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CHAPTER ONE

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT.

COMICS WERE THOSE BRIGHT, COLORFUL MAGAZINES FILLED WITH BAD ART, STUPID STORIES AND GUYS IN TIGHTS.

I READ REAL BOOKS, NATURALLY. I WAS MUCH TOO OLD FOR COMICS!

BUT WHEN I WAS IN 8TH GRADE, A FRIEND OF MINE (WHO WAS A LOT SMARTER THAN I WAS) CONVINCED ME TO GIVE COMICS ANOTHER LOOK AND LENT ME HIS COLLECTION.

SOON, I WAS HOOKED!

WHEN I WAS A LITTLE KID, I KNEW EXACTLY WHAT COMICS WERE.

HI, I'M SCOTT MECLOUD.
IN LESS THAN A YEAR, I BECAME TOTALLY OBSESSED WITH COMICS! I DECIDED TO BECOME A COMICS ARTIST IN 10TH GRADE AND Began TO PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE!

I FELT THAT THERE WAS SOMETHING LURGING IN COMICS... SOMETHING THAT HAD NEVER BEEN DONE.

SOME KIND OF HIDDEN POWER!

SURE, I REALIZED THAT COMIC BOOKS WERE USUALLY CRUDE, POORLY-DRAWN, SEMILITERATE, CHEAP, DISPOSABLE KIDDE FARE--

--BUT--

THEY DON'T HAVE TO BE!

THE PROBLEM WAS THAT FOR MOST PEOPLE, THAT WAS WHAT "COMIC BOOK" MEANT!

DON'T GimME THAT COMIC BOOK TALK, BARNEY!

IF PEOPLE FAILED TO UNDERSTAND COMICS, IT WAS BECAUSE THEY DEFINED WHAT COMICS COULD BE TOO NARROWLY!

A PROPER DEFINITION, IF WE COULD FIND ONE, MIGHT GIVE LIE TO THE STEREOTYPES--

--AND SHOW THAT THE POTENTIAL OF COMICS IS LIMITLESS AND EXCITING!

THIS IS WHERE OUR JOURNEY BEGINS.
THE WORLD OF COMICS IS A HUGE AND VARIED ONE. OUR DEFINITION MUST ENCOMPASS ALL THESE TYPES--

"COMICS" IS THE WORD WORTH DEFINING, AS IT REFERS TO THE MEDIUM ITSELF, NOT A SPECIFIC OBJECT AS "COMIC BOOK" OR "COMIC STRIP" DO.

WE CAN ALL VISUALIZE A COMIC.

--WHILE NOT BEING SO BROAD AS TO INCLUDE ANYTHING WHICH IS CLEARLY NOT COMICS.

BUT WHAT--

--IS--

--COMICS?

TAKEN INDIVIDUALLY, THE PICTURES BELOW ARE MERELY THAT—PICTURES.

NOTICE THAT THIS DEFINITION IS STRICTLY NEUTRAL ON MATTERS OF STYLE, QUALITY OR SUBJECT MATTER.

MUCH HAS ALREADY BEEN WRITTEN ON THE VARIOUS SCHOOLS OF COMIC ART; ON PARTICULAR ARTISTS, PARTICULAR TITLES, PARTICULAR TRENDS.

BUT TO DEFINE COMICS, WE MUST FIRST DO A LITTLE AESTHETIC SURGERY AND SEPARATE FORM FROM CONTENT!
The artform—the medium—known as comics is a vessel which can hold any number of ideas and images. The “content” of those ideas is, of course, up to creators, and we all have different tastes.

--for the messenger.

At one time or another virtually all the great media have received critical examination, in and of themselves.

But for comics, this attention has been rare. Let’s see if we can help rectify the situation.

*Eisner’s own comics and sequential art being a happy exception.
EISNER'S TERM SEEMS LIKE A GOOD PLACE TO START.

LET'S SEE IF WE CAN EXPAND IT TO A PROPER DICTIONARY-STYLE DEFINITION.

ANY IDEAS?

THERE ARE A LOT OF DIFFERENT KINDS OF ART. HOW ABOUT SOMETHING A LITTLE MORE SPECIFIC?

OKAY. TIALT AT

HOW'S THIS?

HEY, WHAT ABOUT ANIMATION?!

BEG PARDON?

ISN'T ANIMATED FILM JUST VISUAL ART IN SEQUENCE?

HMM... GOOD POINT.

I GUESS THE BASIC DIFFERENCE IS THAT ANIMATION IS SEQUENTIAL IN TIME BUT NOT SPATIALLY JUXTAPOSED* AS COMICS ARE.

EACH SUCCESSIVE FRAME OF A MOVIE IS PROJECTED ON EXACTLY THE SAME SPACE -- THE SCREEN -- WHILE EACH FRAME OF COMICS MUST OCCUPY A DIFFERENT SPACE.

SPACE DOES FOR COMICS WHAT TIME DOES FOR FILM!

*JUXTAPOSED = ADJACENT, SIDE-BY-SIDE, GREAT ART SCHOOL WORD.
Anyway, this should make it a bit more specific.

Juxtaposed Sequential Visual Art

Okay, how about this?

Juxtaposed Sequential Static Images

Now it sounds kind of arbitrary.

Oh, it doesn't have to contain words to be comics...

Letters are static images, right?

When they're arranged in a deliberate sequence, placed next to each other, we call them words!

No, no. I mean, doesn't that definition describe words??
Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence

com·ics (kom'iks)n. plural in form, used with a singular verb. 1. Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.

2. Superheroes in bright, colorful costumes, fighting dastardly villains who want to conquer the world, in vivid, sensational, pulse-pounding action sequences.


4. Corruptor of our Nation's youth. com·ics (humor adj)

---AND IN MOST CASES, THIS IS THE ONLY DEFINITION WE'RE LIKELY TO NEED.

BUT, WITH A SPECIFIC DEFINITION UNDER OUR BELTS---

SEQUENTIAL ART

---PERHAPS WE CAN SHED SOME NEW LIGHT ON THE HISTORY OF COMICS.

MOST BOOKS ABOUT COMICS BEGIN SHORTLY BEFORE THE TURN OF THE CENTURY, BUT I THINK WE CAN VENTURE A BIT FARTHER THAN THAT.
HERE'S A PAINTING BY MAGRITTE CALLED "THE TREACHERY OF IMAGES."

THE INSCRIPTION IS IN FRENCH. TRANSLATED, IT MEANS "THIS IS NOT A PIPE."

AND INDEED THIS IS NOT A PIPE.

THIS IS A PAINTING OF A PIPE.

RIGHT?

SEE PAGE 216 FOR MORE INFORMATION.
WELL, ACTUALLY, THAT'S
WRONG. THIS IS NOT A
PAINTING OF A PIPE, THIS IS
A DRAWING OF A PAINTING
OF A PIPE.

N'EST-CE PAS?

NOPE. WRONG AGAIN.
IT'S A PRINTED COPY OF
A DRAWING OF A PAINTING
OF A PIPE.

TEN
COPIES.
ACTUALLY.

SIX. IF YOU
FOLD THE PAGES
BACK.

DO YOU
HEAR WHAT I'M
SAYING?

IF YOU DO, HAVE YOUR
EARS CHECKED, BECAUSE
NO ONE SAID A WORD.
These are not ideas.
This is not a man.
This is not a country.
This is not a leaf.
These are not people.
This is not music.
Welcome to the strange and wonderful world of the icon!
This is not my voice.
Splat!
This is not sound.
These are not flowers.
This is not me.
This is not a planet.
This is not a car.
This is not food.
This is not a company.
This is not a face.
These are not separate moments.
NOW, THE WORD
ICON MEANS
MANY THINGS.

FOR THE PURPOSES
OF THIS CHAPTER, I'M USING THE
WORD "ICON" TO MEAN ANY
IMAGE USED TO REPRESENT A
PERSON, PLACE, THING OR
IDEA.

THAT'S A BIT BROADER
THAN THE DEFINITION
IN MY DICTIONARY,
BUT IT'S THE CLOSEST
THING TO WHAT I
NEED HERE.

"SYMBOL" IS A
BIT TOO LOADED
FOR ME.

AND FINALLY, THE ICONS WE CALL PICTURES:
IMAGES DESIGNED TO ACTUALLY RESEMBLE
THEIR SUBJECTS.

THE SORTS OF
IMAGES WE
USUALLY CALL
SYMBOLS ARE
ONE CATEGORY
OF ICON, HOWEVER.

THEN THERE
ARE THE ICONS
OF LANGUAGE,
SCIENCE AND
COMMUNICATION.

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ICONS OF THE
PRACTICAL
REALM.

BUT
AS RESEMBLANCE
VARIATES, SO DOES THE
LEVEL OF ICONIC
CONTENT.

OR, TO PUT IT
SOMewhat CLUMSILY
SOME PICTURES ARE
JUST MORE ICONIC
THAN OTHERS.
In the non-pictorial icons, meaning is fixed and absolute. Their appearance doesn't affect their meaning because they represent invisible ideas.

In pictures, however, meaning is fluid and variable according to appearance. They differ from "real-life" appearance to varying degrees.

Words are totally abstract icons. That is, they bear no resemblance at all to the real McCoy.

But in pictures, the level of abstraction varies. Some, like the face in the previous panel, so closely resemble their real-life counterparts as to almost trick the eye!

Others, like yours truly, are quite a bit more abstract and, in fact, are very much unlike any human face you've ever seen!

Let's see if we can put these pictorial icons in some sort of order.

There are many things that set these apart from actual faces--they're smaller, flatter, less detailed, they don't move, they lack color--but as pictorial icons go, they are pretty realistic.

Common wisdom holds that the photograph and the realistic picture are the icons that most resemble their real-life counterparts.

Reality this way.
SOMETHING MORE ABSTRACT IS THIS STYLE OF DRAWING FOUND IN MANY ADVENTURE COMICS.

ONLY OUTLINES AND A HINT OF SHADING ARE STILL PRESENT, BUT WE EASILY RECOGNIZE THIS AS A HUMAN FACE.

WHY THEN, IS THE FACE ABOVE SO ACCEPTABLE TO OUR EYES? WHY DOES IT SEEM JUST AS REAL AS THE OTHERS?

WHAT IS THE SECRET OF THE ICON WE CALL--

--THE CARTOON?
Why would anyone, young or old, respond to a cartoon as much or more than a realistic image?

Why is our culture so in thrall to the simplified reality of the cartoon?

Defining the cartoon would take up as much space as defining comics, but for now, I'm going to examine cartooning as a form of amplification through simplification.

When we abstract an image through cartooning, we're not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details.

By stripping down an image to its essential 'meaning,' an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't.
Film critics will sometimes describe a live-action film as a "cartoon" to acknowledge the stripped-down intensity of a simple story or visual style.

Though the term is often used disparagingly, it can be equally well applied to many time-tested classics. Simplifying characters and images toward a purpose can be an effective tool for storytelling in any medium.

Cartooning isn't just a way of drawing, it's a way of seeing!

The ability of cartoons to focus our attention on an idea is, I think, an important part of their special power, both in comics and in drawing generally.

But I believe there's something more at work in our minds when we view a cartoon—especially of a human face—which warrants further investigation.

Another is the universality of cartoon imagery. The more cartoony a face is, for instance, the more people it could be said to describe.

The fact that your mind is capable of taking a circle, two dots and a line and turning them into a face is nothing short of incredible!

But still, more incredible is the fact that you cannot avoid seeing a face here. Your mind won't let you!
WHEN I WAS VERY YOUNG, I HAD A RECURRENT DAYDREAM THAT THE WHOLE WORLD WAS JUST A SHOW PUT ON FOR MY BENEFIT, THAT UNLESS I WAS PRESENT TO SEE THINGS, THEY JUST--

--CEASED TO EXIST.
Later in life, I found others who had similar daydreams as children. None of us ever really believed these theories, but we had all been fascinated by the fact that they could not be disproved.

Even today, as I write and draw this panel, I have no guarantee that anything exists outside of what my five senses report to me.*

I've never been to Morocco, but I take it on faith that there is a Morocco!

I've never seen the Earth from space firsthand, yet I trust that the Earth is round.

I've never been in the house across the street, yet I assume it has an interior, that it isn't just some big movie set!

In this panel you can't even see my legs, yet you assume that they're there.

Even though they're not!

* Not to say our senses are any kind of guarantee!
ALL OF US PERCEIVE THE WORLD AS A WHOLE THROUGH THE EXPERIENCE OF OUR SENSES. YET OUR SENSES CAN ONLY REVEAL A WORLD THAT IS FRAGMENTED AND INCOMPLETE.

EVEN THE MOST WIDELY TRAVELLED MIND CAN ONLY SEE SO MUCH OF THE WORLD IN THE COURSE OF A LIFE. OUR PERCEPTION OF "REALITY" IS AN ACT OF FAITH, BASED ON MERE FRAGMENTS.

AS INFANTS, WE'RE UNABLE TO COMMIT THAT ACT OF FAITH. IF WE CAN'T SEE IT, HEAR IT, SMELL IT, TASTE IT OR TOUCH IT, IT ISN'T THERE!

THE GAME "PEEK-A-BOO" PLAYS ON THIS IDEA. GRADUALLY, WE ALL LEARN THAT EVEN THOUGH THE SIGHT OF MOMMY COMES AND GOES, MOMMY REMAINS.
THIS PHENOMENON OF OBSERVING THE PARTS BUT PERCEIVING THE WHOLE HAS A NAME.

IT'S CALLED CLOSURE.

IN OUR DAILY LIVES, WE OFTEN COMMIT CLOSURE, MENTALLY COMPLETING THAT WHICH IS INCOMPLETE BASED ON PAST EXPERIENCE.

SOME FORMS OF CLOSURE ARE DELIBERATE INVENTIONS OF STORYTELLERS TO PRODUCE SUSPENSE OR TO CHALLENGE AUDIENCES.

OTHERS HAPPEN AUTOMATICALLY, WITHOUT MUCH EFFORT... PART OF BUSINESS AS USUAL.

IN RECOGNIZING AND RELATING TO OTHER PEOPLE, WE ALL DEPEND HEAVILY ON OUR LEARNED ABILITY OF CLOSURE.

IN AN INCOMPLETE WORLD, WE MUST DEPEND ON CLOSURE FOR OUR VERY SURVIVAL.
Closure can take many forms. Some simple, some complex.

Sometimes, a mere shape or outline is enough to trigger closure.

The mental process described in Chapter Two whereby these lines become a face could be considered closure.

Every time we see a photograph reproduced in a newspaper or magazine, we commit closure.

Our eyes take in the fragmented, black-and-white image of the "half-tone" patterns.

--And our minds transform it into the "reality."

--of the photograph!
In film, closure takes place continuously—twenty-four times per second, in fact—as our minds, aided by the persistence of vision, transform a series of still pictures into a story of continuous motion.

A medium requiring even more closure is television, which, in reality, is just a single point of light racing across the screen so fast that it's described my face hundreds of times before you can even swallow that corn chip!!

---

A medium where the audience is a willing and conscious collaborator and closure is the agent of change, time and motion.

---


HERE IN THE LIMBO OF THE GUTTER, HUMAN IMAGINATION TAKES TWO SEPARATE IMAGES AND TRANSFORMS THEM INTO A SINGLE IDEA.
Nothing is seen between the two panels, but experience tells you something must be there!

Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments.

But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality.

If visual iconography is the vocabulary of comics, closure is its grammar.

And since our definition of comics hinges on the arrangement of elements--

Then, in a very real sense, comics is closure!
THE CLOSURE OF ELECTRONIC MEDIA IS CONTINUOUS, LARGELY INVOLUNTARY AND VIRTUALLY IMPERCEPTIBLE.

BUT CLOSURE IN COMICS IS FAR FROM CONTINUOUS AND ANYTHING BUT INVOLUNTARY!

NOW YOU DIE!!
NO!
NO!

EVERY ACT COMMITTED TO PAPER BY THE COMICS ARTIST IS AIDED AND ABETTED BY A SILENT ACCompLICE.

I MAY HAVE DRAWN AN AXE BEING RAISED IN THIS EXAMPLE, BUT I'M NOT THE ONE WHO LET IT DROP OR DECIDED HOW HARD THE BLOW, OR WHO SCREAMED, OR WHY.

AN EQUAL PARTNER IN CRIME KNOWN AS THE READER.

NOW YOU DIE!!
NO!
NO!

ALL OF YOU PARTICIPATED IN THE MURDER.
ALL OF YOU HELD THE AXE AND CHOSE YOUR SPOT.

THAT, DEAR READER, WAS YOUR SPECIAL CRIME, EACH OF YOU COMMITTING IT IN YOUR OWN STYLE.
TO KILL A MAN BETWEEN PANELS IS TO CONDEMN HIM TO A THOUSAND DEATHS.

PARTICIPATION IS A POWERFUL FORCE IN ANY MEDIUM. FILMMAKERS LONG AGO REALIZED THE IMPORTANCE OF ALLOWING VIEWERS TO USE THEIR IMAGINATIONS.

BUT WHILE FILM MAKES USE OF AUDIENCES’ IMAGINATIONS FOR OCCASIONAL EFFECTS, COMICS MUST USE IT FAR MORE OFTEN!

FROM THE TOSSING OF A BASEBALL TO THE DEATH OF A PLANET, THE READER’S DELIBERATE VOLUNTARY CLOSURE IS COMICS’ PRIMARY MEANS OF SIMULATING TIME AND MOTION.

CLOSURE IN COMICS FOSTERS AN INTIMACY SURPASSED ONLY BY THE WRITTEN WORD, A SILENT, SECRET CONTRACT BETWEEN CREATOR AND AUDIENCE.

HOW THE CREATOR HONORS THAT CONTRACT IS A MATTER OF BOTH ART AND CRAFT.

LET’S TAKE A LOOK AT THE CRAFT.