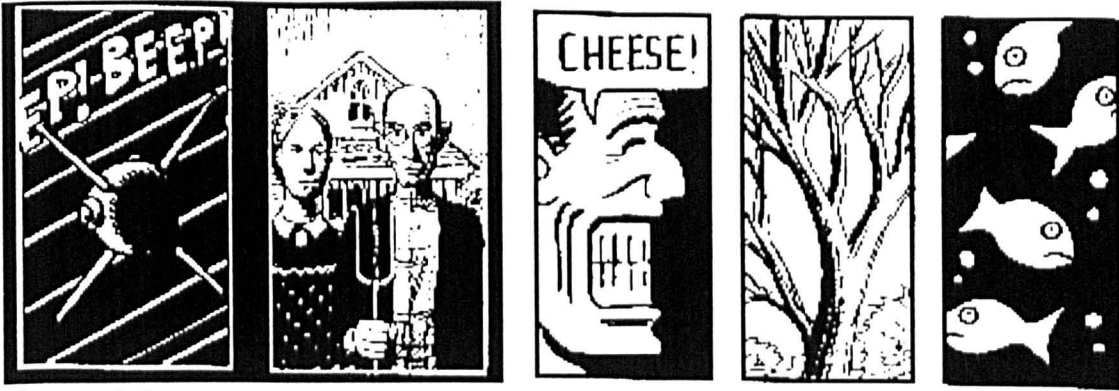
The reader needs to consciously think of how to fill the gutter and it is only out of experience, or by considering larger sections of the text, that he or she can hypothesise on how the panels may be related to each other.

Those of Figure 3.1 and Figure 3.2 are only two examples, but in fact, the ways in which two subsequent panels are linked together can differ a great deal. In this regard Scott McCloud has proposed a categorisation of what he calls "panel-to-panel transitions". He identifies six types of transitions (McCloud, 1994: 70-2):

1. moment-to-moment
2. action-to-action
3. subject-to-subject
4. scene-to-scene
5. aspect-to-aspect
6. non-sequitur

The sequence of Figure 3.1, for example, is an action-to-action transition, and requires very little participation from the reader to establish the link, whereas in Figure 3.2 the transition is of the subject-to-subject type and the reader has to collaborate to make the sequence meaningful.

What is particularly good about McCloud's taxonomy is that it allows one to relate



**Figure 3.3:** Scott McCloud,  
*Understanding Comics*

What is particularly good about McCloud's taxonomy is that it allows one to relate each category to a greater degree of reader's involvement. However, I would modify it slightly. First of all, I believe that the distinction between subject-to-subject and scene-to-scene is an unnecessary one, since the two types of transition are conceptually equivalent. McCloud says that scene-to-scene transitions "transport us across significant distances of time and space", but I think it is impossible to judge exactly when distances of time and space begin to be significant, and therefore prefer not to distinguish between these two types of transitions, which could be both called subject-to-subject. Secondly, I would move the aspect-to-aspect type up to third place in the scale, because I think that the relatedness is actually stronger than in subject-to-subject transitions.

In addition, I do not agree with the theorisation of non-sequitur transitions, which McCloud defines as ones which offer "no logical relationship between panels *whatsoever!*" (McCloud, 1993: 72, original emphasis). Rather, I think that in this type of transition relatedness still obtains. In the absence of textual clues, the relatedness between text units relies entirely on the reader's input, but there is nothing to justify *un*-relatedness. Significantly, the examples that McCloud uses to illustrate "non-sequitur" transitions (Figure 3.3) are not part of authentic texts.

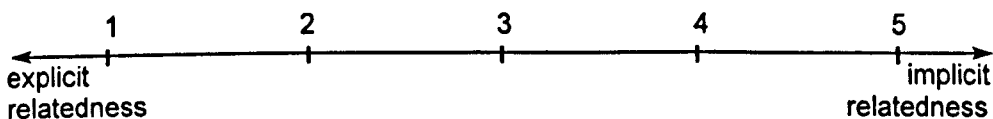


So, my revised scale of panel-to-panel transitions looks like this:

1. moment-to-moment
2. action-to-action
3. aspect-to-aspect
4. subject-to-subject
5. non-sequitur

The usefulness of such a categorisation of panel-to-panel transitions is that it can be seen as reflection of the explicit/implicit scale of relatedness and can support the concomitant argument that the two 'forces' of relatedness, the textual and the cognitive, are indirectly proportional to each other. The scale proposed by McCloud (with my slight modification) fits nicely with the model of relatedness that I propose in this chapter::

1. moment-to-moment: complete repetition (all the elements of one panel are repeated in the next)
2. action-to-action: high degree of repetition (most elements of one panel are repeated in the next)
3. aspect-to-aspect: collocation and/or semantic space (the elements of the two panels tend to co-occur or are items of the same semantic field)
4. subject-to-subject: few elements of explicit relatedness, usually based on common semantic field
5. non-sequitur: no explicit markers of relatedness at all



The scale above is fundamentally one of reader's involvement. It is significant that the action-to-action type of transition is by far the most common in the comic books that are primarily directed at younger readers, like, for example, in the traditional super-hero stories. Interestingly, with the relatively recent appearance and affirmation of more experimental types of comics, whose readership is mainly made up of adults, the storytelling has become often very complex and,

as far as panel-to-panel transitions are concerned, the action-to-action type has become less predominant while the proportion of the other types has conversely grown significantly larger. The link between the panels is less obvious and the degree of reader's involvement is consequently higher, since the need to fill the gutter increases and closure becomes more and more an important part of the reading process.

Indeed, one fundamental difference between adult comics and children's comics is that in the latter the narrative flows much more smoothly. In children's comic books the separation between the panels is minimised as much as possible by a very strong relatedness which is maintained throughout the story. The gutter, there, is only a mere blank, empty space between the panels, which the reader skips effortlessly, and when a change of scene occurs, it is normally accompanied by a narratorial comment which leads the reader in the right direction. In most adult comics, instead, the cohesion between the panels is much more feeble, and the emphasis is placed on what is told *as well as* on what is untold, on what is shown *as well as* on what is hidden. The gutter is therefore as important as the panel itself, because it contains all the missing parts. The reader, as a result, cannot afford to just 'jump over' the gutter, but necessarily needs to pause and think of possible ways to see 'inside' it.

### 3.3 Analysis

In the theory section of the present chapter I have discussed relatedness from a linguistic point of view and I have accordingly borrowed terminology and certain notions which 'belong' to the field of linguistics. My purpose is now to demonstrate that the same core concepts are valid when applied to comics too. I would like to make it clear that this does not originate from a simple curiosity; rather, by applying to comics notions that have been developed and theorised within the

field of text-linguistics, my goal is to reinforce the idea that comics texts and language-based texts are semiotically similar and, ultimately, that the concept of text does not need to be confined to verbal language only and, consequently, that studies of text-linguistics should widen their scope to include visual materials too. It is for this reason that the extracts I have chosen are nearly or even completely wordless.

### 3.3.1 Repetition

The importance of repetition for the perception of relatedness is very evident in comics. Frequently, visual elements repeated from panel to panel represent the only clue as to how certain panels may be reciprocally related. In such cases, the reader needs to understand the interplay between given information and new information, and decide how and to what extent the new information affects the given.

One comic book in which the author makes extensive use of repetition as a way of linking panels together is Peter Kuper's *The System*. The novel, which depicts various aspects of modern life in New York, is narratively arranged into short flashes linked together by a clever intersection of different stories with different characters as protagonists. In fact the real story in *The System* is the system itself: everything that happens within the system somehow affects all those who are part of it. It is like a complex mechanism in which every element has a function, a role and a more or less direct influence over the other elements.

So, the narrative structure of the novel does not follow a linear path, but focuses on different facets of society. Consequently, throughout the novel there occur numerous changes of scenes which are one way or another connected together.

The first short sequence (Figure 3.4) I will consider is the opening of the novel.

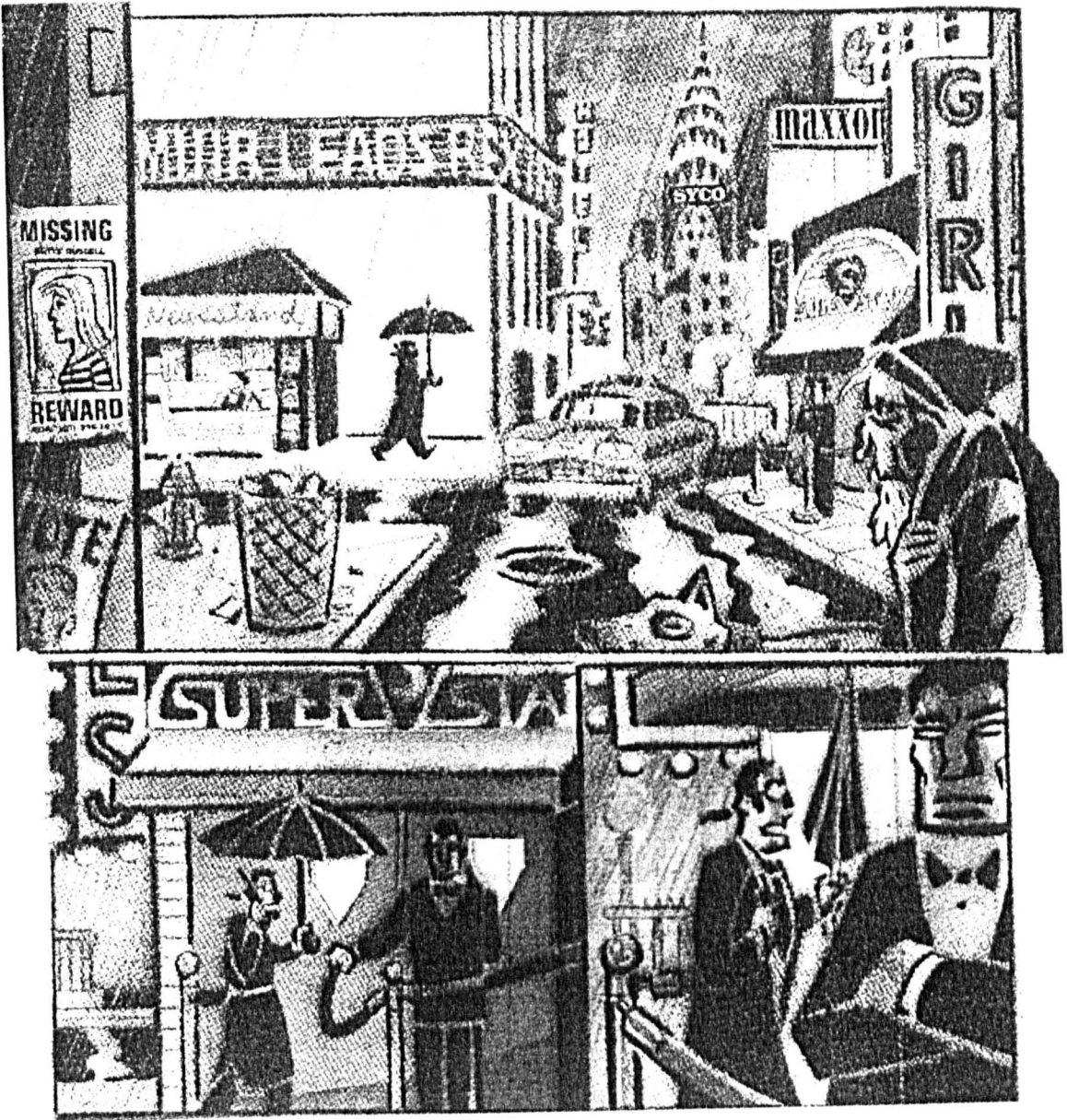


Figure 3.4: Peter Kuper, *The System*

The first panel shows a scene with various elements and no particular focus, while in the second panel, where the view is more restricted, there can be clearly seen a man entering the *Superstar*. The most obvious link between the first panel and the following one is represented by the repetition of two elements, the *Superstar* itself and the umbrella, and it is precisely these repetitions that allow the reader to establish the relatedness between these first two panels. As a consequence of this, the man entering the bar in the second panel can be 'traced back' as the one holding the umbrella in the first panel.

Fundamentally, this is a case of cataphora: the indistinguishable figure in the first panel has the same function of a pronoun (*he*, for example) which refers forward to the second and third panels, where the man's face is revealed. It is important to underline that this cataphoric relation is an effect of the relatedness previously determined between the first two panels: without the *Superstar* and the umbrella, there would be no way of relating the figure in the first panel to the man in the second.

Kuper makes extensive use of repetition to provide the reader with connections between different panels and scenes. Figure 3.5 is a sequence of five seemingly unrelated panels which are held together only thanks to repeated elements.

The first two panels are connected by the repetition of the dove, the second and the third by the repetition of the dustmen (while the dove is still discernible in the sky in the third panel), the third and the fourth by the repetition of the old man with the dog, the fourth and fifth panels by the repetition of the young couple. Here it is evident that the connections exist only between one panel and the next, but there no apparent relation holding the sequence together as a whole.

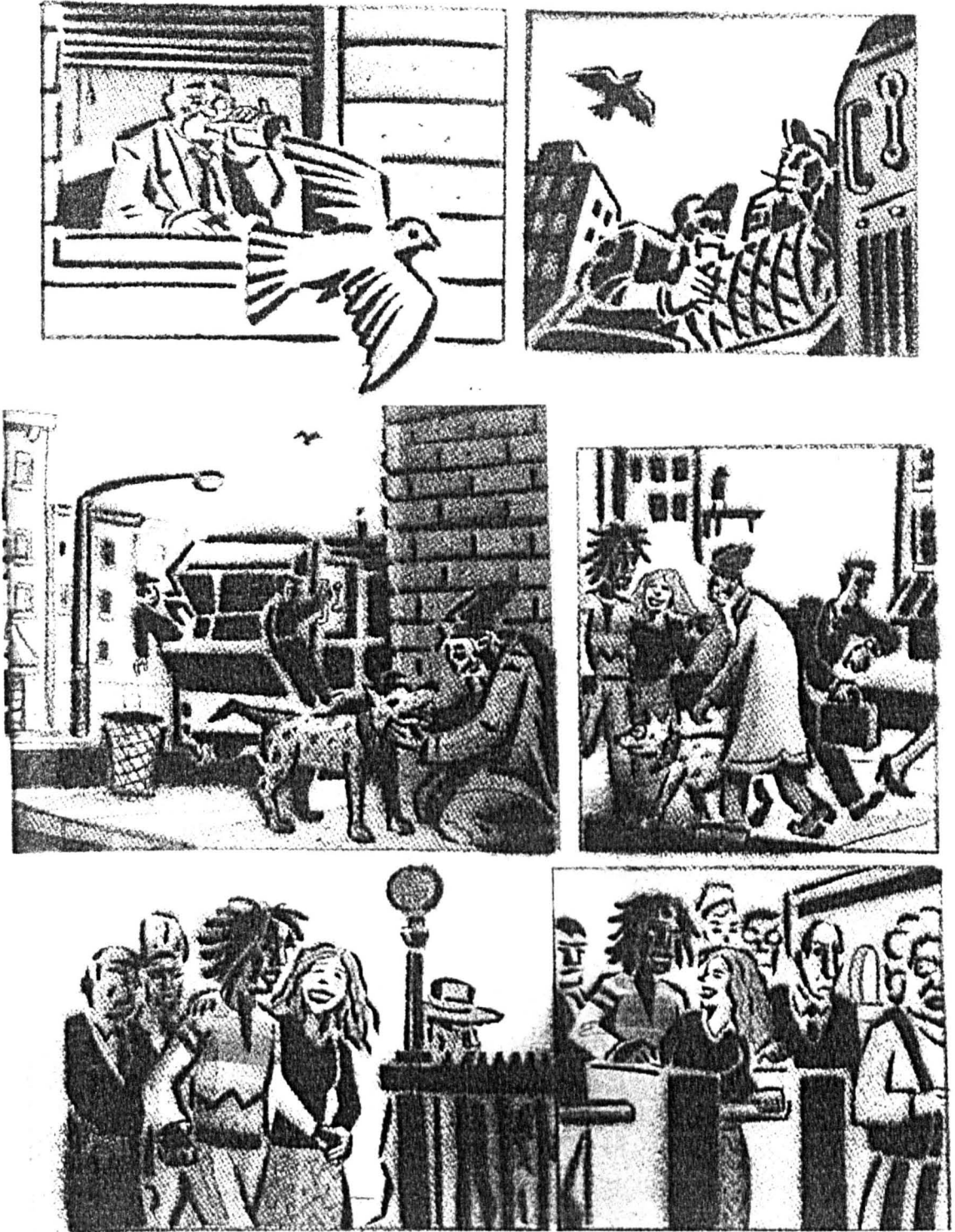
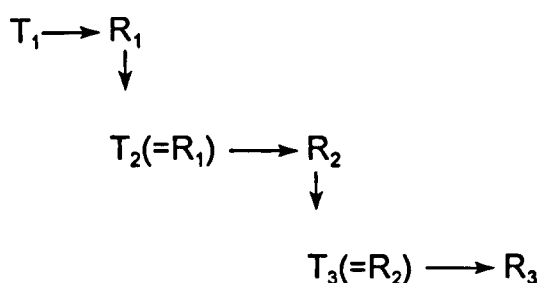


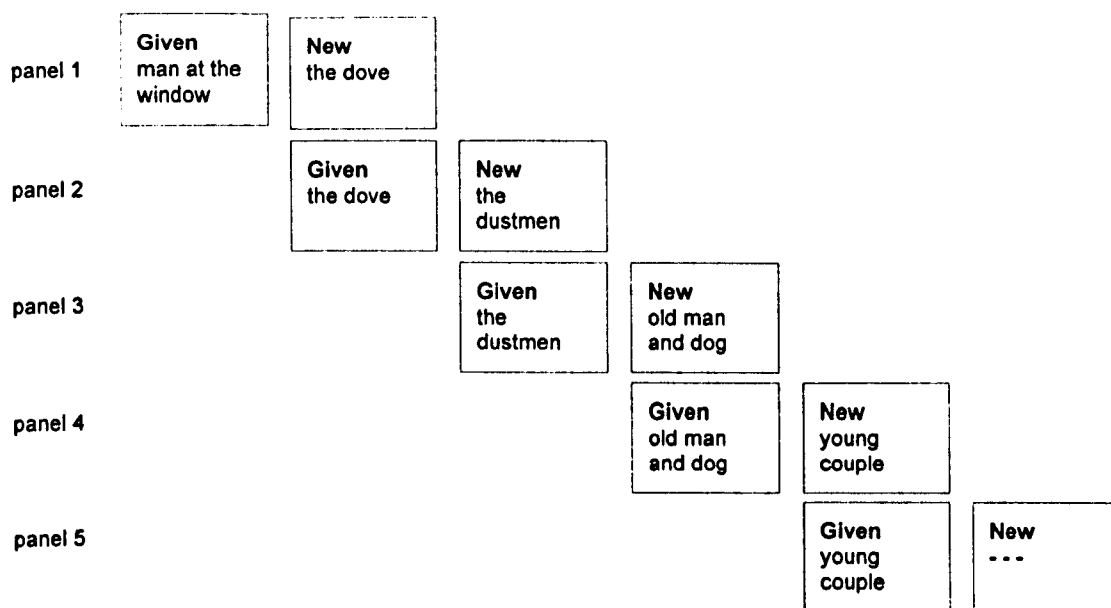
Figure 3.5: Peter Kuper, The System

In fact, in the extract in Figure 3.5, the first five panels have the function of introducing new characters to the reader and therefore are perfectly coherent within the whole text. In this novel the introduction of new characters is always cleverly realised through sequences based on the relationship between *given* and *new*: what is new in one panel becomes given in the next. Fundamentally, this is a very similar concept to one illustrated by Daneš (1974), for whom coherence is essentially matter of "thematic progression" (114). Thematic progression has to do with the way in which the *theme* and the *rheme* of any given sentence are related to the *theme* and the *rheme* of the following sentence, and the simplest thematic progression identified by Daneš is the linear one, graphically represented as follows (118):



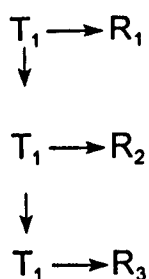
Although the terms *theme* and *rheme* are used here, the same concept holds if they are replaced by the terms *given* and *new*. In fact, in text-linguistics the pairs theme-rheme and given-new are always considered in close relation, if not actually identified with one another. Without entering the vast literature concerning those notions, it will be sufficient to say that the identification/separation of theme-rheme and given-new is actually an element that Peter Fries considers to be a distinguishing point between two schools of thought, namely the scholars of the Prague School, who define theme-rheme in terms of given-new, and the advocates of Systemic Functional grammar, who instead believe that theme-rheme and given-new do not necessarily coincide and prefer to separate the two. (Fries, 1995: 1). However, whether or not theme coincides with given and rheme with new, the close relation remains, and the sequence of

panels in Figure 3.5 certainly represents a kind of progression analogous to that described by Daneš above:



The author is thus able to introduce new characters in rapid succession and in an extremely economical way, while, at the same time, the *given* elements prevent the reader from being displaced.

Another interesting example of repetition is the one shown by the sequence in Figure 3.6, where different scenes and characters are connected by one repeated element. Again, this is conceptually equivalent to what Daneš called Thematic Progression with a continuous (constant) theme, where "the same T appears in a series of utterances (to be sure, in not fully identical wording), to which different R's are linked up" (Daneš, 1974: 119).





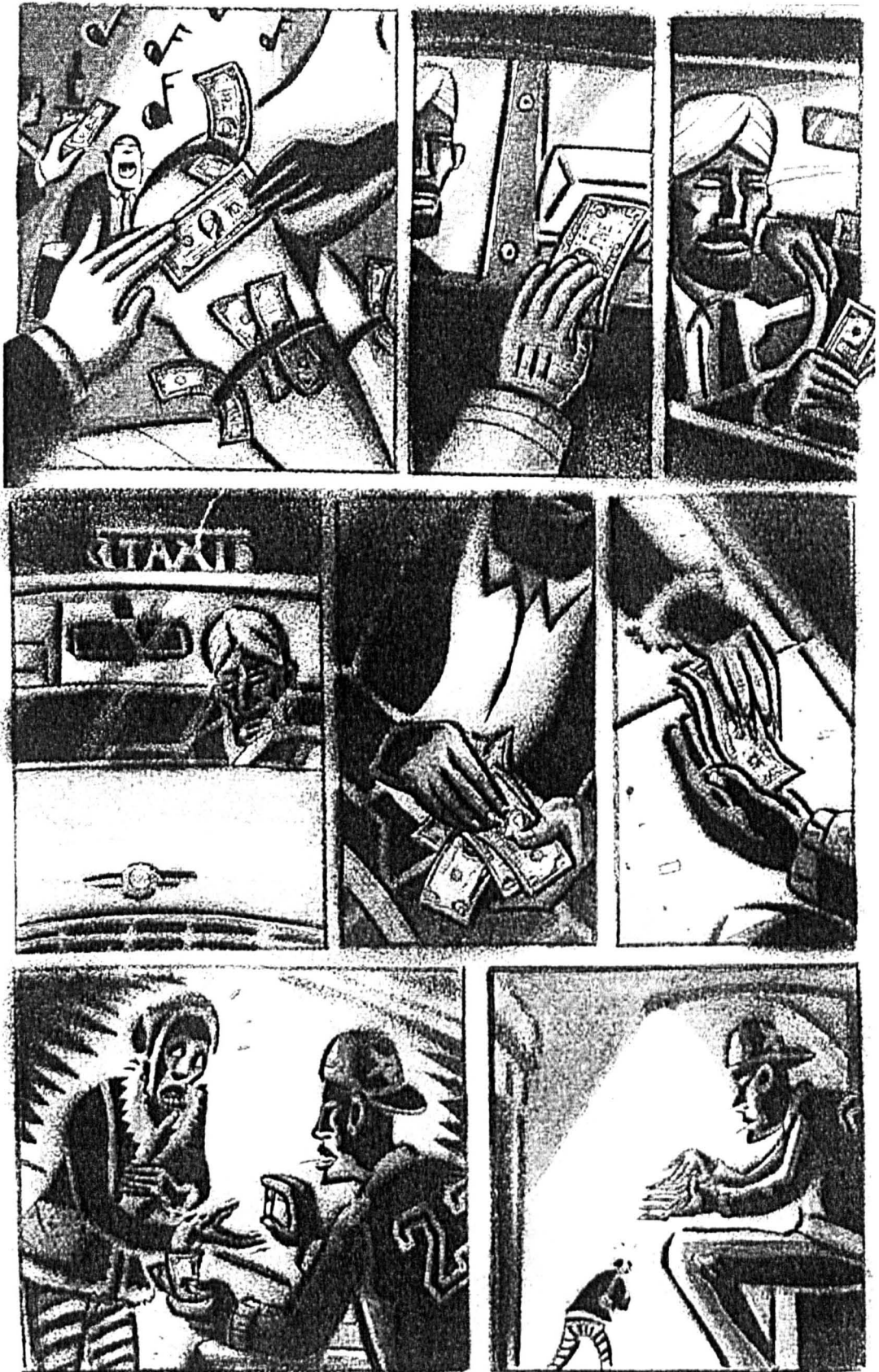
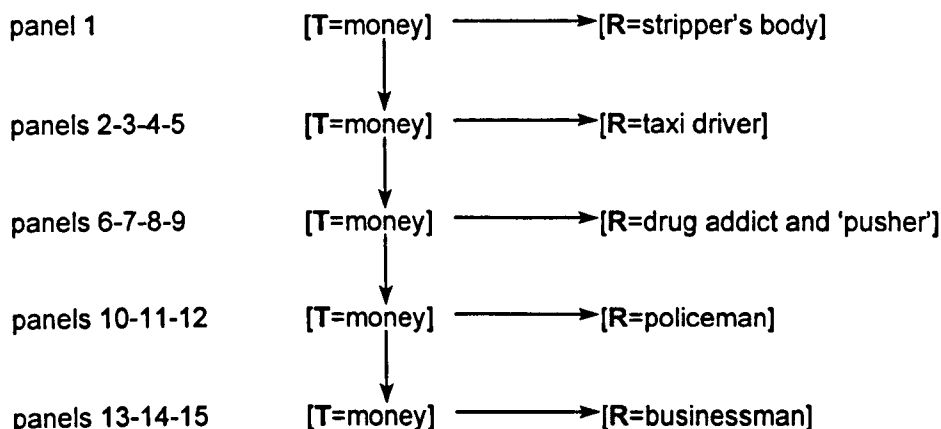


Figure 3.6: Peter Kuper, *The System* (continued on next page)



Figure 3.6: Peter Kuper, *The System*

Here the constant theme is obviously 'money', and the graphical representation of the progression is as follows:



The function of the continuous presence of money is not only to provide a connection for the sequence, but also to convey a sense of its importance in all parts of *the system*.

Between the ninth and the tenth panels there occurs an instance of what could be called a *merged transition*, i.e. a transition in which the content of one panel merges into the content of the next panel. In this particular case, the hands of the pusher merge into those of the policeman. This is a technique that Kuper uses frequently and involves the identification of two elements. To use linguistic terminology, it is a process whereby two items are made to appear synonyms, or near-synonyms, and Kuper exploits it to put into a synonymic relation elements which are not normally associated with each other. Here, for example, the fact that the two pairs of hands are put in such a relation suggests that there is not much difference between the pusher and the policeman, as the development of the story indeed will reveal. Another interesting example is shown in Figure 3.7, where the merging occurs between the second and the third panel: a computer terminal showing a stock exchange transaction merges into a video-game screen which reads YOU WIN AGAIN! The two characters involved, apparently so distant from each other, are, from this particular point of view, effectively doing the same thing: playing a game.

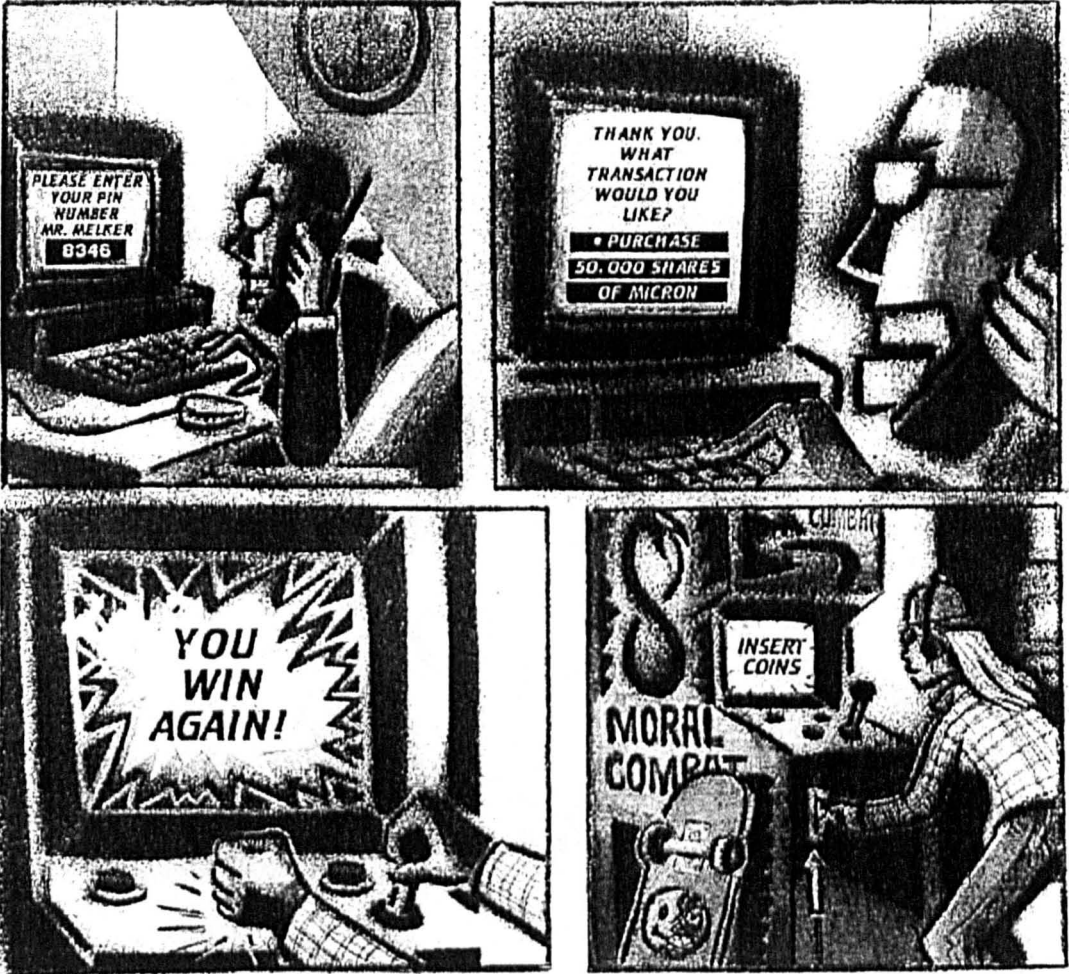


Figure 3.7: Peter Kuper, *The System*

Repetition can also be used to link panels in terms of time and/or space. In Figure 3.8, for example, the repetition of the black-haired girl makes it possible to position the second panel in the right point in time and space.



Figure 3.8: Richard Tommaso, *Clover Honey*

Similarly, Figure 3.9 shows three panels where the chronological and spatial connection with the third is only assured by the repeated presence of one otherwise insignificant element: the group of people near the litter bin. This has interesting implications on the issue of relevance as described in the theoretical part of this chapter, in that it shows how any particular element is not relevant or irrelevant in itself, but only for its contextual effect. In this example, the group of people around the litter bin is in the background and is given no visual emphasis



whatsoever. Yet, it is the *only* element that allows the reader to put the content of the first panel into relation with the content of the second panel, and therefore it becomes relevant, since it has the contextual effect of establishing the time and location of the two scenes.

Six pages later, there appears the panel shown in Figure 3.10, which is connected to the ones in Figure 3.9 by the presence of the shadow on the wall, a repetition from the second panel in the sequence above.

Repetition certainly plays a major role in conveying a sense of relatedness to the reader, especially when the related panels are not adjacent, as is the case with this last example. In fact, repetition allows the reader to perceive connections across the whole length of a text. There are graphic novels (which, for reason of space and of copyright it is impossible to reproduce in their entirety) in which panels are connected to one another even though they are several pages apart. Theoretically, repetition allows the author of comics to place panels almost anywhere within the text. It is significant that in certain more experimental texts, where even the conventional left-to-right order is not adhered to, to reconstruct the story the only overt device the reader is left with is precisely repetition.

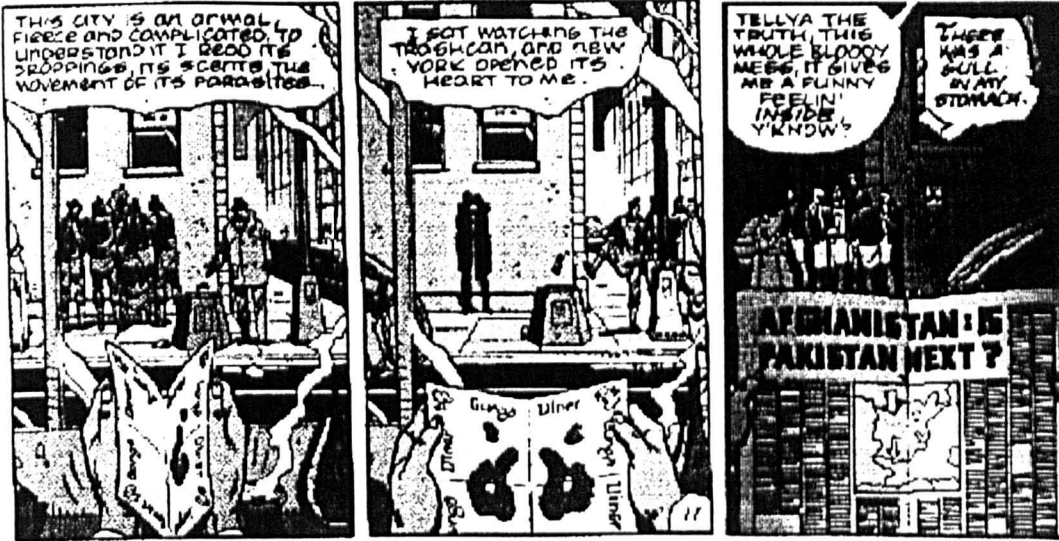


Figure 3.9: Alan Moore, *Watchmen*

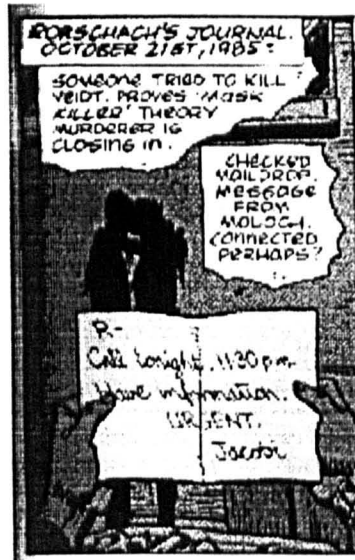


Figure 3.10: Alan Moore, *Watchmen*

### 3.3.2 Collocation and semantic field

In all the extracts considered so far, the relatedness between the panels relies on repetition, that is to say, on one or more elements repeated across the sequence in various ways. I will now examine some extracts in which the connection between panels is based on collocation or on common semantic field.

The first one (Figure 3.11) is a passage from Richard Tommaso's *Clover Honey*.

Here the connection between the different panels is of a different nature. The only instance of repetition occurs between the fifth and the seventh panel, while what really holds the sequence together is relations of collocation and of semantic field. The sixth panel represents an exception because it is not linked to the rest of the passage as a whole but only to the fourth panel, and this link is established by the reader thanks to the co-text (the reader know that the fact and the body part belong to the same character). The diagram below shows the links among the panels:

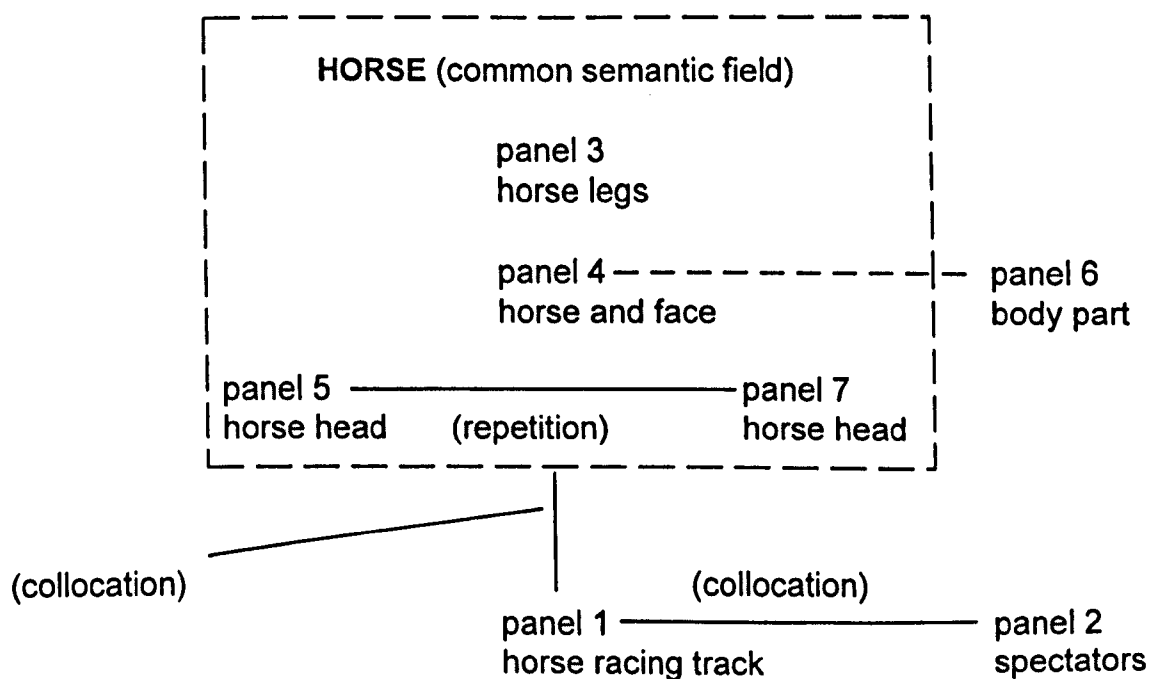






Figure 3.11: Richard Tommaso, *Clover Honey*

This graphical representation of the relationships that exist in the sequence shows how all the panels, except panel 6, rotate around a common semantic field, which is identifiable with the content of the first panel. Therefore, in this sense panel 1 functions as discourse topic, exactly in the same way as van Dijk intends it, since, effectively, it activates a semantic space which the subsequent panels belong to. Panels 5 and 7, besides being part of the same main semantic space, are also linked to each other by repetition.

Another interesting passage is the one in Figure 3.12, taken from *It's A Good Life, If You Don't Weaken*, a graphic novel by Seth. In this sequence, there is no individual panel that can be said to represent the discourse topic, which then needs to be implied by all the panels jointly.

The first thing to be noticed is that the content of six panels is directly connected with weather phenomena:

panel 3	-	snow
panel 5	-	lightening
panel 6	-	rain
panel 10	-	heat
panel 15	-	rain
panel 20	-	snow

This sub-sequence can already indicate that the panels are not put together at random, but are ordered according to a precise succession: the passing of seasons. Indeed, there are other panels which show scenes which are normally associated with a particular period of the year:

panel 8	-	spring
panel 11	-	summer
panel 16	-	autumn
panels 17-18	-	November



Figure 3.12: Seth, It's a Good Life If You Don't Weaken (continued on next page)

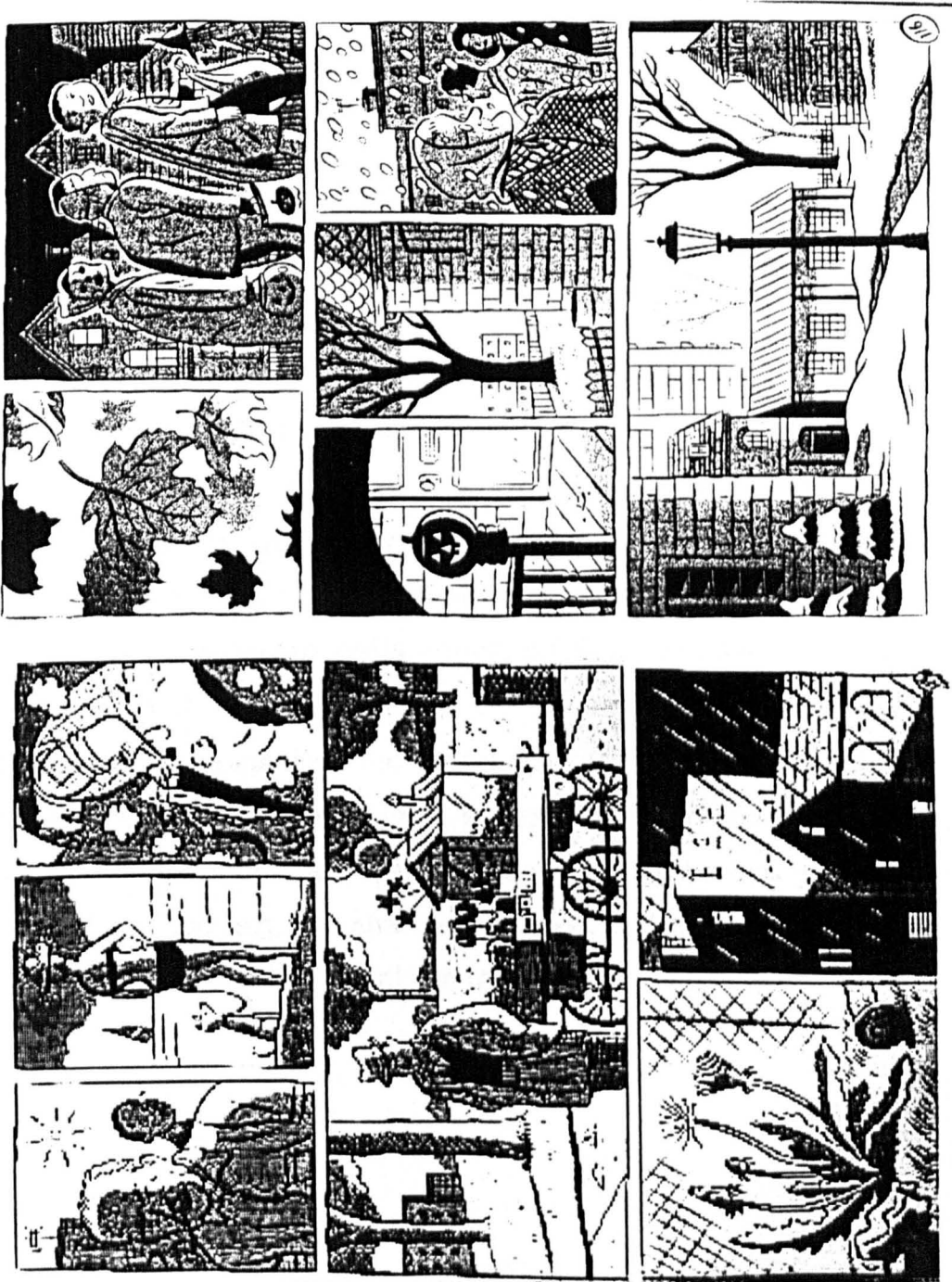


Figure 3.12: Seth, It's a Good Life if You Don't Weaken

The ordering of this second sub-sequence confirms the idea that the passage is about the passing of time, and precisely the passing of one year, from winter to winter. Once this has been established, the rest of the panels can also be connected with the discourse topic. The first and the last panel, for example, can be seen as depicting typical winter scenes, and also panel 12 can be associated with summer since it is normally in that part of the year that road-works are done. This means that there can be panels or, more in general, discourse units, that can only be related to a discourse topic *after* this has been determined by other discourse units.

### 3.3.3 Closure

Figure 3.13 shows six panels taken from a 1935 Mickey Mouse story.

This page shows a typical panel sequence of a traditional comic book. The first thing that can be noticed is that the two main items, Mickey and Pluto, are repeated throughout the sequence, and the panel-to-panel transitions are all of the action-to-action type. Such a consistency creates a strong relatedness between the panels, so that the sequence can be read as a continuum and the separation from panel to panel is virtually nullified. After the fourth panel there is slight change of scene, but there is also a narratorial comment that explains exactly what is happening. The presence of this comment is very significant: because nearly all the information is provided by the panels, in this kind of traditional comic books the gutter is mostly empty, however when it does contain some information (e.g. in a change of scene), such information is made easily accessible through a narratorial comment.



Figure 3.13: Floyd Gottfredson, "Mickey Mouse and Pluto the racer"



Figure 3.14, by contrast, is a passage from Tom Hart's *The Sands*, in which a completely different kind of technique is employed. Here the relatedness is much less evident. In fact, the panel-to-panel transitions between each panel and the next is always of the non-sequitur type: there is no repetition, nor are there any elements that can be considered collocates of the same semantic space. The links are therefore completely left to the reader to discover.

However, although the panels of this short sequence are seemingly disconnected from one another, they are not, nevertheless, disconnected from the story as a whole. Indeed, the second panel is related to what has gone immediately before this page, while the first panel too is connected with a previous scene, twelve panels earlier. The function of the third panel is more obscure: it is connected, by repetition, with the very first panel of the novel, ninety-five pages earlier, and it is very difficult for the reader to imagine what its meaning might be in this part of the novel. The fourth panel, finally, which shows the protagonist's wife observing insects with a magnifying lens, is a recurrent scene throughout the novel.

Apart from their actual meaning (whose interpretation must be based on factors which go beyond the determination of relatedness), it is significant that each panel in the sequence is somehow connected with the story, which, as a consequence, means that they are also necessarily connected with each other too. Once again, Daneš's essay can be useful in this regard. The third type of thematic progression that he identifies is one "with derived T's" (Daneš, 1974: 119):

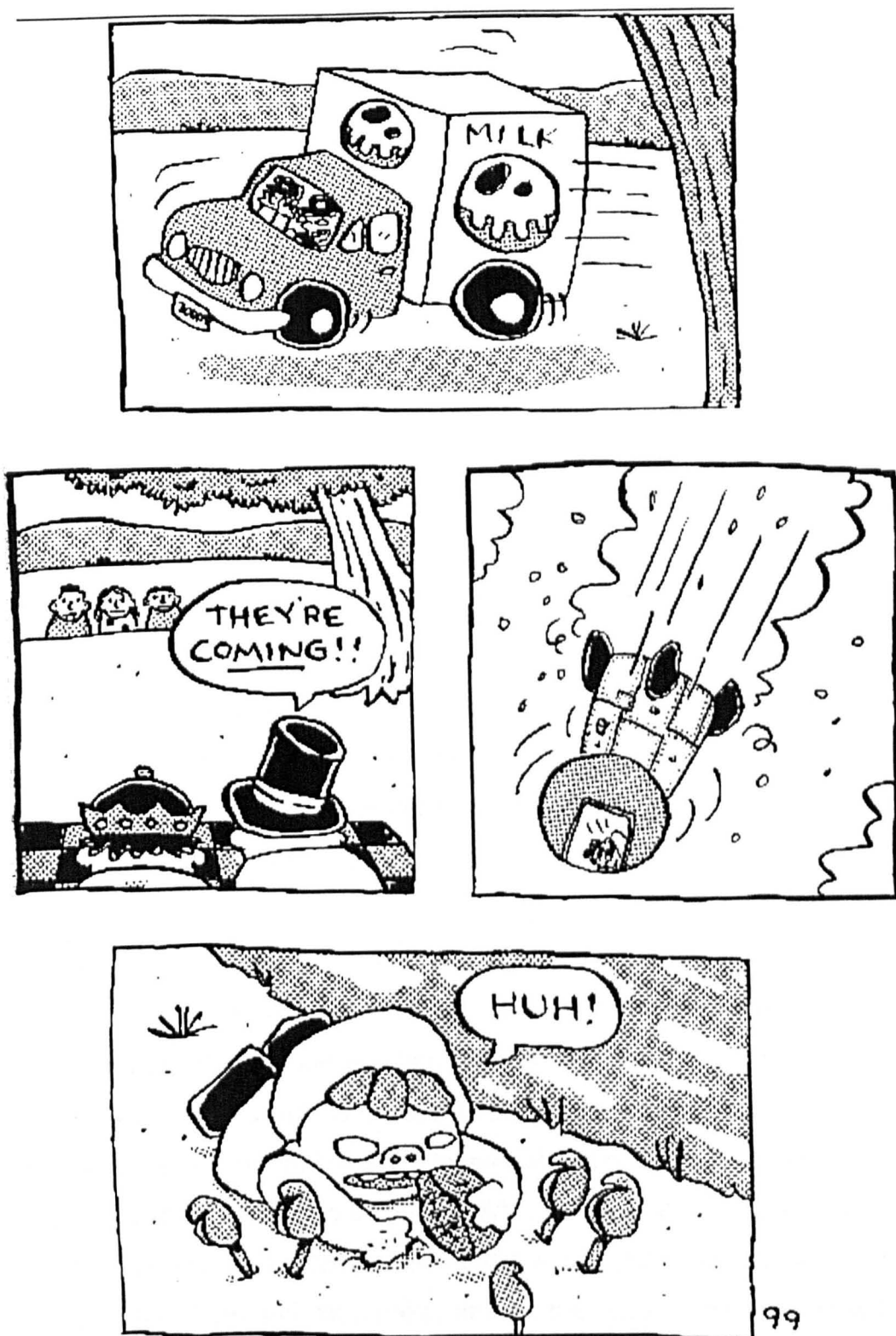
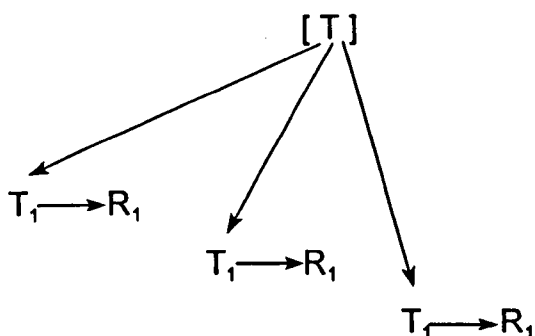


Figure 3.14: Tom Hart, *The Sands*





where the "particular utterance themes are derived from a "hypertheme" (120). If generalised enough, I think that the same concept applies to the passage above too, in which each of the panels are associated with a theme within the story, while the story itself can be considered to be the "hypertheme" from which all the other themes derive. Daneš also observes that "the choice and sequence of the derived utterance themes will be controlled by various special (mostly extralinguistic) usage of the presentation of subject matter" (120). In literary texts, the presentation of subject matter is not necessarily controlled by strict conventions but the author is freer to "disarrange" it for various purposes, one effect being always an increased involvement and participation of the reader.

In the last two passages above, two diametrically different approaches to the medium of comics are evinced: in one the author clearly aims at minimising the fragmentation that panels inevitably cause in the narrative, while in the other, on the contrary, the novelist accentuates that fragmentation and makes use of it as a powerful narrative tool in order to involve the reader and call for his contribution. Accordingly, reading is quite a different experience in the two extracts. In the Disney one the narrative runs fluidly and in total harmony with the physical succession of the various panels, and all the reader needs to do is follow the story-line. No particular contribution is required from him and closure is a completely unconscious phenomenon. In the passage from *The Sands*, instead, the act of recomposing and linking together parts of the story is a constant

necessity for the reader, if he or she wants to make sense out of it.

### 3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has dealt with the topic of intersentential connections within texts, which has been referred to with the term *relatedness*. The theoretical underpinnings have been largely drawn from existing analytical models of cohesion in verbal language, which is the main concern of text-linguistics. It is precisely in this area of research that relatedness has been most widely investigated, while, on the other hand, non-verbal texts have attracted very little interest from this point of view. The lack of any established theory in the field of relatedness in non-linguistic text, has left no other choice but to approach the matter from the point of view of verbal language.

Significantly, this has not represented a limitation but, on the contrary, it has been an advantage, as it has made it possible for the analysis to be based on a solid theoretical basis. Indeed, the application of linguistic models to picture-only passages of comics has proven to be so suitable that the following conclusions can be drawn:

- 1) the analysis of comics texts using linguistic models can have repercussion on the study of language-based texts, in that it shows with particular clarity the importance of such categories as repetition, collocation, semantic field and closure in the determination of the relatedness between text-units;
- 2) the applicability of linguistic models to visual comics texts reinforces the idea that pictures can effectively function as language. This poses a greater, more general question of what is ultimately the nature of communication: verbal or visual?

The reinforcement of the idea that visual texts can be subject to the same type

of analysis that is normally applied to verbal texts allows to take the investigation further, into what is the domain of literary linguistics. This is the topic of the next chapter.

## Chapter Four

### Aspects of style in comics:

#### Point of view, voice and narratorial weight

#### 4.1 Introduction

The investigation proposed in this chapter represents a development of the core hypothesis of this study, in the sense that it continues to suggest the existence of points of similarity between verbal language and visual language. So far, I have discussed the similarities between verbal language and visual language from a general semiotic perspective (in Chapter Two), and seen how these similarities are not only confined to the individual image or picture but also exist on the textual level (in Chapter Three). Here, I intend to carry the analysis forward more decidedly into the realm of stylistics. In broad terms, this chapter addresses what seems to me a natural and logical continuation of the study: the opposition that exists in narrative between *mimesis* and *diegesis* or, more simply, between telling and showing. As a mixed-code medium, comics certainly offer elements that can spur an interesting discussion on the intrinsic diegetic or mimetic nature of the form.

The chapter is divided into two sections, organised in a such a way that the first one offers the theoretical underpinnings for the analysis contained in the second one.



speech, thus reducing the directness of 'showing'" (Rimmon-Kenan: 1992: 108). Therefore, the conclusion at which both Genette and Rimmon-Kenan arrive is that in narrative the problem is not so much the distinction between mimesis and diegesis, as one of *degrees* of diegesis (Genette, 1980: 164; Rimmon-Kenan: 1992: 108).

I agree with the notion of degrees of diegesis. However, I do not concur with the terms in which Genette raises his objection to Lubbock's claim above. The idea of a story that "tells itself" is absurd if one takes this expression in its literal sense. Yet, Genette's objection is based precisely on a literal interpretation of Lubbock's assertion. Indeed I think that when applied to narrative, a crucial point in the whole issue of the opposition between diegesis and mimesis is whether or not such opposition should be taken literally. If it is, then no alternatives are possible to the fact that all narrative is always and solely diegetic, precisely because, as Genette himself notes, language signifies, and does not imitate. Therefore, if the notion of diegesis is taken literally, even the idea of different degrees would not hold, as it would be incompatible with the axiom that language cannot imitate.

What is more, Genette's and Rimmon-Kenan's two conclusions, (a) that narrative cannot attain mimesis, and (b) that only degrees of diegesis are consequently conceivable, seem to me reciprocally contradictory. If diegesis is opposed to mimesis, and if the existence of different degrees of diegesis is allowed for, concurrent different degrees of mimesis *must* exist too: different degrees of diegesis *are* different degrees of mimesis.

If the expression "story that tells itself" is, on the other hand, *not* taken literally, the case opens up to different possibilities. The alternative to a literal interpretation is one in which the opposition between mimesis and diegesis is considered as part of the "craft of fiction". It is only in this sense, in my opinion, that not only are different degrees of diegesis/mimesis conceivable, but also pure mimesis cannot

be excluded.

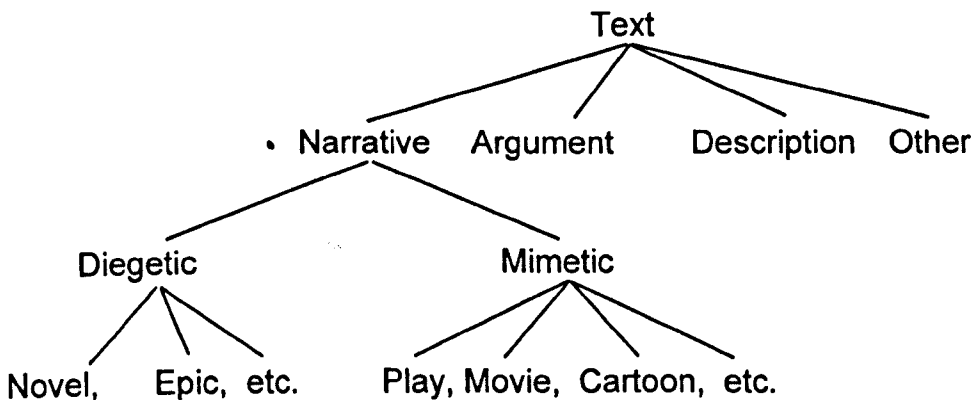
#### 4.2.1.2 Seymour Chatman's view

Genette's literal interpretation of Lubbock's expression derives from the fact that the French scholar considers "narrative" in a narrow sense, i.e. only as verbal. For Seymour Chatman, instead, "narrative" has a broader sense: it is a text type which incorporates both drama (when it is enacted) *and* verbal narration (when it is recounted), since

Both rely on sequences of events, and both present a chronology of events different from the chronology of the discourse. This double chronology is the fundamental property that distinguishes the text type Narrative from others.

(Chatman, 1990: 110)

Thus, Chatman is of the opinion that "the distinction between Narrative and the other text types is of a higher order than that between the two ways of communicating a narrative, telling and showing" (115) and proposes the following hierarchy:



(115)

I certainly agree with the idea of narrative being a superordinate of the different forms in which it can be expressed, as it is one of the main postulates of this study. However, the broader sense in which "narrative" is intended is the only point on which Chatman's view really differs from Genette's, since a literal interpretation

of the mimesis/diegesis opposition is still proposed.

In fact, such literal interpretation is fundamentally a semiotic one: mimesis implies the use of icons, while diegesis implies the use of symbols. This, however, poses a first problem for the diagrammatical categorization proposed above, which derives from the fact that the difference between iconic signs and symbolic signs is often not a clear-cut one (see Chapter Two for a more detailed discussion). Chatman himself does not disregard this issue and interestingly mentions "the cartoon's spare lines" as an example of iconic signs which are in fact closer to the arbitrary nature of symbols (Chatman, 1990: 114). But, despite this awareness, he still separates Novel from Cartoon, respectively as a diegetic form and a mimetic form, as if the difference was a clear-cut one.

However, the main problem with a literal/semiotic interpretation of the mimesis/diegesis opposition is that it can only conceive difference *across* the various media, but not *within* them. Even if the "impurity" of many signs is effectively taken into account and a scale (rather than a clear-cut division) of grades of mimesis/diegesis is proposed, such a scale would put into relation the various media with one another, but it would not be possible to contemplate it within each medium. This is because from a semiotic point of view every medium (written narrative, comics, film, drama, etc.) is characterised by a certain degree of iconicity/symbolicity which does not significantly vary within the medium itself. So, if mimetic and diegetic are respectively made to correspond to iconic and symbolic *only*, it is not possible to go any further than an *inter-media* scale. On the other hand, if elements *other than* the semiotic ones are also taken into account, it becomes viable to propose an *intra-medium* scale as well.

In order to do so, it is first of all necessary that Lubbock's expression "story that tells itself" be taken figuratively, rather than literally, i.e. as part of the very "craft of fiction". It is only in this sense that one can envisage stylistic (rather than



semiotic) devices by means of which each medium can vary its own degree of diegesis/mimesis. The aspects of style that contribute to this gradation are point of view and the presentation of speech and thought. However, since I have indicated it as the domain in which the diegesis/mimesis opposition is to be interpreted, before I begin a discussion on point of view and speech/thought presentation, it will be useful to first illustrate the basic constituents of the "craft of fiction".

#### 4.2.2 The craft of fiction

The first important point to highlight is the distinction between *fabula* and *plot*. As Umberto Eco explains,

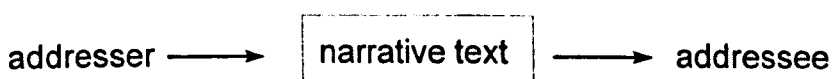
The *fabula* is the fundamental scheme of narration, the logic of the actions and the syntax of the characters, the course of chronologically ordered events. ... The plot, instead, is the story as it is actually told, as it appears on the surface, with its chronological displacements, its leaps forward and backward, its descriptions, digressions and parenthetical reflections.

(Eco, 1985: 102, my translation)

Thus, in its most elementary description, a narrative text is produced when someone translates a *fabula* into a plot and narrates it. Given this basic principle, it is possible to delineate the roles of the various participants in narrative.

##### 4.2.2.1 *The participants in the narrative discourse*

First of all, a narrative text is ultimately a message and, as such, it implies the presence of an addresser and an addressee:



Most obviously, the role of the addresser is played by the author, and that of the

addressee by the reader. However, in the last forty years or so, narratologists, mainly following the ideas of Wayne Booth (1961), have developed this idea considerably, and have conceived the presence of other figures for the roles of addresser and addressee. As an overview, the following chart may be useful:

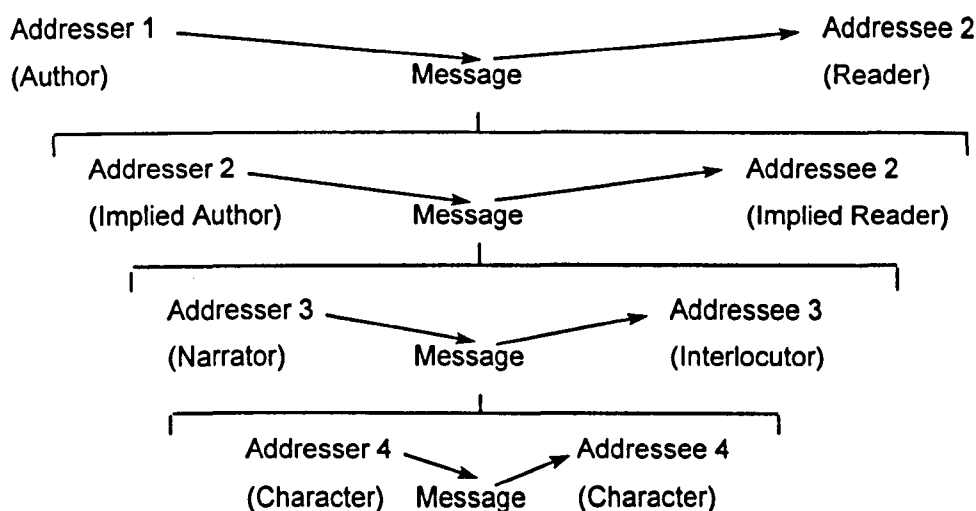


Table 4.1

(Leech and Short, 1981: 269)

As the diagram shows, each addresser reports a message to an addressee, and that message consists of a lower-level addresser also reporting a message to its own addressee, and so on. The way in which Leech and Short schematise narrative levels, however, is not fully shared by other scholars.

#### 4.2.2.2 *Real author and implied author*

As regards the distinction between "real author" and "implied author", Wayne Booth remarks that "as he writes, [the author] creates not simply an ideal, impersonal 'man in general' but an implied version of 'himself' that is different from the implied authors we meet in other men's works" (Booth, 1961: 70-1). So, the implied author is not a real person but a figure that the reader infers from the text itself.

This notion is shared by some other scholars, e.g. Fowler (1977), Leech and Short

(1981), Chatman (1978) and (1990), and Bal (1985), but not by others. Rimmon-Kenan, for example, argues that the implied author should be considered as "a set of implicit norms rather than as a speaker or a voice" and "cannot literally be a participant in the narrative communication situation" (Rimmon-Kenan, 1992: 88). Michael Toolan goes further and claims that the distinction between real author and implied author is immaterial as far as narrative production is concerned. While the reader does create an implied image of the author, which is different from the real author, there is no reason why such an image should have a distinct role in narrative transmission. After all, "even if we know an author personally, we still perform the same process of forming a mental picture or representation (itself a kind of narrative) of that author to ourselves, as in integral part of knowing a person" (Toolan, 1988: 78). So, the implied author is a construct of the reader, "is a projection back from the decoding side, not a real projecting stage on the encoding side" (78). I find Toolan's argument against the role of the implied author as one of the addressers very convincing, and therefore I will follow his view in this study.

#### 4.2.2.3 *The narrator*

Different views exist on the role of the narrator too. Traditional typologies of narrators normally contemplate the basic distinction between narrators that participate in the events of the story and narrators that are absent from those events.

Accordingly, Genette (1980: 248-9) and Rimmon-Kenan (1992: 94-6), differentiate between

- *heterodiegetic* narrator, a narrator who tells a story he is absent from,  
and
- *homodiegetic* narrator, a narrator in the first degree who tells his own story.

More recently, Short (1996) makes a similar distinction between "I-narrators" and "third-person narrators" and explains it in the following way:

I-narrators: "The person who tells the story may also be a character in the fictional world of the story, relating the story after the event. In this case critics call the narrator a first-person or I-narrator" (Short, 1996: 257).

Third-person narrators: "If the narrator is *not* a character in the fictional world, he or she is usually called a 'third-person' narrator, because reference to all the characters in the fictional world of the story will involve the use of the third-person pronouns, 'he', 'she' 'it' or 'they'" (258).

However, this dichotomy is not shared by all scholars. Mieke Bal (1985), for example, rejects the above criteria for a distinction between first-person and third-person narrator, which she considers ineffectual:

As soon as there is language, there is a speaker who utters it; as soon as those linguistic utterances constitute a narrative text, there is a narrator, a narrating subject. From a grammatical point of view, this is *always* a 'first person'. In fact, the term 'third-person narrator' is absurd: a narrator is not a 'he' or 'she'. At best the narrator can narrate *about* someone else, a 'he' or 'she'.

(Bal, 1985: 121-2)

Hence, any sentence of a narrative text implies the presence of an "I" narrative agent. "Mary saw a cat" implies "(I narrate that) Mary saw a cat", in the same way as "I saw a cat" implies "(I narrate that) I saw a cat". The distinction between first-person and third-person does not involve the narrator, but merely the references to the characters, which remain unchanged regardless of whether the narrator happens to have been part of the story or absent from it.

In fact, one should be particularly careful when discussing the presence/absence of the narrator in/from the story. In this respect, Chatman warns against a possible confusion: "The narrator's task is not to go strolling with the characters, but to

narrate what happens to them..." (Chatman, 1990: 120), since "the narrator cannot impinge on story space but must stay within the bounds of discourse space" and "discourse space must not be confused with the story space that it looks upon" (123).

Besides, even if such confusion is avoided, the actual difference between a narrator that did participate in the events narrated and one that did not seems unclear. Rimmon-Kenan takes, as an example of homodiegetic narrator, Pip of *Great Expectations*, and compares him to Fielding's, Balzac's and Lawrence's narrators:

Like them, the adult Pip is a higher narratorial authority in relation to the story which he narrates, as it were, from 'above'. Although not omniscient in principle, when narrating the story he knows 'everything' about it, like the former extradiegetic narrators. He knows the solution to the enigma concerning the identity of the mysterious benefactor ...; he has knowledge of simultaneous events happening in different places ...; he is aware of the characters' innermost emotions ..., etc. However, unlike the other extradiegetic narrators, Pip tells a story in which a younger version of himself participated. He is thus a homo- not a heterodiegetic narrator.

(Rimmon-Kenan, 1992: 95-6)

If, as Rimmon-Kenan clearly states, the narrator Pip is effectively equivalent to the others mentioned and the only difference is that he, unlike them, was a participant in the story, the difference between homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narrator is reduced to a mere fact of terminology, which does not alter the status of the narrator "outside" and "above" the story he narrates.

Chatman, who insists on the principle whereby "the narrator can [not] inhabit both discourse and story at the instant of narration" (Chatman, 1990: 123), surprisingly allows for exceptions in cases of embedded narration (123). In my opinion, the external position of the narrator with respect to his story remains unchanged even in cases in which the narrative includes in itself an embedded narrative, i.e. even when, for example, one of the participating characters (e.g. the Pardoner in *The*

*Canterbury Tales*) tells a story to other characters and becomes himself or herself a narrator. Essentially, it is a matter of narrative levels, each of which is not substantially different from the others. Rimmon-Kenan observes that

A character whose actions are the object of narration can himself in turn engage in narrating a story. Within his story there may, of course, be yet another character who narrates another story, and so on in infinite regress. Such narratives within narratives create a stratification of levels whereby each inner narrative is subordinate to the narrative within which it is embedded.

(Rimmon-Kenan: 1983: 91)

The meta-narrative levels may be embedded, but the narrator, at whichever level he is, cannot at the same time narrate and be part of the story. Graphically, embedded levels of narration can be represented as follows:

level 1 narrator	level 1 narrative			
	level 2 narrator	level 2 narrative		
		level 3 narrator	level 3 narrative	
			level 4 narrator	level 4 narrative

Table 4.2

As the table shows, the level 2 narrator inhabits the story of the level 1 narrative, but is external from the story which he recounts at level 2, and the same applies for all subsequent embedded narratives.

Thus, if the author is the one who, given a story, envisages and creates a plot, i.e. a discourse through which that story is eventually told, the narrator can be considered as the one *delegated* to actually carry out the narrating. This second figure may or may not be someone who has taken part in the events narrated, but it is also possible for the narrator to be non-human.

So far I have been referring to the narrator as "he", which entails the properties

of human and male. This is not uncommon in narratology. Wayne Booth (1961), for example, regularly refers to the narrator as "he", while even in more recent studies (e.g. Simpson, 1993; Short, 1996; Fowler, 1996), the idea of the narrator as being a person is, if not explicitly stated, at least implied. This probably derives from the fact that narrating is, in real life, an activity associated to humans. As for the narrator's gender, the choice of "he" is likely to be due the fact that the English language forces the user to specify the gender of the third-person pronoun, and that, traditionally, in absence of evidence to the contrary, an unnamed agent is always assumed to be male. Significantly, Michael Toolan (1988) refers to the narrator as "she", which, besides perhaps trying to balance inequalities of gender in academic writing, in fact reinforces and confirms the idea of the narrator as a human being.

A different opinion is offered by Chatman, who insists at length on the fact that the narrator need not always be human. As he explains,

every narrative is by definition narrated ... and that narration ... entails an agent even when the agent bears no signs of human personality. Agency is marked etymologically by the *-er/-or* suffix attached to the verbs "present" or "narrate". The suffix means either "agent" or "instrument", and neither need be human.

(Chatman, 1990: 115-6)

In this case it is as if the author delegates the act of narrating not to a person but to a machine, which can be figuratively compared to a video-player, which shows without the mediation of a narrative voice. The story is then not mediated, but presented directly to the audience, and pure mimesis can be said to be attained.

It is crucial — and that is why I reiterate this point — that this scenario be considered entirely as part of "the craft of fiction" and not in any real-life sense. The necessity to stress this point comes from the terms in which Chatman (1990: 115-138) discusses the idea of the narrator as a non-human figure. The American scholar does so primarily from a semiotic *inter-media* perspective: fundamentally,

for Chatman the narrator is not human in those media that he considers mimetic. In film, for example, "The overall agent that does the showing I would call the 'cinematic narrator'. That narrator is not a human being" (Chatman, 1990: 134).

Yet, Chatman also suggests that a non-human narrator may also exist in verbal narrative, when he observes that "modern novels and short stories tend to be shown rather than told" and that "Once we allow the possibility of showing a narrative, we perforce recognize the existence of a show-er, even if not a human one" (116). But this contrasts with his general semiotic approach with which he defines the difference between showing and telling, and which leads him to distinguish Film from Novel on account of their iconic or symbolic nature. Chatman's concrete, real-life stance becomes very apparent when he remarks that "In this age of mechanical and electronic production and reproduction, of 'smart' machines, it would be naive to reject the notion of nonhuman narrative agency" (116). But this cannot be accounted for to explain nonhuman agency in the Novel, for example, which is of a very different nature.

In conclusion, there will be an unresolved conflict between the notion of "showing" in a visual medium like film and "showing" in verbal narrative if one forces both to be explained in semiotic terms. In the second case, only a figurative, fictional explanation is possible, one based on devices of pure stylistic nature.

#### 4.2.3 Point of view

##### 4.2.3.1 *The polysemy of "point of view"*

The category of *point of view* is widely discussed in narrative studies, and yet it has not been defined in any established way. The treatment of point of view is rendered a particularly complex one because of two problems.

The first originates from the fact that "point of view" has different meanings, all



of which are common in every-day language. Chatman (1978: 151-2, 1990: 139-140) stresses this point as he identifies three senses in which the expression "point of view" is normally used:

- *perceptual* point of view is the literal sense, where "view" means what is physically seen, e.g. "from this point you can get a very nice view";
- *conceptual* point of view is the figurative sense, derived from the literal one, and involves someone's opinion, rather than what they physically perceive, e.g. "from my point of view the government has made a mistake";
- *interest* point of view does not entail the activity of perceiving or conceiving, but describes the position in which someone or something is as a result of a certain event, e.g. "from the point of view of the villagers, the construction of the new airport is a calamity".

A similar differentiation of senses attributable to "point of view" in narrative texts is proposed by Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan (1983) and Roger Fowler (1996), both of whom closely (although not entirely) follow Boris Uspensky's (1973) classification. Thus Rimmon-Kenan (1983: 77-82) and Fowler (1996: 162-170) distinguish three aspects of point of view:

- the *perceptual*, which describes the perception of space and time;
- the *psychological*, which concerns someone's mind and emotions;
- the *ideological*, which involves "the set of values, or belief system, communicated by the language of the text" (Fowler, 1996: 165).

In this respect I would like to add a note on the distinction between perceptual and psychological point of view. Although it is undeniable that between the literal and the figurative sense of "view" there is a difference, it is also at the same time reasonable to think that the two are not unrelated. If thinking is a mental activity, so is seeing/hearing. If to be able to know a character's thoughts it is necessary

to gain access to his or her own mind, the same access is needed in order to know what that character sees. The object seen may be an entity external to the character's mind, but to believe that it equates to the character's *perception* of it would be an inexactness. So, the way in which a character sees something can only be known if access is granted to his or her mind. In my opinion, therefore, what is referred to as "perceptual" point of view should also be incorporated within psychological point of view.

The adjective "perceptual" should then be replaced by "spatial", which renders a better idea of the way it actually differs from "psychological". As Paul Simpson explains, "spatial point of view designates broadly the viewing position assumed by the narrator of a story" (Simpson, 1993: 12), while psychological point of view "refers to the ways in which narrative events are mediated through the consciousness of the 'teller' of the story" (11).

#### 4.2.3.2 *Point of view and voice*

Simpson's mention of the 'teller' in his definition of psychological point of view introduces the second problem that complicates the analysis of point of view in narrative texts, which stems from the ease with which the term tends to be associated with the typology of *voice*. This is because it is often assumed that the point of view expressed in any portion of text belongs to the same person who expresses it. Mick Short, for example, is one of the scholars who identifies point of view with voice in a particular marked way. In Short (1996) the treatment of point of view is based on the distinction between I-narrators and third-person narrators (Short, 1996: 257-260), which clearly suggests that the analysis of point of view essentially involves establishing who voices it.

But against the coincidence of point of view and voice there is a strong argument, based on the consideration that what a person sees — not only in the literal sense but also in the figurative senses mentioned above — does not necessarily need

to be expressed by that same person only. In other words, while someone can express his or her own point of view, he or she can also report someone else's, which is precisely what happens frequently in narrative texts, where, for example, the narrator may report one character's point of view. As Chatman observes, "point of view does *not* mean expression; it only means the perspective in terms of which the expression is made. *The perspective and the expression need not be lodged in the same person*" (Chatman, 1978: 153). It is this consideration that has led some scholars, including Chatman himself, to insist on the fundamental distinction between point of view and voice. In this respect, Genette (1980) criticises those studies which "suffer from a regrettable confusion between ... the question *who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective?* and the very different question *who is the narrator?* — or, more simply, the question *who sees?* and the question *who speaks?*" (Genette 1980: 186). Analogously, Bal remarks that when no distinction is made between the two, "it is difficult, if not impossible, to describe adequately the technique of a text in which something is seen — *and that vision is narrated*" (Bal, 1985: 101).

Bulgakov's novel *A Dog's Heart* represents a perfect case in which a story is told through the point of view of an animal but obviously voiced by someone else. However, it is not even necessary to resort to such an extreme example, as the same phenomenon occurs much more often. A short extract from *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* will be useful to show the difference between point of view and voice. It is the episode in which Mr Hyde meets and murders Sir Danvers Carew, and the scene is seen by a maid:

...she sat down upon her box, which stood immediately under the window... And as she so sat she became aware of an aged and beautiful gentleman with white hair drawing near along the lane; and advancing to meet him, another and very small gentleman, to whom at first she paid less attention. When they had come within speech (which was just under the maid's eyes) the

*older man bowed and accosted the other with a very pretty manner of politeness. It did not seem as if the subject of his address were of great importance...*

Here it is the maid who is seeing the scene, and therefore the point of view is hers, which is confirmed by the fact that the two men are described as if they were completely unknown to her. But the voice is quite clearly the narrator's, since it would be difficult to attribute the type of language employed to the maid. Also, the use of the personal pronoun *she* reinforces the idea that the narrator is *reporting* the maid's perception of the scene.

While the terminological differentiation between point of view and voice is an important and necessary one, such a distinction should not be considered as preventing interaction between the two. On the contrary, it is precisely the way in which point of view and voice combine together that can be more interesting than the analysis of one or the other separately. In this respect, it is significant that Rimmon-Kenan observes that the distinction between point of view and voice "is a theoretical necessity, and only on its basis can the interrelation between them be studied with precision" (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983: 72), which clearly suggests that the objective of the analysis is precisely this interrelation. Genette himself, who is the first one to have argued against the identification of point of view with voice, makes it absolutely clear that "It is certainly legitimate to envisage a typology of 'narrative situations' that would take into account the data of both mood and voice; what is not legitimate is to present such a classification under the single category of 'point of view'" (Genette, 1980: 188).

The question, then, is to define which such "narrative situations" are and how they can be studied with precision.

#### 4.2.3.3 *Point of view and perspective*

One notion that seems suitable as a starting point to answer this question is that of *perspective*, which has been developed particularly clearly by Fowler (1986: 89-103) and, in a partially revised version, in (1996: 170-183). Within the discussion of psychological point of view, he introduces the concept of *perspective*, which he classifies into two main categories, each further subdivided into two types:

p e r s p e c t i v e			
i n t e r n a l		e x t e r n a l	
t y p e A	t y p e B	t y p e C	t y p e D

Table 4.3

The first distinction, between internal and external perspective is fundamentally a matter of access into the characters's mind: the internal perspective "opens to us characters' states of mind, reactions and motives", while the external perspective "accepts the privacy of other people's experience" (Fowler, 1986: 89-90). As regards the subsequent classification into types A, B, C and D, these are the definitions provided by Fowler himself:

- Type A— narration from a point of view within a character's consciousness, manifesting his or her feelings about, and evaluations of, the events and characters of the story;
- Type B— narration from the point of view of someone who is not a participating character but who has knowledge of the feelings of the characters;
- Type C— narration from a position outside from any of the protagonists' consciousness, with no privileged access to their private feelings and opinions;
- Type D— narration which stresses the limitations of authorial knowledge, the inaccessibility of the characters' ideologies

(Fowler, 1996: 170).

It should be noted that Fowler does not use the term *voice* nor does he make the theoretical differentiation discussed in section 4.2.3.2. In fact, the definitions above

seem to suggest that point of view is equated to voice, whereas if the distinction between the two is kept — as it should be — the four types can be redefined in terms of "who perceives" and "who speaks". Thus, in both types A and B the point of view is the character's, while the voice belongs to the character in type A and to the narrator in type B. As far as types C and D are concerned, both point of view and voice are attributable to the narrator, thus eliminating the difference between the two types. Therefore, the following three cases are possible:

	<i>point of view</i>	<i>voice</i>
<i>internal perspective (A)</i>	character's	character's
<i>internal perspective (B)</i>	character's	narrator's
<i>external perspective (C and D)</i>	narrator's	narrator's

Table 4.4

Redefined in this way, the distinction between internal and external perspective becomes directly dependent on point of view: if the point of view belongs to the character the perspective is internal, if it belongs to the narrator the perspective is external. The necessity to use the term *perspective* is then greatly reduced, since it effectively becomes a synonym of *point of view*.

The other, more important, point about Table 4.4 above is the fact that it represents a first step towards the definition of mimetic and diegetic narration that I seek to propose here.

#### 4.2.3.4 *Narrator's weight*

It can be noted that in each of the three possible cases the presence of the narrator varies in weight: in the first case it is equal to zero, in the second case it is partial, and in the third total. Thus, Table 4.4 can be slightly re-outlined, and re-ordered, as follows:

case	point of view	voice	narrator's weight
A	narrator's	narrator's	total
B	character's	narrator's	partial
C	character's	character's	zero

Table 4.5

The sentences "Mary saw a cat" and "I saw a cat", for example, are absolutely equivalent in terms of narrator's weight, since in both the point of view is the character's and the voice is the narrator's (case B). A passage of interior monologue, instead, will have narrator's weight equal to zero (case C), while in a description of setting the presence of the narrator will have its maximum weight (case A).

One notion in modern narratology seems to be closely related to this idea of narrator's weight, namely that of narrator's "visibility" or "perceptibility", which is discussed by Chatman (1978: 196-262), Rimmon-Kenan (1992: 96-100) and Bal (1985: 123-134). However, a closer examination will reveal that there is no real equivalence between the two notions. Chatman and Rimmon-Kenan propose the following scale of narrative situations, which ranges from the least visible narrator to the most visible one:

1. description of setting
2. identification of characters
3. temporal summary
4. definition of characters
5. report of what characters did not think or say
6. commentary.

Significantly, in such a scale of visibility set descriptions are regarded as instances of narrative situations in which the narrator is *least* perceptible, which evidently contrasts with the idea of the narrator having maximum weight in this type of

situations, as suggested above in Table 4.5.

To illustrate this difference further, I will take into account the narrative situation of set description, which is the one in which narrator's visibility and narrator's weight are at the opposite ends of their respective scales. Interestingly, Bal (1985: 133-4) proposes a scale of narrator's perceptibility (from lowest to highest) within the description type itself:

1. the referential, encyclopaedic description
2. the referential-rhetorical description
3. metaphoric metonymy
4. the systematized metaphor
5. the metonymic metaphor
6. the series of metaphor.

Without delving into the specifics of each of these categories, it will suffice to notice how the scale is clearly based on the relationship between referential and representational language (see McRae, 1991/1997: 1-7 for further details on this opposition). This implies the presupposition that the more the language employed in a description is representational, the more it signals the presence of the narrator, hence the higher degree of narrator's visibility. Chatman too mentions the presence of metaphors as an indicator of the narrator's presence (Chatman, 1978: 219).

My argument, in this respect, is that once it is established that the voice belongs to the narrators, this fact will continue to be true regardless of the type of language employed, be it more or less representational, evaluative, or modal.

It will be useful, at this point, to examine the following extract from E.M. Forster's *Passage to India*:



The caves are readily described. A tunnel eight feet long, five feet high, three feet wide, leads to a circular chamber about twenty feet in diameter. This arrangement occurs again and again throughout the group of hills, and this is all, this is a Marabar cave. Having seen one such cave, having seen two, having seen three, four, fourteen, twenty-four, the visitor returns to Chandrapore uncertain whether he has had an interesting experience or a dull one or any experience at all. He finds it difficult to discuss the caves, or to keep them apart in his mind, for the pattern never varies, and no carving, not even a bees nest or a bat, distinguishes one from another. Nothing, nothing attaches to them, and their reputation, for they have one, does not depend upon human speech. It is as if the surrounding plain or the passing birds have taken upon themselves to exclaim Extraordinary! and the word has taken root in the air, and been inhaled by mankind.

It is interesting how this description gradually moves from the encyclopaedic referential type to the representational metaphoric type, effectively covering, within a few lines, nearly the whole range of description types contemplated by Bal. Besides, the amount of judgmental/evaluative language also follows an incremental pattern. Expressions like "and this is all", "uncertain", "interesting", "dull" and so on are, according to the criteria of narrator's visibility/perceptibility, instances of the narrator's making himself seen/heard.

However, in my opinion, whether the language is referential or representational, whether it expresses evaluation or remains neutral, whether or not it contains metaphors, in narrative situations like the one in the extract above the description can only be voiced by the narrator.

Besides, when the Marabar Caves are described, there are no characters present in the scene, which means that the point of view too belongs to the narrator. In it is in this sense that this can be considered to be an example of case A (see Table 4.5 above), in which the narrator has maximum weight, as opposed to having little visibility according to more traditional criteria.

Commenting on a short set description from a short story by Hemingway, Rimmon-

Kenan, who follows Chatman's scale of degrees of perceptibility, observes that "In a play or film, all this would be shown directly. In narrative fiction it has to be said in language, and the language is that of a narrator" (Rimmon-Kenan, 1992: 97). Yet, this is regarded as a case in which there is a "relatively minimal sign of a narrator's presence" (96-7). This seems to me rather paradoxical. If, unlike in a play or film — or in a comic strip — set descriptions in written fiction need to be told, rather than shown, it means that there must be a narrator that tells them.

As discussed earlier in section 4.2.2.3, this kind of paradoxes can be resolved if the difference between mimesis and diegesis, between showing and telling, is defined not only in semiotic terms but also, within the same medium, in stylistic ones and, especially, if the two are not combined together by force. When analysing verbal narrative it would be a conceptual inexactitude to claim that a set description is "shown", with little signs of a narrator's presence, because the same scene would be shown in a film. "Showing" cannot be intended in the same sense in both cases: from a semiotic stance, film narrative shows, verbal narrative tells, and comics narrative does both; in stylistic terms, the distinction between "showing" and "telling" is of a different order, since it concerns the devices by which each medium varies its own degree of mimesis/diegesis.

#### **4.2.3.5**      *Different roles for the narrator*

Thus, in the six types of set descriptions seen above and, for that matter, in *any* narrative situation, the narrator's weight is determined by establishing the combination that exists between who thinks/feels/perceives and who speaks. This implies that the narrator can have different roles:

- in case A his role is to narrate the events from his own point of view;
- in case B he narrates the events as perceived by a character, or the subject of narration is the character's thought or feelings;
- in case C he does not report the events with his own voice or from his own point of view, but lets the characters voice their thoughts/feelings/perceptions

directly.

To conclude, it should be noted that the type of narrator is not necessarily fixed across the whole length of the same narrative text. Rather, since both point of view and voice can shift from narrator to character and vice versa, the narrator's weight varies accordingly.

The next section will examine more closely the typology of voice and the various ways in which it is presented in narrative.

#### 4.2.4 Speech and thought presentation

The presentation of speech and thought in fictional narrative is a relatively less debated area than the one concerning point of view or the types of narrators. One of the most comprehensive studies on this aspect of narratology is *Speech in the English Novel*, by Norman Page (1988), who analyses not only the different modes of speech and thought presentation but also, and especially, how they intermingle, so that rather than rigid categories, Page discusses what is best described as a gradation of ways in which speech and thought can be presented in fiction. This is the approach that I will follow in the second part of this chapter, when extracts from comics texts will be analysed. However, the aim of this section is not to provide a thorough investigation, but rather to provide an outline of the various modes of speech/thought presentation and to relate them to the overall topic of the chapter. Therefore, for a more schematic description, I will utilise the model offered by Leech and Short (1981: 318-351).

##### 4.2.4.1 *Five modes of speech/thought presentation*

Leech and Short distinguish five different ways in which speech and thought can be presented in narrative fiction: *narrative report*, *indirect*, *free indirect*, *direct* and *free direct*, so that for both speech presentation and thought presentation, the

modes are:

s p e e c h	t h o u g h t
<i>narrative report of speech act (NRSA)</i>	<i>narrative report of thought act (NRTA)</i>
<i>indirect speech (IS)</i>	<i>indirect thought (IT)</i>
<i>free indirect speech (FIS)</i>	<i>free indirect thought (FIT)</i>
<i>direct speech (DS)</i>	<i>direct thought (DT)</i>
<i>free direct speech (FDS)</i>	<i>free direct thought (FDT)</i>

Table 4.6

Although from this table it may look as if the modes of speech presentation are equivalent to the modes of thought presentation, the stylistic implications that they have are different, and so it is best if the two be considered separately.

#### 4.2.4.2 Presentation of speech

The differences between the five modes of speech presentation can be illustrated with examples (from Leech and Short, 1981: 319-325):

NRSA *He promised to visit here again.*

IS *He said the he would return there to see her the following day.*

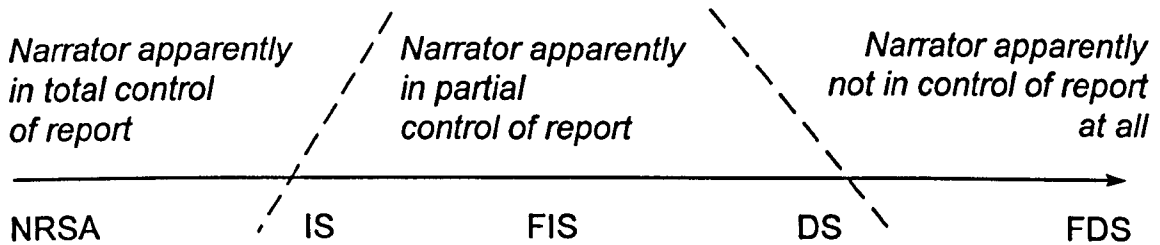
FIS *He would come back there to see her again the following day.*

DS *He said: "I'll come back here to see you again tomorrow."*

FDS *I'll come back here to see you again tomorrow.*

FDS represents the character's speech as was 'really' uttered, and shows no intervention by the narrator. Moving up the scale, the other modes increasingly exhibit signs of narratorial intervention. Such signs are shown both in form, through changes in syntax, verb tenses, and orthography; and in content, as the utterance ceases to be reported as such and becomes part of the narrative. So, it can be seen how, from NRSA to FDS, the control of the narrative gradually shifts

from the narrator to the character. And, in fact, Leech and Short position the five modes in what they call "cline of 'interference'":



(adapted from Leech and Short, 1981: 324)

In terms of narratorial control, the diagram represents three cases — total control, partial control and absence of control — which can be put into relation respectively to cases A, B and C discussed earlier (see Table 4.5, section 4.2.3.4).

First of all, it can be observed that for NRSA and FDS there is a one-to-one equivalence respectively with case A and case C, since they represent absolute values — *total* control by and *no* control by the narrator. IS, FIS and DS, instead, all correspond to case B, thereby effectively refining the definition of narrator's "partial" control. To different degrees, IS, FIS, and DS are "impure" forms of speech presentation, in the sense that the voice is not wholly the narrator's nor the character's. For example, if one takes the following FDS

*Where does it come from? I've heard it somewhere.*

and transforms it into DS, FIS and IS, in all cases some modification will be necessary. In DS, a reporting clause is normally used, as well as quotation marks:

*"Where does it come from?", she asked, "I've heard it somewhere."*

Thus, both quotation marks and reporting clause represent the narrator's intervention. In IS such intervention is more substantial:

*She asked where it came from, though she admitted that she had heard it before.*

Here, the changes involve syntax, verb tenses and lexis. In FIS, which can be placed between DS and IS in terms of faithfulness to the original speech, one possible version of the 'original' speech could be:

*Where did it come from? She had heard it somewhere.*

In this example the verb tenses have changed, although the amount of manipulation by the narrator's that FIS entails can vary considerably (see Page, 1988: 36-40; Leech and Short, 1981: 325-334). However, for the purposes of the present discussion what is significant is that IS, FIS and DS are all forms which combine the character's voice with the narrator's. Hence, a revised, more refined, version of Table 4.5 can be the following:

<b>narrator's weight</b>	<b>point of view</b>	<b>voice</b>	<b>case</b>
total	narrator's	narrator's	NRA and NRSA A
partial	character's	partly the narrator's and partly the character's	IS B <sub>1</sub>
			FIS B <sub>2</sub>
			DS B <sub>3</sub>
zero	character's	character's	FDS C

Table 4.7

#### 4.2.4.3 *Presentation of thought*

If the presentation of speech refines the 'voice' parameter in the scale of narrator's weight, the presentation of thought refines the 'point of view' parameter. This is because having access to the thoughts of characters means having access to

their point of view. However, the association of thought presentation with point of view and its independence from voice are issues that need detailed discussion.

One first problem arises: although, as Table 4.7 shows, the modes of thought presentation are formally identical to the modes of speech presentation, such equivalence certainly is not reflected in the ways speech and thought actually take place. The first obvious difference is that speech is expressed externally, while thought occurs internally, inside someone's mind. It is this question that leads Leech and Short to remark that

... it should always be remembered that the presentation of the thoughts of characters, even in an extremely indirect form ... is ultimately an artifice. We cannot see inside the minds of other people, but if the motivation for the actions and attitudes of characters is to be made clear to the reader, the representation of their thoughts, like the use of the soliloquy on stage, is a necessary licence.

(Leech and Short, 1981: 337)

The other element of differentiation between speech and thought is the fact that while speech is expressed verbally, thought is not necessarily so, which confirms and reinforces the idea of thought presentation as "a necessary licence".

However, the focus of attention should not be centred on the artificiality itself of thought presentation. After all, the whole of narrative fiction could be regarded as a "necessary licence", most markedly shown by the very fact that it involves events that never took place, people that never existed, and the presence of someone who is omniscient about those events and people. What is significant is that thought presentation is perceived as *more* artificial than speech presentation, and it is interesting to discuss the *consequences* that this has in terms of style. When the characters' speech is presented, especially in its direct modes, the readers have no reason to doubt its faithfulness: as Norman Page observes, they accept it as "a convention of the medium" (Page, 1988: 30). But when thought is presented, there is another concession to be made, namely that the narrator

is able to see inside the characters' mind and that the characters always verbalise their thoughts. While the first "compromise" is a presupposition, almost a requisite, to the very act of reading fiction, the second one is not necessarily so automatic.

The difficulty in accepting the possibility that someone can report someone else's thoughts is augmented by the fact that in real life one often tends to *guess* people's thoughts, emotions, feelings etc, simply by judging on exterior signs, including speech itself. The following example is particularly illuminating:

'You are a strange man . . . I wasn't intending to say anything of the sort . . .'

What she implied was: I didn't expect you to be an educated man. She didn't say it, but I knew that was what she was thinking; I'd made no end of an impression.<sup>13</sup>

Here the narrator first seems to be unequivocal about the woman's 'real' thought, but then makes it explicit that his is only a guess based on the fact that he made a very poor impression on the woman. It would be legitimate to argue that *all* presentation of thought is of this same nature, and that whether or not the narrator makes the "guess" explicit is ultimately a choice of style.

This has important repercussions on the extent to which one should be prepared to associate thought presentation to "access into the character's mind" and, consequently, to point of view. Leech and Short have a clear idea in this regard:

If a writer decides to let us know the thoughts of a character at all, even by the mere use of thought act reporting, he is inviting us to see things from that character's point of view.

(Leech and Short, 1981: 338)

In my opinion this certainty about the character's point of view is continuously

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13. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *A Gentle Creature* (1876), in *A Gentle Creature and Other Stories*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.



potentially undermined by the observation made above: it is always possible, and never categorically excludible, that even when the narrator does not say so explicitly, the report of a character's thoughts is only the result of the narrator's intuition, which can be regarded as *his* point of view on what the character's thoughts might be. Therefore, rather than imagining an absolute relation between thought presentation and character's point of view, I think it is more accurate to envisage a "scale of likelihood" (i.e. how likely it is that the narrator has actually granted access to the character's mind or is simply guessing the character's thoughts) based on the different types of thought presentation, where FDT would represent maximum likelihood, and NRTA the minimum.

The other problem inherent in thought presentation is, as already mentioned, the conflict created by the non-verbal nature of thought and the fact that thought *is* presented verbally. This "necessary licence" has an important consequence on the attribution of voice. Leech and Short observe that "when DT is used the writer is in effect saying 'this is what the character would have said if he had made his thoughts explicit'" (345). If this is the case, it means that the voice is not the character's but the narrator's and, besides, if this is true for the direct mode of thought presentation, even more so it will be for the indirect mode.

Thus, the presentation of thought can refine the scale of narrator's weight exclusively in the extent to which it affects point of view. More specifically, it can do so to the extent in which it is likely to portray the actual thoughts of a character. So, a further version of the scale of narrator's weight could be the following:

narrator's weight	point of view		voice		case
total	narrator's	NRA and NRTA	narrator's	NRA and NRSA	A
partial	more likely to be the narrator's	IT	partly the narrator's and partly the character's	IS	B <sub>1</sub>
	equal likelihood	FIT		FIS	B <sub>2</sub>
	more likely to be the character's	DT		DS	B <sub>3</sub>
zero	character's	FDT	character's	FDS	C

Table 4.8

### 4.3 Analysis

This part of the chapter will focus, through the analysis of short excerpts from graphic novels, on the way in which the general opposition between mimesis and diegesis is attained in comics. Once again, it is useful to reiterate that such opposition is not regarded in semiotic terms: if this were the case, wordless comics, like Peter Kuper's *The System* (analysed in the previous chapter), would be considered purely mimetic and, conversely, those with many narratorial comments would be considered much more diegetic. The concern of this chapter is to see how the scale of mimesis/diegesis varies according to style. Therefore, in line with the theoretical section, the opposition between mimesis and diegesis will continue to be proposed as based on the way the narrative is more or less in the hands of the narrator, and on the way in which this variation depends on point of view and voice.

### 4.3.1 Point of view in comics

Before point of view can be properly discussed in comics, it is first of all necessary to make a distinction between *spatial* and *psychological* point of view.

#### 4.3.1.1 *Spatial point of view*

According to the definition provided by Simpson (1993), quoted in section 4.2.3.1, spatial point view is "the viewing position assumed by the narrator" (Simpson, 1993: 12). Simpson also compares spatial point of view to "the 'camera angle' adopted in a text" (12), thereby implicitly accepting the fact that the narrator can be a 'camera eye' and therefore a non-human agent. In any case, the emphasis seems to be on the viewing position, rather than on the viewer. In other words, the importance lies not so much on *who* sees as on *what* is seen and *from which position*. This is confirmed in Fowler's discussion on spatial point of view, when he says that

someone who reads a novel which represents objects, people, buildings, landscapes, etc., is led by the organization of the language to imagine them as existing in certain spatial relationships to one another, and to the viewing position which he feels himself to occupy.

(Fowler, 1996: 162-3)

Thus, if spatial point of view is given by the position of an imaginary camera, a consequent question concerns the validity of the distinction between internal and external point of view proposed by Rimmon-Kenan (1992: 77-8) and Bal (1985: 104) (both of whom prefer to use to term *focalization* to "point of view"). According to this distinction, the point of view is internal or external depending on whether it lies *with* a character or *outside* it (see Bal, 1985: 104), and in the first case the reader "watches with the character's eyes" (104).

In this respect, I am of the opinion that rather than making a distinction between internal and external point of view, one should consider the *relation* that exists

between the position of the camera and the character. In this sense, the viewpoint of the camera can

- have a completely different viewpoint from that of the character;
- *approximate* to that of the character; or
- *coincide* with that of the character.

Strictly speaking, in none of these cases can the spatial point of view be considered "internal" to the character. Even with the third case it can be argued that the camera angle is still separated from the character's viewpoint, since coincidence is not the same as equivalence. In other words, when a scene is said to be viewed through a character's eyes, what really happens is that the viewing position of the narrator, intended as 'the camera angle', *coincides* with that of the character, so that the narrator *and* the character effectively see the same thing from the same position. However, before discussing the implications inherent to this last case, I will briefly show examples of how spatial point of view is used to achieve different effects in the first two cases.

A spatial point of view which is completely extraneous to that of a character can have various purposes: it can be used to present or describe a person, object or place, to offer a purposely limited and partial view of a scene, to focus on a particularly significant detail, etc. Figures 4.1 and 4.2 show panels of presentation/description.

In some cases the point of view adopted "zooms in" on certain details. This may be done in order to concentrate the reader's attention on one specific element, or to reveal only part of a subject, leaving the rest hidden. In general it entails a higher amount of inference from the reader. Figures 4.3, 4.4 and 4.5 are some examples.



Figure 4.1: Dylan Horrocks, *Hicksville*



Figure 4.2: Dylan Horrocks, *Hicksville*



Figure 4.3: Dylan Horrocks,  
*Hicksville*



Figure 4.4: Dylan Horrocks,  
*Hicksville*



Figure 4.5:  
Dylan Horrocks,  
*Hicksville*

A particular case is when the camera zooms in on a character's face, like in Figures 4.6, 4.7 and 4.8:

In these instances, the "close-up" shows the character's expression, which, in turn, may be an indicator of his or her feelings and emotions. This happens very frequently in modern graphic novels and it could be argued that such-like panels reveal the character's psychological point of view where, in fact, there is no access into the character's mind and only assumptions are possible.

The question is whether or not this can be said to represent the character's psychological point of view. If this were the case, internal perspective, access into the character's mind, would be possible in much the same way as anyone, in real life, is capable of guessing other people's feelings from their expressions and behaviour. The fact that "We cannot see inside the minds of other people" (Leech and Short, 1981: 337) would then not represent a problem in terms of what is (im)possible in narrative fiction.

In Figure 4.6, a verbal translation of what seems to be the girl's mental state, could be "she looked rather annoyed about something". But often novelists are much more precise, e.g. "she was annoyed and frustrated at her own unresolved sentimental conflicts which kept tormenting her day after day." So the crucial point is to distinguish between saying what *seems* to be someone's thoughts and saying what *is* someone's thoughts. The difference is fundamental: while in the first case the report originates from a mere inference, in the second case it is based on knowledge. Therefore, the narrator's revelation of a character's inner thoughts and emotions is not an imitation of real-life inference, but entirely an act of fiction in narrative. As I observed in section 4.2.3, whenever information about the feelings/emotions/ thoughts of a character seems to be revealed, one should be aware of the fact that such information may derive from the narrator's knowledge of what goes on inside the character's mind, or simply from an assumption based on the character's external signs; a close-up on a character's face represents precisely this second case.

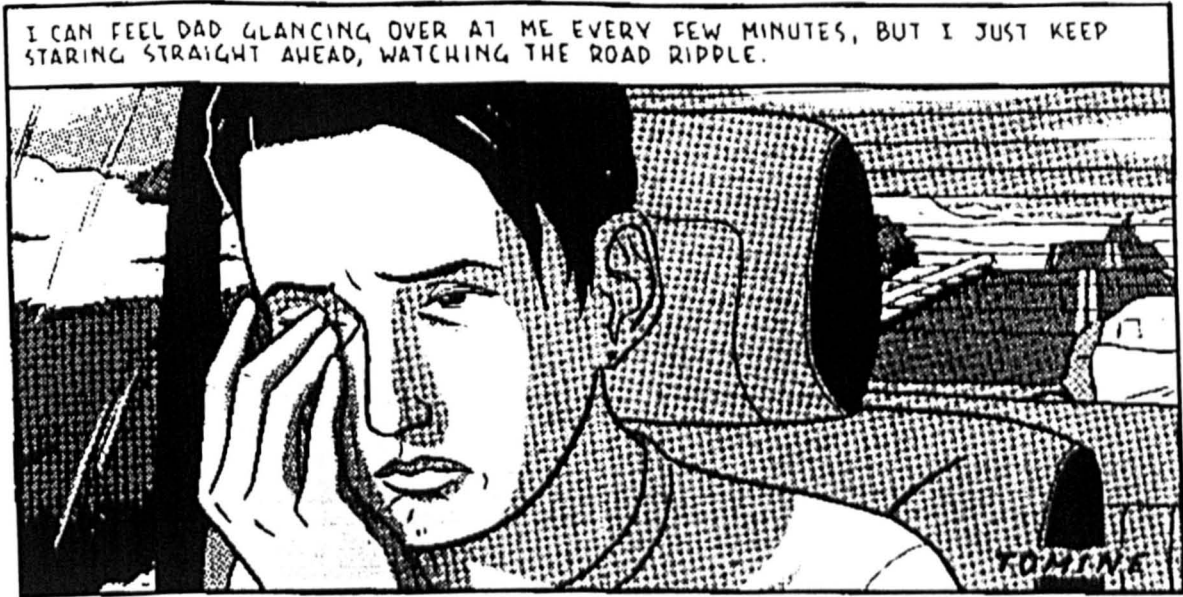


Figure 4.6: Adrian Tomine, "Dylan & Donovan"



Figure 4.7: Nabel Kanan, *Lost Girl*



Figure 4.8: Sanpei Shirato, *The Legend of Kamui*

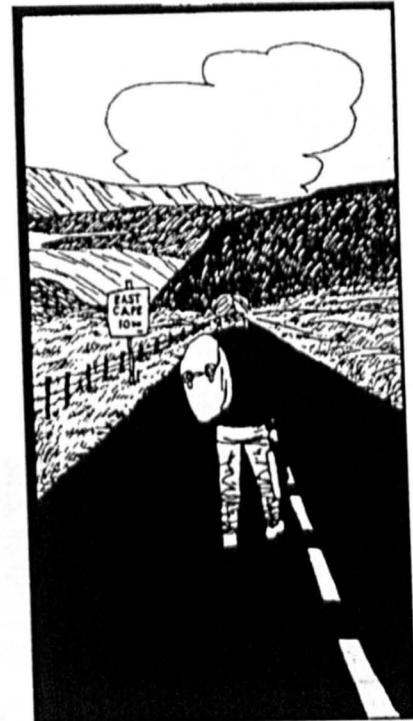


Figure 4.9: Dylan Horrocks, *Hicksville*

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Figure 4.10: Dylan Horrocks, *Hicksville*



Figure 4.11: Dylan Horrocks, *Hicksville*



Figure 4.12: Dylan Horrocks, *Hicksville*

The perspective through which relationships between characters and/or objects are conveyed has in effect an equivalent function to deixis. It is by means of deixis that, in verbal narrative, it is possible to establish the position of characters within the events narrated, as highlighted by Fowler (1996: 164) and, more prominently, Simpson (1993: 13-20). Simpson insists on the importance of deixis as "the most important linguistic component" in "constructing spatio-temporal points of view" (13), which, in turn, "serve to anchor the fictional speaker in his or her fictional world" and provide "a window and vantage point for readers" (15).

However, there is one question that seems to be missing in Simpson's argumentation: *why* a certain vantage point is chosen rather than another. Specifically, what is the effect of a spatial point of view deictically proximal to one character rather than another? My argument is that when the point of view of the camera approximates that of a character, the effect is that the character assumes a "vantage" position in the narrative: he or she becomes the character that the reader perceives as the protagonist, or the "hero". In the panels shown in Figures 4.13, 4.14 and 4.15 are examples of this type of visual deixis.

Extremely explicative examples of how spatial point of view can change a story are those included in *Exercises in Style*, by Matt Malden. Here, the cartoonist has drawn the same short comic-strip in a number of different versions, most notably from different spatial points of view. Figures 4.16 and 17 the story is respectively drawn from the man's vantage position and from the woman's. This clarifies very well in what sense spatial point of view can have a deictic function and how this function, in turn, can make the story be perceived from different vantage points.

The different vantage points from which the story is told, or shown, in Figures 4.16 and 4.17 should not be considered respectively as the man's point of view and the woman's point of view, since the point of view is still entirely external to the characters.



Figure 4.13: Nabil Kanan: *Lost Girl*



Figure 4.14: Adrian Tomine, "Fourth of July"



Figure 4.15: Richard Tommaso, *Clover Honey*

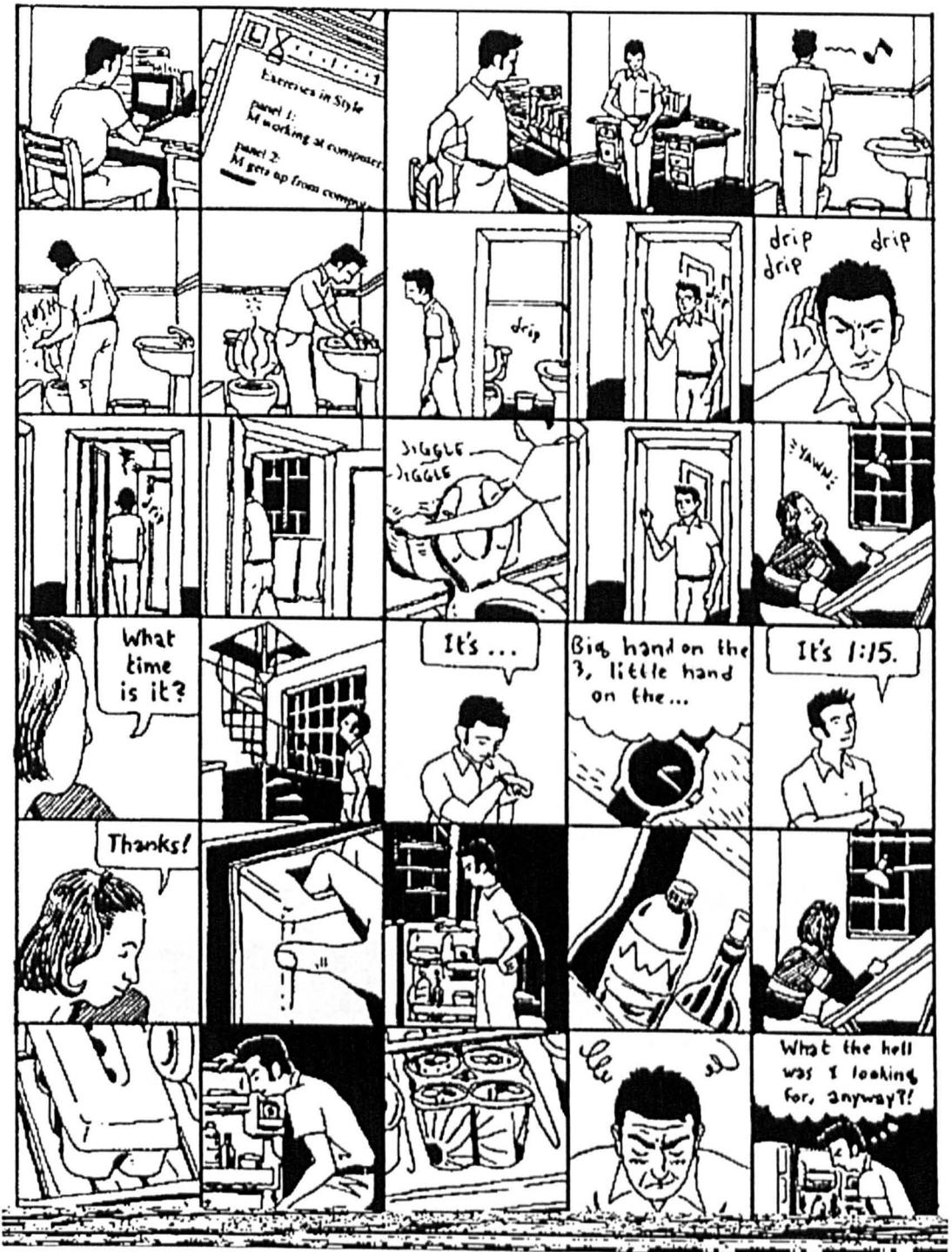


Figure 4.16: Matt Malden, *Exercises in Style*

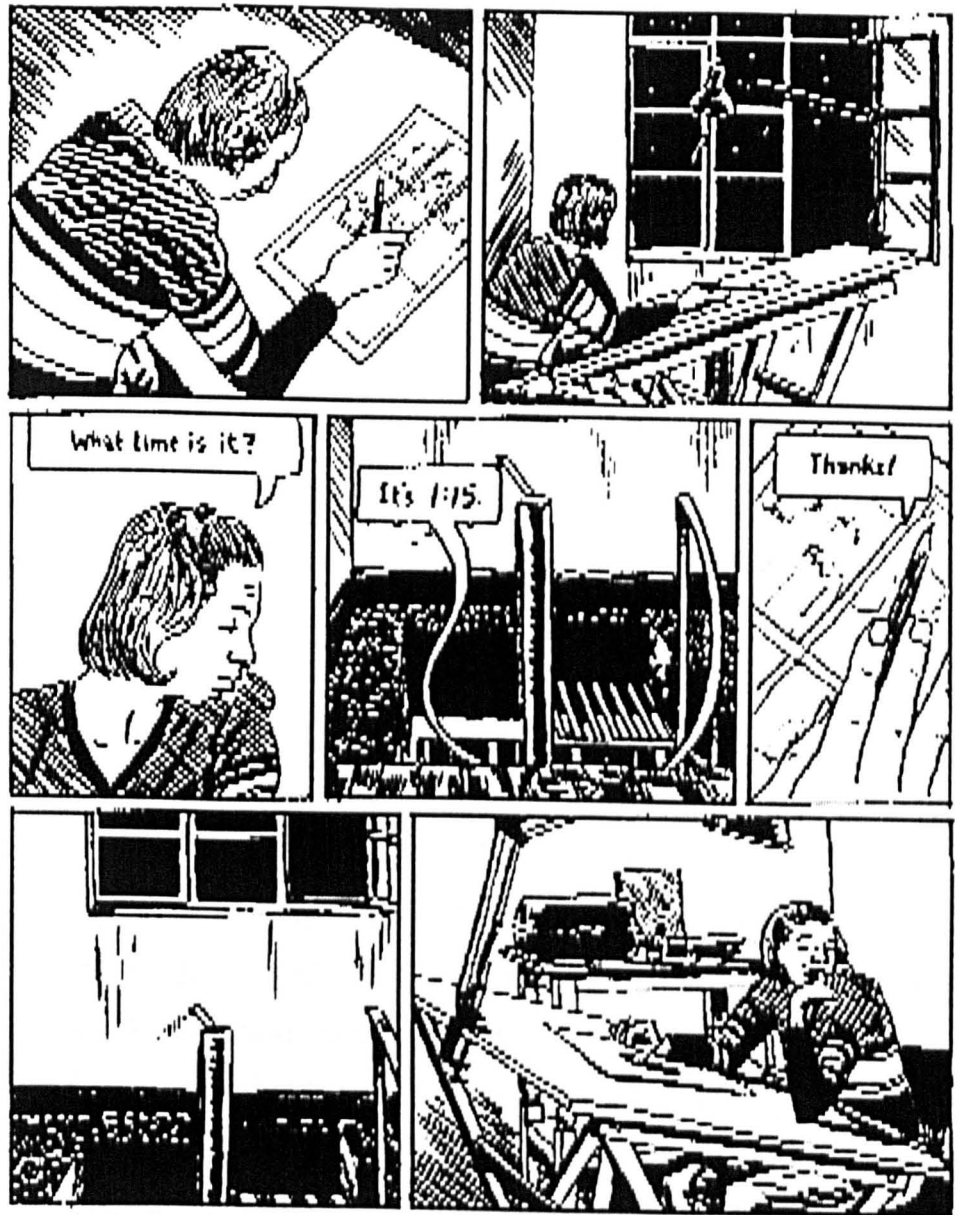


Figure 4.17: Matt Malden, *Exercises in Style*

The only instance in which the situation differs is when the camera angle actually coincides with the position of the character's eyes. As I mentioned above, even in this case it can be argued that, strictly speaking, the point of view cannot be said to be "internal" to the character if one assumes the presence of the imaginary camera. Yet, in these cases the reader is indeed led to see things as the character sees them; therefore it is legitimate to claim that when the position of the camera's eye coincides with the position of the character's eyes, the story is shown from the character's spatial point of view. In Figure 4.18 is the same story as in Figures 4.16 and 4.17, but shown from the man's point of view.

The difference between Figure 4.18 and the previous two clarifies the different effects generated by a story told from the vantage point of a character, and one told exactly from his or her point of view.

Another interesting issue to discuss about the character's spatial point of view is whether or not it represents his or her psychological point of view as well. In section 4.2.3.1 I have indeed claimed that perceptual point of view should be included within psychological point of view. Thus, if one accepts that the character's spatial point of view represents his or her visual perception, it is also possible to say that the character's spatial point of view coincides with his or her psychological point of view. This becomes particularly apparent in cases like the panels reproduced in Figure 4.19.

In the first panel a doctor is seen from a neutral, external point of view, while in the last panel the camera's position coincides with the character's spatial point of view. Apart from this spatial coincidence, however, the way the doctor looks is different, his face, and all that surrounds him, is visibly distorted and disfigured: the image is no longer what the camera sees, but what the character sees. It is very significant that the narratorial comments above the panels refer to the character's thoughts, thereby reinforcing the idea that what is being represented is his psychological point of view *through* his spatial point of view.

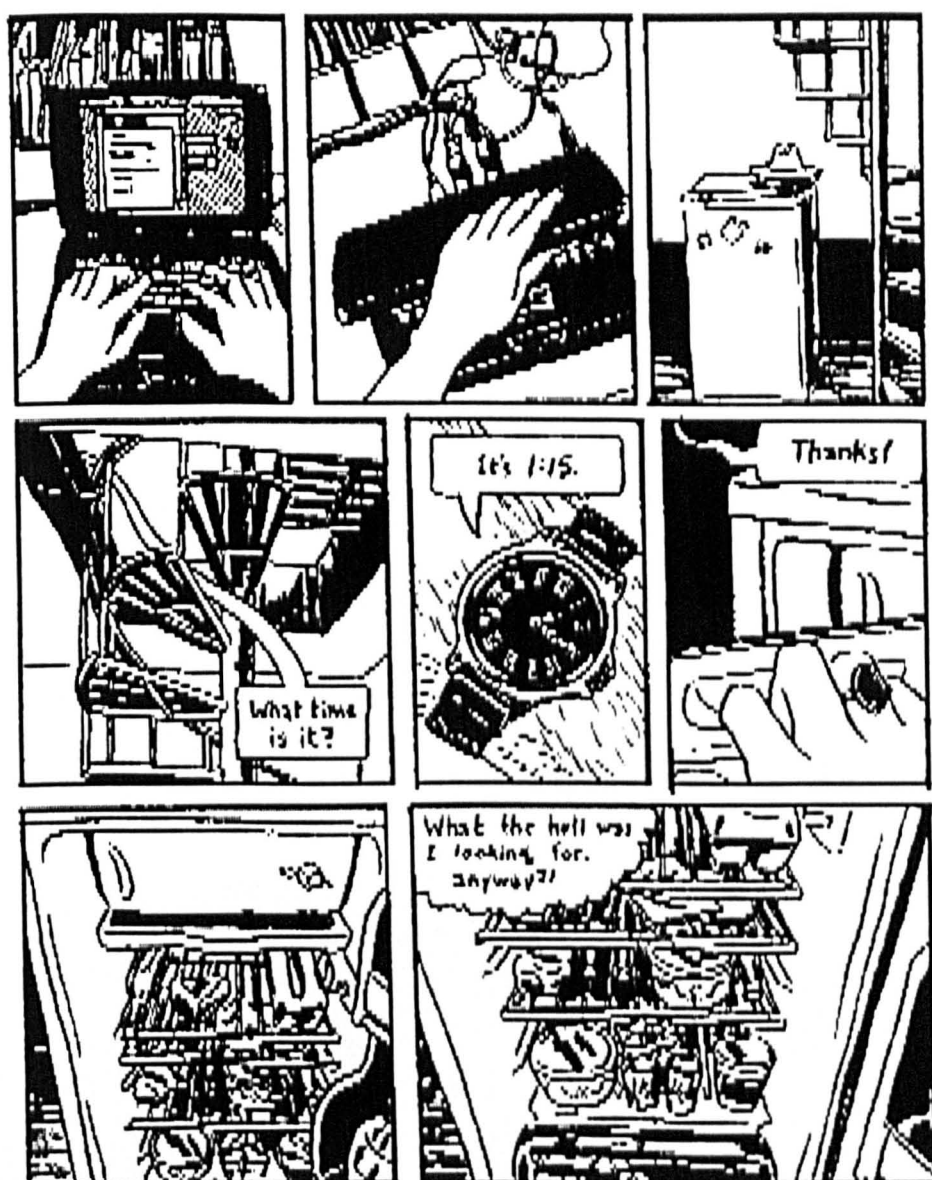


Figure 4.18: Matt Malden, *Exercises in Style*



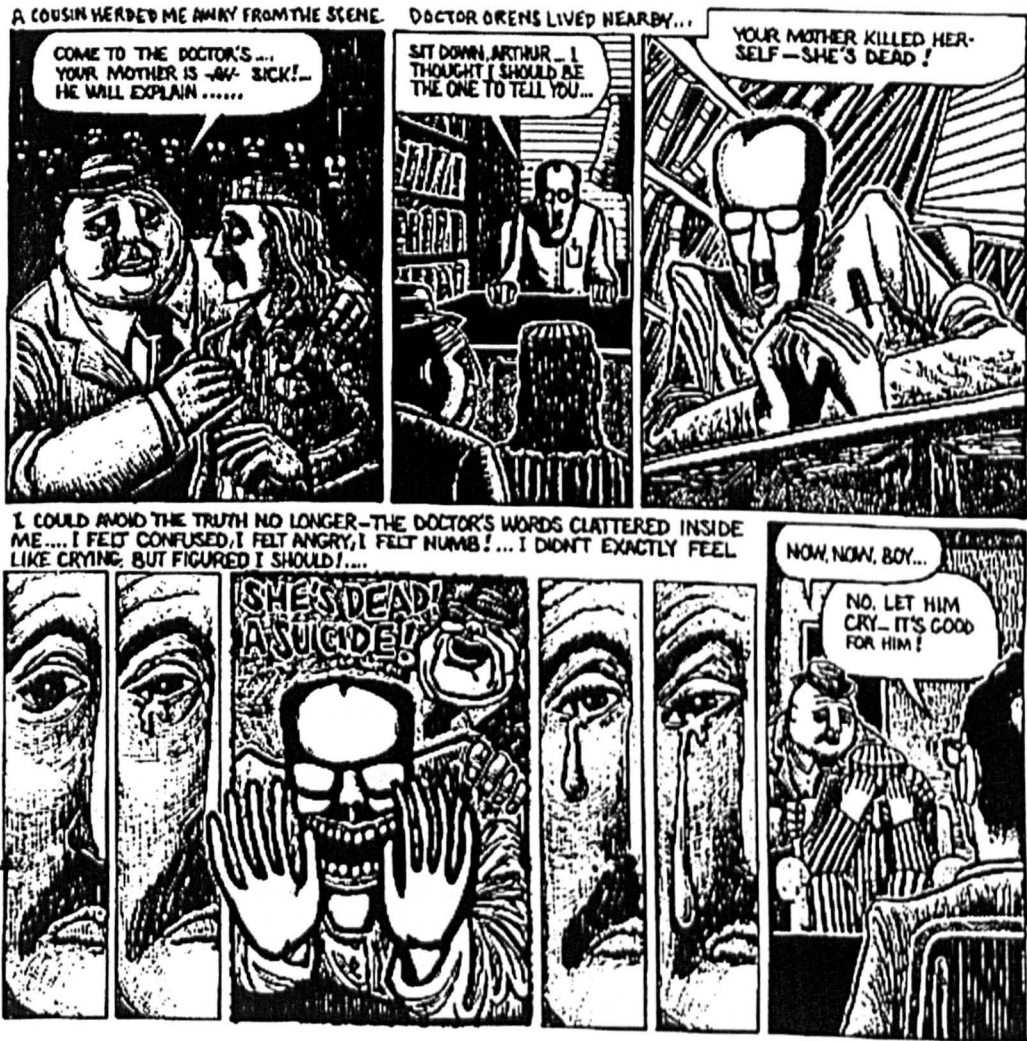


Figure 4.19: Art Spiegelman, "Prisoner in the Hell Planet"



Therefore the original Table 4.5 could be further sophisticated as follows:

narrator's weight	point of view		voice		case
	narrator's	NRA, NRTA and external spatial point of view	narrator's	NRA and NRSA	
total	narrator's	NRA, NRTA and external spatial point of view	narrator's	NRA and NRSA	A
partial	more likely to be the narrator's	IT	partly the narrator's and partly the character's	IS	B <sub>1</sub>
	equal likelihood	FIT		FIS	B <sub>2</sub>
	more likely to be the character's	DT		DS	B <sub>3</sub>
zero	character's	FDT and internal spatial point of view	character's	FDS	C

Table 4.9

The next section will discuss the rendering of psychological point of view in comics more in detail.

#### 4.3.1.2 *Psychological point of view and thought presentation*

In the previous section I have illustrated how spatial point of view can "merge" with psychological point of view, by portraying certain events as seen through the eyes of a character. In particular, the last example considered, where the view is distorted as a reflection of the character's state of mind, represents an eloquent case of "transition" from purely spatial point of view to psychological point of view.

In comics there exist other ways in which psychological point of view is rendered visually. One of the most common is the portrayal of a character's dreams, hallucinations, mirages, etc. In Figure 4.20 the series of panels represent the character's day-dreaming about his past relationship. The rounded borders distinguish the "day-dream" panels from the last one, which represents the character in "real life".



Figure 4.20: Jason Lutes, *Jar of Fools*



Figure 4.21: Richard Tommaso, *Clover Honey*

In other cases, there are no such graphological indications, and the interpretation of the panels as representing the character's imagination is left to the reader. Figure 4.21 is an example. Here the fact that the panels portray an imaginary event is understandable only from the context, but the fact remains that what is represented is not an actual event, perceived from an external spatial point of view, but the imagination of a character, from his psychological point of view.

Psychological point of view can also be represented verbally, through the use of thought balloons, which are the equivalent in comics of direct thought. The only difference between thought balloons and DT is in their graphological representation: the introductory reporting clause and the quotation marks are replaced in comics by the balloon itself and the small bubbles that point towards the characters who expresses the thought (see Figure 4.22).

Before I discuss the implications inherent the use of DT in comics, it is interesting to notice that, as part of their mixed-code nature, comics also offer another way of representing a character's psychological point of view, namely the inclusion of a picture, instead of words, in a thought balloon, like in the example in Figure 4.23. In these panels the representation of thought is an hybrid form, in that it employs pictorial elements within formal structures (the balloons themselves) which normally contain verbal elements.

As a direct mode of thought presentation, thought balloons supposedly report the characters' thoughts as they 'really' occurred. However, as Leech and Short remark, "Thoughts, in general, are not verbally formulated, and so cannot be reported verbatim" (Leech and Short, 1981: 345). I agree with this observation, but while the two stylisticians are preoccupied with the resulting artificiality of thought presentation, I would like to emphasise its function in comics narrative.

The first issue that needs clarification is the discrepancy between the following

two points:

- thoughts cannot be considered to occur in the same way as verbal utterances;
- both in verbal narrative and in comics narrative there is no substantial difference between the direct presentation of thought and the direct presentation of speech.

Indeed, the only difference between DT and DS is in the verb used for the introductory reporting clause: generally *think* in DT and *say* in DS. Analogously, in comics, thought balloons and speech balloons differ only in the way in which the balloon is directed to the character: the former with a few small bubbles, and the latter with a tail:



<p>There is no substantial difference in presentation between</p> <p><i>He said, "I don't want to go to school anymore."</i></p> <p>and</p> <p><i>He thought, "I don't want to go to school anymore."</i></p>	<p>There is no substantial difference in presentation between</p>  <p>and</p> 
---	--

Table 4.10

In section 4.2.4.3 I claimed that the presentation of thought cannot be taken with the same "trust" as the presentation of speech, since there is always the possibility

that the narrator is simply reporting what he *guesses* a character's thoughts might be. Consequently, I proposed a scale of likelihood based on the various modes of thought presentation. In comics the only mode of thought presentation is DT, through thought balloons, and so the likelihood that the content of a thought balloons really represents the character's point of view should be very high.

However, this is not necessarily always the case. The content of a thought balloon may have a function other than the apparent purpose of portraying the character's thoughts. In particular, thought balloons can be used to give information to the reader in the "disguise" of a character's thoughts. In Figure 4.24, for example, it is possible to argue that the content of the thought balloon may not entirely be the representation of the character's thought. Here, it seems improbable that the expression "I'll stop and window shop at this women's shoe store" can actually be part of the girl's thought; its purpose seems to be more that of informing the reader about the girl's action. Thus, it can be said that the artificiality intrinsic to the verbalisation of the character's thought has been utilised to convey information to the reader. In this sense, it is as if the narrator is speaking to the reader precisely through the verbalisation of the character's thoughts. This technique is in fact fairly common in comics, although much more so in traditional works than in contemporary, more experimental ones.

In Figure 4.25 is reproduced a panel from Osamu Tezuka's *Adolf*, a novel in which the style is relatively conventional. In this case the informational function of the thought balloon is even more evident. Besides, the character seems to be "talking" directly to the reader, which adds a further point of interest in the discussion. Significantly, Short compares DT to the soliloquy in drama, which he describes as "notoriously ambiguous as to whether the character involved is thinking aloud or talking to the audience" (Short, 1996: 312). In the panel above, an analogous doubt exists: is the character simply thinking, thinking aloud, or addressing the reader? Ultimately, it does not matter: the function of the verbalisation of his thoughts is recognisably that of providing the reader with a piece of information.



Figure 4.22: Posy Simmonds, *Gemma Boverly*



Figure 4.23: Dylan Horrocks, *Hicksville*



Figure 4.24: Richard Tommaso, *Clover Honey*

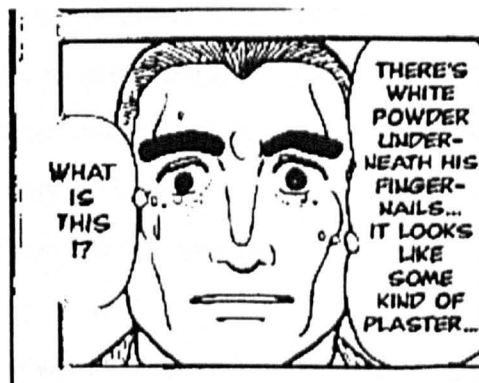


Figure 4.25: Osamu Tezuka, *Adolf*

What does matter is the implication that this has in terms of the scale of narratorial weight that I am proposing in this chapter. Specifically, the parameter that is subject to variation is voice. To recapitulate, first of all it seems that despite the "directness" of DT, the representation of a character's thought is effectively a verbal translation of a non-verbal phenomenon. Therefore, it is legitimate to deduce that the agent of this translation is the narrator. Secondly, the narrator's control in DT becomes even more manifest in comics when the function of thought presentation appears to be informational. These conclusions imply that in thought presentation the voice is always the narrator's. However, before accepting this as a fact, it is useful to consider the presentation of speech in comics.

#### *4.3.1.3 Speech presentation*

Similarly to the presentation of thought, the only mode of presenting speech, in comics, is the direct mode, with speech balloons as its graphological form. As mentioned above, the outline of the balloon itself has a function equivalent to that of quotation marks in verbal narrative, while the tail pointing at the character is the same as introductory clauses like "he said", "Mary said", etc. Various effects are attained through symbolic signs. Loudness, for example, is rendered by bold typeface; when a voice comes from the telephone, radio or television (e.g. Figure 4.26), the balloon outline is normally zig-zagged, and so on.

These devices, however, are not the concern of this research, since they have been amply studied elsewhere (see, especially, Gasca and Gubern, 1994: 412-479). The interest here is more centred on the way in which analysing comics can contribute to an understanding of how the use of direct reported speech can be positioned on the scale of narratorial weight.

The subject of discussion is whether, and to what extent, DS can be said to allow the characters to "speak for themselves" (Page: 1988: 25). Earlier in the chapter, in section 4.2.4.2, DS was already described as a hybrid form of speech



presentation, in that it includes elements which are clearly "interferences" from the narrator, namely the introductory reporting clause and the quotation marks. I intend to take this point further, by examining other ways in which the direct form of reported speech distances itself from the "actual words spoken".

I concluded the previous section with the claim that the voice in reported thought is always the narrator's. Now, as a starting point for the discussion of direct report of speech, I will seek to establish if a similar claim could apply to reported speech too.

A strong point against the faithfulness of reported speech is that articulated by Deborah Tannen, who bases her argument on the general presupposition that "...the term 'reported speech' is grossly misleading in suggesting that one can speak another's words and have them remain primarily the other's words" (Tannen, 1989: 101). She insists on the notion that reported speech is not necessarily the representation of some dialogue that has actually taken place:

In many, perhaps most, cases ... material represented as dialogue was never spoken by anyone else in a form resembling that constructed, if at all. Rather, casting ideas as dialogue rather than statements is a discourse strategy for framing information in a way that communicates effectively and creates involvement.  
(110)

Such an assertion challenges, at its very basis, the idea of reported speech, even in its direct form: "...even seemingly 'direct' quotation is really 'constructed dialogue', that is, primarily the creation of the speaker rather than the party quoted." (99). In these terms, the objection to the faithfulness of direct reported speech begins to be similar to the one concerning the authenticity of direct reported thought. This is confirmed by the fact that Tannen considers the latter in an even more uncompromising way: "... it is unquestionable that when a speaker reports what someone else thought, the words thus animated in dialogue do not correspond to words actually thought by the other person" (114).

Tannen's assertions are rather absolutistic and leave little space for compromise. Besides, she does not refer specifically to literature — where the fact that the dialogues never actually took place is a postulate *a priori* — but to reported speech in general. However, her comments are very useful in that they spur a reconsideration of the role of reported speech in literary texts and, more specifically, of its potential artificiality. In this sense, the presentation of speech finds itself in a position similar to the presentation of thought in terms of acceptability. In section 4.2.4.3, I observed that reported thought is felt as more artificial than reported speech, because of the verbalisation of mental processes which do not necessarily occur in verbal form. From Tannen's "sceptical" perspective, reported speech appears to be susceptible to the same remark.

Yet, I think that the artificiality of reported speech is not as pervasive as that of reported thought. In other words, while the presentation of thought can be said to be artificial to some degree in *all* cases, the presentation of speech contains elements of artificiality only in certain instances. Particularly, in comics there can be identified cases in which the formal structures of reported speech appear to be used not only to present dialogue but also to give factual information to the reader. This happens predominantly in monologues. In Figure 4.27, the character appears to address his speech directly to the reader.

In this respect, the way in which Page describes direct speech is particularly significant: "[The] distinctive virtue [of direct speech] lies in its capacity for allowing a character to 'speak', in an individual voice, directly to the reader..." (Page, 1988: 32-3). The panel in Figure 4.27 seems to fit perfectly in Page's definition of direct speech. However, in this case, the protagonist's speech is also, at the same time, providing a kind of summary of the events that have just unfolded, thereby adding a further, informational function. It is therefore possible to detect a certain degree of artificiality in suchlike reports of speech.



Figure 4.26: Richard Tommaso, *Clover Honey*



Figure 4.27: Osamu Tezuka, *Adolf*

It can be noticed that the function of the speech balloons in Figure 4.27 is equivalent to that of the thought balloons in Figure 4.25, and this equivalence allows one to draw the conclusion that there is no substantial difference between interior monologue and monologue, apart from their formal conventions of presentation. In this respect, Gasca and Gubern observe that

Analogously to novel and drama, the characters in comics can use linguistic utterances in monologues or soliloquies, which should not be confused with interior monologue... In this case, unlike interior monologue, there is no modification of the characteristics of the traditional balloon utilised to contain the speech of the characters.

(Gasca and Gubern, 1994: 504, my translation)

Significantly, the difference referred to here is only a formal one, namely the shape of the balloon. In fact, monologues have their origins in "the theatrical monologue, in which the characters express their thoughts aloud because that is the only way of communicating them to the audience" (Barbieri, 1995: 222, my translation). At the same time, "[Interior monologue] can ... be treated as a special case of monologue, in which the thoughts are not only unspoken but not fully verbalized..." (Page, 1988: 41).

Thus, in conclusion, the artificiality attributable to thought presentation discussed in the previous section can be ascribed to speech presentation in cases of monologues. In traditional comics, the same informational function that monologues have can also be found in dialogues. In Figure 4.28 for example, the dialogue between Mickey Mouse and Minnie Mouse does not only represent the conversational interaction between the two characters, but it also has the function of informing the reader about events that have occurred.

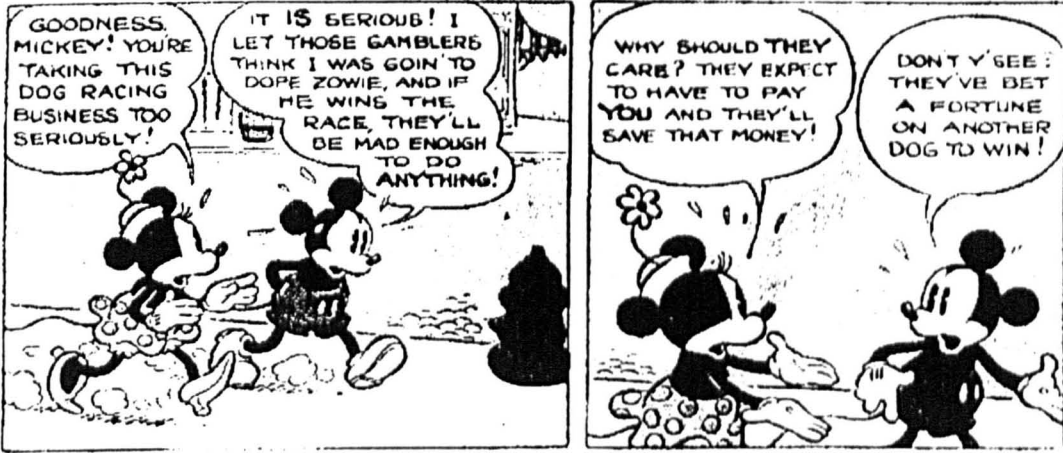


Figure 4.28: Floyd Gottfredson, "Mickey Mouse and Pluto the racer"

Therefore, in similar cases, it can be argued that the narrator may have used a dialogic form to convey what would otherwise have had to be explained in a separate narratorial caption. This function of dialogues falls within a more general perspective according to which "*..the entire fictional text, including the conversational interactions between characters, is directed to the reader as a homogeneous product.*" (Yus, 1997: 56, my translation).

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

A novel like Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* comes to mind as a perfect example in which dialogues are used as part of the totality of the fictional text directed to the reader, but one does not need to resort to such an extreme case since, ultimately, from all reported speech, or thought, the reader can infer information about the events of the story and about the characters themselves. This, however, would be the concern of study in pragmatics.

In this chapter I continued the investigation, initiated in Chapter Two and carried forward in Chapter Three, of what could be called "visual language", focusing this time on the stylistic implications that the typologies of point of view and voice have on the scale of mimesis/diegesis in narrative texts. Both can be narrator-bound or character-bound, not in absolute terms, but in relative ones. Based on the reciprocal relation between narrator-bound narrative and character-bound narrative, I have proposed a scale of "narratorial weight". Such a scale has not been considered across different media, i.e. the novel and comics, but *within* the same medium, in the conviction that the highest order of differentiation, in narrative, is not so much at the level of medium, but at the level of style.

To conclude my investigation on visual language, in the next chapter I will offer some suggestions about possible ways in which it can be profitably used for pedagogical purposes.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Comics in education:**

#### **Genuflection to 'serious culture'**

##### **5.1 Introduction**

The theoretical part of this thesis, which forms the core of the study, investigates how the conventional notion of 'text' can be broadened to include visual components (Chapter Two), how such visual components interact with the linguistic ones so as to create relatedness (Chapter Three), and how this cooperation contributes to the understanding of style in literary texts (Chapter Four). Accordingly, the research draws from the fields of semiotics, text-linguistics and stylistics, and in the present chapter I intend to propose a series of comics-based pedagogical applications aimed at teaching the fundamental notions pertaining to those fields.

Two points need to be highlighted:

- 1) although for reasons of clarity and layout I will divide the description of the activities into sections according to the field (semiotics, text-linguistics or stylistics), this does not mean that I consider such areas of study as equally separated from each other. In fact, I think that all three can be profitably integrated within the same course;
- 2) the focus on semiotics, text-linguistics and stylistics reflects the focus of this thesis and is not to be intended as a general demarcation of scope for comics-based pedagogical applications, since classroom activities can be, and indeed have been, devised in other areas as well, i.e. in foreign language teaching, history, cultural studies, film studies and others.

## **5.2 Historical background**

The way in which comics have been used in education over the years has depended upon two factors: the reputation accorded to the medium and its popularity/diffusion. Therefore, an historical overview of comics in education should be accompanied by parallel overviews of the reputation of comics.

The need for an overview of the reputation of comics arises from the fact that comics have been subject to criticism to a degree much greater than other forms of creative communication (written literature, drama and film), and that "Action against comics has been more extreme than for most other media as far as the control of their content is concerned" (Howitt and Cumberbatch, 1975: 108). This cannot be overlooked, because it has had important repercussions on the acceptance, or lack of it, of comics in education.

Essentially, such criticism has expressed itself in two forms. One has come from a moral stance and has targeted the danger, supposedly inherent in comics, of corrupting young people by presenting wrong and deviant values or even, it has been argued, by encouraging readers into delinquency. The other, on which the first is partially based, has imputed to comics an excessive simplicity of both form and content and has consequently seen them, at best, as poor reading material.

### **5.2.1 The (a)morality of comics**

The criticism directed at comics from a moral perspective has concentrated on the negative influence that they have been said to have on the readers. John Springhall puts the issue in an historical perspective, noting that these concerns have been, and still are, addressed to different media and "have their roots in nineteenth-century anxieties about the 'ill effects' of popular forms of amusement on the 'children of the lower classes'" (Springhall, 1998: 2). Such popular forms



of amusement were, in Britain, the so-called *Penny Dreadfuls*, "cheap illustrated periodicals devoted to tales of sensation and adventure" (Sealwood and Irving, 1993: 21; see also Barker, 1989: 99 and Springhall, 1998: 41-2) and, in America, the *Dime Novels* (see Springhall, 1998: 73). It is within this historical perspective that Sealwood and Irving assert that "Prejudices against comics go back to the 1860s and the beginning of mass literacy" (Sealwood and Irving, 1993: 21).

However, although it is historically ascribable to the nineteenth-century criticism of cheap popular literature, a real condemnation of comics did not begin until the 1950s. Barker notes that in Britain the publication of comics began<sup>14</sup> as a way to "counteract the attractions of the Dreadfuls" and "were produced within a climate in which they were counterposed to everything dangerous" (Barker, 1989: 8; see also Brown, 1986: 82). In America, the first comics appeared as strips in newspapers towards the end of the nineteenth century<sup>15</sup>, and their aim was to boost sales by providing a funny and entertaining section (Waugh, 1947: 1-15).

So, despite the fact that it started from the very birth of comics (7), criticism towards the medium was relatively mild until the late 1940s. What made the situation different in that period was first of all the fact that by then comics had reached an unprecedented level of popularity, also thanks to the diffusion of comic books<sup>16</sup> (see Waugh, 1947: 334). Another, even more important, factor was the appearance of types of comic books known as "crime comics" and "horror comics". Thus, it was the popularity of comics and their seemingly dubious contents that began to create serious preoccupation in some educators and parents.

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14. When exactly British comics began is not agreed on. However, the first publications which can be considered incipient forms of comics, like *Comic Cuts*, appeared in the mid-1880s (Brown, 1986: 81-2).

15. "The Yellow Kid", which first appeared on February 16 1896 in the *New York World*, is generally considered as the forerunner of American comics.

16. Comic books first began to appear in America in the 1930s as collections of newspaper strips.

The foremost figures in the expression of those worries were Doctor Frederic Wertham, in America, and George Pumphrey, in Britain. Wertham, a psychiatrist, wrote a book unequivocally entitled *Seduction of the Innocent* (published in 1954 in the USA and a year later in Britain) where, based on his own research, he argued the existence of a causal link between reading comic-books and juvenile delinquency. Wertham's criticism towards comic books was stated as a vigorous all-front attack: not only did he see comics as encouraging juvenile crime, but he also believed that they represented a serious hinder to children's reading skills (Wertham 1955: 119-146). Although Doctor Wertham has been harshly criticised, even by some of his contemporaries (see Springhall, 1998: 124-6; Barker, 1984: 71-83), *Seduction of the Innocent* has had a fundamental importance in the creation of a sort of demonised view of comics (see Springhall, 1998: 125).

In Britain, it was George Pumphrey who, in the same period, triggered the alarm about the dangers of comics and their supposed negative influence on children. Pumphrey's views were less categorical than Wertham's, in that he conceded that comics were not all of the same type, and that at least *some* were not as bad as others. Indeed, Pumphrey found that "...our British home-produced comics are harmless" (Pumphrey, 1955: 27-8), while his invective was specifically targeted at American comics imported into Britain (37-55). His criticism towards what he called "objectionable comics", however, was as vehement as Wertham's.

The concerns over the presumed harmful influence of comics on children gave rise to actual campaigns against comics both in America and in Britain, which led to censorial legislation. In America a "Comics Code" was established in 1954, which Thomas Inge has described as "the most severe form of censorship applied to any mass medium in the United States" (Inge, 1985: 12). In Britain, "horror comics" coming from the other side of the Atlantic "sparked a particularly fiery public reaction, and the Conservative government, late in 1954, introduced a bill to control them. Known as the Children and Young Persons (Harmful Publications)

Act, it became law in 1955. Within weeks, virtually all these comics had disappeared" (Barker, 1984: 9).

Wertham's and Pumphrey's denunciations, which have represented a major influence on the reputation of comics, were based on the general assumption that media which portray "unsuitable" behaviours (e.g. violence or sexism) can lead their younger readers/audience to emulate such misconduct. Such a postulate is still currently maintained (Sealwood and Irving, 1993: 26; see Barker and Petley, 1997 for a comprehensive analysis and a critique of the "ill effects" theory) and the reputation of comics is inevitably still negatively affected by the castigation of those who promulgate it.

### 5.2.2 Comics as a lower form

In 1947, Coulton Waugh, one of the foremost comics historians, wrote that

Comic books are ugly; it is hard to find anything to admire about their appearance. The paper - it's like using sand in cooking. And the drawing: it's true that these artists are capable in a certain sense; the figures are usually well located in depth, they get across action . . . But there is a soulless emptiness to them, an outrageous vulgarity...

(Waugh, 1947: 333).

Waugh's words epitomise the other major factor that has contributed to the negative reputation of the medium of comics: the belief that it is an extremely simple, unrefined and rough form of expression. One of the consequences is that "the history of comics in both Britain and America is a history of nervousness about their cultural position" (Barker and Sabin, 1995: 146). Within this history, there is a general acceptance of the fact that comics have evolved, over the years, from sub-literary over-simplified and clichéd commercial products to publications whose intrinsic artistic value makes it possible to consider them at the same level as "higher" forms, like the novel, drama or film.

In this respect, a first move was the publication of a comics version of *The Three Musketeers* [1941], initiating the line of *Classic Comics*, which later became *Classics Illustrated* and lasted until 1971. The initiator of this series, Albert Kanter, had the explicit aim of making it as respectable as possible, especially as a response to the campaign against comics books of the period 1948-55 (see Barker and Sabin, 1995: 149-151). As a result, in many ways *Classic Illustrated* departed from the formal norms of comics (this will be discussed more in detail in the next section).

Gary Groth indicates the underground comics movement of the late 60s as having sparked a change in the production of comics, in that a number of artists began to work "out of an inner need, from the social and cultural matrix, not from the economic one" (Groth and Fiore, 1988: xi). Up to the point, he notes, the comics industry had been "dominated by hacks since its inception" and "the great bulk of comic books was puerile junk, shoddily produced, and marketed to children" (xi). Underground comics were radically different from mainstream ones, in that "Instead of pandering at kids' market, these titles spoke to the counter-culture on its own terms" (Sabin, 1996: 92).

The new opportunities created for underground cartoonists gave rise to an increased production of "alternative" comics, characterised by a removal of the subservient role that the vast majority of cartoonists played in mainstream companies. Thus, alternative comics attracted more and more attention from the public, and specialised comics shops began to appear towards the mid 70s (92). At the time, alternative comics were still largely the domain of *aficionados*, and it was not until ten years later that they "were discovered by the mainstream press" (Sabin, 1993: 87).

Indeed, it was "not ... until 1986-7 that adult comics really took off" (Sabin, 1996: 162). It was then that a large number of articles appeared in the press proclaiming

that comics had "grown up" (Sabin, 1996: 91; Groth and Fiore, 1988: xii), and the term "graphic novel" was introduced. According to Roger Sabin, the use of "graphic novel" in place of "comics" was part of a marketing strategy which sought to exploit the media hype by giving the medium an air of respectability:

The term had several advantages from a publicity perspective. First, it was used as a device to mark [graphic novels] out as something new, to distance them from the childish connotations of the word 'comic'. By the same token it hopefully elevated them to the status of novels.

(Sabin, 1993: 93)

However, despite the tardy recognition by the media and the commercial ends of some publishers, comics did acquire a degree of respectability in that period. The publication of a book like *Maus* by Art Spiegelman (1987;1992) – discussed more in detail in Chapter Two – by Penguin Books represented perhaps the apex and, at the same time, an "official" confirmation of the recognition of comics as being able to express literature.

### 5.2.3 My position

As far as the reputation of comics is concerned, I would like to clarify that this study does not intend to provide a unilateral defence of comics against accusations regarding the amorality or the over-simplicity of their content. This is because, in the first instance, it should be noted that all the criticism that has been directed, in one form or another, at comics has suffered from one fundamental misconception: it has regarded comics as a well-identifiable, monolithic genre with its own fixed characteristics, rather than – here is the crucial difference – as a medium through which different genres and different types of narratives/topics can be expressed. Therefore, any type of defence against such criticism would be as ill-founded as the manifestations of disapproval that it aims to discredit.

Secondly, once that fallacy is brought to the surface and removed, validity can certainly be recognised, at least in part, for the concerns expressed by the detractors of comics. It is indeed undeniable that many comics productions have been the vehicle of much gratuitous violence and sexism, for example, and that a good many productions have been characterised by over-simplified and extremely clichéd form and content. Establishing whether or not productions of this type can have actual negative influence on the readers is entirely outside the scope of this thesis, but any possible conclusions in this regard should not be held against, or in favour of, comics, which, as a medium, can only be described in neutral, non-qualitative and non-judgemental terms.

As regards the sketchy, apparently rough and unrefined style of the drawings found in many comics, it should be remembered that, as I discussed in Chapter Two, from a semiotic point of view it is more complex to decode stylised pictures than realistic pictures, since the former have a higher degree of symbolicity and arbitrariness. This means that the decoding of stylised pictures requires more training on the readers' part than do realistic pictures, which, by virtue of their high degree of iconicity, are more easily associated with what they are meant to represent.

Finally, I would also like to state my position regarding the relatively recent recognition of comics as a form of art/literature. Comics *per se* cannot be considered literature, art or mediocre commercial products. Apart from the objective difficulty of defining *anything* as literature (or not), as I mentioned earlier, such evaluative terms cannot be used to describe a medium, but only, at the most, individual works. Therefore the statement that "comics have acquired the status of literature" is malposed because, as a medium, comics are

are as good or bad as any other. For example, critics are fond of pointing out that ninety per cent of comics are rubbish. That may be true, but then undoubtedly the same figure holds true for any other medium (how many of the films that are

released every week does one really want to see?) Needless to say, it is the ten per cent of comics that make things interesting.

(Sabin, 1996: 9).

It is within this view that even a neat divide between literary and non-literary comics would in any case be completely arbitrary and, therefore, objectionable:

...the interminable polemic which tends towards a definite and preventive separation between cultured and popular in comics seems to me a rather negligible one. Any prejudicial act aimed at such a separation is absolutely arbitrary and could only have a sense, at the most, if intended as an intellectual challenge

(Ambrosini, 1999: 9-10, my translation).

### **5.3 A review of the literature**

The way in which, and whether or not, comics have been used in education, has inextricably depended on the factors delineated above. Besides, education systems are notoriously incapable of, if not explicitly adverse to, keeping pace with the way culture evolves outside their physical and metaphorical walls. As a result, despite the recognition of their literary potential, comics have not found much space in the classroom, especially at the higher levels of education. Besides, the diffusion of comics in education seems to follow a trend which only in part reflects the diffusion of comics in general. In particular, the advent of the graphic novel and the related broadening of comics readership which occurred between the second half of the 80s and the beginning of the 90s does not seem to have had a tangible effect on the diffusion of comics in education.

In this respect, I collected some data by searching the ERIC International database, to find out how many publications have been devoted to comics and cartoons in the field of education from 1966 to the present time. I split the results in 5-year periods, so as to observe an historical trend. These are my findings:

<b>period</b>	<b>publications</b>
1966 - 1969	44
1970 - 1974	205
1975 - 1979	291
1980 - 1984	223
1985 - 1989	183
1990 - 1994	173
1995 - 1999	139

Table 5.1

As can be seen, after a dramatic increase in the 70s, the number of comics-related educational publications slowly but steadily dropped. This in spite of the fact that comics and cartoons still rank among the top favourites among young people. A recent study conducted by Worthy, Moorman and Turner (1999) on 419 six-grade students from three American (Texas) Middle schools showed a contrast between the availability of different types of publications and the preferences of the students. Table 5.2 shows each category and the percentage of students across the three schools who said they would choose to read materials in that category. Table 5.3 summarises the availability of the top student-preferred materials in libraries and classrooms across the schools.



Rank	Type of material	Percentage who would read often
1	Scary books or story collections	66%
2	Cartoons and comics	65%
3	Popular magazines	38%
4	Sports	33%
5	Drawing books	29%
6	Cars and trucks	22%
7	Animals	21%
8	Series	21%
9	Funny novels	20%
10	Books written mostly for adults	17%
11	Novels about people	17%
12	Science fiction or fantasy	17%
13	Picture books	16%
14	Almanacs or record books	14%
15	Poetry	12%
16	Biography	10%
17	Adventure novels	9%
18	Information books about history	6%
20	Information books about science/maths	2%

Table 5.2 (Worthy, Moorman and Turner, 1999: 18)

Availability	Description	Materials (rank)
Very good	Funny novels were in plentiful supply in libraries. Most classrooms had some.	Funny novels (9)
Moderate	All school libraries and some classrooms contained some series books and scary books, but the most recent ones were in short supply. Few classrooms had trade books about animals.	Scary books (1) Series (8) Animals (7)
Limited	Most school libraries contained sports and car books and magazines and some drawing books, but many books were dated and magazines were not always available for checkout. Few classrooms had any of these materials.	Drawing books (5) Sports (4) Cars and trucks (6)
Very limited	The specific magazines named by students were largely unavailable in libraries. One library and one classroom had cartoons, but they weren't circulated. Comics were unavailable.	Comics and cartoons (2) Popular magazines (3)

Table 5.3 (Worthy, Moorman and Turner, 1999: 22)

As the tables show, "Availability of the most popular materials is limited" (21). The researchers also report that

Many teachers and librarians object to specific materials ranked highly by students on the grounds that they contain explicit sexual content ... or graphic descriptions of violence...

Drawing books, comics, and many popular magazines ... were seen by many teachers as "fine for reading at home but inappropriate for school". As one of the teacher explained: "...One of the reasons I'm kind of restricting the comic book and magazine format is I think you can really get into looking at the pictures and not reading the text.."

(21)

A distant echo of Doctor Wertham's condemnations seems to resound in these words. However, the decline in the use of comics in education since the late 70s cannot be ascribed to remnants of the "moral panics" of the 50s: other reasons must be identified. Already in 1984 the educationist Ermanno Detti saw the introduction of comics in schools as part of "an almost frantic search for alternative materials" which sought to bring modernisation into education (Detti, 1984: 143). According to him, the results of such an enterprise were in many cases "uncertain or catastrophic" (143), because of a generalised tendency to propose such materials only as mere substitutes for more traditional ones. In particular, Detti remarks that the use of comics, or of any other "alternative" materials, was intended for activities which completely removed any elements of pleasure for the students (165).

More recently, Gorla and Luini (1998) claim that since comics constitute a language *per se*, they should not be regarded as a subsidiary resource in the classroom, and they note that attempts which have used comics as "a sort of Trojan Horse with which to pass difficult or boring subjects" have been often unsuccessful (Gorla and Luini, 1998: 230). "In most occasions", they go on, "the use of comics in education has not taken into account the specific characteristics of this medium and has instead ended up being an hybrid" (230). This is a reflection of the fact that comics have always been used in education with what

Barker and Sabin call "a hint of genuflection to 'serious culture'" (Barker and Sabin, 1995: 146).

### 5.3.1 Language and literacy

Sealwood and Irving note that "If comics are used at all in schools, it tends to be in the context of English and media studies and foreign language teaching" (Sealwood and Irving, 1993: 63) and that the "most obvious type of comics for educational use are adaptations of classics" (34). *Classics Illustrated* (see previous section) were the most famous examples of such adaptations. However, in an effort to gain respectability and, at the same time, avoid distorting the original versions, these adaptations introduced certain features which distorted the nature of comics.

The dominant characteristic, in this sense, is that "the visual information is subordinate to the verbal, and the pictures are visual glosses on the words above them" (Witek, 1989: 22). The verbal elements are thus kept as distinct as possible from the pictorial ones: the shape of the balloons is unusually squared and the lettering is mechanical rather than hand-written. In this regard, Will Eisner notes how "Attempts to 'provide dignity' to the comic strip are often tried by utilizing set-type instead of the less rigid hand lettering", but also warns that "Typesetting has does have a kind of inherent authority but it has a 'mechanical' effect that intrudes on the personality of free-hand art" (Eisner, 1985: 27). So, the search for "dignity" through an emphasis of the importance of words over pictures and, therefore, through a change in one of the fundamental characteristics of comics, represents an implicit statement about the inadequacy of comics to express literary texts.

The aim of *Classics Illustrated* and of similar series, is to provide young students with an incentive to read, later, the original versions. The editors of the *Pendulum Illustrated Shakespeare* series so describe their objectives and the supposed

advantages for the students:

...it is one thing to adapt *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and another thing entirely to touch the works of the immortal bard. What we wanted was a clear, precise, absolutely true-to-detail script for each play. We wanted no poetic license other than Shakespeare's own.

...  
By encouraging students and helping them along as they read each play, their fear of Shakespeare diminishes. Having enjoyed several titles, they are reassured to the extent that other things about the plays begin to interest them. ... With proper guidance, these students might even attempt to read the plays in the original — if not at the moment, then later on, when their skills permit.

(Preface to *Pendulum Illustrated Shakespeare*, 1980)

*Comics as a springboard to serious culture* was one of the leitmotifs in the literature of the 70s about the use of comics in education. In an article unequivocally entitled "The Classics—Alive and Well with Superman", Leonard Harris proposed using comic books in the classroom with the aim of "stimulating interest in the classics" (Harris, 1975: 405). Similarly, although from a broader media perspective, Mark Cohan maintained that "Learning to read a comic book critically — to understand that it is significant as well as fun — may be a step towards coping intelligently with the rest of the media" (Cohan, 1975: 325). Bruce Brocka pointed out the benefits of satire in comics: "When the spoof is aimed at a literary work ... it opens the door to the characteristics of the form, and could lead students to an interest in the original work" (Brocka, 1979: 32). Herb Kohl suggested that comics could be useful to teach narrative voice without, however, overlooking the direction of comics-based activities:

It's fun to read a batch of comics just to figure out how the narrative voice works and to experiment with different voices. The study of narrative in comics can lead to the study of its use in books. After looking at comics for a while, we began to consider the fiction books

(Kohl, 1977: 14)

Kohl's words introduce another dominant theme that pervades arguments in favour of the use of comics in education: the element of fun that comics bring into the

classroom. Many of those who have pointed out the pedagogical benefits of comics have tended to concentrate on comics' popularity among young students and on the consequent appeal that they generate. From an historical perspective, this could probably be seen as part of the wave of innovation that swept into education in the Western world starting from the end of the 60s. As Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle observed, in the years 1968/70 "school had no choice but to allow comics to officially enter the classroom" (Fresnault-Deruelle, 1986: 71, my translation).

In an article entitled "Fun, Funny, Funnies", Trudy Urbani remarked that "Comic strips provide practically everything needed to make the year interesting, colorful and fun" (Urbani, 1978: 60). For Robert Schoof, "fun" is undoubtedly the key-word: "What is it about these colorful little magazines ... that children find so attractive? In the end, probably the only answer to this question is simply that for most children and even for many adults, comic books are 'fun' to read" (Schoof, 1978: 821). Significantly, Schoof made sure that no doubt could arise from his proposing the use of comics in the classroom: "comic books should never be expected to serve as art or literature. That is not their purpose, and never has been. In a sense, comic books are still nothing more than entertaining junk" (827). The element of fun has been seen as an important incentive for otherwise unmotivated students, and comics have been regarded, for example, as "a fun activity that can make writing interesting and appealing for many students" (Chilcoat *et al*, 1991: 39).

And, indeed, motivating children into literacy is the third main factor constituting the rationale behind the use of comics in education. As far back as 1973 one Key Haugaard reported about the beneficial influence that comic books had on her three children in motivating them to read, and she expressed a wish: "If educators ever find out what constitutes the fantastic motivating power of comic books, I hope they bottle it and sprinkle it around schoolrooms" (Haugaard, 1973: 55). This

wish has in fact come true, in that comics have been recognised their important motivating potential (see especially Sealwood and Irving, 1993), and most classroom activities that make use of them revolve around improving reading/writing skills (e.g. see Swain, 1978; Richie, 1979; Detti, 1984; Goldstein, 1986; Wright and Sherman, 1994; Lewis 1998). Such language-based pedagogical applications of comics also include foreign language learning (e.g. see Brown, 1977; Lowe, 1995; Williams, 1995).

Thus, the common denominator of most applications of comics for pedagogical purposes<sup>17</sup> is the fact that the medium is seen essentially only as a conduit to higher forms of culture. The move up (and away) from comics is therefore considered as an integral part of the process which comics themselves are said to initiate. The report by Michael Rosen about his son's fascination with comic books and how they helped him in the early stages of reading is emblematic. Although he recognises that

Reading *The Beano* is a complex process, operating at various levels both within its texts and backwards to previous issues. It calls on various kinds of sophistication in picking up messages, codes, structures and meanings that are not immediately apparent.

(Rosen, 1996: 134)

he also makes it clear that

Some six months or so later ... Isaac had become less obsessed about *The Beano*

...

(134)

and that

... he was slowly and painstakingly reading *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

(135)

and concludes that

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17. With the exception of some European works in which it is suggested that comics can and should be taught *per se*, like, for example, Moro (1991), Bianchi and Farello (1997), and Gorla and Luini (1998).

... comics can provide a wide platform of knowledge and skill, most, perhaps all, of which is usable in other literary and graphic forms. The comics provided Isaac with a massive back-referencing reservoir as well as an autonomy. These two kinds of awareness strike me as vital for turning children into readers.

(135.)

### 5.3.2 Towards visual literacy

The objective of pedagogical activities which involve comics is markedly language-oriented, which, as a consequence, means that the visual aspect is relegated to a subordinate position. The dual-coded nature of comics is therefore largely ignored, while the main benefit of pictures is considered to be the fact that they "gain attention and enhance receiver enjoyment ... will often be evaluated favorably as part of an accompanying message [and] ...tend to increase recall of ideas in stories..." (Wigand, 1986: 35).

Such applications generally ignore that "Reading comics ... is a very complex activity ...readers need to pay the greatest attention from the very first panel, since they are required to decode graphic signs and verbal signs simultaneously, as well as to imagine all that may happen between one panel and the next..." (Traini, 1999: 33, my translation).

Half a century ago, Lancelot Hogben remarked that

The challenge of the Comic is the stupendous popularity of the picture as a competitor of the printed word; and the reason why it is a challenge is that formal education still relies largely on the printed or spoken word as the medium of instruction.

(Hogben, 1949: 231)

Now the situation is hardly changed, despite the fact that communication takes place, and culture is conveyed, largely in media characterised by the *interaction* of verbal and visual codes. Yet, the generalised tendency is to consider verbal and visual elements separately, the ones the domain of visual arts and studied

from an aesthetic perspective, the others the domain of linguistic and literary studies. There seems to be very little recognition of the fact that the combination of visual verbal codes effectively constitutes a new code in its own right and, therefore, a new language with its own grammar, which Robert Horn (1998) calls *visual language*. I think it is time the education system took up the challenge and included *visual literacy* as one of the objectives in the curriculum.

## 5.4 What this study suggests

### 5.4.1 A brief pedagogical preface

Before I go on to illustrate actual classroom activities, I think it necessary to highlight what I consider as the fundamental pedagogical principles underlying the activities themselves.

David Nunan observes that

A perennial tension in language teaching is between those who subscribe to a subject-centred view and those who subscribe to a learner-centred view of language and language learning. The subject-centred view sees learning a language as essentially the mastering of a body of knowledge. The learner-centred view, on the other hand, tends to view language acquisition as a process of acquiring skills rather than a body of knowledge.

(Nunan, 1988: 21)

Although Nunan focuses his attention on language teaching, the same comment can be made about education in general. The rest of this section will be devoted to explaining the reasons why I think a learner-centred approach is to be preferred to a subject-centred, or teacher-centred, approach. The argument in favour of learner-centred methodologies is based on general considerations as well as on more specific ones. From a general point of view, this study adopts the position whereby dynamic learning is more beneficial than static learning (see McRae,



1991). In more specific terms, a student-centred approach appears to be preferable given the fact that disciplines like semiotics and linguistics are concerned primarily with processes of semiosis, i.e. how meaning is derived from signs, words, texts, and therefore with the dynamics proper of interpretation, which is a subjective process rather than an objective fact.

#### 5.4.1.1 *Static learning vs. dynamic learning*

If subject-centred, education can be regarded as a process whereby knowledge is imparted from teachers to students. This idea presupposes that:

- knowledge is regarded as a well-defined and well-confined set of information, facts and data;
- teachers are those who possess knowledge, i.e. know (part of) such information, facts and data, and have the task of transmitting them to students;
- students are those who do *not* possess knowledge yet and therefore have the task of receiving it from teachers.

Within this frame of reference, teaching is viewed as a unidirectional process in which teachers are the only participants with an active role, while students, on the receiving end, merely play a passive role (that is why a subject-centred approach is also a teacher-centred approach).

In this respect, John McRae stresses the difference between 'static' and 'dynamic' learning:

It is worth making the distinction here between *static* and *dynamic* learning. Teacher input, to be assimilated and reproduced, invites static, almost mechanical learning. Interaction, learner involvement, inductive learning, all contribute to making the process of learning dynamic.

(McRae, 1997: 8)

In my view, the distinction between static and dynamic learning has broader

repercussions on the way the concept of knowledge is considered, i.e. whether it is considered to be a static body of information that can be isolated and, as it were, looked upon from the outside or, quite the opposite, as a dynamic entity which primarily exists within, and is shared among, people's minds. In the former case knowledge, in a kind of self-referring definition, tends to be identified with the media utilised to record it, such as books and, as a consequence, it acquires their static properties<sup>18</sup>. In the latter case, knowledge is seen as an abstract entity, distinct from the physical media in which information is recorded, and continuously subject to change.

Thus, dynamic learning can be seen as a process whereby students see themselves as part of this perpetual mutation and reshaping of knowledge.

#### *5.4.1.2 Specific reasons*

Apart from the general pedagogical principle outlined above, there are other considerations that, in my opinion, make a student-centred approach preferable to a subject-centred one. Such considerations are more specific to the areas of study this research focuses upon.

First of all, semiotics, text-linguistics and stylistics are all very recent disciplines, for which the concept of ever-changing knowledge is even more applicable than elsewhere. Their analytical models and methods are not canonised and even their boundaries and scopes are rather indistinct, given also the large amount of overlap that exists among them.

For this reason, in an hypothetical course which incorporates these disciplines, I think it is important that the various topics should not be introduced as absolute

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18. In this respect, it is imaginable that the Internet, as an extremely dynamic medium of information exchange, will contribute to modifying this static view of knowledge.

truths.

It is indeed a common tendency for teachers to adhere to what is generally perceived as the canon and, consequently, to present topics as undeniable facts. Such a propensity, in turn, contributes largely to the very process of canonisation. But the complete reliance on (arbitrarily constructed) canons is expression of a static view of teaching/learning, in that it encourages the presentation of ideas and concepts as not having valid alternatives and, consequently, as indisputable.

In my opinion, especially in the areas of study focused upon here, such an approach finds little justification. I think that students of semiotics and/or linguistics need to know that those disciplines are subject to continuous evolution and, accordingly, topics should be introduced as points to discuss rather than as unquestionable facts. Consequently, the focus should be centred on ensuring that students comprehend general concepts and are able to discuss them, rather than on providing and expecting factual information.

Admittedly, the methodological approach I am discussing here may seem to be more "difficult", in that it entails that teachers should have not only a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which a particular area of study evolves but also be equipped with sufficient critical awareness as to allow students to express their criticism towards any idea discussed in class. It is undoubtedly easier to teach factual information and to assess the recall of such information, but this would be perhaps desirable only in scientific subjects like physics or chemistry. Indeed, the fault that I see in traditional teaching methodologies is a tendency to make the teaching of any subjects conform to the norms for the teaching of scientific subjects.

Referring to literature curricula, Swan and Meskill note that

Deeply embedded in the tradition of the English language arts ... is a set of beliefs which holds that there are "common images, evocations, and responses" to a literary piece that all good readers experience, hence, that "certain approved interpretations of particular phrases, lines, or themes ... need to be learned" (Langer, 1993). Such beliefs have led to the development of literature curricula whose instructional goals and assessment procedures emphasize "objective" readings of the text that converge on sanctioned interpretations. In short, even literature curricula typically promote scientific, not literary, understanding.

(Swan, K. and Meskill, C., 1997)

#### 5.4.2 Why Comics

As illustrated in Chapter Two, in comics there occurs a full interaction between verbal and visual elements, so much so that the two codes merge into what I have termed *semiotic blend*. This makes the medium of comics an ideal source of materials to use in a course in visual literacy. However, the semiotic blend is not exclusive to comics, since it characterises other media too, like television, the Internet and film. But, as far as pedagogical applications are concerned, comics have some important advantages.

First of all, the relatively small size and weight of comic books, and their consequent portability, represents a first advantage that comics have over other mix-coded media. Comics do not need any special equipment, unlike television, the Internet or film.

Moreover, besides this logistic aspect, comics are particularly suitable for pedagogical applications since their printed format means that they are read rather than watched like a television programme or a film. The readers of a comic book are more in control of the decoding process than TV or cinema viewers, primarily because of the way the decoding process takes place in terms of time: for TV and cinema the flow of the narration is medium-bound, while for books it is reader-bound. In other words, the speed at which the decoding process occurs (or is expected to occur) is, in a way, "imposed" upon the viewers of TV or cinema, whereas comic-book readers are free to choose how much time they spend on

each panel. Besides, the readers of comics have also total control over the "direction" of the flow, in that they can go back or skip forward whenever they wish to do so.

So, a comic book is an object which remains, in its entirety, always "in the hands" of the reader, both literally and metaphorically, which makes it ideal for analysis.

### 5.4.3 Pedagogical ideas

In this section I will provide some indications as to how comics could be used in education, as part of what can be called "visual literacy". However, this term marks a very broad field. My proposals will therefore concentrate on the scope of this study, namely semiotics, text-linguistics, and aspects of narrative and of literary stylistics, although clearly there will be overspill into many other areas of language-learning, cognitive and affective areas especially.

#### 5.4.3.1 *semiotics*

Comics could be used profitably in a course of introduction to semiotics. The first concepts that such a course should present are

- the notion of sign and of its two aspects: signifier and signified;
- the way in which the signifier *signifies* the signified, i.e. the process of semiosis;
- the way in which different types of semiosis determine different types of signs.

Comics could come into play when the different types of signs are introduced. In this respect, it should be noted that exactly how many types of signs exist is far from being established. In an educational environment this could be at odds with the tendency, in classroom situations, to favour clear-cut taxonomies. Such a tendency always carries the risk of conveying preconceived ideas as factual information. Also, classifications are often presented in such a way as to disallow overlaps and gradations among the various categories.

In the case of the different types of signs such an approach would be particularly inappropriate. It is very important that any type of categorisation be presented as tentative, and emphasis be placed not so much on which and how many categories there are, as on *why* and *how* different types can be identified, *to which degree* the differences among the various types obtain, and to what extent signs can be of a mixed nature, e.g. partly iconic and partly symbolic.

So, a first classification might be proposed, according to which signs are grouped into indexes, symbols and icons. This categorisation is purposely unspecific, in that it is general enough to allow for possible refinements and sub-categorisations.

Comics can be particularly useful in a discussion of symbolic and iconic signs. If *icon* is defined as a sign in which "there is a topological similarity between a signifier and its denotata" (Sebeok, 1994: 28) and *symbol* as a sign "with a conventional link between its signifier and its denotata" (33), the discussion could begin by considering pictures and words as examples of icons and symbols respectively. So, for example, in Figure 5.1, there is a pictorial representation of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, and a verbal reference to it: "St Paul's, a church of Christ". The picture and the verbal expression signify in different ways: the picture looks recognisably similar to the real St. Paul's Cathedral, while the meaning of the words that compose the verbal expression is derived by virtue of a pre-established convention.

Here the picture is a fairly realistic one, while the words are not particularly iconic, and this clear semiotic difference makes this panel an ideal point of departure for a reflection on the icon/symbol relationship.

After such a difference has been ascertained, a discussion could be triggered about the fact that iconicity and symbolicity are gradable characteristics rather than absolute categories. For this purpose, some questions could be asked, such



Figure 5.1: Alan Moore, *From Hell*

After such a difference has been ascertained, a discussion could be triggered about the fact that iconicity and symbolicity are gradable characteristics rather than absolute categories. For this purpose, some questions could be asked, such as: "can you detect anything in the picture which signifies by convention rather than by resemblance?" and "do you see anything in the writing which has visual significance?". After the students have thought about it for a while and perhaps come up with some answers, it would be helpful to show them a photograph (preferably from a similar angle) of St. Paul's Cathedral and ask them to compare it to the drawing in the panel. A number of questions can be asked: What difference can you see? Do you think that one resembles the real cathedral more than the other? Why? What elements are present in the drawing and *not* in the photograph? Are these elements iconic or symbolic? Why?

The photograph will probably be indicated as more faithful to the actual building it represents and, as a consequence, the gradability of iconicity should already begin to manifest itself. If icon and symbol are placed at the opposite ends of the same continuum, every degree of iconicity corresponds, at the same time, to a degree of symbolicity. If the drawing of St. Paul's Cathedral resembles the real cathedral less than the photograph does, it means that the drawing is less iconic and, hence, more symbolic. The students could be invited to reflect on this, and to say what it is that makes the drawing more symbolic than the photograph: what is the meaning of the many horizontal lines? how is colour rendered in this monochromatic drawing?

At this point, the students could be asked an important question: where would you place the photograph in the icon/symbol continuum? If they position it exactly at the *icon* end, it would be interesting to suggest that even photographs are not purely iconic: in what way can a bi-dimensional piece of printed paper, 15x10 cm (or so) in size, be said to resemble a building like St. Paul's Cathedral? This consideration could serve to trigger a critical rethinking of the definition of icon



and, within it, of the concept of "resemblance". In particular it may be useful to suggest that in iconic signs the signified does not resemble the signifier as an object, but *reproduces some of the conditions under which the object that it represents is normally visually perceived* (see Eco, 1982: 32).

As for the verbal elements in the panel, the discussion could follow a similar direction. The words in the balloons can be placed at the opposite end of the continuum, namely at the *symbol* end. But, how purely symbolic are they? Do they have a visual semantic value, besides their linguistic one? It would be interesting to see whether a different effect is created if the words are printed in a mechanical typeface rather than in an handwritten style.

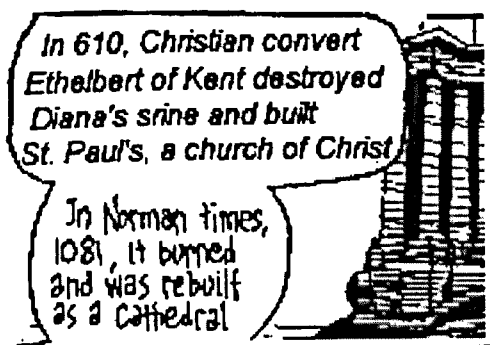


Figure 5.2

In Figure 5.2 the style of the original words in the first balloon has been replaced by a more rigid set type. What effect does this create? What difference is there between the first and the second balloon? Probable answers may be that the first balloon acquires more dignity, formality and/or credibility. It does not matter exactly what the various responses might be, since as long

as the students detect *some* difference, it is already sufficient to make them aware of the importance of the visual aspect of writing. Similar questions can be asked about the second balloon: what is the effect of handwritten text? Again, different ideas are likely to emerge.

Next, the students could be invited to rethink the positioning of the verbal elements in the icon/symbol continuum. By now they should be aware of the fact that, semiotically speaking, the symbolicity of writing is not identifiable to an absolute value but is gradable and that, as a consequence, the verbal constituents of a panel are, like the pictorial ones, both symbolic and iconic, to various degrees.

At this point it may be useful to show the students some panels where the symbolicity of pictures and the iconicity of words are more apparent.

In Figure 5.3 the verbal and the pictorial elements gradually come semiotically closer to each other: the words acquire more and more iconicity, and the picture acquires more and more symbolicity, both signifying the boy's anger. It would be interesting to decide where each panel's words and pictures should be placed along the icon/symbol continuum:

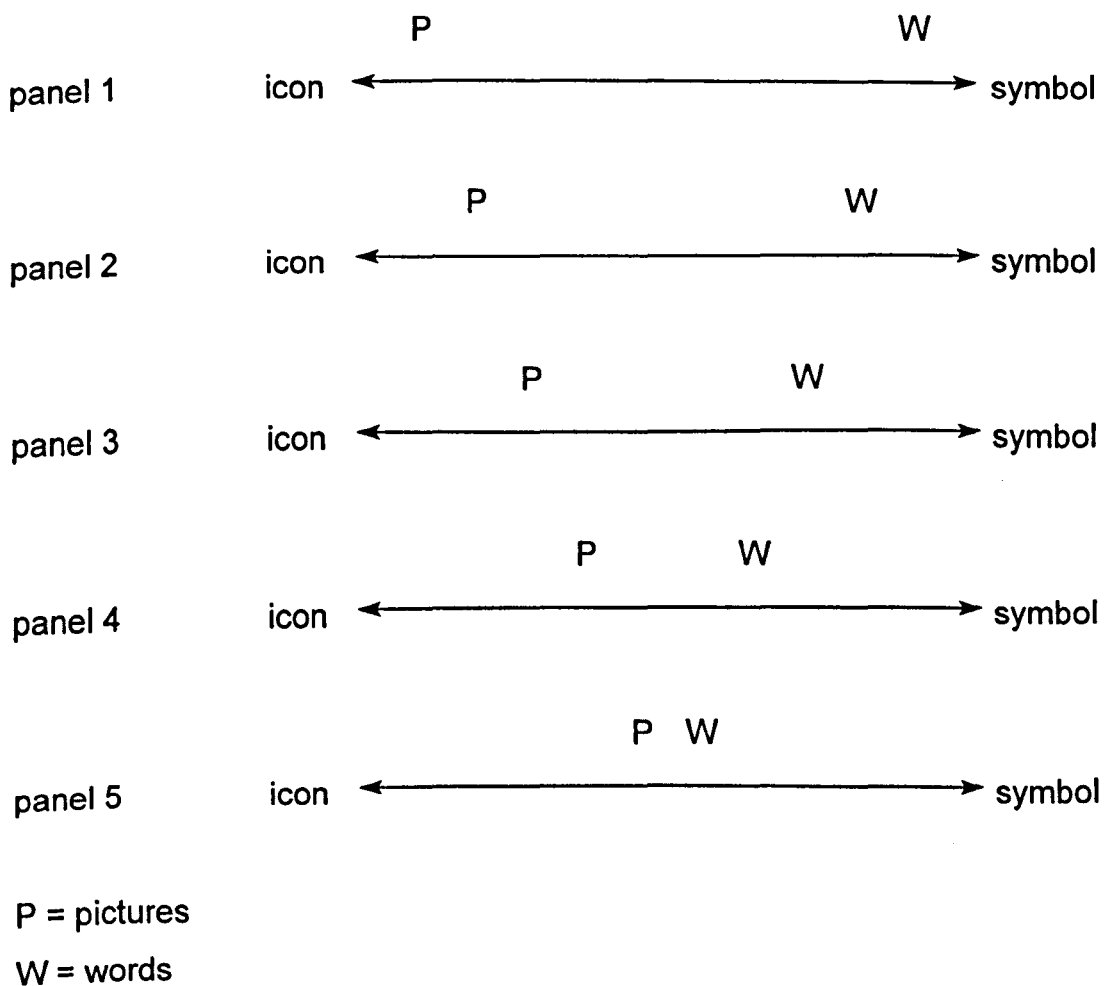


Figure 5.3 can be considered a graphical representation of what I called *semiotic blend* (see Chapter Two).

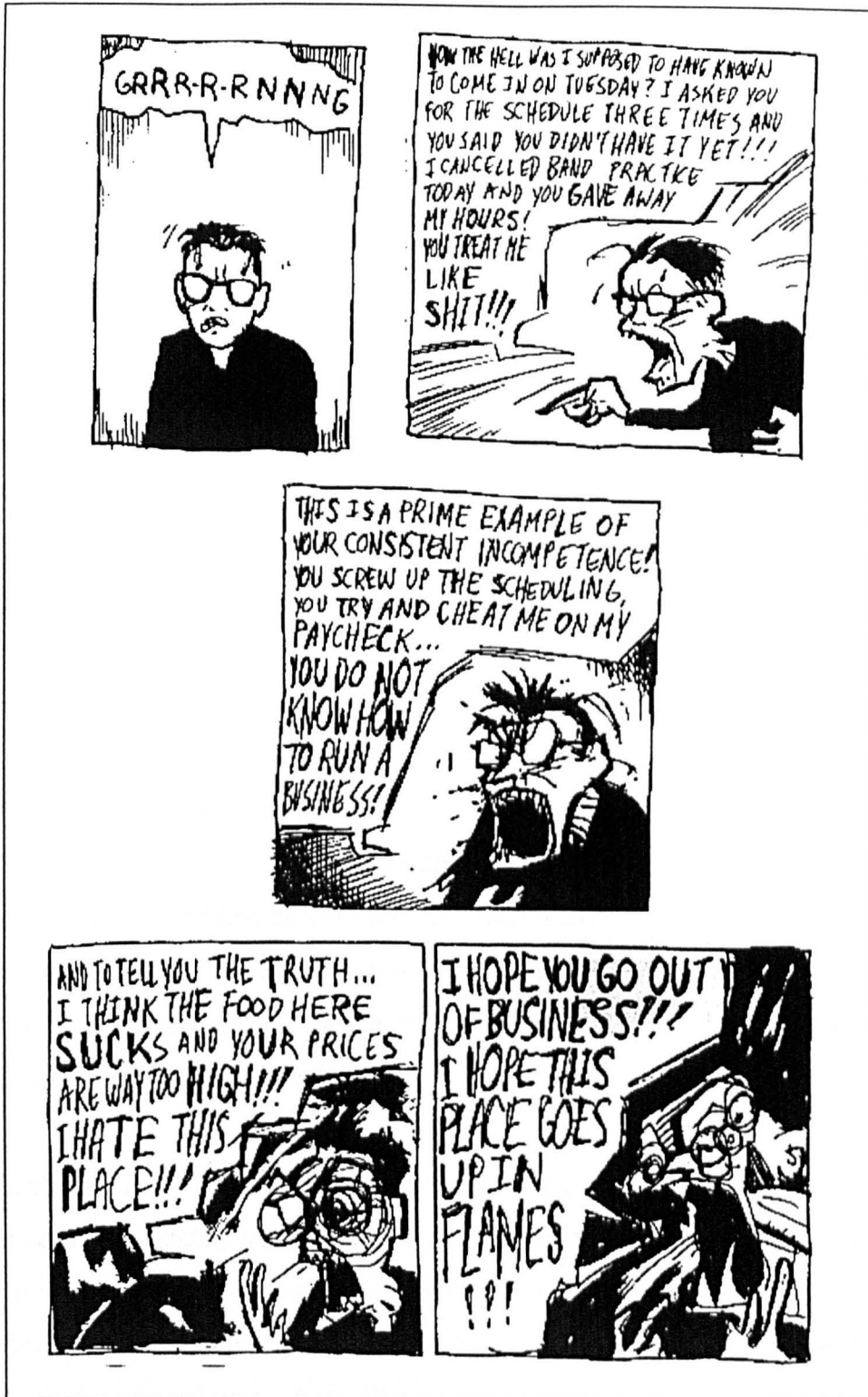


Figure 5.3: Adrian Tomine, "Adrian quits his job"

As a follow-up, the students could be invited to think where, other than in comics, a similar phenomenon can be observed and, perhaps, as a homework activity they could collect some samples to show in class.

Very probable answers will be political cartoons, advertisements and magazine covers. Figures 5.4, 5.5, 5.6 and 5.7 are some examples.

In all these examples visual and verbal elements intermingle. In Figure 5.4 a flimsy system of leaking pipes forms the word "democracy". In Figure 5.5 the slogan of the pen advertisement is purposely written in a free-hand style. In Figure 5.6 there is a clever double visual/verbal rendering of "quietness": first the meaning is conveyed by the fact that the word "Quiet" is hardly discernible from the black background; then it is conveyed by the very small size of the caption "it's quieter than that". Finally, in Figure 5.7 the shapes of the various sentences mimic that of smoke coming out of chimneys.

#### 5.4.3.2 *text connectivity*

The "semiotic blend" is a phenomenon which, at least in the terms discussed above, concerns primarily the level of the single panel. The interaction between words and pictures, however, is only one of the characteristics of comics. The other is *sequentiality*, i.e. the succession of panels in a form which can recognisably be called a "text".

As I illustrated in Chapter Three, a parallel can be drawn between the linguistic sentence and the comics panel, both seen as the main constituents of texts. The main tenet of my theory is that both the sentence and the panel can be considered as packages of information, and that a collection of such packages of information is identified as a text when it possesses *relatedness*, i.e. when these units are recognised to be related to each other.

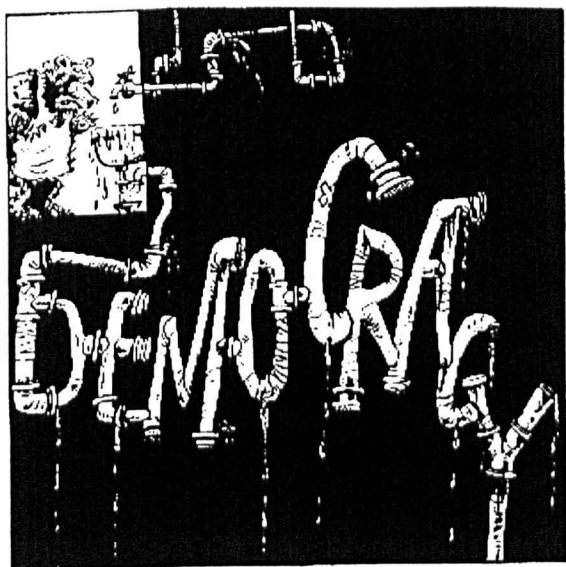


Figure 5.4



Figure 5.5

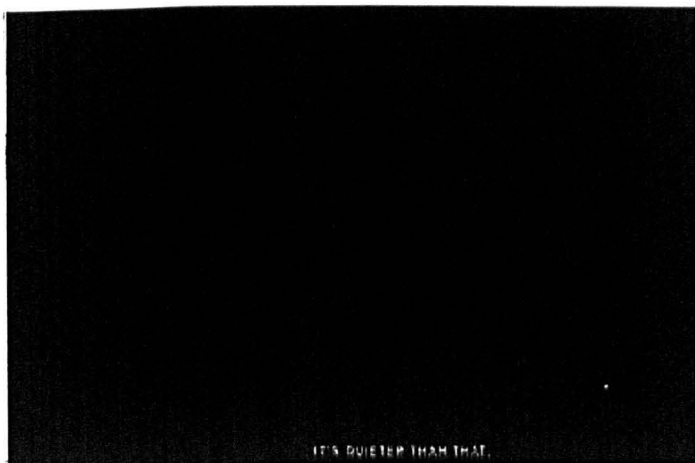


Figure 5.6

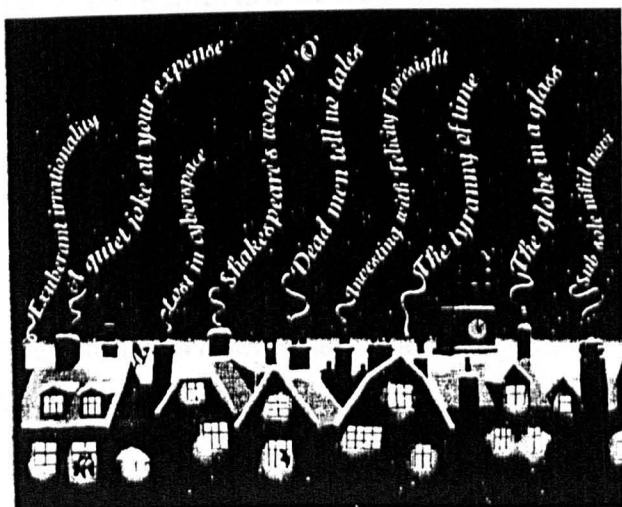


Figure 5.7

The notion of text has predominantly been associated with language, and has consequently been studied from a linguistic perspective, and so are existing concepts of text connectivity, above all cohesion and coherence. Within the sphere of language studies, this is the domain of text-linguistics which, by definition, is preoccupied with the structural organisation of language at the textual level. Particularly, the focus of text-linguistics is to determine what it is that makes a collection of sentences be perceived as "text", beyond the mere fact of its being presented as such.

Thus, comics can be used in a course in text-linguistics both as an expansion of the notion of text — to include visual elements alongside verbal ones — and as a tool to aid the understanding of the concepts illustrated.

Text-linguistics is a relatively new discipline and therefore I think that it is important that existing concepts and ideas are not presented as conclusive factual information, but as a theoretical basis upon which students can reflect and, hopefully, develop their own thoughts.

The first general idea that the students' attention should focus on is the fact that texts are composed of a series of smaller parts, or text-units. For this purpose it could be helpful to present them with a linguistic text and a comics text and to ask them how they think the two texts could be broken down into text-units. The arrangement into panels will probably facilitate the recognition of such units in the comics text, and so a possible question could be "what is the equivalent of the panel in the linguistic text?". Students may suggest various answers, the most likely being the paragraph, the sentence, the clause, or the phrase. Whichever the answer, it is important that it be accompanied by an explanation, which should be discussed in detail by the class collectively.

The decision on a linguistic equivalent of the panel will probably not prove to be

an easy task, but will have the benefit of encouraging the students to reflect on the concept of text-unit and also on the differences between such elements as paragraph, sentence, clause and phrase.

So, if a text is a collection of identifiable units, the question is: "how are these units related to each other?" I think the best way to attempt to answer this question is by taking into consideration actual texts or passages first of all. Those analysed in Chapter Three are good excerpts from comics texts.

This should be a good brainstorming exercise. In both excerpts relatedness is fairly obvious, but to explain in formal terms *how* it obtains is perhaps not so immediate. In Figure 3.6 of Chapter Three money is a repeated presence which gives a sense of continuity to the otherwise seemingly unrelated panels. So, the relatedness of the sequence can be said to be based on *repetition*. It will be useful, at this point, to ask the student to find a similar type of relatedness in a language-based text.

(1) There was a cold smell in the chapel. (2) But it was a holy smell. (3) It was not like the smell of the old peasants who knelt at the back of the chapel at Sunday mass. (4) That was a smell of air and rain and turf and corduroy. (5) But they were very holy peasants. (6) They breathed behind him on his neck and sighed as they prayed. (7) They lived in Clane, a fellow said: there were little cottages there and he had seen a woman standing at the halfdoor of a cottage with a child in her arms, as the cars had come past from Sallins. (8) It would be lovely to sleep for one night in that cottage before the fire of smoking turf, in the dark lit by the fire, in the warm dark, breathing the smell of the peasants, air and rain and turf and corduroy. (9) But, O, the road there between the trees was dark! You would be lost in the dark. (10) It made him afraid to think of how it was.

### Text 1

In this passage (from James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*) the word "smell" is repeated five times, "peasants" is repeated three times, "cottage" three times, and "dark" four times. It should not be difficult for the students to see the importance that repetition has for the perception of relatedness. Subsequently, they could be invited to think whether there are other words at all that contribute to repetition in the passage. In particular, they could be asked to consider the role of pronouns. It is essential that the students be familiar with this part of speech, and especially with its fundamental function. It will be helpful to point out that in the word *pronoun* the prefix *pro-* means "in place of" or "substitute for". Hence, if pronouns are words that are used in place of, or as substitutes for, other words, it follows that they should be taken into account when considering repetition. So, returning to the joycean passage, one question could be: "which words are the pronouns substitutes for?" Focusing on sentences (2) to (7), the table below summarises the answer:

sentence	pronoun	word replaced
2	it	smell
3	it	smell
4	that	smell
5	they	peasants
6	they; him; they	peasants; (Stephen); peasants
7	they; he; there	peasants; (Stephen); in Clane

Table 5.5

As the table shows, the words "smell" and "peasants" occur more often than has previously been counted. Except that in three occasions they occur not in the same orthographic form, given that language allows words to be replaced, under certain circumstances, by a special class of grammatical words called pronouns.

At this point, it may be useful to consider the phenomenon of pronominalisation



within a broader frame, i.e. that of *relexicalisation* or, to use Halliday and Hasan's (1976) terminology, *substitution*<sup>19</sup>. So, students should be made aware that repetition does not occur only when a word, or a lexical item, is repeated exactly in the same form, but also when it is relexicalised by another item. Thus, hyponymy, synonymy and meronymy can all be considered special types of repetition, all contributing to the relatedness of texts.

In Figure 3.13 of Chapter Three is a passage from a comics text in which relatedness obtains in a different way.

Here repetition plays a part too, but in a less evident and prominent way than it does in the previous passage. To start with, It will be interesting to ask the students the following questions:

"Do you perceive the passage as possessing relatedness?"

"Can you explain why?"

followed by

"How does repetition work here?"

This third question is particularly useful, since it encourages the students to consider a wider spectrum of possible ways in which repetition obtains. In the first three panels, for example, "snow" is a repeated element but, while between the first and the second panel the repetition can be considered as *exact*, in the third panel there is a slight relexicalisation, in that snow is not on the ground but is falling from the sky. Other possibilities:

in panels 5 and 6 the lightening and the rain are meronyms of "thunderstorm"?

---

19. Even though it is used in a different sense in *Cohesion in English*, the term *substitution* describes well the phenomenon discussed here.

in panel 15 there is an exact repetition of the rain in panel 6?  
panel 18 is a meronym of panel 17?

And, on a higher level:

the first three panels are subordinates of "winter"?  
panels 5 to 8 are subordinates of "spring"?  
panels 10 to 12 are subordinates of "summer"?  
panels 13 to 18 are subordinates of "autumn"?  
panels 20 and 21 are subordinates of "winter"?

As observed in Chapter Three, these assumptions are also culture-bound, particularly the references to Halloween.

At this point it will be useful to introduce the concept of collocation, in its simplest definition, namely as "the company that words keep". Then this concept can be broadened to transcend the level of words and enter a more abstract domain, so that collocation could be seen as "the company that *ideas* keep". From this perspective, "snow" will be associated with the idea of winter, "heat" and "beach" will be associated with the idea of summer, "falling leaves" with the idea of "autumn", etc.

It would be interesting to ask the students to translate the text into a verbal form, and subsequently ask them to analyse the resulting texts in terms of relatedness.

Another important observation can be made about this passage, namely the fact that if not taken as a whole, it would be impossible to perceive any significant relatedness among the various panels. The students could be invited, for example, to consider a random pair of contiguous panels in isolation and to see whether they can still see them as connected in any way. The difficulty in doing this should show that texts are more than mere addition of smaller units. Consequently, if emphasis is placed only on *pairs* of text units rather than on longer passages of

whole texts, there is a serious risk of recognising text connectivity only in cases where each text unit is related to the next in a chain-like manner.

Yet, Halliday and Hasan's *Cohesion in English* (1976) and Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1994), two works which have generally been considered as ground-breaking, respectively in the fields of linguistics and comics studies, focus their attention precisely on pairs of text units. This emerges clearly from Halliday and Hasan's notion of *cohesive tie* and McCloud's concept of *panel-to-panel transition*. Particularly significant, for example, is the special type of panel-to-panel transition that McCloud terms *non-sequitur*, which, according to him, "offers no logical relationship between panels *whatsoever!*" (McCloud, 1994: 72, original text enhancements). As examples of this type of transition, he provides these examples:

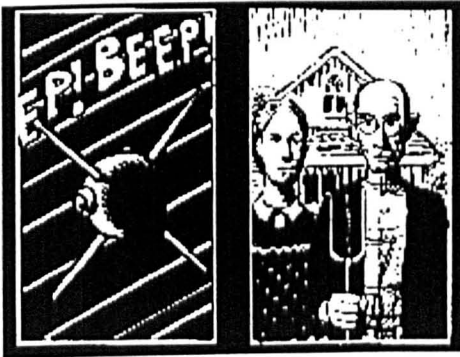


Figure 5.8: Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*

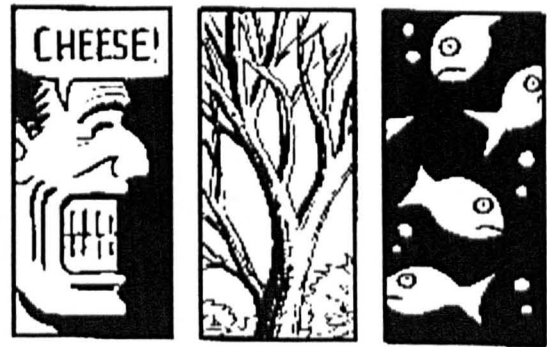


Figure 5.9: Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*

These very short sequences are formed by panels deliberately put together by the author in order to show the meaning of non-sequitur panel-to-panel transactions. However, McCloud's argument, in my opinion, is flawed by the fact that the examples that are supposed to illustrate non-sequitur transitions are not part of authentic texts. If they were, it would be imaginable that some relationship could be recognised between the selected panels and other points in the texts.

When analysing a text, a good exercise would be to find all instances of contiguous sentences/panels that are not logically connected if taken in isolation, and then to establish how these sentences/panels are actually related to the rest of the text. It will be useful, at this point, to illustrate Hasan's idea of cohesive chain and Hoey's idea of cohesive network and to ask the student to discuss those ideas based on their own findings.

#### 5.4.3.3 *literary stylistics*

In a course in stylistics the concepts of point of view and voice will certainly be among the most important ones. To begin with, the students could be asked to think of how many meanings they know for the expression "point of view" and to illustrate those meanings with examples. Two main usages should emerge: one in which "point of view" is used within the sphere of physical perception, and one in which it is used in a more psychological sense. Hence, the expressions "perceptual point of view" and "psychological point of view".

Then, a verbal text could be analysed. Text 1 above seems a good starting point. The students could be invited to establish where a perceptual point of view is expressed and, subsequently, to say whose point of view they think it is: "who senses the smell in the chapel?" "who used to hear the peasants breath and sigh at the back of the chapel?" "who saw a woman standing at the door of a cottage?" etc.

Next, attention should be focussed on psychological point of view, and the students should be asked to look in the passage for instances where this type of point of view is expressed and, again, to decide whose it is. The most obvious case is in sentence (8): "who expresses the desire to sleep for one night in a peasants' cottage?" But other instances of psychological point of view can be identified: "according to whom was the smell 'holy' (sentence 2)?" "according to whom were the peasants 'holy' (sentence 5)?" "who was afraid to think 'how it was' "

(sentence 10)?"

At this point, the students should be made aware of the fact that perceptual and psychological point of view are not necessarily two completely different categories. They could be invited, for example, to consider and comment on the expression "warm dark" in sentence (8). Both "warm" and "dark" are adjectives associated with sensorial perception, but Stephen is only *wishing* he could be in the peasant's cottage, which means he has *never been* there, so how can he sense the warmth and the darkness in the cottage? The "warm dark" is part of Stephen's mental image of a peasants' cottage. Interestingly, the word "image", normally associated with visuality, is used here in its psychological sense. In fact, the word "perception" too can be used to indicate a purely sensorial phenomenon but also a mental one.

The semantics of such words reflects that of the expression "point of view". Indeed, even when it is intended in its visual sense, the word "view" ultimately refers to a mental process which, at least potentially, is subject to be influenced by other factors within the viewer's mental state. To return to the passage above, in sentence (9) the view of "the road there" as "dark" is presumably not just an objective physical description (surely the road cannot be dark all the time!) but, again, more of a mental image that the protagonist has of that particular place. So the adjective "dark" is loaded with other psychological connotations, such as fear and sense of threat, as confirmed by the next sentence: "It made him afraid to think of how it was."

At this point, some passages from comics texts could be taken into consideration.

In Figure 2.4 of Chapter Two the protagonist "shrinks" to the size (and acquires the physical features) of a child. The students can be invited to reflect on this: "who sees the character shrink?" and "do you think anyone actually sees that?" It is important that the students are not led to think that their thoughts may be

incorrect; instead, they should be encouraged to discuss and share their ideas collectively, without thinking that one idea may have more validity than another.

An interesting activity could involve translating the "shrinking" into a verbal form. Again, it is useful if the students compare, discuss and explain their different versions. Also, they could be invited to consider the following renderings:

- (3) "He shrank to the size of a child"
- (4) "He began to behave like a child"
- (5) "He felt as if he had shrunk to the size of a child"
- (6) "He felt like a child"

Each one of these four verbal translations represents a different way in which the "shrinking" is perceived. The first one is an objective literal translation of what is shown in the passage; in the second one an element of subjective interpretation is introduced, in that the physical nature of the "shrinking" is perceived as a metaphor for the protagonist's childish behaviour; in the third one the perspective becomes internal, in that the "shrinking" is regarded as the way in which the protagonist felt in that particular circumstance; in the fourth version, finally, the "shrinking" is, like in the second one, only a metaphor, but this time the metaphor is not for an external observation of the character's behaviour, but for his internal feelings. So, the differences between the four versions could be represented in the following table:

	<i>literal interpretation</i>	<i>metaphorical interpretation</i>
<i>external perspective</i>	version 1	version 2
<i>internal perspective</i>	version 3	version 4

Table 5.6

The difference between external and internal perspective is a key concept in

linguistic criticism (see Fowler, 1986; 1996), which the students are likely to be unfamiliar with. So it will be worthwhile spending some time on it. For this purpose, it may be useful and interesting to reconsider Text 1 precisely in terms of perspective.

Another notion related to, but different from, point of view is voice, which tells us who "speaks" in a narrative text. When this concept is first introduced, the students will probably not see a great deal of difference between voice and point of view. Again, Text 1 provides interesting material to reflect on. The students could be asked to analyse it in order to answer the question: "who speaks here?" This is very open to interpretation, so they should not think that there exists any correct answer that they should try to get at. What they should be made aware of is the fact that within the same text, or even within the same sentence, the "speaker" can change. So, for example, while in sentence (8) the voice could be said to be Stephen's, in sentence (10) the presence of the third-person pronoun "him" is an element indicating that the voice must be someone else's.

At this point the figure of the narrator starts to emerge: if the voice is not Stephen's it must be the narrator's. The students could now be invited to reflect on perspective along the same lines: whose perspective is "external perspective?" After introducing the concept of narrator, the discussion of voice can go on to consider the differences between speech presentation and thought presentation. For this purpose, a passage from a comics text could be presented, with both speech balloons and thought balloons (the students will probably be familiar with the graphological differences between the two types of balloons).



**Figure 5.10:** Posy  
Simmonds, *Gemma Boverly*



**Figure 5.11:** Posy Simmonds,  
*Gemma Boverly*

Now, the students could be invited to think of how they would render the balloons in prose form. The most immediate "translation" is to replace the tail and of the balloon with an introductory clause like "he said" or "he thought" and the outline with quotation marks. It may be useful to put the two versions side by side on the board or on a OHP. First a speech balloon and its prose equivalent:



She asked: "Charlie on his way, is he?"

Now, the students may be asked to think whether they can think of different ways of rendering the balloon into prose. Gradually (perhaps with the aid of examples from real texts) the various modes of speech presentation should be introduced. It is important to always consider the role of the narrator in this discussion: how important is it in each mode? how much does the narrator interfere?

The direct modes will emerge as the ones with the least amount of control by the narrator. Now, if attention is turned back to comics, this observation will lead to the conclusion that since speech balloons are the equivalent of Direct Speech, they exhibit very little narratorial presence. At this point the students could be



invited to consider the *function* of speech balloons: do they always have exclusively the function of reporting speech? Depending on their familiarity with comics, the students may find it difficult to answer this question, so it might be helpful to use a few panels where a character is engaged in a monologue (Figure 5.12).



Figure 5.12: Osamu Tezuka, *Adolf*

A number of questions could be asked: What is the function of these speech balloons? Is the character really speaking? Who is he speaking to? Is this comparable to the cases in which a character in a play addresses the audience directly? Does the narrator have a role at all?

Now, Figure 5.12 could be compared to Figure 5.13.



Figure 5.13: Floyd Gottfredson, "Race for riches"

What is the function of the caption? Whose is the voice in it? Is the caption in any way comparable to the speech balloons in Figure 5.12? A third passage could serve to complement the first two.

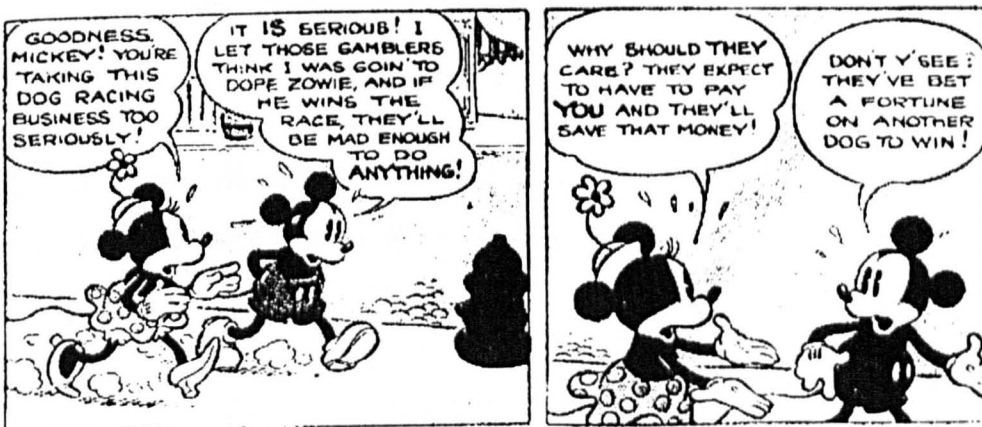


Figure 5.14: Floyd Gottfredson, "Mickey Mouse and Pluto the racer"

Questions similar to the ones above could be asked here. The two characters are talking to each other, but is the passage merely reporting a dialogue, or is it also doing something else? In order for the students to get a fuller picture, the passage should be presented to them in its textual environment, i.e. with a few panels preceding and following it. It will then become apparent how the four panels represent a short pause in the narrative, with the function of clarifying and summarising (for the young readers the text is expected to be read by) the situation at that particular point in the story.

It should be clearer by now that although they are formally used to report the characters' utterances, speech balloons can also serve to provide information for the reader. This, in turn, suggests that the voice of speech balloons does not necessarily always belong exclusively to the character indicated by the tail, but is "infiltrated" with the narrator's presence. Thus, an interesting activity could be one in which the students first rank Figures 5.12, 5.13 and 5.14 according to narratorial's weight (see Chapter Four for a fuller theoretical discussion) and then translate

- the caption of Figure 5.13 into a monologue and into a dialogue;
- the monologue in Figure 5.12 into a dialogue and into a caption;
- the dialogue in Figure 5.14 into a caption and into a monologue.

By being actively involved in these translations, the students will have a chance to

a) experience directly the effects of different ways in which the narrator "interferes" with the narrative

and

b) familiarise themselves with the concepts of narrator and narratorial weight.

If the presentation of speech is not necessarily a faithful report of the characters' utterances, what can be said about the presentation of thought?

Since the students are already familiar with the ways in which the narrator "manipulates" the characters' speech, they could be invited to think whether, and to what extent, similar manipulations are operated on the characters' thought. After a period of discussion, if the issue has not emerged, two crucial questions should be asked:

1) Does thought always occur in the form of linguistic utterances?

and

2) How does the narrator know what goes on in a character's mind?

These two questions entail a third one: How "seriously" can we take the direct modes of thought presentation? Again, it may be helpful to consider some comics panels.



Figure 5.15: Floyd Gottfredson, "Mickey Mouse and Pluto the racer"

This funny passage is of course an extreme case but, precisely because of that, it can help students grasp concepts better. Here, the presentation of thought is even more difficult to accept as a faithful report since the thinking agent is an animal rather than a person<sup>20</sup>. So, the verbalisation of Pluto's thoughts looks markedly like an artificial device. The reasons for this perceived artificiality are closely connected with the questions asked above: to what extent are we ready to accept that a character's mind is accessible to the narrator's inspection (whence the attribute "omniscient" given to the narrator) and that the "content" of the character's mind has linguistic form? Also, does it make a difference if the character happens to be a dog (like in Figure 5.15) or a human being?

20. From a real-world perspective, in Mickey Mouse comics the characters are actually animals, but within that particular fictional world, they acquire anthropomorphic features (most notably speech) so that the real-world difference between humans and animals exists there too.



Figure 5.16: Posy Simmonds, *Gemma Boverly*

How different is this panel from the previous one in terms of "acceptability" of reported thought? As I underlined on other occasions earlier, the students should not feel that they are required to provide "correct" answers, but to contribute to the discussion. At this point the different modes of thought presentation should be reviewed and, similarly to what was done with speech presentation, the various modes can be considered with regard to narratorial intervention. How does the degree of narratorial weight vary in each mode? Which modes imply more narratorial weight? This question will probably generate interesting responses. Especially interesting will be to see how the students rank the various modes of thought presentation in terms of narratorial weight in comparison to the modes of speech presentation.

#### 5.4.3.4 Comics-prose transcoding

Another type of activity that can be done with comics is what may be called "transcoding", involving the reproduction of comics texts into prose form and/or vice versa. The rationale for such-like activities could be summarised by Charles Sanders Peirce's definition of meaning as "the translation of a sign into another system of signs" (cited in Hartshorne and Weiss, 1933: 4.127, 99).

The main consequence of the definition of meaning as translation into another system of signs (or code) is that the process of understanding can be considered as a productive act. As Roland Barthes pointed out, "the Text is experienced only in an activity of production" (Barthes, 1984: 157). In order to *experience* the text, then, students should be actively involved in the *creation* of the meanings. Indeed Barthes saw reading as equivalent to writing:

Not only does the theory of the text extend to infinity the freedoms of reading... but it also insists strongly on the (productive) equivalence of writing and reading.

(Barthes, 1981: 42)

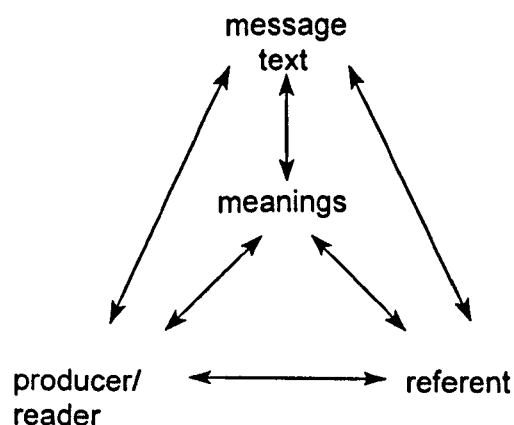
The idea of the equivalence between reading and writing or, to put it in more general terms, the equivalence between decoding and re-producing the message, is a common concept in semiotic studies. John Fiske illustrates it very clearly:

For semiotics ... the message is a construction of signs which, through interacting with the receivers, produce meanings. The sender ... declines in importance. The emphasis shifts to the text and how it is 'read'. And reading is the process of discovering meanings that occurs when the reader interacts or negotiates with the text. ...

The message, then, is not something sent from A to B, but an element in a structured relationship whose other elements include external reality and the producer/reader. *Producing and reading the text are seen as parallel, if not identical, processes* in that they occupy the same place in this structured relationship.

(Fiske, 1990: 3, my emphasis)

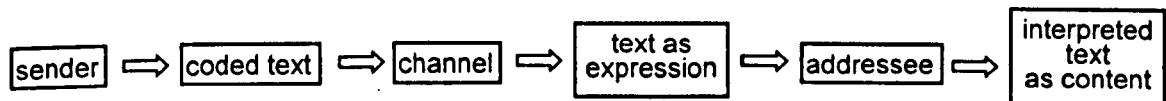
Diagrammatically, this relationship can be represented as follows:



(Fiske, 1990: 4)

Analogously, Umberto Eco claims that "every reception of a work of art is both an *interpretation* and a *performance* of it, because in every reception the work takes on a fresh perspective for himself" (Eco, 1989: 4).

Such a concept is based on a more general model of communication, according to which the interpretative act involves "making a message (insofar as it is received and transformed into the *content* of an *expression*) an empty form to which various possible senses can be attributed" (Eco, 1981: 5). Graphically, such a model is represented like this:



(adapted from Eco, 1981: 5)

This semiotic notion which equates "interpretation of the text" to "reproduction of the text" is at the basis of Rob Pope's idea of "textual intervention", which

...involves *critique through transformation* as well as interpretation and analysis; *re-coding* as well as de-coding; gratification through *re-production* as well as consumption; and *re-creation* in a genuinely active sense rather than 'recreation' in the sense of more or less passive leisure.

(Pope, 1995: 186)

Among the classroom activities proposed by Pope there is one which is about turning a short verbal text into filmic form (p. 83-92). One of the issues he raises is the indeterminacy of verbal language as opposed to visual language, in that the former "has a high degree of *generality* and requires a correspondingly high degree of *participation* from the reader/listener in order to fix meanings" (p. 85), while the latter is a more determinate code, since "We can immediately see at least something of what a film or photo or painting is about, even without subtitles and captions" (p. 86). Consequently, in the process of transforming the verbal text



into visual text, one fundamental problem is to decide how to render particular and specific what is indeterminate and general.

This type of activity will undoubtedly stimulate the interpretative skills of the students whenever they need to make a decision on, for example, the way in which they are going to choose an actor for a particular character, or what the setting should look like and so on. And, in doing so, they will need to analyse the verbal text closely in order to find possible clues to help them in their transcoding exercise. Similar activities could be carried out with comics with, I think, some important added advantages.

One first problem with the verbo-filmic transformation is of practical nature: to actually implement the transcoding from verbal text into filmic text there needs to be available equipment such as a camera, a projector, lights and so on which it is not normally easy to find in educational environments. And when this equipment is indeed *not* available, if the students were simply asked to write the script of a film, the activity would change completely (although still retaining part of its usefulness) since it would become a translation between one verbal text into another verbal text. In addition, even if the school does have the necessary gear to make a film, it is probably difficult to ensure that each student of a whole class is actively involved in the same way.

In this regard, with comics, the advantage is that all is needed is paper, pencils and, optionally, crayons. The activity can be carried out in small groups or by each student individually, with no one having to have a marginal role of semi-spectator.

Besides these logistical considerations, there is another important advantage that the use of comics has in this type of transcoding activities, intrinsic in the nature of the medium itself: the greater semiotic possibilities that comics offer in terms of what Pope refers to as (in)determinacy of the code. This becomes clear if the

following two points are considered:

- 1) the opposition between determinacy and indeterminacy is, in Pope's own explanation, based on the opposition between icon and symbol (p. 86);
- 2) in comics, as I argued in Chapter Two, the iconicity of the visual code and the symbolicity of the verbal code are not absolute parameters but exist on a continuum and often blend with each other.

Thus, this means that when drawing/writing a comic strip, one is not limited to the determinacy of the realistic images typical of the filmic medium, nor to the indeterminacy of words, but has available a whole range of *varying degrees* of determinacy and indeterminacy or, which is fundamentally the same, of iconicity and symbolicity.

So, for example, in creating visual representations of characters, one is not obliged to portray detailed physical features, but can choose to employ highly stylised pictures, thus exploiting the symbolic properties of pictures in order to convey a particular meaning. The mouse faces of the characters of *Maus*, each identical to all the others, are a perfect example of this use of symbolic pictures: the hair colour, the shape of the eyes or the size of the nose become all unnecessary and insignificant details, while what matters is the symbolic meaning the mouse face.

This semiotic flexibility offered by the medium of comics multiplies the interpretative – always intended as productive – possibilities activated in transcoding activities.

Besides, a further enlargement of these possibilities is represented by the fact that the verbal code is always at the disposal of the creator of comics. This means that at all times there is a choice to be made of *what* and *how much* to put in words or, conversely, to represent through non-verbal signs. And, additionally, the verbal text can exist in the form of dialogues, within speech balloons, in the

form of interior speech, within thought balloons, or in the form of narratorial comments, within captions.

This extremely wide scope of possibilities allow a multitude of different re-creations of the original text and, therefore, a multitude of interpretations, the discussion of which in the class can be a invaluable source of reflection and better understanding of a variety of semiotic, linguistic, stylistic and literary subjects.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have suggested ways in which comics could be used in an educational context. As a deliberate choice, such suggestions have not been presented in the form of detailed step-to-step classroom activities, since my aim has been to provide some useful insight in how different types of media, specifically comics and verbal texts, can be integrated in courses of semiotics, text-linguistics and/or literary linguistics. An important point that has been stressed is that this type of integration should not encourage situations in which one medium is used an attractive alternative to ultimately gear the students' attention towards the other medium. On the contrary, the main benefit that derives from the concurrent use of language-based texts and comics is that the students are able to abstract certain concepts to a higher level, i.e. to a level which transcends the particularities of one or the other medium.

## **Conclusion**

### **6.1 Conclusions**

In analysing comics texts from a perspective normally adopted for verbal texts only, this thesis has attempted to achieve three main results:

- 1) To expand the concept of 'language' beyond the traditional sense that is normally attributed to it, and incorporate other systems of signs within the same concept; in particular the visual and the verbal components of comics have been considered as 'languages', and therefore analysable as such.
- 2) To push the limits of, and to reconsider from a new perspective, well-established theoretical notions developed in the linguistic/stylistic field, such as cohesion and the role of the narrator in narrative texts.
- 3) To contribute to the knowledge of the way in which comics texts are structured and of their formal components, so that a better understanding of this narrative form can perhaps help place it alongside other forms like film, prose or drama.

To summarise the conclusions reached at the end of the three core theoretical chapters:

Chapter Two has been devoted to a discussion of the semiotic similarities that can be proven to exist in comics between words and pictures. This has been done by theorising a scale at whose two ends are iconicity (the semiotic property of

images) and symbolicity (the semiotic property of words). The chapter has shown that in comics words and pictures alike possess both properties and in certain cases this dual nature is so prominent that it produces what I have called *semiotic blend*, that is iconic and symbolic properties blend with one another in words as well as in pictures.

Chapter Three has dealt with the issue of text connectivity, normally referred to as *cohesion* in linguistics. The arrangements of comics texts into panels makes them highly elliptical and therefore the question of how each panel (or unit) is related to the neighbouring ones as well as to distant ones is of central importance for the interpretation of comics texts. In the chapter I have argued that the way text units are related to one another (the phenomenon that I have called *relatedness*) depends both on recognisable textual features and, at the same time, on cognitive factors, i.e. on the individual reader's contribution to the interpretation of the text.

Chapter Four has taken into account such stylistic features as point of view and speech/thought presentation, and has discussed the way their combination generates different degrees of *narratorial weight*. Again, having the analysis of comics as the objective has made it possible (and necessary) to reconsider the notions under examination. Thus, the classical opposition between psychological and spatial point of view, the role of the narrator, the functions of speech and thought presentation have all been subject to careful scrutiny and re-thought from a new and fresh perspective.

After these three theoretical chapters, and based on the conclusions and the findings therein, Chapter Five has offered some indications for possible pedagogical applications of comics.

## 6.2 Confines of the study

Because of its multidisciplinary nature, this study has been restricted by inevitable confines.

First of all, the fact that the three theoretical chapters (Two, Three and Four) are, to a large extent, autonomous from each other, has meant that rather than developing one main analytical model, this thesis has proposed three different frameworks, one in each theoretical chapter: the semiotic blend, relatedness, and narratorial weight.

Secondly, the focus on the similarities between verbal language and visual language – epitomised by the very use of the common word 'language' – has meant that the non-linguistic properties of images, i.e. those properties that Elkins calls the "silent" part of images (1999: 81), have not been taken into account. So, in comics, elements such as colour, the line style, the different drawing techniques, etc. have not been considered in the theoretical discussion nor in the analysis. Although I do not, in fact, believe that these elements are actually "silent", i.e. incapable of being interpreted semantically, I am persuaded that a convincing investigation of *how* they mean requires a significant amount of knowledge in the field of visual arts and, therefore, lies well outside the scope of the present study.

Third, the variety of perspectives from which the research has been carried out has necessarily entailed a certain measure of simplification in the description of the theoretical and analytical models drawn from. In doing so, however, I have tried to preserve the integrity of, and not to misconstrue, the principles of those models.

The semiotic distinction between icon and symbol, for example, on which Chapter

Two is grounded, is based on the Peircean classification of signs, and, despite the fact that Peirce's own model

- (a) was itself more complex than the tripartite categorisation into icon, index and symbol; and
- (b) has undergone significant revisions and reformulations by later semioticians such as Umberto Eco and Thomas Sebeok;

I think that the essence of the notions of icon (signifying through resemblance) and symbol (signifying through arbitrariness and convention) has not been altered. Besides, the icon/symbol opposition proposed in Chapter Two serves more an instrumental function than one of investigation into the concepts themselves of icon and symbol, since the main goal of the chapter is to show one of the main features of comics: words can be as iconic as pictures, and pictures as symbolic as words.

Fourth, reasons of space and time have imposed limitations on the range of comics texts that I have been able to analyse. This has meant that for the selection of the passages it has been necessary to make choices according to certain criteria. Indeed, the extracts have been taken from comics which are

- (a) contemporary (mainly from the past decade); and
- (b) directed to adult readers.

Older comics, intended for a younger readership, were considered only for comparison purposes. Such a choice is due to my personal conviction that contemporary adult comics offer a significantly higher degree of sophistication and complexity precisely in the aspects that this thesis is more concerned with, namely the interaction between words and pictures, the phoric flow and aspects of narratology.

Finally, an important issue that certainly merits attention is that comics and, in general, all other types of texts, do not exist in an ideological vacuum but always

have, more or less explicitly, implications on the sociological level. This is because the conveyance of any text, as a semantic entity, from human sender(s) to human receiver(s) already constitutes a sociological event. This, in turn, means that any text has, potentially, to some extent, an ideological stance and an ideological impact.

In the specific case of comics texts, some attention has already been devoted to this topic. About two decades after the moral preoccupations of a few critics in the Fifties (discussed in Chapter 5, section 5.2.1) some studies began to be published about the ideological implications of comics. One of the first and most influential works was the Chilean book *Para Leer al Pato Donald* ("Reading Donald Duck") (Dorfman and Mattelart, 1973), which dealt with the ideological messages 'hidden' in children's Disney comics. Later, other similar interesting works were published mainly in Britain (see Barker, 1989; Sealwood and Irving, 1993; Barker and Sabin, 1995; Springhall, 1998). However, as they focus on sociological aspects, all these studies do not consider the formal structure of comics, which, in my opinion, somewhat undermines the solidity of the arguments that they put forward. For example, the suggestion that Uncle Scrooge stories show a marked colonialist attitude (Barker, 1989: 279-99) could be more convincing if it were supported by an in-depth discussion of how such an attitude comes across through subtle utilisation of narratological aspects such as point of view and voice, and/or by an analysis of the types of transitivity processes that are at play in those stories.

The present thesis is largely a structuralist study, generally devoid of sociological and ideological consideration. I believe that its focus on formal aspects represents a necessary first stage, as it constitutes a theoretical basis which can be very useful when moving into further areas of investigation like, indeed, the field of ideology and power relations.



## 6.3 Areas for further research

### 6.3.1 Visual culture and ideology

Because of its iconic nature, visual communication has a great capacity to convey messages very directly, and that is why it is utilised increasingly often in texts which have the aim of persuading. The texts of political electoral campaigns, for example, employ a great many visual elements in combination with verbal ones, and it would be interesting to carry out studies on the way in which images are used to support (verbal) statements aimed at gaining or maintaining positions of power within a society.

It would also be interesting to investigate the way in which newspapers which stand, more or less explicitly, in favour of a particular political view or position, use pictures and photographs in order to validate the verbal content of their articles or, more in general, to help convey a particular message to their readers. The *Straits Times*, Singapore's national newspaper, last year published an article on its front page about an American marine soldier who had won a competition for the "best soldier in the USA", and the article was accompanied by a large colour photograph of the man, in his mimetic uniform, holding a rifle and ready to fire, during military training. The picture had an evidently prominent position in the paper's front page, and functioned as a fundamental support for the message that the article clearly intended to convey: to arouse admiration in the young Singaporean readers for the valour of the soldier and, with it, to emphasise the importance of defending their country in the army. This is only an example, of course, but it epitomises how pictures can be a powerful device to foster ideas. Critical discourse analysis and language awareness, therefore, should aim to make people aware not only of the way verbal devices are utilised and manipulated for ideological purposes, but also of the accompanying visual codes.

### 6.3.2 The Internet

The recognition of the importance of verbo-visual texts should entail a more systematic inclusion within fields of study which have normally been concerned with verbal texts only. My own contributions, the ideas of semiotic blend, relatedness and narratorial weight, deal with three aspects of an enquiry with a potentially much wider scope.

One interesting medium which offers an enormous amount of multi-modal material that can be analysed from a semiotic-linguistic point of view is the Internet. A systematic study of Internet texts, or *hypertexts*, can certainly be a very fascinating undertaking, especially as far as the three aspects that I have dealt with in the present study are concerned:

- the verbo-visual semiotic blend is a prime feature in a great many Internet texts, where a myriad of symbolic images, with their own syntax, are used and where much of the verbal element have a very high degree of iconicity and visual impact;
- the concepts of *hypertext* and *hyperlink* open up a new range of possibilities in terms of text connectivity, where connections exist not only among sentences or panels but also among whole texts, thus expanding the idea of relatedness from intersentential to intertextual;
- the question of voice, who speaks in an Internet text, who is the narrator, can be a very interesting issue to investigate; the anonymity that characterises the vast majority of Internet texts and the extremely high number of their potential readers makes it imperative to rethink such notions as author, implied author, reader and implied reader.

### 6.3.3 Corpus linguistics

One branch of linguistics for which verbo-visual texts could represent a new

challenge is corpus linguistics. The notions of concordance and collocation could be applied to texts which employ a combination of verbal and visual signs in order to observe which words or phrases collocate with which images, and vice versa. I imagine, for example, a possible study of advertisements aimed at a better understanding of the way in which certain verbal expressions collocate, and are therefore associated with, certain images. Foreseeable results might indicate that expressions like 'healthy' or 'natural' collocate with images of slim and young women. This is only my intuition, though, while a systematic corpus-linguistic approach could produce more evidenced findings and, at the same time, would be able to observe more subtle associations: in which verbal environment do images of homosexuals tend to appear? Does the word 'home' collocate with images of heterosexual couples and families? And so on. Again, if any type of claims are to be made as a result of the analysis of these associations, it is crucial that such analysis be as objective as possible and hence based on statistically significant data.

Certainly other areas could be explored in which visual-verbal interaction creates meaning in ways which are different from the semiosis that occurs in entirely verbal or entirely visual texts. And it is likely that this type of investigation will be carried out more often and systematically, given that multimodal texts are affirming themselves as the most important form of communication.

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