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MORPHOLOGICAL AND STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPORARY POPULAR AMERICAN, EUROPEAN AND JAPANESE COMICS

Magistrsko delo

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Magistrsko delo

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Morfološka in slogovna analiza sodobobnega popularnega ameriškega, evropskega in japonskega stripa

Ključne besede: strip, analiza, kompozicija, razporeditev, zgodba

UDK: 741.52(043.2).

Povzetek

Namen tega magistrskega dela je raziskati stripe kot edinstven medij. V delu se bo predstavil celoten proces ustvarjanja stripov, od začetka ideje do končne verzije, ki je identična tiskanemu stripu. Vsak strip je sestavljen od vizualnega dela in literarnega dela, ki skupaj tvorita nekakšno zgodbo. Za dobro razumevanje stripa je potrebno definirati vse vizualne ter literarne dele in njihove medsebojne vezi. Stripi se berejo drugače kot se berejo knjige ali gledajo filmi. Predstavljena bo raziskava o tem kako vpliva razporeditev ilustracij na stranah stripa na branje stripov in na zgodbo, katera se v stripih izvaja. Razporeditev ilustracij in besed vpliva na vrstni red branja, ampak nima velikega vpliva na zgodbo, oziroma na pomen tega kaj se bere. Enako zaporedje slik lahko razporedimo na različne načine brez ogrožanja pomena.

Avtorji stripa uporabljajo tehnike enkapsulacije in okvirjanja, da bi zgodbo prikazali v obliki stripa. Proces enkapsulacije se uporablja izključno v stripih in zaporedno umetnosti, za prikazovanje toka časa med ilustracijami. Okvirjanje je proces, ki se uporablja za prikazovanje prostora. Uporablja se tudi v slikarstvu, fotografiji in filmski industriji. Okvirjanje je selekcija distance in kota pogleda na centralni objekt v ilustraciji. Bralci tiste informacije dekodirajo z ustreznimi nasprotnimi procesi, katere bomo tudi razložili znotraj dela. Razen teh procesov, se bodo predstavili in analizirali tudi elementi grafičnega oblikovanja, ki se nahajajo v stripu. Eden od teh elementov je kompozicija stripa, ki se nanaša na postavitev elementov znotraj ilustracijah in tudi na telesno govornico ter mimiko likov. Znotraj stripa, kompozicija se nanaša tudi

[I]

na postavitev besedila na ilustracijah. Analizirale se bodo tudi barve, njihova nasičenost in količina kontrasta med njimi; pa še stil risanja, linije in senčenje. Za vsaki strip se bo predstavil kratek povzetek zgodbe in se bo analiziral stil pisanja ter izraznost in karakter besed.

Stripi imajo svoj vizualni jezik, ki se razlikuje odvisno od kulture in lokacije avtorja. Razen tistega, ki ga poznamo v Evropi in Ameriki, obstaja tudi in japonski vizualni jezik, ki se uporablja v japonskih mangah. Različen je po tem, da se bere od desne proti levi strani in ima svojo specifično vizualno ikonografijo. Zaradi tega se bo delala analiza stripov s področja ameriškega, evropskega in japonskega trga. Tisto, kar bo skupno vsemi stripi je, da so dokaj novi in da so popularni znotraj svojega žanra. Vsi analizirani stripi bodo različnih žanrov, slogov in različnih založnikov. Glede na rezultate analize, se bodo različni elementi stripa delili v skupine po geografski lokaciji in po žanrih, da bi vzpostavili kateri elementi prevladujejo v teh dveh kategorijah. Za vsako delitev se bodo uporabljali ustrezni izbrani elementi stripa, kot prevladavajoče barve, stil pisanja, lasnosti glavnih likov in temu podobne stvari.

V tem delu je analizirano deset stripov. Tri so evropska, tri so japonska in štiri so ameriška. Vsi stripi so različnih žanrov, od superherojev, prek komedije in drame, do grozljivke in znanstvene fantastike. Zaradi tega imamo raznolik vzorec za analizo, in je lažje odkriti nekatere elemente, ki so pogosti v več kot eni kategoriji. Rezultati analize so predstavljeni v dveh tablicah. Ena tablica za razdelitev elementov prema žanru in druga prema geografski lokaciji. Nekatere kategorije so prisotne v obeh tablicah, vendar vsaka tablica ima večinoma svoje kategorije. Tisti rezultati so predstavljeni kot generalizacije, in je pomembno omeniti da obstajajo izjeme za vsako izjavo. Vendar, so izjave večinoma ispravne, ko se nanesemo na celotno stripovsko industrijo.

Morphological and Stylistic Analysis of Contemporary Popular American, European and Japanese Comics

Key words: comic, analysis, composition, layout, story

UDK: 741.52(043.2).

Abstract

The purpose of the Master thesis is to study comics as a unique media form. Every comic has visual and literary components, which work together to create a story. To have a good understanding of a comic book, one needs to understand these components and the ways they complement each other. Comics have their own visual language, which can vary according to the culture and geographic location of its authors. For this reason, the analysis will be made on several comic books from American, European and Japanese markets. Using the results of the analysis, we will group the common elements of these comic books according to geographic location and genre, for the purpose of knowing which types of elements are most common in these categories.

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1. Introduction

Comic books, graphic novels and manga are a relatively new form of media, developed from comic strips included in newspapers. Through the decades, this media form has evolved in different geographical and cultural environments. This has lead to the creation of several different styles of comics. Today, comics enjoy a big rise in popularity, due to the many cinematic adaptations of their stories, but are somehow still considered by the public as childish and by some scholars as a lower form of art.

In this thesis we will examine several contemporary comic books that can be considered popular in their countries of origin or in their genre. The comics were carefully selected to include different genres and styles. There are examples from North America, Europe, and Japan, which are three major markets for comics in the world. The purpose of this is to show the unique aspects of comics that no other media can replicate, and to show that comic books are indeed a form of art.

To be able to do that, first we will need to explain how comics are created, and what they consist of. We will study the visual language in which they are written in and examine how their readers decode the information within to compile the intended story. Using this knowledge, the selected comics will be analyzed, and using the results of the analysis, we will create a table of some general elements that can be used to describe comics in terms of geography and genre.

2. Creation process

2.1 Writing

Writing for comics is not very different from writing a screenplay or creating a storyboard for theatre and cinema. The writer will describe every scene on the page and write the text that should appear within. The amount of detail in the descriptions depends on the writer. One writer may describe almost every element of the illustration, including background objects, sources of light, composition, expressions of a character, and so on. Another writer may only offer general descriptions, leaving the interpretation to the artist. Whenever there is an element of the illustration that is very important to the story, the writer will most likely explain it in detail, but at other times the artist will have more freedom in how he creates the art of the comic. There are times when the writer and the artist are the same person, and then this process is a bit different. In that case, the writer will only make notes of important things. These descriptions are not meant to instruct the artist on how to render a specific element of the illustration, they are meant to convey the general feel of the scene, the atmosphere. The artist is generally free to omit some parts, if he thinks they are unnecessary or redundant. Will Eisner, in his book *Comics and Sequential Art*, has this to say about writing for comics:

> *"In order to consider, separately, the role of the writer, it is necessary to arbitrarily limit the 'writing' for comics to the function of conceiving the idea and the story, creating the order of telling and fabricating the dialogue or narrative elements."* [6]

2.2 Sketching and Penciling

Once the artist gets the writer's notes, he can start sketching the scenes. These are rough illustrations, with no color and minimal shading. During this phase, the artist mainly focuses on composition, layout, perspective, and lighting of the scene. The small details are added in the next phase. When these sketches are approved by the writer and/or publisher, the artist can start drawing the art in full detail. This stage is called penciling, in the past it was done using a pencil, but

contemporary artists usually do this digitally. This stage determines the look of the comic, and it is a base upon which all further art is built.

2.3 Inking

When the pencils are done, the final line art on the comic is done by inking. Inking is not just simply tracing the lines done during penciling. The artist can further enhance the visibility of some lines, while diminishing the visibility of others. In other words, inking can be used to highlight some parts of the art. During this process, the artist can repair some pencil lines, or choose to leave them out. Shading of the art is also done during this phase. This includes subtle manipulations by the artist to affect light and shadow in the composition. Finally, at this stage the art is prepared for coloring, if there is to be color in the comic.

2.4 Coloring

Due to time constraints, artists often leave the coloring of their work to colorists. Once the whole pages are inked and all shapes defined, the colorists fill them up with color. The color palette is often discussed beforehand with the writer and artists who made pencils and inks. As mentioned before, it's important to know the atmosphere of the scene, and use appropriate colors to present it. Colors in comics are not meant to compete with the line art, but to compliment it. With regard to that, the colorist is usually not allowed to change the line art in any way.

2.5 Lettering

After the art is finished, the letterer places word balloons and word boxes in specified places inside the artwork, and places text inside. Proper placement of word balloons is carefully considered, so that they don't compete with the composition or cover important art. The letterer is also responsible for choosing or designing the typefaces used in the comic. The following picture shows the process of creating

the art for a comic book. Starting from the left, it shows penciling, then inking, and coloring and lettering on the right.
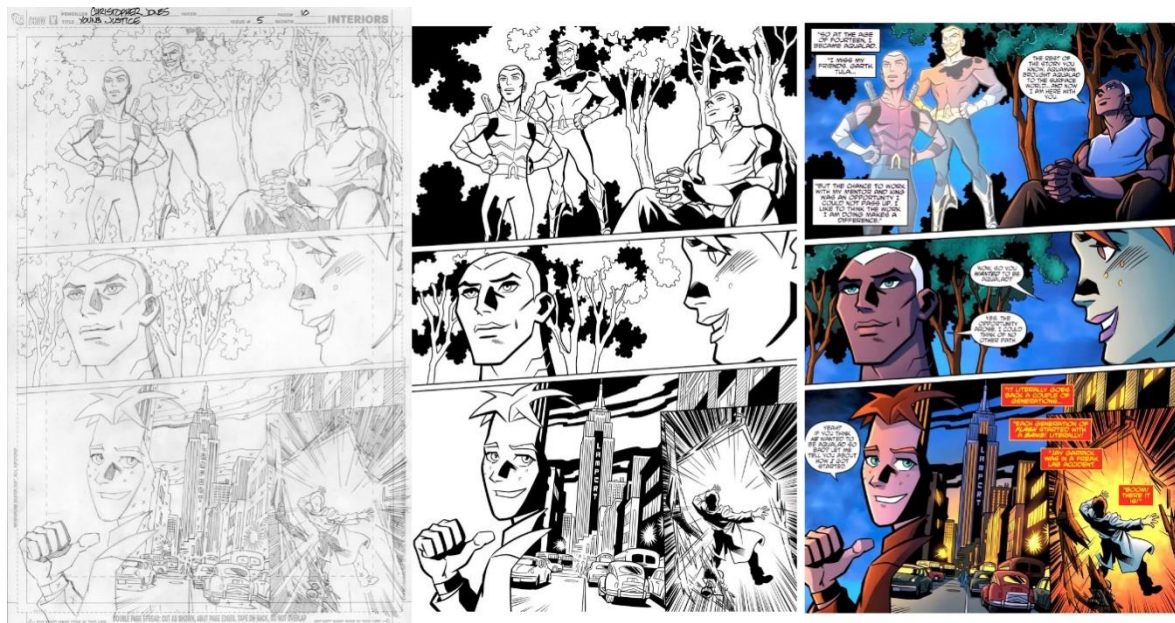
Image 2.1 Penciling (left), inking (middle), coloring and lettering (right). Image taken from: <http://blog.christopherjonesart.com/origin-story-kid-flash-from-young-justice-5/>

2.6 Collaborative nature of comics

Considering the steps needed to create a comic book, it is often a result of the work of several different people. There are examples of one author doing all the work, but it is rare. In the popular comic book industry, because of strict deadlines, it is common to divide the work among 2 to 4 people. When crediting the people who created a comic book, it is the norm to credit the writer first, then the penciller/inker, and finally the colorist and/or letterer. Here is what Will Eisner has to say about this in his book *Comics and Sequential Art*:

> *"The writer must at the outset be concerned with the interpretation of his story by the artist, and the artist must allow himself to be a captive of the story or idea. The separate considerations of the writing and drawing functions are directly involved with the aesthetics of the medium because the actual segregation of the writing and art function has proliferated in the practice of modern comics."* [6]

3. Structure of a page

3.1 The panel

A single panel is the most basic form of comic book storytelling. It is a single frame filled with an illustration, which may contain text and colors. A comic book is, in essence, a sequence of panels. There is no defined way a panel should be shaped or sized; usually it is in the shape of a rectangle or a square with varying sizes. The size of the panels and the distance between them can influence the perception of time that passed in the story for the reader. Panels of the same size, with the same distance between them, create a rhythm of reading. In his book *Toward a Theory of Comic Book Communication*, Randy Duncan says:

> *"The unit of comic book communication known as a panel occupies a finite space and encapsulates a finite, if sometimes indeterminate, span of time."* [5]

3.2 Borders and gutters

The distance between the panels, in comic book terminology, is called a gutter. Gutters are also important to consider when talking about the flow of the page. Their size determines the perception of time that passed between the panels. Panels can have different borders, which can affect the atmosphere of the artwork. Sometimes having no borders is also a good way to present the artwork in a desired way. The following pictures are taken from the book *Comics and Sequential Art* by Will Eisner, and they show some examples of how borders and shapes of panels can be used to affect the meaning of what is shown within a panel.

A. The jagged outline implies an emotionally explosive action. It conveys a state of tension and is related to crisp crackle associated with radio or telephonic transmission of sound.

B. The long panel reinforces the illusion of height. The positioning of several square panels emulate a falling motion.

C. The illusion of power and threat is displayed by allowing the actor to burst out of the confines of the panel. Since the panel border is assumed to be inviolate in a comic page this adds to the sense of unleashed action.

D. The absence of a panel outline is designed to convey unlimited space. It provides a sense of serenity and supports the narrative by contributing atmosphere to the narrative.

E. The 'panel' here is actually the doorway. It tells the reader that the actor is confined in a small area within a wider one — the building. It narrates this visually.

F. The cloudlike enclosure defines the picture as being a thought, or memory. The action would be read as actually taking place if there were no panel or a hard outline.

Image 3.1 Different types of borders on panels [6]

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3.3 Page as a whole

The page itself is also one big panel, and must be taken into consideration when talking about the flow of the story. Every time a page is turned, a significant pause occurs in the reader's perception of time. This can be used by the writer as a transition point in the story. It's a perfect moment to move to a new location, or to a different time. This is not always possible, so the writer must use it creatively to avoid breaking the flow of the story. Sometimes one panel can stretch over two pages, this is called a splash page. The reader spends significantly more time examining a splash page, so it is usually used as the introduction panel or the last panel in a sequence, so it does not break the flow of reading. Splash pages are not used frequently because of the time it takes to make one, and because it's usually easier to just make several less detailed panels to show the same thing.

> *"Operating at a broader level of narrative breakdown, layout concerns the relationship of a single panel to the succession of panels, to the totality of the page and to the totality of the story."* [5]

4. Layout and composition in comics

4.1 Distance and angles

Space shown within a panel can be described with these two aspects. Distance from the point of focus, and the angle from which the reader is looking at it through the panel. Distances can be categorized in a similar way as in cinematography (Image 3.1). There are equivalents of close-ups, mid shots and wide shots, and everything in between. They are also used for similar reasons, for example close-ups are used to increase dramatic effect, and wide shots to introduce a new scene [9].

Image 4.1 Distances used in comics and cinematography [9]

Angles are used to show characters and objects of focus from different sides and perspectives. Depending on the comic, it can be useful to change the angles frequently between panes to make it more dynamic, or it could be better to show a sequence from the same angle to have more focus on the characters and their actions. By showing characters from a higher or lower point of view, the artist can achieve a different atmosphere inside the panel. This method is very effective in

visual storytelling. Sometimes the artist will tilt the point of view so that the image appears diagonal within the page; this is mostly used for action scenes.

4.2 Body language and facial expressions

According to Will Eisner, body language in comics consists of postures and gestures of characters. The artist must choose the correct moment in time to capture a character's movement, so it can show the meaning intended by the writer, depending on the context within the sequence. When showing movement, this choice should communicate time, as well as emotion. It should be noted that within the narrative, each posture is of equal importance. This is how Eisner explains the relationship between body language and text in comics:

> *"In comics, body posture and gesture occupy a position of primacy over text. The manner in which these images are employed modifies and defines the intended meaning of words. They can by their relevance to the reader's own experience invoke a nuance of emotion and give auditory inflection to the voice of the speaker."* [6]

Together with posture and gesture, facial expressions are used in comics to convey the character's emotional state. In *Making Comics,* McCloud explains that there are six basic human emotions that are shared by all humans, regardless of culture, language or age. All other expressions are derived from these basic ones. They are anger, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, and surprise. By varying their intensities and mixing them up, it is possible to produce a different recognizable expression.

4.3 Words and their containers

In comics the text is usually contained within the image, which means that the verbal message must fit within the confines of the space defined by the visual message. In other words, what is written must fit with what is shown. Any sounds that are to be introduced into the story must be visual, which makes them elements of the composition [5]. To put text in context within the image, it needs to be shown within a container. This can be a speech balloon, a thought balloon, or a word box.

Speech and thought balloons are used to connect text to a specific character within a panel. They both have two parts, the symbol and the tail that connects them to a specific character. A word box is used for narration, the text within is usually spoken by a character that is not shown in the panel where the word box is located. The word box is shaped as a rectangle. Another type of text used in comics is onomatopoeia. Onomatopoeia is used to visually show sound effects in the environment, such as explosions, gunfire, sound of running, or sound of rain falling. Onomatopoeia is the only text not shown within a container. It is instead visually stylized and placed next to the origin of the sound it represents.

4.4 Layout of a page

The layout here refers to the positioning of panels within a page in regard to the readability. In other words, the reader should always know which panel is the next one in the sequence. Many artists like to use panels of different sizes in a single page, to make it more dynamic and stylish, and to highlight some important events in the story. But these types of layouts can sometimes confuse the reader in a way that the reading order is not immediately obvious. A research described in Neil Cohn's article *Navigating comics: an empirical and theoretical approach to strategies of reading comic page layouts* [3] shows that readers follow strategies that extend beyond the Z-path used to read written text and Gestalt laws of grouping. They instead use a system of navigating through a page formed of hierarchic constituent structures for pages that have unusual layouts that block the standard Z-path. This research was made using empty panels, and it does not take into account the narrative contained on the page. The examples of layouts used in the research can be seen in Image 3.2.

"While layout and content likely interface in important ways, they are ultimately independent structures. The same sequence of images can be arranged in multiple ways without impairing meaning." [3]
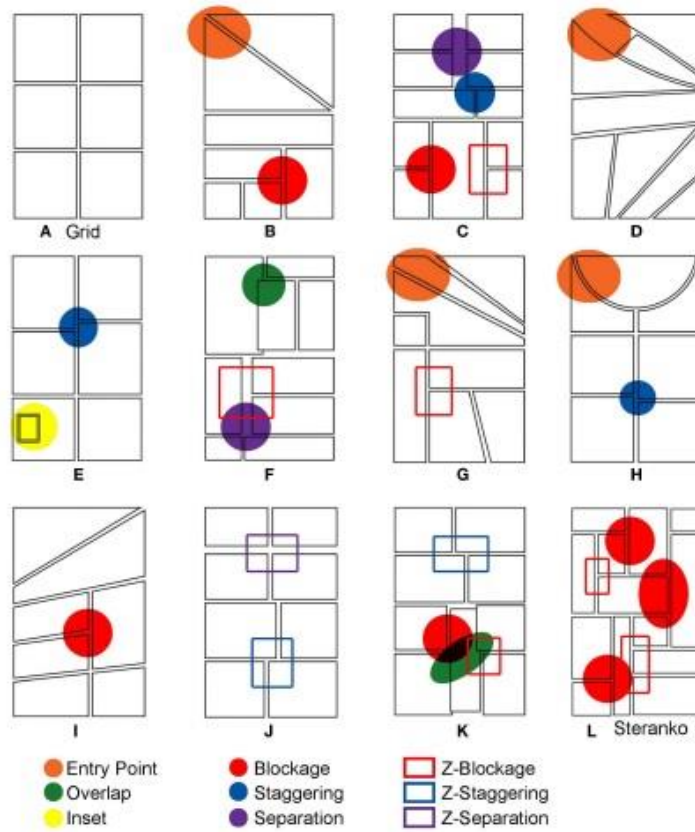
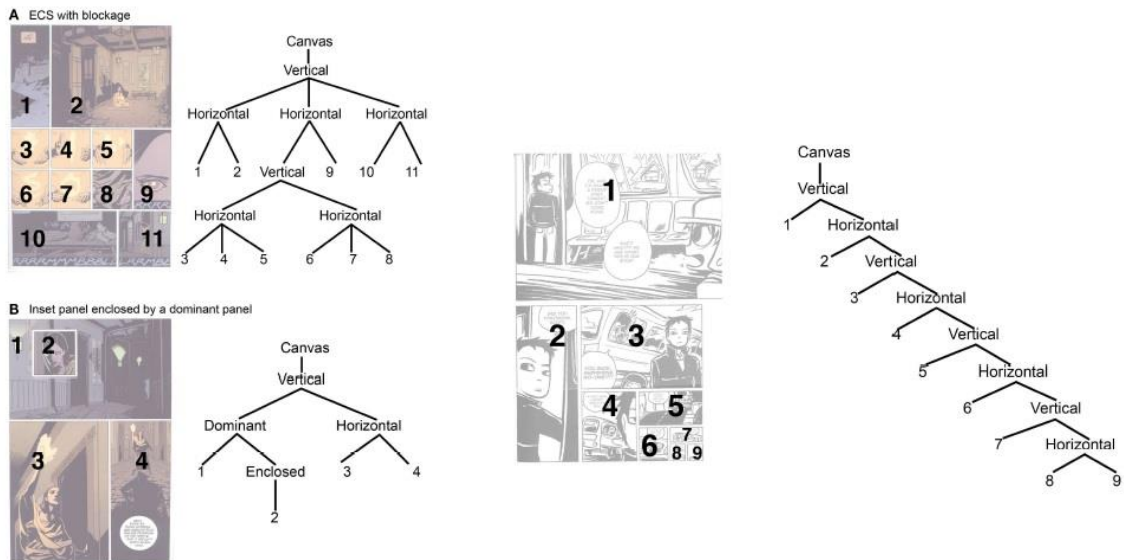*Image 4.2 Panel layouts used in Neil Cohn's research [3]*

Image 4.3 Examples of reading order. Left example is from B.P.R.D. by Mike Mingola. Right example is from Scott Pilgrim vs. The World by Brian Lee O'Malley. [3]

5. Visual language

Language is a system of communication that uses symbols and signs which can be arranged in a sequence using a specific set of rules. To be able to understand or read a language, one must be familiar with all these symbols and signs and the rules by which they are arranged. While written and spoken language has been researched and discussed for centuries, with the emergence and evolution of comics a lot of research and discussion has been done on the topic of visual language. Visual language uses visual elements to convey ideas and meaning. It has been used in pictograms and ancient writings on walls and artifacts for thousands of years, but today it is best represented in comics. Visual language has its own grammar, even though there is no formal syntax or semantics. In comics, visual language is almost always used in combination with written language, making them multimodal in nature.

> *"While visual language is the biological and cognitive capacity that humans have for conveying concepts in the visual-graphic modality, comics are a socio-cultural context in which this visual language appears (often in conjunction with writing)."* [1]

When talking about comics, there are, in fact, two different visual languages that are being used. The western visual language, which is the most commonly used visual language in the world, and then there is the Japanese visual language, which is used in Japanese manga [2]. The main difference between the two is in the reading order. The western visual language is read from left to right, while the Japanese visual language is read in the opposite direction. Other than that, there are some specific differences in art style and a lack of color in manga. Beyond that, some visual symbols have very different meanings when compared to the western visual language, as shown in Image 4.1. For example, to indicate a sleeping character in the western visual language, the letters Zzz are often drawn above its head. To indicate the same thing in the Japanese visual language, the character will have a bubble of snot extending from its nose.
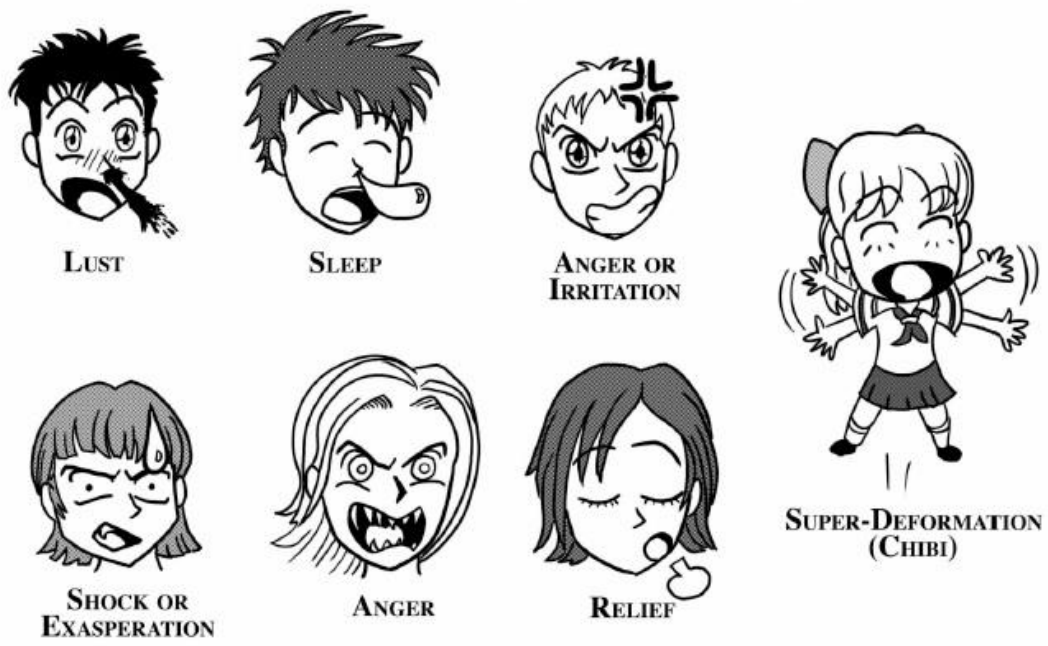
Image 5.1 Examples of different meanings of visual symbols in the Japanese visual language. [2]

6. Framing and encapsulation

Both framing and encapsulation are processes that the writers and artists of comics use to decode information. They are used to capture moments. Framing refers to capturing space, while encapsulation refers to capturing time. In visual narration, the task of the writer/artist is to show a continuous flow of events by breaking them up into segments of frozen scenes and enclose them into panels. Encapsulation means selecting which of these moments to show, while framing means selecting the point of view, distance, and angles from which to show that moment in a panel. This decision, about which moments to show and how to present them, is the central concern of writers and artists working on a comic. The selection of what is to be shown is greatly influenced by the quantity of the story material (how much exposition is required, how much action, what must be depicted in order to prepare for subsequent events, and so on) and by the amount of space that is available. There is a constant dynamic between what is shown and what could be shown. [5] Framing and encapsulation are reductive processes, as they are used to select parts that will represent the whole. To this end, everything in comics, including characters, is presented using generalizations or stereotypes.

> *"A panel can present a single action or multiple actions. The degree and nature of motion in a panel can be classified as movement or stasis, broad or subtle, fast or slow. Motion can be rendered, by speed lines, repeated figures, etc."* [5]

> *"The manner in which time is encapsulated controls the duration of attention and affects the pacing of the story. The amount of time encapsulated in a panel can be an instant, a moment, or even a sequence of events."* [5]

Word containers are also encapsulation devices for sound, as they have their own perceived duration, so the panels they are in do too. Sometimes a single panel also depicts both cause and effect, especially in dialogue, with multiple speech balloons. On the other hand, silence has the effect of removing a panel from any particular span of time.

7. Reading comics

7.1 Closure

Closure is a process opposite to encapsulation. It happens in a reader's mind when he/she creates a continuous story from the pieces shown in the panels. Scott McCloud calls it the phenomenon of observing the parts, but perceiving the whole. In his words, visual iconography is the vocabulary of comics, and closure is their grammar [7]. While encapsulation is a reductive process, closure is an additive one. Between every two panels there is an interval which requires a mental filling by the reader. There is no fixed way one image connects to another; the reader interprets this using his imagination and life experience, based on the information offered in the panels.

> *"The receiver has cognitive reactions (knowing) and affective reactions (feeling) to the signs that are communicated by the compositional elements within panels. The generalization might be made that affective reactions are primarily to composition and cognitive reactions are primarily to encapsulation, particularly layout. However, the two levels of interpretation are inextricably interwoven and constantly inform one another during the interpretive process. At one level, the story is understood cognitively by perceiving structure, but the idea derived from the story comes from both perceiving the subtext and feeling the meaning."* [5]

7.2 Subjective narration in comics

Most of the text in comics can be ascribed to characters, because of the shape of the speech/thought balloons. Thought representation is the best example of subjective narration in comics, as it is shared only by the character and the reader, unlike speech representation, which is usually shared between other characters in the narrative. Body language and facial expressions can also be considered as techniques of subjective narration, as they visually show a character's emotional and physical state. Focalization is another technique of subjective narration. A story usually takes place within a specific space and time, as told by the narrator.

Whenever the reader has the same temporal and spatial orientation as the character, that character is a focalizer. In other words, the reader accompanies the focalizer in the story. To expand on this, if what is seen by the focalizer has a specific meaning or evokes a certain emotional response in him, the reader may also "feel" this with him [4].

8. Analysis

8.1 Batman Hush

Batman Hush is a 12 issue mini-series written by Jeff Loeb, with art by Jim Lee (pencils), Scott Williams (inks), and Alex Sinclair (coloring). It was published by DC Comics in 2002 as a part of the Batman monthly series. The story introduces a new villain to the Batman's rogues' gallery. This villain is called Hush, and the story follows Batman and a very large support cast of his allies and enemies, as he tries to figure out the real identity of Hush and his motivations. The writing is simple and very direct, and the story is told through subjective narration by Batman. The story suffers from an overabundance of characters and many of them do not add anything significant to the narrative, they could be omitted from the story and it would not suffer for it. It is a classic example of fan service, which is common in popular titles published by DC or Marvel comics. This Batman story is much faster-paced than usual, and it mostly falls into the action category, instead of a detective story that Batman is known for. The whole story feels like it was written for the artists, so that they have a lot of characters to work with, and to show as much action as possible in the panels. The ending falls flat, because only one new character is introduced in the story along with the new "mysterious" villain, so most readers can figure out who the bad guy is before it is actually shown in the story. The pencils are done by Jim Lee, who is one of the most iconic artists in contemporary superhero comics. His style has inspired many artists working in the industry today. This style is perfect for drawing superheroes, as almost all the male characters have an exaggerated amount of muscles, and the female characters are impossibly beautiful. The lines used are more angular than curvy, shading is also done with lines and it makes everything look intense and sharp (Image 8.1). The colors are vibrant, even though most of the story takes place at night. Almost half of the panels in the comic show action, so the poses of the characters are very diverse. (Image 8.3) There are some panels which contain sequences of movement, mostly characters fighting or chasing each other (Image 8.2). Onomatopoeia is used for explosions, shooting, fighting, and similar sounds. Some panels show Batman's memories, and they are done in

a slightly different style, without inked lines, and the coloring imitates watercolor techniques (Image 8.4).
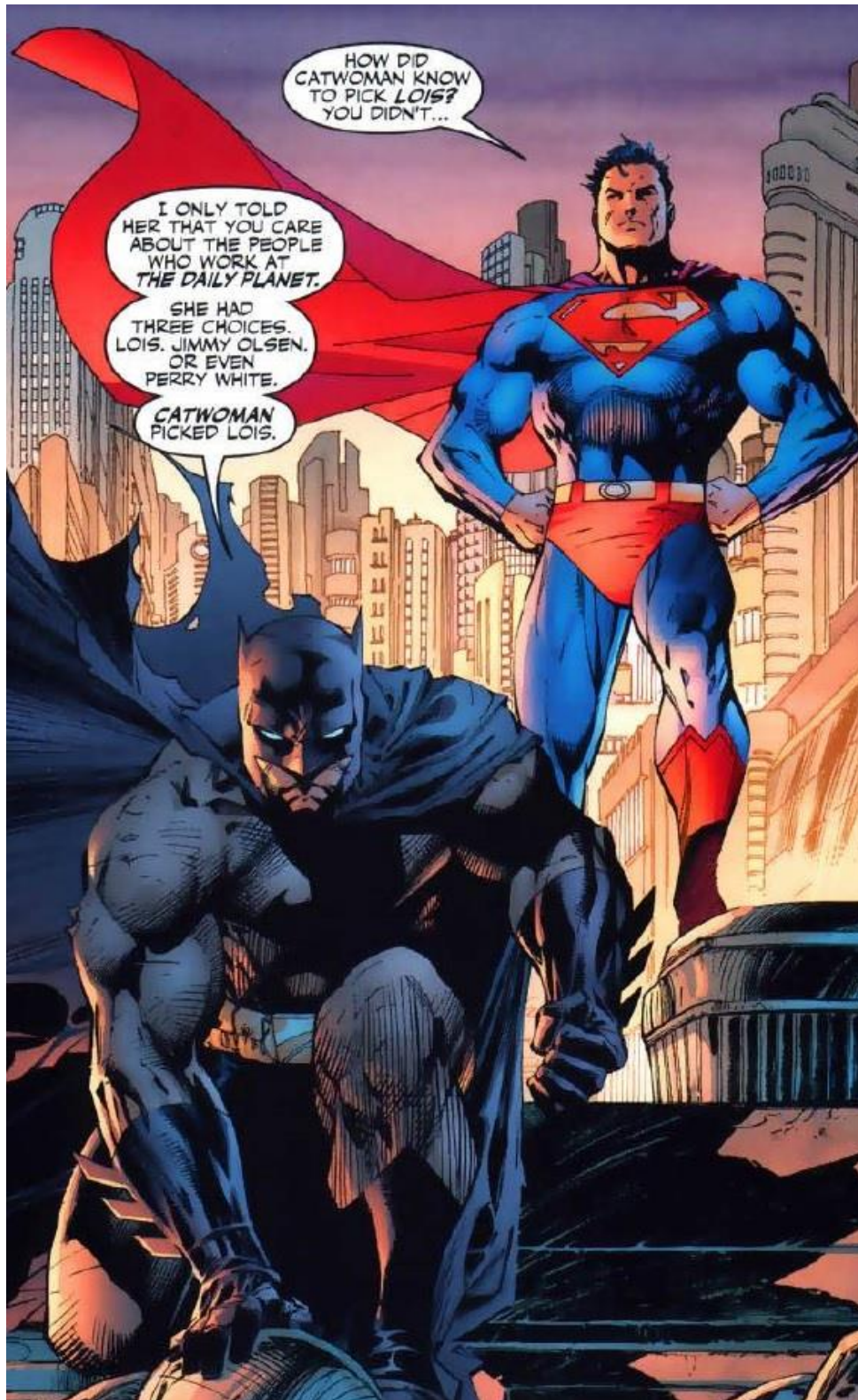
Image 8.1 Jim Lee's exaggerated art style, and heavy use of lines for shading [16]

Image 8.2 Sequence panel [16]

Image 8.3 Action pose [16]
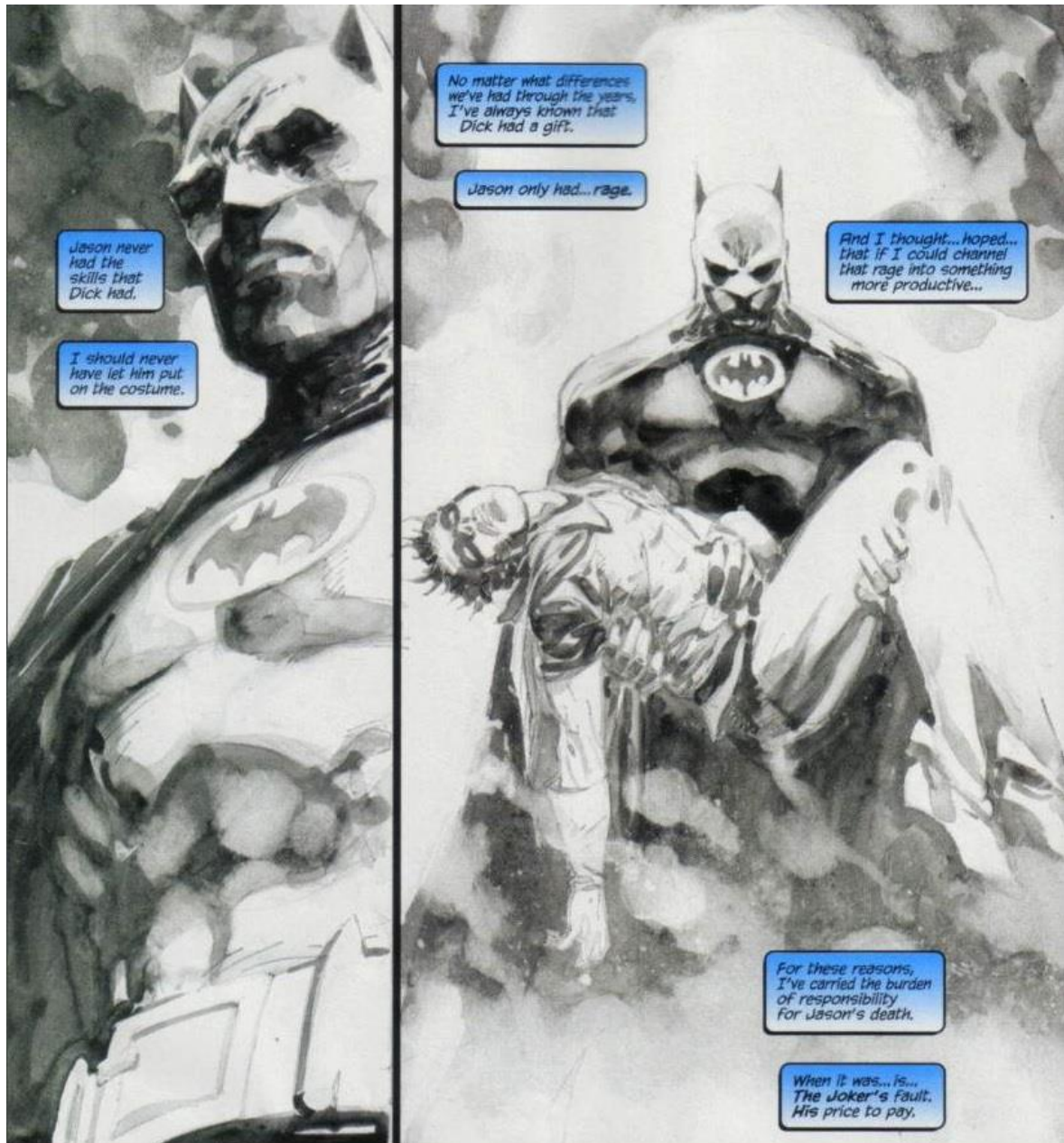
Image 8.4 Different art style in panels depicting memories [16]

8.2 Dormant Beast

Dormant Beast is a science fiction comic book, written and illustrated by the French author Enki Bilal. The book follows the protagonist Nike Hatzfeld, who has exceptional memory. He can remember his entire life, back to the days after he was born. He is trying to find two people who were in the same bed with him when they

were infants, a few days after all of them were born, during the war in Yugoslavia. As he follows his own agenda, he and the people he is looking for are caught in a huge conspiracy with the Obscurantis order, a group of fanatics with intentions to change the world. The plot is fairly complex, with information coming as the characters, not the reader, require it. However, it is not difficult to follow the plot, due to excellent pacing. All the narration in the comic is subjective, made by the characters. The word balloons are all in the shape of a rectangle, which is unusual, but it fits well with the artwork. The word balloons and text boxes also have a tendency to overlap over two panels and over gutters. Some panels consist of only text containing dialogue of the characters in surrounding panels, but they are not visually connected to any of the characters, so the reader must use his/her judgment to connect spoken lines with their respective characters (Image 8.5).
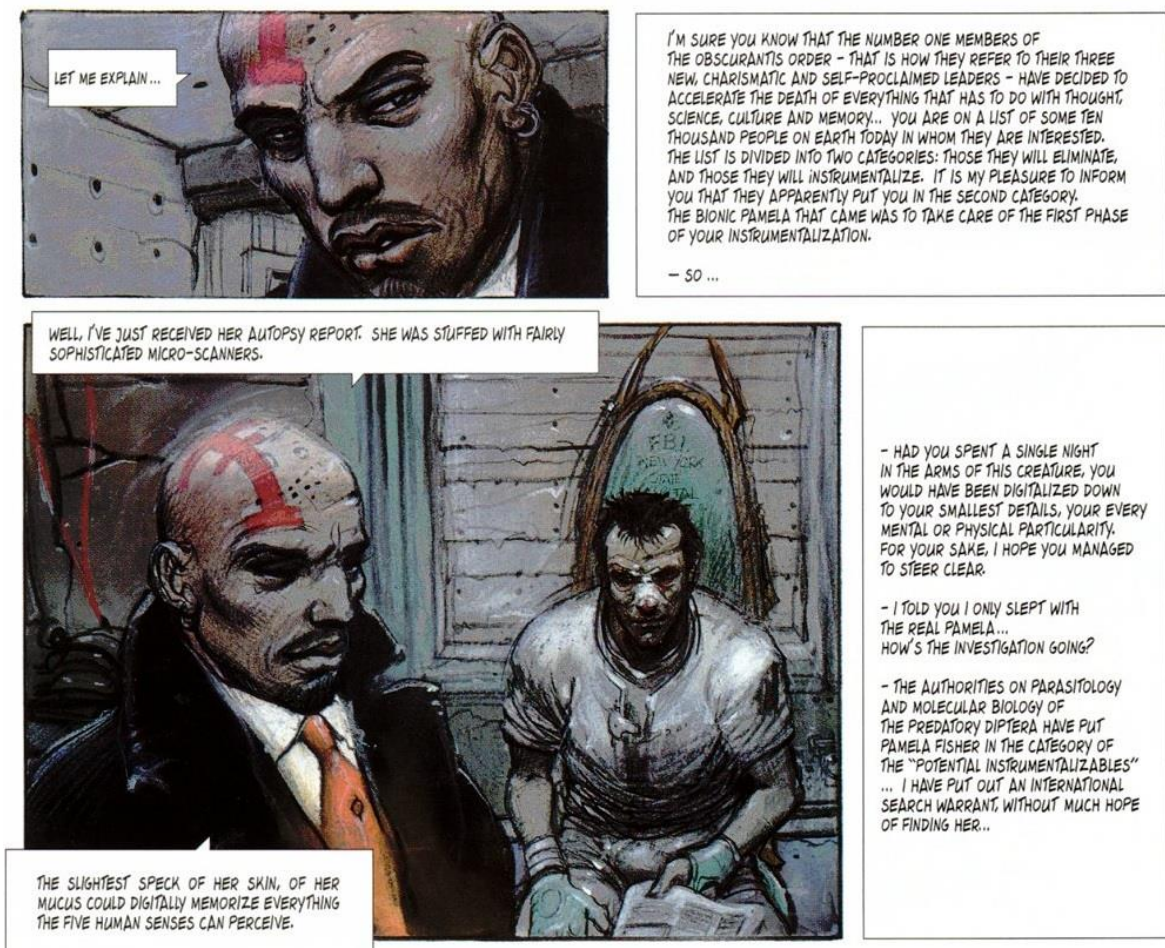

Image 8.5 Rectangular word balloons, some panels containing only text [10]

Almost all text is handwritten, with one exception. Some word boxes are separated by using black backgrounds and digital white text. These boxes are used for the memories of the protagonist, Nike, as he is trying to remember the past, all the way back to the day he was born. Each of these boxes is reserved for the memories of one day, going backwards from day 17 to day 1 of his life (Image 8.6).
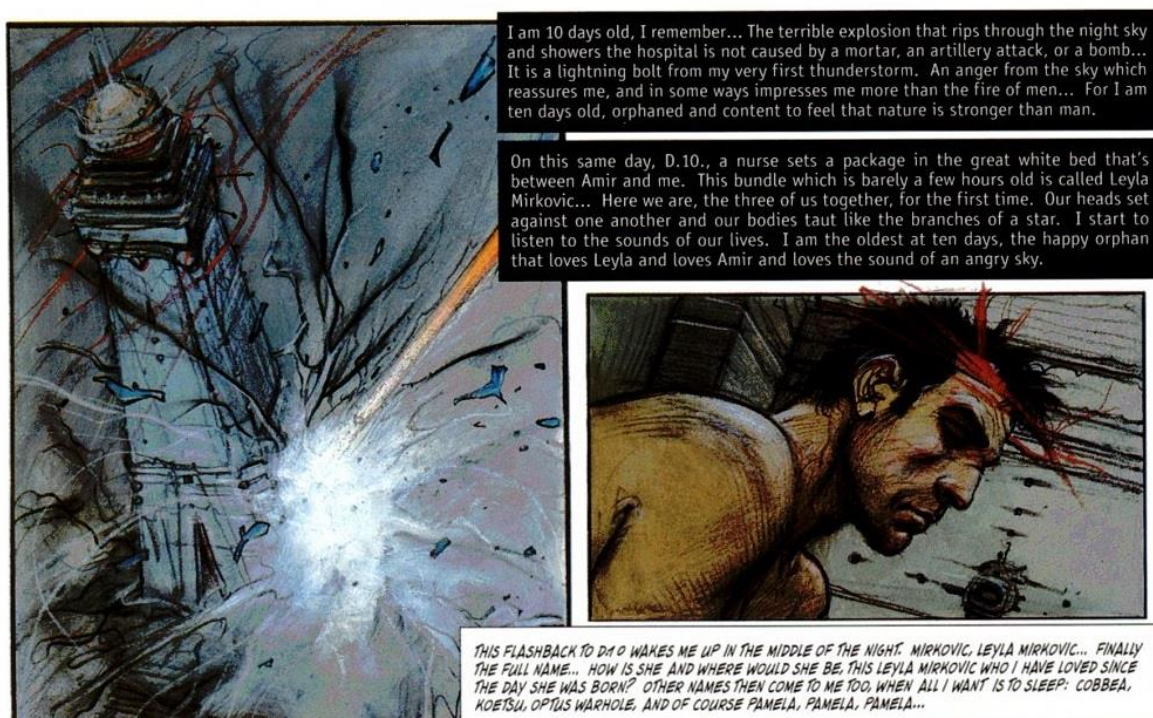

I am 10 days old, I remember... The terrible explosion that rips through the night sky and showers the hospital is not caused by a mortar, an artillery attack, or a bomb... It is a lightning bolt from my very first thunderstorm. An anger from the sky which reassures me, and in some ways impresses me more than the fire of men... For I am ten days old, orphaned and content to feel that nature is stronger than man.

On this same day, D.10., a nurse sets a package in the great white bed that's between Amir and me. This bundle which is barely a few hours old is called Leyla Mirkovic... Here we are, the three of us together, for the first time. Our heads set against one another and our bodies taut like the branches of a star. I start to listen to the sounds of our lives. I am the oldest at ten days, the happy orphan that loves Leyla and loves Amir and loves the sound of an angry sky.

THIS FLASHBACK TO D.10 WAKES ME UP IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT. MIRKOVIC, LEYLA MIRKOVIC... FINALLY THE FULL NAME... HOW IS SHE AND WHERE WOULD SHE BE, THIS LEYLA MIRKOVIC WHO I HAVE LOVED SINCE THE DAY SHE WAS BORN? OTHER NAMES THEN COME TO ME TOO, WHEN ALL I WANT IS TO SLEEP: COBBEA, KOETSU, OPTUS WARHOLE, AND OF COURSE PAMELA, PAMELA, PAMELA...

Image 8.6 No onomatopoeia (left), black background and white text used for memories (upper right) [10]

There are also some word balloons with a black background and white handwritten text, which are used for the speech of the three villains of the story. The interesting thing about this comic is that there is absolutely no onomatopoeia, which makes the comic feel quiet, even in those few moments of action (Image 8.6). The story begins and ends with the same body of text, making it so that at the end the reader finds out that the main character is telling the story to the person he meets in the last panels. The artwork is hand drawn, mostly with crayons and brushes. It looks rough, like sketches surrounded by colors. It is very different from the mainstream comics, it looks much more artistic. There are no standard ink lines, every panel looks like a painting. The color palette is subdued, there are no vibrant colors. The colors most

used are black, white, and shades of gray, highlighted by natural colors. This makes the world appear grim and "lived in". Even though it is set in the future, with flying cars and new technology, nothing looks new and clean (Image 8.7). Most of the panels are close-ups and middle shots, concentrating on characters. There are a few wide shots of exteriors, which are very detailed, but for the most part the story takes place indoors. There are not a lot of action scenes, so most panels show dialogue between characters. There is no exaggeration in body language or facial expressions, and some panels contain nudity.
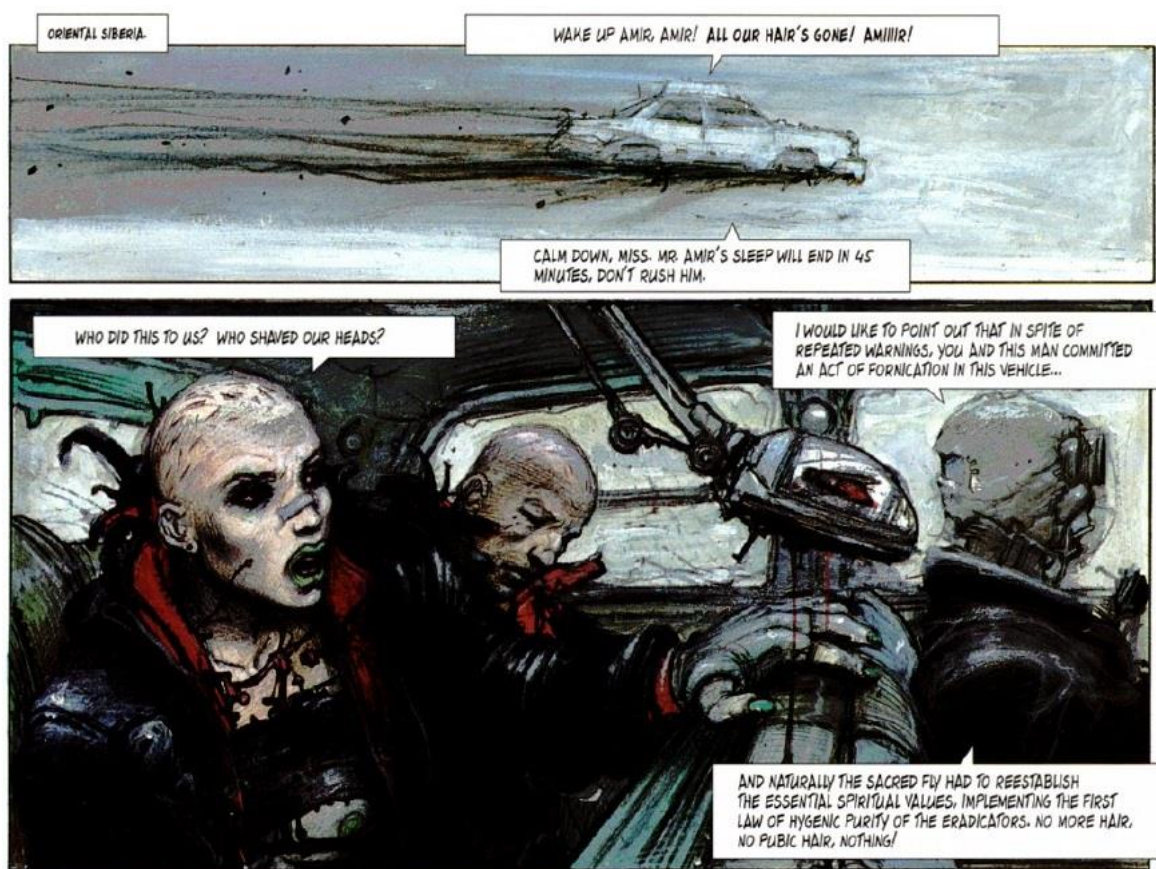

Image 8.7 Subdued colors make the world look grim, even though the setting is futuristic [10]

8.3 Black Hole

Black Hole is a graphic novel that consists of 12 single issues that have been published in the span of 10 years, starting in 1995. The story follows a group of teenagers in America during the mid-1970s. They are experimenting with drugs, drink alcohol, have sex, run way from home and eventually all the characters get infected by a sexually transmitted disease. This disease they call "the bug", afflicts the victims with different physical deformities, such as unusual open wounds, shedding skin, strange growths on the body, and so on. The story is completely character centric, there is no world building or an explanation for how the disease came to be, how it is spread across the world, or is it just the group in the comic that is affected. There is also an absence of grown up characters in the story. The story is told through subjective narration of several characters. The writing is quite simplistic, but it makes sense considering its being narrated by teenagers. Despite that, the story is difficult to follow because the timeline is non-linear and there is never any text that indicates the time and place where the story is happening. There are also a lot of scenes of dreams, fantasies, and memories, which are often intertwined with what is currently happening in the story. These panels are always indicated by serrated borders on the panels (Image 8.8). The scenes depicted in these panels look psychedelic and trippy, which makes sense because most of the characters in the comic are heavy drug users. All the text is handwritten. The art is simplistic and clean, using only black and white color. Black is used more than white, and it gives the comic a creepy, horror-like atmosphere. The way the characters are drawn makes them look very similar to one another, even their hairstyles are similar. Their clothes are also very generic and can't be used to differentiate between them. For example, in Image 8.9 we see 3 characters from behind during the night, and they are almost impossible to differentiate. Most of the panels in this comic are close-ups and middle shots, with a few wide shots used to introduce new locations. The backgrounds are varied, from very detailed to almost pure black, especially in close-up panels (Image 8.10).

Image 8.8 Panels depicting dreams and thoughts have different borders [11]

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Image 8.9 Characters look alike from some angles [11]

Image 8.10 Many close-ups with minimal backgrounds [11]

8.4 Sakamoto Desu Ga (eng. I'm Sakamoto, Don't You Know)

The debut work of Nami Sano, Sakamoto Desu Ga is a comedy manga that started being published in Japan in 2011. Today, it's being published and translated in several countries; there is also an anime adaptation which started airing in 2016. The manga follows the life of a high school student named Sakamoto, who is the most popular person in the school, among both students and the faculty. He has a reputation of being the "coolest" person, because he handles every situation perfectly and with style. The story is episodic, there is no overarching narrative. Each chapter has Sakamoto or some of his classmates stuck in some exaggerated everyday life situations, and then Sakamoto always manages to turn them around by just being cool. This being a Japanese comic, it is written in the Japanese visual language, which means that the reading order is from right to left. And because it's a comedy, a lot of the humor is achieved visually, so readers not familiar with the Japanese visual language might be unable to perform closure between all the panels (Image 8.11 and 8.12). The writing is simplistic and direct, with the same font being used throughout, sometimes bolded to add dramatic effect. The text is placed very liberally, mostly within speech and thought balloons. The thought balloons are sometimes depicted as explosions, to show the intensity or urgency of the inner dialogue. Sometimes the text is placed on the artwork without any balloons or boxes (Image 8.13). The artwork is fairly detailed, in black and white and grayscale shading. It's drawn in the modern manga style, meaning that the lines are more curvy then angular. All the characters have slightly enlarged eyes, but the noses look more natural when compared to older manga styles. Facial expressions and body language of all the characters are greatly exaggerated, so all their reactions seem "over the top". Sometimes even the background is changed to add dramatic effect (Image 8.14). Onomatopoeia is very frequent in this comic, to the extent that it not only mimics natural sounds, but also artificial sound effects, such as glance or zoom, which are often seen in TV anime adaptations of manga (Image 8.15 and 8.16). Straight lines in this comic are not only used to indicate speed and movement, but also loudness and intensity. All this together creates good visual comedy.

Image 8.11 Visual humor with a lot of onomatopoeia (translated as SFX), panels read from right to left [17]

Image 8.12 Panels read from right to left [17]

Image 8.13 Text placed liberally without boxes or balloons, explosion like balloons signify intensity (lower left) [17]

Image 8.14 "Over the top" scene, even the background changes to add dramatic effect [17]

Image 8.15 Onomatopoeia (translated as SFX) [17]

Image 8.16 Onomatopoeia (translated as SFX) [17]

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8.5 Sandman Overture

The Sandman series is one of the most recognized and critically acclaimed comics in history. It made Neil Gaiman a literary superstar that he is today. After almost two decades since finishing the original series, Gaiman returned to the universe he created with a prequel story, titled Sandman Overture. The artwork is done by J. H. Willims III (pencils and inks), Dave Stewrt (colors) and Todd Klein (lettering). It's one of the most visually interesting and beautiful comics of the decade. The protagonist is Dream, also called Morpheus, one of The Endless, who are the embodiments of essential concepts that have existed since the beginning of the universe. The story begins with the death of one of the many aspects of Dream. While trying to find out what happened, Dream discovers that the universe might end and that he was somehow involved in its destruction. At one point in time, Dream hesitated in destroying a single star that was deemed dangerous by the council of the Endless, and his reluctance resulted in a chain of events that will lead the universe to destruction. The writing is very expressive and elegant, even though the story is a mix of fantasy, science fiction, and philosophy. The reason for this is, no doubt, the literary experience of the author. The story takes place beyond time and space, so time is meaningless within the narrative, and the art reflects this very well. The layout is unconventional and visually complex; there are no standard panels, borders, and gutters. Most of the artwork is composed as spread pages, meaning one big composition spread through two whole pages. The layouts seem chaotic at first, but the composition is done so well that the reading order is almost always obvious and it flows smoothly through the pages (Image 8.17 and 8.19). The shapes and lines are very inconsistent in the artwork, some pages have almost no straight lines, while others are structured more like a classic comic with rectangular panels, and some pages have both these styles combined or intertwined. The colors are equally inconsistent, as some objects and characters have vibrant, contrasting colors, while others have a more subdued palette with less contrast. Using this approach, the artists have achieved the feeling that every character and location really do come from a different world (Image 8.18). The lettering in this comic is also quite impressive. Every non-human character, that is about two thirds of all the

characters, has a unique design of their word balloons with different background colors, fonts, and borders (Image 8.20).
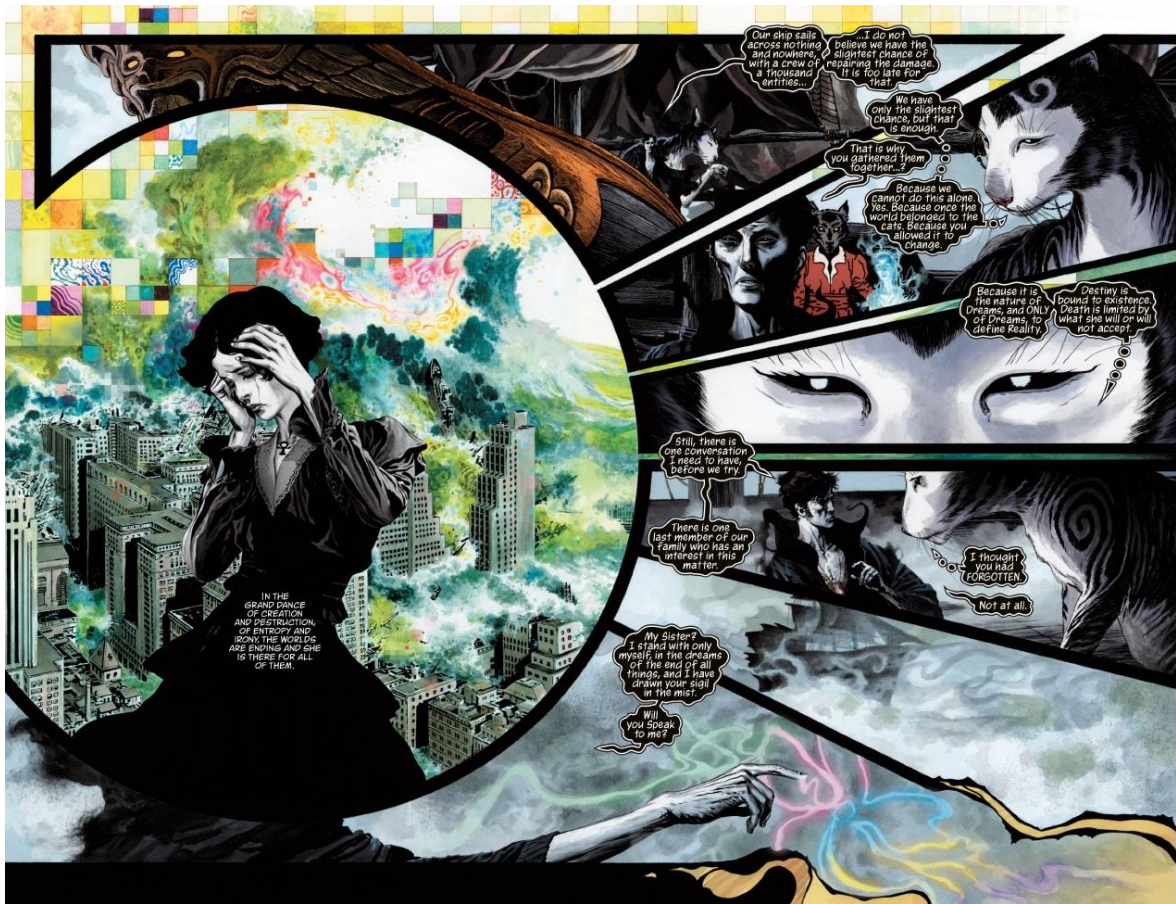

Image 8.17 Creative layouts with obvious reading order [13]

Image 8.18 Different styles of drawing characters [13]

Image 8.19 Complex layout with obvious reading order [13]

Image 8.20 Characters have their own distinctive word balloons [13]

8.6 Pax Romana

Pax Romana is a science fiction, 4 issue mini-series, written and illustrated by Jonathan Hickman. The story tackles the issues of philosophy, religion, and morality. The premise - the Roman Catholic Church is facing a decline in Europe in the year 2045, as Islam is taking over. The Vatican invents time travel and sends a troop of mercenaries back in time to Constantinople at the start of the 4th Century to civilize and Christianize the world, to prevent the Dark Ages, and to eliminate competing world religions in advance. However, the leaders of the 5000 mercenaries sent back soon abandon the Church's plan, and start working to remake the future according to their own values. Along the line their ideals clash, and what follows is centuries of infighting with repercussions affecting the future. This comic is text heavy, with a very dense plot and a lot of exposition. The amount of information presented in only 4 issues is quite impressive. The way it is presented is better described as a design, rather than artwork (Image 8.21).
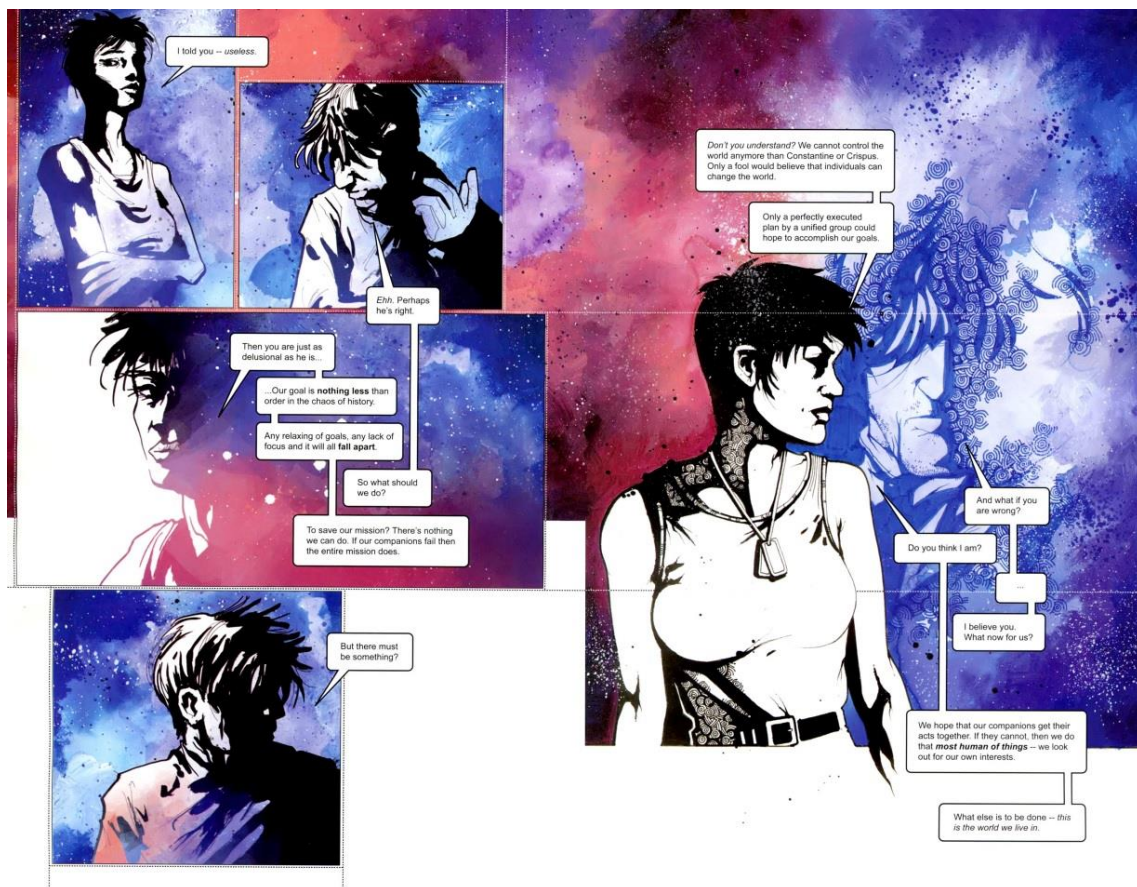

Image 8.21 Layout (circular patterns can be seen on the right) [14]

This is, no doubt, due to the author being a professional graphic designer before he started writing comics. This is evident throughout the pages; some of them contain infographics and detailed maps, which is unusual to see in comics (Image 8.22).
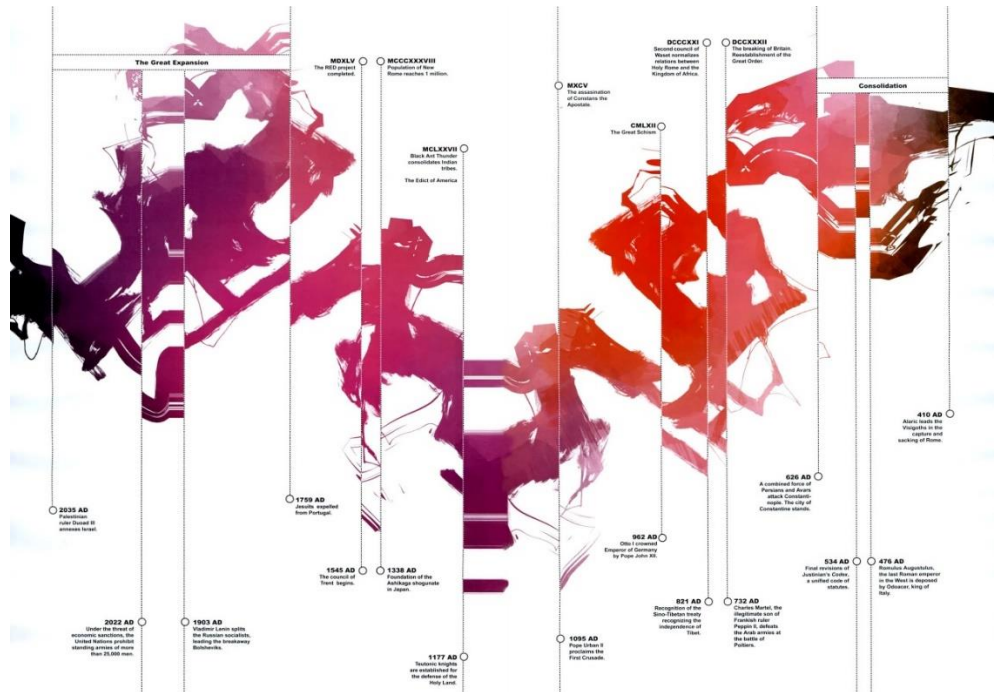

Image 8.22 Timeline infographic [14]

Some parts of the story are presented as text only, in the context of the story they are transcripts of secret meetings between important people discussing different aspects of the mission (Image 8.23). Besides that, the entire comic looks and feels like it was made using some designer software. The characters, on the other hand, are visually less impressive than the whole layout. They are drawn with thick lines, and their faces are not very distinguishable, but variations in clothing and hair styles help to differentiate between them. From the story standpoint, they all serve a purpose in the overall narrative, but are generally one-dimensional and receive almost no personal development throughout the story. The coloring is more stylish than functional. Characters and objects are not traditionally colored, but are placed on top of colored backdrops. These backdrops serve as a background to the characters because the environments are almost never shown; they are specified only in the text. The color palette is dominated by white and shades of yellow, dark

orange, blue, and violet. There is a single pattern that frequently shows in the artwork, but it does not seem to have any meaning, it is purely decorative (Image 8.21 and 8.24).

Image 8.23 Text heavy layouts [14]

Image 8.24 Circular pattern in the artwork [14]

8.7 Blacksad

Blacksad is a comic series written by the Spanish author Juan Díaz Canales and illustrated by Juanjo Guarnido. Originally published in Spanish and French, due to its popularity it has been translated to English and published internationally by Dark Horse Comics. The story follows a private investigator named John Blacksad as he solves different cases of murder, kidnapping, and missing persons in America during the 1950's. The world is presented using anthropomorphic characters, meaning they have an appearance of humanoid animals. The main character, John Blacksad is a black tomcat, usually wearing a trench coat. Every character in the comic has the appearance of an animal that visually describes its personality. The choices of animals are not random, but selected specifically to serve the purpose of characterization. Just by looking at a character, it's easy to deduce its motivations and moral code. Even the background characters receive the same treatment; they are depicted in great detail and are full of character (Image 8.25).

Image 8.25 Very expressive character design [12]

The whole comic has a very distinctive noir feel, the writing, artwork, and the setting for the story reinforce this. The writing is direct, but more elegant than one would find in American mainstream comics. The narration is subjective, done by the main

character, John Blacksad. The dialogue is fast paced and poetic. Lettering is digital, using a handwritten font. The artwork is very detailed, with the same amount of attention given to the environments and to the characters (Image 8.26).

Image 8.26 Very detailed environments [12]

Characters are drawn very expressively, with exaggerated facial expressions, but it fits with the artwork very well. At first glance, the art looks like something made for children, because of how the characters look, but the stories are themed for adults, and the colors transfer that well (Image 8.27). The color palette is subdued, but it contrasts well with many black lines in every panel. Juanjo Guanido plays with light

and shadow a lot to create atmosphere. Every illustration has a grainy texture, which further reinforces the noir feel and adds atmosphere. The pacing of the story and composition choices give a cinematic feeling to the comic, most likely because many elements of old noir films are used (image 8.28).

Image 8.27 Adult themed content [12]

Image 8.28 Elements of composition from old noir films [12]

8.8 Uzumaki

Uzumaki is the most famous work of Junji Ito, one of the most popular horror manga writers in Japan. Originally published in Japan, it has been translated to many languages, and in North America it was published with reversed pages, so it can be read from left to right (originally it is read from right to left). It is a psychological horror story, centered on a small imaginary town in Japan, where the residents grow increasingly infatuated with the form of a spiral. The title "Uzumaki" means spiral in Japanese. Each chapter shows a different example of people dying or going mad because of the influence of the spiral. The story feels episodic in the beginning, but by the end there is a clear over-arching narrative. The scope of the people infected and the madness increases with each chapter, until it culminates in the last chapters with clear influences from Lovecraftian cosmic horror. The writing in the comic is simple, and only used when necessary, most of the story is shown rather than told. Dialogues are short, used only to justify moving the story forward, with minimal exposition where it's required. There is no narration in the comic, the story is told through dialogue and thought balloons of the characters. There are two characters that are present in each chapter, but this is not a character driven story, the real star is the spiral and the madness it causes (Image 8.29).

Image 8.29 Effects of the spiral shown through the thoughts of the victims [15]

The characters have little influence on what is happening to them, and their actions mostly just prolong the inevitable. The artwork is clean but detailed, done only in black and white. The white is used more, as a backdrop to many thin black lines that form the images. The characters are drawn in a straightforward anatomical style and the environments are equally naturalistic. It does not look like standard manga artwork. The thing that really stands out is the many disgustingly grotesque images of deformed bodies inflicted by the spiral madness (Image 8.30 and 8.31).

Image 8.30 Realistic artwork, man turning into a snail [15]

Image 8.31 Realistic artwork, man folded into a spiral [15]

These depictions are so scary and disgusting just because the artwork is realistic and the anatomy is correct enough. However, all of these images are not there for the shock value, they are used only when necessary and never just because. This being a horror manga, there is not a lot of blood or guts in the pages, and there is no central physical antagonist. There is only the shape of the spiral and the effects it has on the characters (Image 8.32).
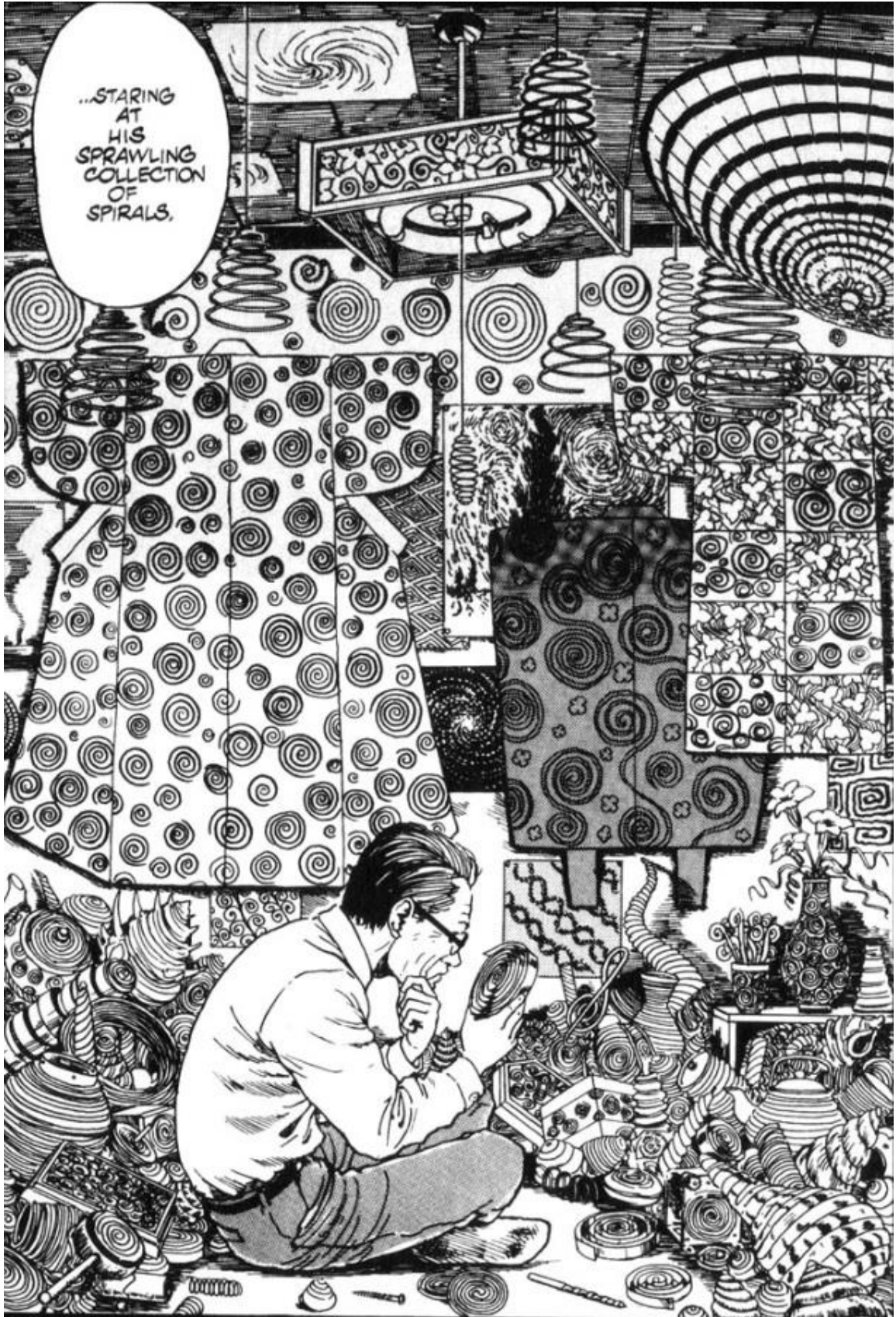
Image 8.32 There is a spiral in some form in almost every page [15]

8.9 Sharaz-De (Tales from the Arabian Nights)

A graphic novel inspired by the tales of 1001 Arabian Nights, written and illustrated by Sergio Toppi. Sharaz-De is considered by many to be the best graphic retelling of the famous book. The story begins with a king who finds his wife being unfaithful with another man. The king's punishment for this is death for them both. After this, he visits his brother and discovers that his wife is cheating on him also. The brother punishes her and her lover with a death sentence. Enraged that this is happening, and losing faith in all women, the king decides that he will take all young beautiful women from his kingdom to spend one night with him, after which they will be executed, so that they may never be unfaithful like his former wife. One such woman is Sharaz-De, who voluntarily gives herself to the king. Every night she tells the king a different story, and the king spares her life so that he may hear more of these stories. This is how she saves another innocent woman every night. These stories are taken from fables, fairy tales, songs, and folklore. They are themed around greed and justice, they talk about men ungrateful with what they have, who always want more, which inevitably leads them to suffer a tragic fate, while humble and intelligent men are rewarded with riches. The choice of stories seems fitting to the predicament Sharaz-De finds herself in, we can conclude that she is appealing to the king to see the error of his ways. The writing is done in the style of fables, with words not commonly used in communication today. The stories are told mostly through narration, with Sharaz-De being the narrator of her stories, and a separate narrator who tells the overarching story of her and the king. The artwork is done in black and white, with the exception of two stories that are colored in watercolors (Image 8.35). Instead of colors, Sergio Toppi uses lines to give depth to the artwork, not only for shading, but he also uses different sets of lines instead of different color tones. Many pages contain only one composition spreading through the entire page, but there are also more traditional layouts with panels. Some parts of the artwork often go over the borders of the panels, giving the effect of it all being one composition, even when there are multiple panels on the page (Image 8.34). These compositions can be visually complex, similar to the compositions in Sandman Overture, but with less experimenting and with more consistent artwork. Characters are drawn in an unusual style, with otherworldly clothes and hairstyles, and with

subtle facial expressions, unlike many comics where facial expressions are exaggerated (Image 8.33).

Image 8.33 Characters have extravagant clothing, subtle facial expressions [18]
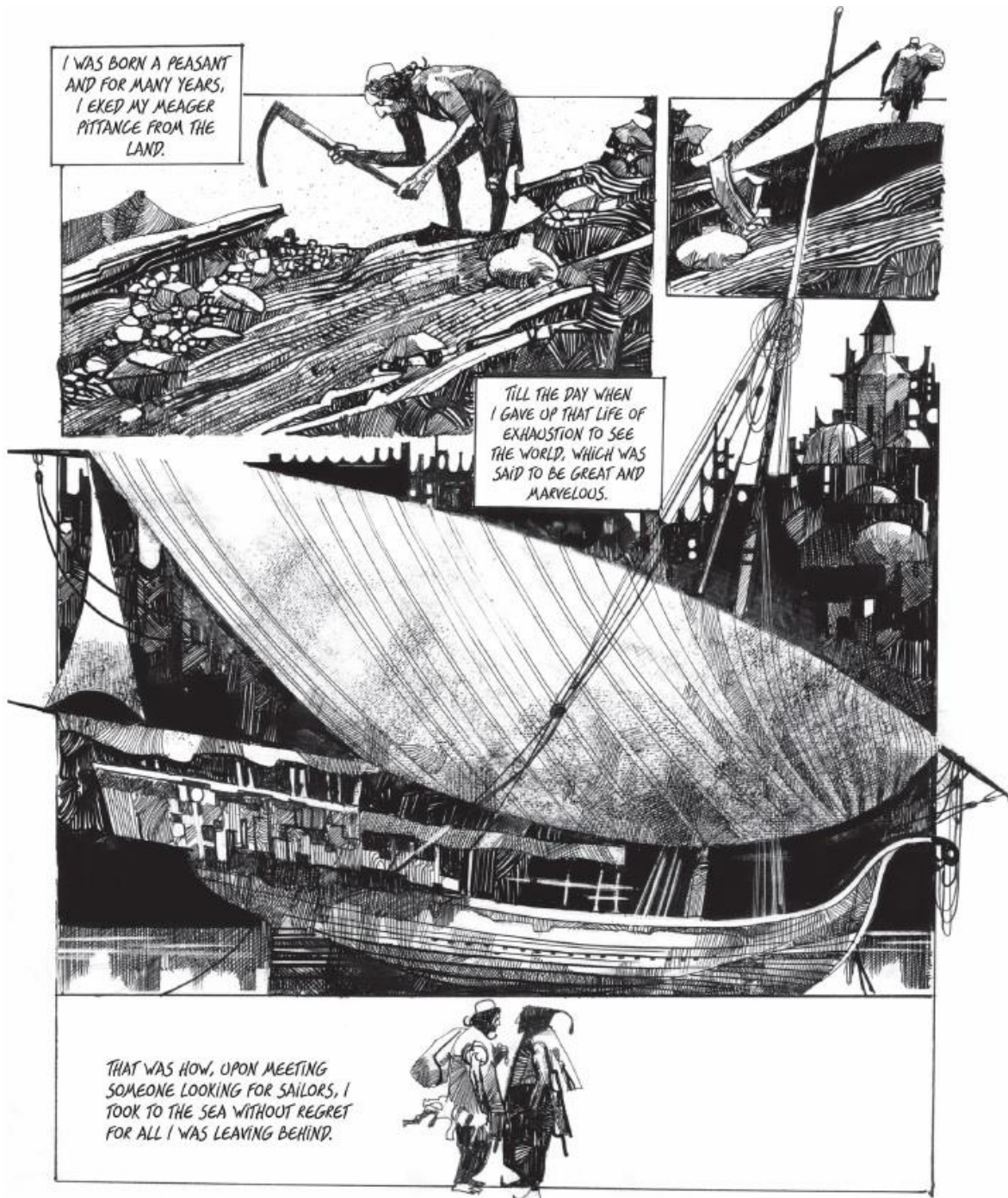
Image 8.34 More traditional layout with panels, though some objects go over the borders [18]

Image 8.35 Colored page, with a complex composition [18]

8.10 Break Blade

Break Blade is a Japanese manga written and drawn by Yunosuke Yoshinaga. It belongs to the mecha genre, which is very popular in Japan, and lately it has been made more popular by Hollywood movies, such as Transformers series and Pacific Rim. The mecha genre focuses around characters that are piloting giant mechanical devices, mostly humanoid in shape. These robots are known as mechs in manga culture, but usually they also have a different name in their own respective manga terminology. In the world of Break Blade, 99% of the population has the power to control quartz crystals, and all their technology is based on this power. They use huge golems for manual labor, like construction, transport, and as weapons. Only those with the ability to control quartz can use the technology in the world. The protagonist, Rygart Arrow, is one of the few people who were born without this ability. In the continent where the story takes place, there are 4 countries, and they are all on the brink of war. During his college days, Rygart was good friends with Hodr and Sygin, who are currently the king and queen of one of these countries, and with Zess, who is a high ranking general in the opposing army. When Sygin discovers an unusual golem in some ancient ruins and nobody is able to move it, she calls for her friend Rygart, thinking there might be a possibility that he will be able to control it. Her hunch turns out to be true and at that time the first attack takes place, lead by their old friend Zess. The story of Break Blade is the story of war, and how it changes people. It is mostly character centric, but there are also some politics and war tactics used to explain the actions of certain characters. With the exception of politicians, who are exclusively evil and one dimensional in this story, all other characters are morally gray people with good intensions and values, but they are often forced to do some bad things to handle the situations they find themselves in. Because of good characterization, every death of an important character has an emotional impact, on any side of the battlefield. Though it handles some serious themes, the story is not always serious and heavy, there are some light-hearted moments of comedy and the battles are interesting enough, with some characters having their own specialized unique golems. The manga is written in the Japanese visual language and read from right to left. The artwork is in black and white with grayscale shading. The characters are drawn in modern manga style.

During some light-hearted moments, the characters have simplified facial expressions, so the situations look more comical (Image 8.36). This is standard in most manga.

Image 8.36 Simplified facial expressions, used to add comedy to the scenes. The cross shaped, bulging vein on the forehead and lines indicating eyes are classic examples of the Japanese visual language. [19]

Just like with Sakamoto, there is heavy use of onomatopoeia (Image 8.39). The artwork is a bit more detailed than most manga, but quite generic in terms of style and layout. The only thing it does differently is that sometimes parallel panels have diagonal sides. Lines are used heavily in the artwork, for showing movement, speed, and intensity (Image 8.37). For battle scenes, lines are used with shading to give an illusion of motion blur, to show force of impact (Image 8.38). During the battles, when two or more golems are in the same panel, it can be hard to figure out what is going on (). The lettering is digital, there are different fonts for normal talking, shouting, and talking through the speakers of the golems. The borders of the balloons change according to the loudness of what is spoken.

Image 8.37 Lines used to give urgency and intensity to the scene [19]

Image 8.38 Lines and shading used to give the illusion of motion blur [19]

Image 8.39 Onomatopoeia used as a part of the scene [19]

9. Synthesis

Using the information from the analyzed comic books, and some general knowledge of the comic book industry, we will point out the prevailing elements and styles in comics, in regard to geography and genre. It should be noted that this is a generalization, and there are exceptions to all of these claims. However, taking into account the huge reach of comics as a medium, and the sheer amount of different styles available, looking at the industry as a whole, these claims will prove to be correct.

9.1 Generalizations according to geography

Regarding geography, here we refer to North American, European, and Japanese territory. These are the main markets in the world of comics. North American superhero comics are the most popular worldwide, no doubt because the movie theaters across the world are full of adaptations of famous stories from the comics. These characters and stories, while being created and written by individuals, are owned by companies, which are completely sales oriented, so they can afford great marketing expenses to keep these comics popular. In the example of *Batman Hush* [16], we can see that the quality of the story is not a priority, and is put second to the beautiful artwork of Jim Lee. The story is written to accommodate as many characters as possible to get into conflicts, just to justify these scenes being rendered by a very popular artist. That way, when the readers see the comic on the shelf they are drawn to the artwork and to the popularity of Batman as a character, and that is reason enough to buy it. To find non-superhero comics, one must turn to independent publishers such as Image Comics and Vertigo. These publishers allow the creators to keep the rights to their intellectual property. Naturally, with these publishers there is a bigger variety of genres and styles to choose from. *Pax Romana* [14], *Sandman Overture* [13], and *Black Hole* [11] are all creator owned, independent comic books, published in North America. All of these comics could be described as complex and experimental, especially in terms of layout and storytelling. These stories are introspective and deal with philosophical issues. Not

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all independent comics are this progressive, some are much more traditional. There is also a number of independent superhero comics, but without the restrictions from the companies, the writers have more freedom to make the stories darker and mature, or funny and random.

In Europe, many comics are written only in their author's native language and some of them are never translated to English or other languages. This is most likely why European comics are not so popular outside of Europe. Another reason is that many European writers and artists work in the American comic industry. The most internationally popular comics from Europe are The Adventures of Tintin and Asterix. Unfortunately, most contemporary comics from Europe do not enjoy that level of popularity. Out of the three European comics that were analyzed, *Blacksad* [12] is by far the most popular outside of Europe, thanks to the universally appealing art and anthropomorphic characters. *Dormant Beast* [10] and *Sharaz-De* [18] are critically well recognized, but do not have a big audience outside of Europe. Writing in European comics is more expressive when compared to American and Japanese comics. And the artwork is much more diverse, with many artists using traditional techniques along with the digital. The characters are not always designed to look attractive and most of them have flawed personalities. Unlike American comics, the story always takes priority over the art, or they are equally valued.

Japanese comics, or manga, are quite different from their western counterparts. While one could say that European and American comics have much more in common than not, manga has always stood out as different. Manga artwork is always black and white, and most of it is very similar to other manga. Then there is the unique visual iconography, which takes some getting used to for the readers who are new to manga, along with the reversed reading order. Manga has much bigger genre diversity than western comic books. The genres are not only divided by the theme of the story, but also by the intended audience. For example, shounen is a genre made for boys and young men, and shuojo for young women. Then there are very specific genres such as sports, mecha (giant mechanical robots, like in *Break Blade* [19]), ecchi (very sexualized situations, but without explicit scenes), and harem (male protagonist surrounded by attractive female supporting

characters). Manga is published in Japan differently than comics are published in the western world. Divided into chapters, they are published in manga magazines, together with chapters of other manga, and only later are they published as collected editions of only one manga. Because of this release schedule, and the small number of pages available, manga tends to have a slower pace and more chapters than western comics. Many mangas are adapted into animated shows on TV, which can make them more popular to the audience outside of Japan. It is one of the most important reasons for the worldwide popularity of manga. Because these anime adaptations often do not contain the whole story of the manga but only several arcs, the people want to see how the story will end, so they begin reading the original manga.

Table 9.1 Generalizations according to geography

	American comics	**European comics**	**Japanese manga**
Popular genres	Superhero, sci-fi, fantasy, crime/thriller	Adventure, fantasy, sci-fi, drama, crime/thriller	Comedy, sci-fi, mecha, slice of life, romance, horror, ecchi, shounen
Main characters	Beautiful, perfect, overpowered	Flawed, smart, can be charming,	Mostly young, always special in some way, emotional
Writing	Direct, serious, can be sarcastic	Elegant, expressive, poetic	Direct, Inspiring, can be light hearted
Layout	Mainstream is traditional, independent scene can be very experimental	Mostly traditional, some experimentation	Very traditional, not much experimentation

Colors	Mostly vibrant, high contrast, digital	Subdued palettes, naturalistic, some contrast	Black and white, grayscale for shading

Some general differences between the three big markets of comics can be seen in Table 9.1. The first category by which they were compared is the most popular genres. It should be noted that most comic book stories contain elements of more than one genre, and this division takes that into account. It's no secret that the most popular genre in America is superhero, but many such comics also have elements of sci-fi, crime/thriller, fantasy, drama, and even comedy genres. From the comics that were analyzed, *Batman Hush* [16] would fit into the superhero, crime/thriller, and sci-fi genres. *Sandman Overture* [13] would fit into fantasy, sci-fi, superhero, and drama. *Black Hole* [11] is mostly a character driven drama with elements of horror, and a little bit of crime/thriller elements, and *Pax Romana* [14] is almost pure sci-fi. On the European side, we have *Dormant Beast* [10] (sci-fi, drama, adventure), *Blacksad* [12] (crime/thriller, drama), and *Sharaz-De* [18] (fantasy, adventure, drama). And for the manga we have *Sakamoto Desu Ga* [17] (comedy, slice of life), *Uzumaki* [15] (horror, drama), and *Break Blade* [19] (sci-fi, mecha, shounen, ecchi).

The next category is the main characters; this includes visual distinctions and personality traits. From American comics, we have Batman/Bruce Wayne who is extremely rich, handsome, intelligent, and can pretty much beat anybody in a fight. In other words, he is perfect and overpowered. Morpheus from *Sandman Overture* [13] is also extremely powerful and immortal, and even though everybody sees him differently, it can be said that he is beautiful, if not traditionally then by his presence, which can be described as graceful, elegant, and majestic. The mercenaries from *Pax Romana* [14] are not beautiful in any sense of the word, but are technologically and biologically more advanced than anyone in the world at the time the story takes place, so we could call them overpowered. The only ones who do not fit into this description at all are the teenagers from *Black Hole* [11], and that is one of the few exceptions to the rule, as these types of comic books are usually not popular at all in the American market. Characters of European comics are much more difficult to categorize. Nike from *Dormant Beast* [10] is street smart and has some shady acquaintances, but is obsessed with finding the people from his past, and it clouds his judgment. He is not traditionally charming, but he knows how to get information from others. John Blacksad, on the other hand, is a very charming character, as he

can be seen flirting with women in every story he is in. He is also smart and has great attention to detail, but often gets in trouble because of his strong sense of justice, and sometimes his actions get someone else killed. Sheraz-De is definitely the most charming character from the analyzed comics, as her life depends on charm, and every day she must use it to persuade the king not to take her life. She is also described as beautiful, and obviously she is very smart to know so many stories and to choose them according to the situation she is in. No flaws of hers are shown in the comic, but she is not the focus of the stories being told. The protagonists of manga have much more in common, for example they are all young people, mostly students of some kind. Sakamoto is a high school student with superhuman abilities of being cool in every situation, Rygart Arrow from *Break Blade* [19] is a young man who is special in a way that he lacks the power that everyone else has, but because of this he is able to pilot an ancient and powerful mech, and Kirie and Shuichi from *Uzumaki* [15] are high school students who are somehow able to survive for months in the haunted city, and manage to always see the people affected by the spiral before they go crazy.

The writing in comics is very limited by space, so it must work together with the artwork to tell the story. Because of this, it is usually direct and based on dialogue, and a small amount of narration. The descriptive parts are substituted by the artwork. In American comics, the writing is done just for the characters, for the dialogue, or subjective narration, there is almost never a separate narrator. The artwork sometimes takes priority over writing. Most of these comics take themselves seriously, and the writing reflects this. If there is humor, it is usually achieved by sarcasm. Comedy titles are the exception to this, but in the American market they are not so common as in Europe or Japan. The writing in European comics is a bit more refined. The dialogues are not so direct, and the wording is more eloquent. There are more examples of separate narrators, and there are more descriptive texts that can sometimes repeat what is shown in the artwork. The writing and artwork are equally valued. In manga there is a similar situation like in the American comics, in regard to absence of narrators and direct dialogue. Even dialogue heavy comics are written this way, probably because the audience is somewhat younger. The difference is in the humor, which is very frequent in manga, even in serious

stories. Even the darkest stories can have some panels that use exaggerated and simplified expressions to show visual humor.

The layouts in comic books are not experimented with a lot, in part because the layout itself does not affect the narrative in meaningful ways. It exists to lead the reader through the pages. In most popular comics the layouts are similar, with rectangular panels and consistent gutters. There is always some small thing that adds diversity, like a splash page or a character that goes beyond the borders of a panel, but nothing more drastic. A few authors in Europe and America experiment more drastically with layouts. J. H. Williams III in *Sandman Overture* [13] and Jonathan Hickman in *Pax Romana* [14] have challenged the standard and proved that a visually complex layout doesn't necessarily confuse the reader. Sergio Toppi did a similar thing in *Sharaz-De* [18]; however, it seems that his layouts are not unusual for the sake of experimentation, but to accommodate his art style.

The choice of colors in American comics is almost always vibrant and high contrast with the black inks. Many comics have a dedicated colorist who digitally adds colors. There is also a heavy use of gradients, especially in superhero comics. The colors tend to be more saturated than in nature. There are a small number of black and white comics, like *Black Hole* [11], but these are rarely popular. In Europe there is a balance between digital and traditional coloring techniques, and sometimes they are combined. The colors used are more often less vibrant than in the American market, and often naturalistic. There are also more black and white comics. In Japan, all manga are done in black and white and sometimes gray colors for shading. There are examples of colored manga from Korea and China, but the original Japanese manga is always black and white, with the exception of covers.

9.2 Generalizations according to genre

Table 9.2 Generalizations according to genre

	Characters	**Writing**	**Composition**	**Colors**
Superhero	Beautiful, perfect, exaggerated, overpowered	Direct, sarcastic, inspiring	Mostly medium and wide shots, lots of action scenes, some onomatopoeia	Vibrant, digital, high contrast
Science fiction	Smart, adaptable, inquisitive	Direct, expressive, dense	A good balance of different shots	Can be vibrant and subdued, mostly digital, high contrast
Crime/thriller	Realistic, gritty, complex	Direct, expressive, can be dense, usually character driven	Mostly close-ups, medium and wide shots, a lot of attention given to lightning, cinematic feel	Mostly subdued colors, high contrast
Fantasy	Curious, powerful, usually fits an archetype, not always human	Elegant, poetic, lots of exposition	Mostly medium and wide shots, a lot of landscape scenes,	Can be vibrant and subdued, naturalistic colors, some contrast
Horror	Realistic, normal people, can be ugly or disfigured	Direct, usually character driven, can be minimal	Mostly close-ups, medium and wide shots, a lot of attention given to lightning	Darker shades, high contrast,
Comedy	Simple, exaggerated	Direct, humorous, witty	A good balance of different shots, heavy use of onomatopoeia, exaggerated body language	Vibrant, lots of colors in a single panel

We already discussed some elements of the superhero genre in the previous chapters. The only thing to add is that the composition mostly consists of medium

and wide shots, because there is usually more than one character in the panel, and there is a lot of fighting scenes. With fighting comes noise, so there is also a decent amount of onomatopoeia. In the science fiction genre, the main characters tend to be smart and adaptable, and a lot of time the villains share those traits, like in *Dormant Beast* [10]. The writing can be dense, as is the case in *Pax Romana* [], because there is a lot of exposition needed to explain the worlds where these stories take place. The composition and colors are hard to categorize, because these types of stories are so diverse, there is a little bit of everything. We can agree that there is a lot of contrast when depicting imaginary worlds with advanced technology. Both *Pax Romana* [14] and *Dormant Beast* [10] have a subdued color palette, but this is not the norm. The crime/thriller genre is filled with realistic and usually dark characters. The writing is direct and expressive, as the stories are character centric. Composition and colors usually add to the gritty atmosphere, like in *Blacksad* [12], where the colors are subdued, but there is a lot of contrast. Because there is not a lot of action in these stories, the shots must be as cinematic as possible not to bore the reader. In the fantasy genre, the characters are diverse and not always human, but they are always curious, wanting to learn more about the world. An example of this is the king from *Sharaz-De* [18], who is so infatuated with his prisoner's stories that he keeps her alive only to hear more. Morpheus from *Sandman Overture* [13] is one of the most powerful entities in the universe, but when something happens that he does not understand, he immediately crosses space and time to find out what has happened. The writing in this type of story is usually more poetic and elegant than the way we speak in our everyday lives. There is also a fair amount of exposition and it is usually narrated by either a character or a separate narrator. The environments in fantasy stories are usually naturalistic, and so are the colors used to depict them. There is a good balance of shots, but more than usual extra wide shots that show different large environments. Both *Sandman Overture* [13] and *Sharaz-De* [18] have plenty of them. In the horror genre, the main characters are usually normal, realistic people and the antagonist is non-human, or ugly and disfigured. The writing in these stories is direct and minimal. More is shown than written, like in *Uzumaki* [15], the images can tell more than words in some situations. This is one of the genres where black and white can be even more effective than

colors. When there are colors, they tend to be in darker shades, with heavy contrast. The shots concentrate on characters, so close-ups, medium, and wide shots are the most frequent. The characters in the comedy genre tend to be simplistic, sometimes with exaggerated features. The writing is direct, witty and humorous, but also minimal. The principle of "show, don't tell" works here as well, as we can see in Images 8.11 through 8.16 from the manga *Sakamoto Desu Ga* [17]. There are many examples of exaggerated body language and facial expressions, and a heavy use of onomatopoeia.

10. Conclusion

The elements of comic books that make them unique are the page layout and the interplay of words and images. In no other media can we find stories told in such a way. Another thing unique to comics is the visual representation of the passage of time within a scene and within the narrative. By arranging the panels in a certain way and changing the composition inside them, an artist can communicate a certain meaning in many different ways on a single page. Each reader will interpret it from a different angle and distance, and with a different timeline in their own mind, but the meaning will stay the same.

By analyzing comic books of different styles and genres, it was shown how a story can be presented in many different ways, using a combination of visual iconography, written words, and images. The choice of color, visual style, and the amount of detail can further enhance the atmosphere or mood that the authors are trying to communicate. And while layout does not play a part in communicating meaning, it can contribute to the mood and the presentation of a story, making it more interesting for the reader or, in some cases, more complicated. The only requirements to be able to read the comics is to know the language the text is written in and to understand the visual language, i.e. the visual iconography used, and the order of reading. With only ten comic books analyzed, it was quite difficult to categorize specific elements that would accurately describe a certain style of comics, especially because some of these comics do not fit entirely in just one style. With a more expansive sample of comics, a better categorization could be achieved. With that in mind, in the Tables 9.1 and 9.2 we can see some very general elements and themes that are used in the majority of comic books in their respective categories.

In some of the examples in this thesis, it was shown that there are writers and artists who are doing some unique things in the medium, which makes it even

more distinguished when compared to cinema, television, and books. We have still not seen everything that can be done with comic books.

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11.1 List of analyzed comic books

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[15] Ito J., *Uzumaki*, VIZ Media LLC, 2012

[16] Loeb J., Lee J., Williams S., Sinclair A., *Batman Hush,* DC Comics, 2009

[17] Sano N., *Sakamoto Desu Ga,* Seven Seas, 2015

[18] Toppi S., *Sharaz-De*, Boom Entertainment, 2013

[19] Yoshinaga Y., *Break Blade*, CMX, 2009

IZJAVA O AVTORSTVU

Spodaj podpisani/-a _____ Ivan Prevedan _____

z vpisno številko _____ E5016374 _____

Sem avtor/-ica magistrskega dela z naslovom: _____ Morphological and Stylistic Analysis of Contemporary Popular American, European and Japanese Comics (Morfološka in slogovna analiza sodobobnega popularnega ameriškega, evropskega in japonskega stripa) _____

(naslov magistrskega dela)

S svojim podpisom zagotavljam, da:

- Sem magistrsko delo izdelal/-a samostojno pod mentorstvom (naziv, ime in priimek)
  _____ doc. Dr. Andrej Skrbinek _____

  In somentrotstvom (naziv, ime in priimek)
  _____

- So elektronska oblika magistrskega dela, naslov (slov., angl.), povzetek (slov., angl.) ter ključne besede (slov., angl.) identični s tiskano obliko magistrskega dela.
- Soglašam z javno objavo elektronske oblike magistrskega dela v DKUM.

V Mariboru, dne _____ 19.07. 2016. _____

Podpis avtorja/-ice:

_____

FERI

IZJAVA O USTREZNOSTI ZAKLJUČNEGA DELA

Podpisani mentor :

Andrej Skrbinek

(ime in priimek mentorja)

In somentor (eden ali več, če obstajata) :

(ime in priimek somentorja)

Izjavljam (-va), da je študent

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Vpisna številka: E5016374

Na programu: Medijske komunikacije, 2. stopnja

Izdelal zaključno delo z naslovom:

Morfološka in slogovna analiza sodobobnega popularnega ameriškega, evropskega in japonskega stripa

(naslov magistrskega dela v slovenskem in angleškem jeziku)

Morphological and Stylistic Analysis of Contemporary Popular American, European and Japanese Comics

V skladu z odobreno temo zaključnega dela, navodilih o pripravi zaključnih del in mojimi (najinimi oziroma našimi) navodili.

Preveril (-a, -i) in pregledal (-a, -i) sem (sva, smo) poročilo o plagiatorstvu.

Datum in kraj:

Maribor, 19.07.2016.

Podpis mentorja:

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IZJAVA O ISTOVETNOSTI TISKANE IN ELEKTRONSKE VERZIJE ZAKLJUČNEGA DELA IN OBJAVI OSEBNIH PODATKOV DIPLOMANTOV

Ime in priimek avtorja-ice: _____ Ivan Prevedan _____

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Študijski program: _____ Medijske komunikacije, 2. stopnja _____

Naslov zaključnega dela: _____ Morphological and Stylistic Analysis of Contemporary Popular American, European and Japanese Comics _____

Mentor: _____ doc. Dr. Andrej Skrbinek _____

Podpisani-a _____ Ivan Prevedan _____ izjavljam, da sem za potrebe arhiviranja oddal elektronsko verzijo zaključnega dela v Digitalno knjižnico Univerze v Mariboru. Zaključno delo sem izdelal-a sam-a ob pomoči mentorja. V skladu s 1. odstavkom 21. člana Zakona o avtorskih in sorodnih pravicah dovoljujem, da se zgoraj navedeno zaključno delo objavi na portalu Digitalne knjižnice Univerze v Mariboru.

Tiskana verzija zaključnega dela je istovetna elektronski verziji, ki sem jo oddal za objavo v Digitalno knjižnico Univerze v Mariboru.

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Zaključno delo zaradi zagotavljanja konkurenčne prednosti, verstva industrijske lastnine ali tajnosti podatkov naročnika: _____ ne sme biti javno dostopno do _____ (datum odloga javne objave ne sme biti daljši kot 3 leta od zagovora dela).

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Podpisani izjavljam, da dovoljujem objavo osebnih podatkov, vezanih na zaključek študija (ime, priimek, leto in kraj rojstva, datum zaključk študija, naslov zaključnega dela), na spletnih straneh in v publikacijah UM.

Datum in kraj: _____ Maribor 19.07.2016. _____   Podpis avtorja-ice: _____

Podpis mentorja: _____
(samo v primeru, če delo ne sme biti javno dostopno)

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