Subjective Narration in Comics

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Introduction

Comics are, even by the narrowest definition, already a rather old medium. Emerging at the turn of the twentieth century as short funnies in newspapers, they developed in different ways in mainland Europe, America and Japan. In Europe, especially France and Belgium, comics became recognized as a distinct medium, capable of telling all kinds of stories. In America, a single genre (superheroes) has dominated the mainstream for decades. The widest appreciation for the storytelling possibilities of comics, however, was in Japan, where comics not only reach great quantity in sales, but also in diversity of genres.

Over the past few years, both America and Europe have seen some (re)new(ed) serious interest in comics. Be this as it may, comics have globally been superseded in popularity by newer media like television and Internet in the second half of the twentieth century. Media studies, which became a full-fledged academic discipline in this same time period, have largely ignored comics in favour of newer, more popular subjects. This thesis will study a much overlooked medium and try to show its vitality in comparison to others.

The main question of this thesis will be how subjective narration in comics is different from similar scenes in film and writing. We will first analyse subjective narration in comics using both film and literary theory. We hope to draw conclusions on both subjective narration and comics from this angle.

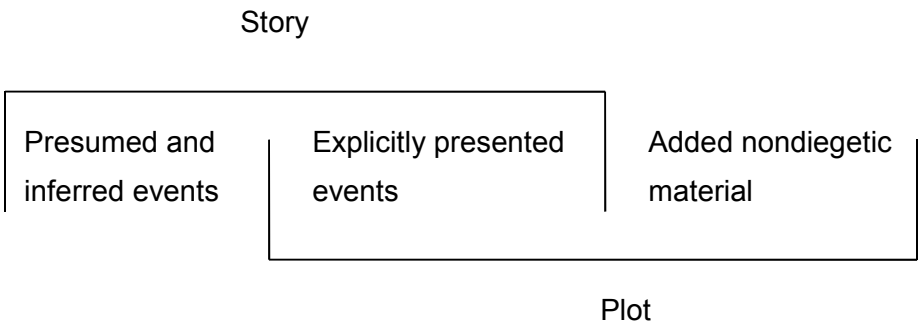
Narration

Our thesis is concerned with texts which present stories. All media, including writing, film and comics, produce texts. A text is a single, finite cultural artefact, which can be 'read' by a public. One should not take 'reading' too strictly – watching a movie is included by our definition. Language is not a requisite. Many texts present stories. But when can we speak of a story? Bordwell and Thompson (2001; first published in 1979) hold that a story is '*a chain of events in cause-effect relationship occurring in time and space*' (60). Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan (1983) goes further and simply sees 'temporal succession' (18) as the minimal requirement for a set of words to be a story. For Rimmon-Kenan, the cause-effect chain is not needed – but this seems a drastic step just to include a few borderline texts.

More interesting is the fact that Bordwell and Thompson name both time and space as story elements, while Rimmon-Kenan only has time. Medium specificity is the cause of this: Bordwell and Thompson discuss movies, and Rimmon-Kenan writing. The former note: 'In some media, a narrative might emphasize only causality and time. Many anecdotes do not specify where action takes place. In film narratives, however, **space** is usually an important factor' (67). Boris Uspensky (1973, first published in 1970) affirms that space is more firmly established in images, and time in writing (76). We will discuss comic stories

when we have established our conception of comics. Because our conception of story must transcend media-boundaries, we will use the definition of Bordwell and Thompson. Notice that a story is not entirely presented in a text; it is *inferred* from a text. The obvious example of the detective story can clarify this. The text presents us with several events: the detective gathers evidence and solves the crime. The entire story, however, also includes the crime itself. The text presents a selection of events, from which the reader must construct the story. Some texts require much speculation, others little.

A storytelling text is a narrative. This does not mean that story equals narrative. A narrative also includes *nondiegetic elements*. We established that a story infers a certain time and space. The result is the 'story-reality', in which the events take place: diegetic space and time. However, texts often contain elements that do not belong in diegetic space and time, which we call nondiegetic. Nondiegetic material can have a narrative function by giving a story extra meaning (i.e. background music in film), but it can also be non-narrative and refer to something outside the story (i.e. film credits). The entire narrative is made up of both the text and the story, which do not overlap entirely. Bordwell and Thompson have made a useful scheme to clarify this (62):



David Bordwell has made a more elaborate version of this in *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1986), but for our purposes this scheme will suffice. In this instance, Bordwell and Thompson's term 'plot' can be replaced with our 'text' – they do not have the same meaning though. The difference between story and text roughly corresponds with the Russian Formalist distinction between 'fabula' and 'sjuzet'.

Already in Antiquity, narratives were divided into stories that are told and stories that are shown. The tragic plays were an example of 'shown' stories, the epic poems were examples of the 'told' stories. This distinction has remained an important part of narratology ever since. Throughout the twentieth century, this theory has taken many different twists and turns, of which a full account is impossible. We will therefore present a handful of useful theories to explain our stance in the debate. First of all, *telling should not be confused with narrating*. Texts that 'show' a story are still narratives, and have a narrator. The fact that the word 'narrator' refers to a person should not mislead us – it is a theoretical construct. With

narratives there always is a narrator. Rimmon-Kenan expresses the necessity of a narrator clearly:

> In my view there is always a teller in the tale, at least in the sense that any utterance or record of an utterance presupposes someone who has uttered it. Even when a narrative text presents passages of pure dialogue, manuscript found in a bottle, or forgotten passages of pure dialogue, there is in addition to the speakers or writers of this discourse a 'higher' narratorial authority responsible for 'quoting' the dialogue or 'transcribing' the written words.
>
> Unlike Chatman, I define the narrator minimally, as the agent which at the very least narrates or engages in some activity serving the needs of narration. […] Instead of Chatman's dichotomy between absent and present narrators, I propose to distinguish forms and degrees of perceptibility of the narrator in the text. [88]

Narrating includes much more than the word implies. Rimmon-Kenan shows this when she lists the different relations narrators can have to their narratives:

- They can be either outside (extradiegetic) or inside the story (intradiegetic);
- They can participate in the story (homodiegetic) or not (heterodiegetic);
- They can be overt to the reader or covert;
- They can be reliable or not (94-103).

'Showing' texts have a covert narrator, 'telling' texts an overt one. Both showing and telling are techniques a narrator uses to present a story. Rimmon-Kenan's definition of the narrator is a very broad one, but is the most apt one for cross-media comparisons. Our narrator is close to what Gaudreault would call a 'grand imagier'; a subject responsible for all instances of both showing and telling (Gaudreault calls these 'monstrating' and 'narrating'; for him telling is the same as narrating). The difference between showing in telling is more complicated in film, but our conception allows us to understand that all narrative films have a narrator.

Another important part of narrating is the role of the reader. Edward Branigan (1984) defines narration as 'a dialectical process between narrator and reader *through which* is realized a narrative' (39). Branigan's assertion that the reader and the narrator create meaning together is very important, because reading is not a passive process. This seems obvious, but the reader is clearly passive in the rigid communication studies' model, which posits the author as a sender and the reader as a receiver.

We avoid references to the actual author in our analysis. However, we do need something more than the narrator to describe the way a reader understands a text. A text always presents a set of implicit norms to the reader. For example, physical violence in film has an entirely different meaning in a comedy than in a martial arts flick, or a social drama.

Some things are completely normal in one narrative, and unheard of in another. The viewer will ask him or herself: ‘How does this relate to other texts?‘, ‘How am I supposed to react to this text?’. A reader determines the *purpose* of a text and constructs an implied author from it. This implied author is always a fictional construct because the reader can never gain full insight into the real author’s intentions. The implied author is constructed in order to create expectations beforehand and interpret these afterwards. In this manner, a reader can categorize a Jerry Bruckheimer film as a guilty pleasure, and a David Lynch film as food for thought – which greatly alters the viewing experience. The implied author can coincide with the actual author, but not necessarily. For many people Walt Disney is the implied author of Disney movies today still. So, the implied author is different for every reader. A text can also have several implied authors; a reader can just like *Goldfinger* (1964) as a James Bond-movie, another as an Ian Fleming-adaptation, another admires Guy Hamilton’s directing, another likes Sean Connery’s acting, and another experiences all of the above. Whenever we refer to (the intentions of) an author in this thesis, we are referring to an implied author.

An important element of narration is the way in which dialogue is represented. Rimmon-Kenan lists several forms of speech representation (109-110). For now, we will only use the distinction between direct and indirect speech representation. In writing, direct representation is an (implied) quotation of speech, usually marked as such by quotation marks (‘He said: “This house is big”’). In indirect representation, the speech act is mentioned, and sometimes its content is described too (‘He said it was a big house’). The difference is less relevant in movies, because they usually apply direct speech representation. We can imagine scenes where a voice-over narrator informs us indirectly about a character’s speech (‘They were having a conversation about houses’), but these are exceptions.

Subjective Narration

Our thesis deals with a specific branch of narration called subjective narration. A narrator usually describes the actions of characters as a spectator could. But sometimes we are allowed to read the experiences of a character, and we begin to share that character’s subjectivity to some extent. This can vary from simply showing what a character sees to a direct mental image of associational thinking. There are three categories of subjective narration:

- Speech representation;
- Thought representation;
- Focalization.

The first two categories are variations of the same technique: narration assumes the voice (in a broad sense) of a character. The reader can directly ascribe a part of the text to a character. We already mentioned that speech can be reported directly and indirectly. Direct

representation, like the second part of the sentence ‘He said: “What is happening?” is a short instance of speech representation. Longer instances can make a character the narrator of the majority of the story (Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*) or even the entire story (Homer’s *Iliad*).

Speech representation occurs ‘outside’ a character (*external*), thought representation occurs ‘inside’ a character (*internal*)[1]. In writing, the shift from external to internal is often a matter of a single word. Our previous example becomes thought representation by changing the verb (‘He wondered:’) or adding a reflexive pronoun (‘He asked himself:’). Like speech, thought can be reported directly or indirectly. Because speech representation is less interesting in other media than writing, we will focus on thought representation in our analyses.

Focalization has commonly been defined as ‘who sees’, opposed to the ‘who speaks’ of narration. A story usually takes place within specific diegetic space and time. Whenever this temporal and spatial orientation is the same as that of a character, that character is a focalizer. The reader accompanies the focalizer in the story, so to speak. Focalization does not depend on grammatical cues; whether a story is written in the first or third person is not matter of focalization, but narration. However, there is more to focalization then spatial and temporal orientation. Monika Fludernik (1996) explains that ‘the perceptional metaphor has been a red herring. The crucial issue is that of the presentation of consciousness, and all visual and perceptional parameters are subordinate to this basic parameter’ (346). Temporal and spatial orientation (‘who sees the story space’) are too narrow. Therefore, Rimmon-Kenan broadens it with ‘cognitive, emotive and ideological orientation’ (71). This brings her to list three facets of focalization:

- The perceptual: ‘Perception (sight, hearing, smell, etc.) is determined by two main coordinates: *space* and *time*’ (77, our emphasis).
- The psychological: ‘the psychological facet concerns [the character’s] mind and emotions. […] the determining components are again two: the *cognitive* and the *emotive* orientation of the focalizer towards the focalized’ (79, our emphasis).
- The ideological: This is very reliant on ‘intuitive understanding’, according to Uspensky. He sums it up as this question: ‘whose point of view does the author assume when he evaluates and perceives ideologically the world which he describes’ (8).

All the facets of character focalization can be used together or independently, and their use can change throughout the story. Scenes with focalization may be followed by one without it, or with another focalising character. Combined with all the possibilities of thought and speech representation, the scope of subjective narration is enormous.

[1] Some researchers use ‘internal’ and ‘external’ to refer to the overall story. We use the terms intra- and extradiegetic for this. Internal and external always refers to characters in this thesis.

The above discussion of speech & thought representation and focalization is based mainly on literary theory. It is no problem to expand our conclusions on speech and thought to include words in film. But focalisation in film requires some extra attention, because films are a visual medium. Film images are commonly focalised. Point-of-view shots (discussed in chapter 2), in which the viewer literally adopts the spatial orientation of a character seem the ultimate example of it. However, focalization is not restricted to these point-of-view shots. A shot from a neutral (non-character) angle can still have elements originating from character experience. Branigan (1984) notes that 'the look of the viewer is not equivalent to that of the camera[2]. […] Thus we may very well see space from a neutral angle while simultaneously holding an aspect of that space – say, colour – apart from the image and attributing it to a character' (96). A classic scene is that of a thirsty man seeing an oasis in a desert. As he tries to dive in the water, the fata morgana disappears, and he lands in the sand. A viewer sees both the man and the oasis from a neutral angle, but still understands that the image of the oasis originates from the man's mind. Branigan also distinguishes between external and internal focalisation. Exernal focalisation equals Rimmon-Kenan's first facet (spatial and temporal orientation). Branigan continues that '[i]nternal focalization is more fully private and subjective […]. No character can witness these experiences in another character' (103). This equals Rimmon-Kenan's second and third facet (psychological and ideological).

It is important not to anthropomorphise subjective narration too much. It is a technique of distributing story knowledge to a reader. A reader must be able to recognize a scene as subjective narration for it to work. Therefore, we require thorough descriptions of the way a text hints at subjective narration, and how a reader recognizes and understands this. The focus is not on the characters (who are simply constructs) but on the process of reading.

Comics

To properly discuss comics, we need to define them first. Of course, there have been useful earlier comic studies, and, in trying to define the formal traits of comics, we will turn to these theories. As with most media, scholars are still in debate regarding the actual characteristics of comics. Generally, the consensus is that there are two important elements by which we can define them. The first is the combination of both word and image. Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons (2001) argue that studies on this topic should investigate whether this makes comics a hybrid medium or a language in its own right [xviii]. The primacy of either word or image is, among other things, discussed in their reader.

Other scholars, however, define comics by the fact that *images are placed in a spatial sequence*. Christian Metz (1974) actually puts it clearly and shortly: 'Yet why must it

[2] Comics obviously do not have a camera, but Branigan uses the camera as a metaphor for the viewers' perception angle in diegetic space.

be that, by some strange correlation, two juxtaposed [images] must tell something? Going from one image to two images, is to go from image to language' (46)[3]. In this definition, comics always consist of at least two distinct images in a deliberate combination. Comic images are arranged spatially, unlike the temporally arranged images of film. A film also consists of images, projected so fast that the human eye sees them as an uninterrupted stream. Comic images remain still; a reader has to infer the movement or state-change between the images. The concept of montage (as a synonym for editing, and not strictly in Eisenstein's conception) lies at the very heart of comics. Thierry Groensteen (1999) is a staunch proponent of this view, when he writes 'l'élément central de toute bande dessinée […] est bien la *solidarité iconique*' (21). The American term 'sequential art', first coined by Will Eisner, is a common abbreviation for the definition, and sometimes even proposed as a new name for comics. Focusing on the sequential nature of comics can result in a broad inclusion of examples from history, such as the Bayeux Tapestry and Egyptian painting, as in Scott McCloud (1994, 13-14).

Both approaches to comics have been used together or independently, and led to interesting results. When we take one of the two views as a strict definition, it is important to note what it excludes. When insisting that comics consist of words and images, sequences of images without words cannot be considered proper comics. Groensteen names a number of important mute contributions to comic history to refute this (18). On the other hand, in regarding sequence as the essential element to a comic, single panel compositions, such as political cartoons, are not real comics. Notice that these are included by the first definition, as they normally include a verbal element. As McCloud notes, such cartoons are usually regarded as comics on the basis of their shared visual conventions (20-21).

Some scholars hold that defining comics' specific features is not that important. In his discussion of *Traces en Cases* (Marion, 1993), Jan Baetens (2001) writes that Philippe Marion 'doesn't try to isolate the comic book's intrinsic characteristics. For Marion, the specificity of the medium has less to do with a fixed set of features used exclusively in comics, than with a larger set of elements it shares with other media' (146). In the present thesis, however, describing comics' intrinsic features is very important. Comparing media is our very topic, so it is essential to see what separates comics from their cousin, animation, which is a sub-genre of film. Comparisons always require a clear definition. For this research, comics are defined as images in spatial sequence. When opposing comics to other media, this approach offers the most clear-cut distinctions. Of course, this is not a study of the exact features of the comic book medium. Elements that are simply dominant in comics, but not defining, like the combination of words and image will surely have our attention. Conventions of subjective narration that are shared with other media interest us as

[3] Unfortunately, Metz's description is based on a dismissal of photo-comics – but that does not make it less striking.

well. Another feature of comics that is dominant, but not defining, is their appearance: they are usually printed on paper, in newspapers, magazines or albums. Not-printed comics do exist; digital comics, for example, have become a cheap and easily distributable (through the Internet) form of expression for young artists.

Now that our understanding of both comics and narration has been explained, we can discuss narratives in comics. Uspensky briefly discusses sequences of Christian pictorial art, and his remarks are surprisingly relevant to comics: 'when temporal expression is a part of a pictorial work of art – for example, in a series of pictures where the same figures participate in a left-to-right sequence – there is much greater freedom (more than in other forms of art) in our temporal ordering of it' (77-78). Gérard Genette (1980) makes a very similar comment, and notices that comics 'lend themselves to, and even invite a kind of global and synchronic look – or at least a look whose direction is no longer determined by the sequence of the images' (34). Uspensky even concludes that time is not necessary in such narratives, which is a bridge too far for us. However, the fact that a reader may choose different paths through a comic narrative is an interesting point. A reader's eye may easily slip to the bottom of the page for the conclusion of a scene. But alternate pathways (other than left to right) can also be exploited to create new meaning on purpose. Notice that alternate pathways are a narrative strategy in our definition[4].

The art of guiding the reader is well-developed by comic artists. For Groensteen, the entire set of relations between images is the very system of comics. He draws our attention to both the standard linear relations ('arthrologie restreinte') and far-reaching, translinear relations ('arthrologie génerale' 25-27). Restrained arthrology occurs in simple left to right-reading, general arthrology can go in any direction – and the images do not have to be next to each other, or even on the same page. The different relations between the images give an entirely unique dynamic to the spatial element of the comic narrative. Although this makes space the dominant element in comic narrativity, time cannot be removed entirely. As E.M. Forster (1963) says, our desire to read narratives stems from 'nothing […] but a primeval curiosity' (45) – we want to know what happens next. Time is simply a prerequisite for stories in any medium. Strictly non-narrative comics are rare, but certainly exist. Instructional comics are common in manuals in Japan. Some humorous comics, like several from Gotlib's series (for example *Rubrique-à-brac*; 1970 – 1974) tell no story either.

Comics usually have several implied authors; a reader can have distinct conceptions of both the work of the author and the penciller. However, there is still a single narrator governing all instances of writing, drawing, inking, colouring and even lettering. This situation is similar to film, which is necessarily made by a multitude of implied authors (actors, directors etc.) as well. Still, like every story, films have a single narrator.

[4] They are non-narrative for Pascal Lefèvre (2000).

In both *Formes et politique de la bande dessinée* (1998) and the aforementioned *A New Theory of Graphic Enunciation*, Baetens discusses how Marion takes Gaudreault's aforementioned distinction between narration and monstration, and then distinguishes between monstration and 'graphiation'. Graphiation is the 'graphic trace or index of the artist' (quoted in Baetens 2001, 149). Baetens adds that this distinction introduces 'elements that are absolutely unique in the comics strip code, that is, elements which are neither narrated nor shown ('monstrated') but drawn ('graphiated')' (149). This handwriting of the author does not refer to the story, but to the penciller (1998, 37). Comic readers can often recognize the drawings of different artists. Clearly then, graphiation is a trait of the *implied author*. A reader may prefer a certain implied author, or have certain expectations of a work that is made by an implied author he or she already knows. Graphiation can also become a narrative device in several ways, and we will come to its application in subjective narration later. In other instances, the distinction between monstrating and graphiating is not particularly useful to us. Our conception of comics never states that the images must be drawn. The distinction could very well apply to animation, which is drawn as well.

The topic of 'drawn' and 'real' images requires more elaboration, especially in the light of the difference between film and comics. Many people will describe comics as 'drawn images', which excludes photos and borderline cases like computer-generated art. Such descriptions of comics take elements of drawing as integral parts of the comics medium. We will not follow in this trend, because it is wrong to mistake the dominant form of content in a medium for a medium characteristic[5]. Similarly, many theories of film are heavily based on a conception of film as a live-action medium, while film as a medium must surely include animation. We feel that the distinction between photos and drawings is becoming more meaningless every day; for us, they are both just images. Another cause of the confusion is that animation, just like the aforementioned cartoon[6], shares many visual conventions with comics – just like photo-comics share some of the conventions usually associated with movies. Of course, we cannot totally ignore the fact that a stylistic trait (drawing) is dominant in one medium, and it will be interesting to speculate on why such a trait is more successful.

With our main subject introduced, we can turn to the some of the other terms in our main question. The terms 'film' and 'writing' have been chosen in favour of the more evaluative 'cinema' and 'literature'. The latter both tend to refer to a particular category; the category of high-quality works, or art. Much of the academic interest in both media using these terms has focused on works with high artistic value, while our research has a more value-free approach. The equivalent evaluative term to cinema and literature in English is

[5] Strictly speaking, photo albums are perhaps the most common (unpublished) form of comics by our definition.

[6] Notice that animated movies are sometimes referred to as cartoons as well, as are comics. In this thesis, cartoons are always single panel compositions.

'graphic novel', which is not used here for similar reasons[7]. Of course, many interesting examples of subjectivity will come from comics with high artistic merit, but non-canonical works will be analysed as well.

Methodology

Much of the already existing theory on comics discusses formal aspects of the medium. On the basis of these analyses we choose our primary works, the examples from comics. These examples will show subjective narration typical of comics, which we can compare to film and writing. We will see how comic book subjective narration is different, and whether we need new theories to understand it. Other, content based studies of comics have usually focused on comic book history, distinct artists or comics' place in popular culture. Such works are of little use here.

We already mentioned that much of comic book theory has taken a strictly formal stance in describing comics as a medium, apart from its content. This thesis has a double approach in looking at both medium and content. The specific traits of one medium (comics) are compared to other media based on a similar form of content (subjective narration). This means we will be able to draw conclusions about subjective narration and comics. By making cross-media comparisons, we hope to get a better understanding of both. The fact that this thesis looks for typical features does not mean that it will look only at stylistic techniques of subjective narration that are *only* possible in comics. Some techniques are simply very common in comics or typically associated with the medium. In such cases, these techniques will definitely be mentioned, and we will ask why they are associated commonly with comics. It is difficult to maintain that a technique is only possible in comics, but it will be fruitful to see which techniques are preferred in comics.

Both content and formal characteristics will thus be under scrutiny; analysing the similar content will help us understand the differences between the media, as well as the nature of subjective narration. Uspensky has a similar approach when he tries 'envisioning a general theory of composition studying the laws which govern the structural organization of the artistic text, and which are applicable to various arts' (5). According to Branigan

[7] Notice that in English, the label of 'graphic novel' has more emancipatory importance than 'cinema' and 'literature' do. It is a way of insisting that comics with the same artistic value as novels do exist. The term 'comics' explicitly refers to the medium's roots in short funnies, and is narrow at best concerning content. Many feel the term should be abolished as it affirms the infantile reputation of the medium. 'Sequential art' was already mentioned as a proposed alternative, but is simply not common enough to be used for this thesis. The Japanese 'manga' is even more judgemental; it roughly means 'irresponsible pictures'. The French 'bande dessinée' and the similar Dutch 'strip' are stylistically out-dated, referring to the time when comics where always linear strips or bands of pictures. The Italian 'fumetti' is named after a typical (but not inherent) device of comics: the speaking balloon.

> Subjective narration cannot be defined with respect to purely formal properties of film (focus, shot, etc.) but, rather, must be defined as a certain kind of statement *about* narrative (the conditions under which is told perceived and known) and these statements may assume different forms within and across media. (81)

Subjectivity in both writing and film is a usually a topic in narratology, the study of narratives. This thesis will therefore draw heavily from narratological studies on both film and writing. Because narratology is quite an academic battlefield, this thesis had to pick a side. Our conception of narrative as a series of events in time and space is a classic, structuralist approach to narratology. It works with arbitrary standards and has been criticised as holistic, or even metaphysical. Linguistics presents another approach, but it is too focused on writing for comparing media. Ann Banfield's (1982) remark that '[n]arrative style is thus the product of the interaction of grammar and writing' (253) is diametrically opposed to our understanding. Other scholars treat images just like words, in order be able to apply linguistic theories to them – which feels forced and unnecessary to us. Conclusions drawn by linguistics can still prove useful in discussions on the nature of narrators, but we will not apply linguistic methods to understand words without the images – or treat images as language. Variations on structuralist classifications are still the most practical to understand comics. Later turns taken in post-structuralism have not offered satisfying replacements for this. Monika Fludernik's natural narratology (1996), which is based on experience instead of causality is interesting, but still too linguistically based as well.

Structuralism is a broad approach. The specific structuralistic branch of semiotics has been adopted by some comic researchers. We, however, will not apply the specific semiotic terminology of images and language. Images and words (language) are strictly separate for us. Some observations from this field can still be useful, and obviously semiotics will have its influence through some of the studies used. However, our present thesis is no analysis of signifiers and semes. Some comic studies take a strict semiotic approach to describe elements within images, such as speech balloons. Groensteen, however, proposes a study of the overall arthrology, and denounces semiotics (8).

Many researchers in the field of cultural studies have turned to psychoanalytically influenced methods over the last decade. A study of subjectivity particularly seems a good topic for such an approach. Our intention is to be descriptive rather than interpretative, however. Subjective narration in comics needs to be described and understood, before we can analyse any psychological ramifications. Such an angle would be interesting for a follow-up of this study, of course. The same goes for a gender or socio-political approach.

It might surprise some readers that writing and film were chosen here to be comics' counterparts. Often comics are regarded as a hybrid medium between painting and writing, a view which surely has its merits. Subjective narration however, requires a story. Although a

painting can give rich information about a state or situation, it is hardly ever considered a narrative. When paintings are put in sequence to create a narrative (such as William Hogarth's series, or Giotto's frescos) they tend to approach comics, at least when sequentiality is considered comics' defining feature. Therefore, comics closest relatives in storytelling, writing and film, will be our centre of attention.

Justification

The aim of this thesis is firstly to explore new fields in comic theory. Scholarly interest in comics has been sparse. As mentioned before, much of it deals with either strictly formal aspects (closure, borders) or cultural aspects (history, artists). Thematic-based research is rare and still needs to be done. Subjective narration has been, and still is, a topic of much debate in other media. It raises important questions about the nature of the characters and the involvement of the readers, and can thus help us understand comic book narrativity. As such, it should help us understand the phenomenon of subjective narration in general as well. Branigan and Uspensky were already quoted to show that an interdisciplinary approach to subjectivity and comparing different media can yield interesting results.

The relative immaturity of comic scholarship is characterised by the fact that McCloud's rather practical *Understanding Comics* and even Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985) are frequently the starting point for theoretical discussions, especially in America. While both are interesting and useful, neither is intended as an academic work. France and Belgium have a somewhat richer tradition, with studies from contemporary scholars like Baetens and Groensteen. Much of it is still pioneering work, however; many subjects need to be introduced in first-time analysis, which prevents thorough analysis of a single topic. This thesis is an attempt to investigate deeper into a particular subject, and will hopefully be a fruitful ground for further discussion.

Perhaps it is the reputation of comics as a pulp, or at best immature medium in some countries, which has prevented many academic forays into the field. With the advent of media and culture studies, the notion that popular culture is a field worthy of research has gained momentum. Furthermore, the interest in the artistic merit of comics has increased since the 1980s, which saw literary awards for Art Spiegelman and Enki Bilal. Other media show their comic influences more openly, which is particularly obvious in film, where we have seen several big budget superhero movies in America, but also in France, where live-action movies were made out of comics as diverse as *Astérix* and the works of Bilal. In Japan, comics and films have been close relatives for a long time, with many comics having animation counterparts and vice versa. Both anime and manga[8] have become increasingly popular in both Europe and America over the last decade, further strengthening comics'

[8] Japanese popular culture has retained a lot of its terminology in the West. Anime refers to Japanese animation and manga to Japanese comics. These terms will be used in this thesis as well.

presence in the cultural landscape. As comics thus become both more accepted artistically and integrated next to other media culturally, their significance is ever more clear, as well as the need for an interdisciplinary approach to study them.

Framework

This thesis will have two chapters. In chapter 1, subjective narration will be discussed in the light of the combination of word and image. This chapter will have the *bottom-up* approach; which means we will look at the individual elements that make up the images. We will dissect the image into small parts and analyse their significance. These are comics' codes. The way word and image can work together, or oppose each other to create character narration will be our concern. The elaborate way letters have been integrated into images and vice versa will offer interesting food for thought. We will also discuss facets of the way characters and their emotions are presented, as long as these occur in a single image. This subject is very relevant in our discussion of word and image, because it here we will encounter instances of images moving towards words. As stated before, most of these scenes are not *only* possible in comics, but could be achieved in cartoons, animation or painting as well. They have been developed to extremes in comics and are strongly associated with the medium, though. This chapter will have a short intermediary conclusion.

Chapter 2 will focus on instances of character narration achieved by transitions from one image to another. A *top-down* approach is applied here; we will look at the overall structure and how its elements work together. For this, we will consider both Groensteens general and restrained arthrology. This includes changes of our perception angle, colour and drawing style between the images, but also frames and lay-out. There will be more focus on whether the comics medium really is unique in its subjective narration. The results of both sections will be evaluated in the conclusion of the thesis. The actual rewards of this thesis' investigation will be discussed here, as well as the need for new ways of understanding subjective narration in comics.

Both sections will be illustrated by examples from various comic books. Five books will have our main interest:

- *Gaston 13: Lagaffe Mérite des Baffes* (1979) by André Franquin
- *Fantastic Four* 265 and 271 (1st series, 1984) by John Byrne
- *L'Ascension du haut mal* album 1 (1996) by David B.
- *No. 5* album 2 (2003; containing chapters 5 – 8; published in Japan in 2000) by Taiyo Matsumoto
- *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (2000) by Chris Ware

This selection is not historical – all five are rather recent books. It is an attempt at an international corpus including a wide array of styles and genres. The Belgian André Franquin (1924 – 1997) was one of the world's most renowned comic artists. During an acclaimed and

important run on the *Spirou et Fantasio* series (1946 – 1968), he created the character Gaston, who would get his own series (1960 – 1996). All albums in this series consist of mostly one or two-page jokes about office life, revolving around the clumsy and lazy Gaston. The narratives here are very straightforward and often follow a basic formula, in which a state of balance is disrupted for comical effect. Sometimes humour takes precedence over narrative. It will be interesting to see how subjective narration works in humorous shorts. Franquin's work is of particular interest because of his eagerness to experiment and his outrageous style.

Superhero comics usually feature conventional hero-narratives, which has invited many comparisons with traditional mythological narratives[9]. The genre dominates mainstream in America. *Fantastic Four* is a long-running series about four heroes, who received superhuman abilities after being exposed to cosmic radiation. It was created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in 1961 and, together with titles like *Spiderman*, was responsible for a renewed interest in the superhero genre. Many other artists worked on the adventures of the team afterwards, including the American John Byrne (1950) from 1981 until 1986. Byrne had a very memorable run on the title as both writer and penciller. While Byrne remained very close to the formula of the genre's stories, he experimented with the way he could tell them. Byrne never broke the superhero mould like Frank Miller or Alan Moore did around the same time (respectively in *The Dark Knight Returns*; 1986, and *Watchmen*; 1987), but his work in *Fantastic Four* defines the genre at its peak. These two issues in particular have unique scenes of subjective narration.

French David B. (short for Beauchard; 1959) gained international recognition for the *L'Ascenscion du haut-mal* series (1996 – 2000). It consists of five autobiographical books in which the author recounts the childhood of his autistic brother and himself. Autobiographical comics have gotten more attention in both America and Europe of late. Of course, this genre is very interesting, because it usually features extensive subjective narration. Also, our definition allows autobiographies as stories. Though artists like Marjane Satrapi, Craig Thompson and Joe Sacco have had somewhat more coverage, David B.'s lush, metaphoric imagery makes him the most interesting for us.

Taiyo Matsumoto (1967) represents Japan's comics in this thesis. Matsumoto is not one of manga's biggest names, but he does represent an interesting trend in his attempts at creating an 'international' style, from the best elements of American, European and Japanese comics[10]. *No. 5* is a series set in a post apocalyptic future, focussing on a peace-

[9] *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology* (1994) by Bruce Reynolds and *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why* (2002) by Geoff Klock both have this approach.

[10] Quoted in *Manga: Sixty years of Japanese comics* (Paul Gravett; 2004), he says: 'American comics are powerful and cool. European comics seem very intellectual. And Japanese comics are very light-hearted. If you could combine the best of all three, you could create some really tremendous work'

keeping team called the Rainbow Council. The protagonist, No. 5 (all members have numbers for names), has gone rogue from the team and is hunted by the rest. The story's main events are clear, but it also features many ambiguous and open scenes. The book has manga's typical playfulness and coding, coupled with a self-conscious drawing style, which make it an essential addition to our line-up.

American Chris Ware (1967) is probably one of the most ambitious comic creators of the moment. Phillipe Sohet (2001) remarks of comic artist Andreas that 'his productions can be read as a reflection on the graphic novel, its reader, and the act of reading' (175), and we could very well say the same of Chris Ware. The reading act itself is exposed, or even thoroughly disrupted in his works. The collection of short comics in *Quimby the Mouse* (2003) is far too metatextual for our purposes. And, although *Jimmy Corrigan* has a clear narrative structure, it probably strays the farthest of all our examples from a traditional narrative It tells the story of Jimmy, a lonely and shy man who goes to visit his father for the first time. There is much focus on design, and metatextual play is at least as important as the story. Ware takes comics to their limits – and subjective narration as well.

(162).

Chapter 1: Word and image

Introduction

According to Baetens (1998), the balance between word and image in comics can be studied in two ways. The first is by looking at 'les codes sémiotiques mêmes, ici linguistique, là iconique, et sur leur respectifs traits déterminants' (47). The second approach searches for the way word and image interact, and rejects the idea that one element is inferior to the other. This approach will be ours in this chapter as well, as we study narrative elements that exist in the fusion of word and image.

We mentioned that sound can be presented directly within quotation marks, or indirectly within a structuring sentence in writing, which is an instance of the distinction between showing and telling. Notice that even direct presentations of sound in writing (and comics) are never as direct as sound in movies; they are necessarily mediated into written language. For a discussion of both direct and indirect sound, we make distinguish between dialogue and other sounds. In film, 'telling' any sound indirectly is somewhat odd. It requires a voice-over to tell the audience a conversation took place or a sound was heard. Both dialogue and other sounds are therefore mostly presented directly in film. In writing, dialogue is presented commonly both directly and indirectly. Other sounds are usually presented indirectly; the awkward alternative is using sound-mimicking onomatopoeia (They are more common in children's books).

Comics cannot produce real sound, and revert to representing sound in written language. Unlike writing, dialogue and other sounds are almost always presented directly. For dialogue, this is usually done in the speech balloon; an oval-shaped white symbol containing words. We should not underestimate the significance of the speech balloon as a formal device in comics. Catherine Khordoc (2001) calls it 'one of the traits unique to comics, [which] marks the intersection between image and word' (156). She also explains how the balloon always consists of two parts: the balloon itself, which is a symbol, and the tail, which connects it to a character (161). Groensteen remarks about balloon-dialogue 'que la parole, en bande dessinée, est plus proche de la parole au cinéma que du texte littéraire (même dialogue)' (151). Both comics and film hardly ever present dialogue indirectly – while writing often does. Now, whether speech balloons are more akin to film than to writing is a debate for another time. But it is certain that in comics dialogue, visual signs (balloons) have replaced the need for structuring sentences like 'he said:'. Comics that still employ such structuring sentences are regarded as out-dated. They require a heavy verbal element, which takes words and image further apart, because long sentences require more space in separate sections. Hergé even declared that some of his early works, consisting of images

with words written beneath, were not really comics (quoted in Peeters 1998, 118). Words are now commonly superimposed over or even integrated into the image, instead of remaining apart from it. This is also true for the reproduction of other sounds in comics, which is nothing like either writing or film. Sound-mimicking onomatopoeia may seem awkward in writing, in comics they have become one of the most recognized parts of the medium's vocabulary[11]. To a seasoned comics' reader, a story might seem remarkably mute when onomatopoeia are omitted, as Alan Moore and David Lloyd did in *V for Vendetta* (1990). We will now turn our attention to the use of 'comics' sound' in subjective narration.

Thought clouds

The shift from direct speech to direct thought is often remarkably small. Direct thought shows us the thoughts of a character as they supposedly occur, and we argue that this technique is derived from direct dialogue in writing, films and comics. We already discussed how direct speech in writing consists of a sentence placed within quotation marks, usually with a structuring sentence making clear that this is being said, by whom and possibly also how. With direct thought, the structure is similar, and only the verb has to change; the most common is 'thinking' instead of 'speaking'. The sentence between the quotation marks is a short instance of either direct thought or speech (which one is not always clear). For a long time, writing always used direct speech: characters thought out loud, like monologues in plays. Only later did writers turn to direct thought. In film, the equivalent technique for direct thought is a scene in which a character is obviously not saying anything (his or her mouth is closed), but we can still hear the character's voice, telling his or her thoughts directly. The closed mouth indicates the stray from normal dialogue – but this technique is hardly popular.

In comics, direct thought is usually achieved by showing the character's words not in a regular speech balloon, but in a cloud shaped balloon. The speaking balloons and thought clouds have become so common and widely accepted in comics (thought clouds are regularly used in American, European and Japanese comics) that one almost forgets how coded they actually are. Superimposing words over images to denote sound is always a violation of diegetic space (words are floating in the air) and relies heavily on conventions a reader needs to be familiar with. The representation of thought is derived from the representation of dialogue; the cloud shaped balloon is an adaptation of the speech balloon. A regular comics' reader recognizes the shift from a speech balloon to a thought cloud just like a change from the verb 'speaking' to 'thinking'.

The reason that direct thought is modelled after direct speech is because the former technique is based on the assertion that human thought takes the form of words. Or, even stronger: direct thought projects structures of speech and language on thought. This

[11] Joost Pollmann offers an interesting discussion of onomatopoeia in 'Shaping sound in comics' (2001) in the *International Journal of Comic Art*, vol. 3, nr. 1 (9-21).

explains why the technique is applied more often in writing than in film: *everything* is necessarily expressed in written language in the former medium, so it is not odd that thought gets the same treatment. Film also has the option of presenting thought in its images. Comics however, which also have images, still use direct thought more commonly than movies; this is obvious from the global usage and recognition of the thought balloon. Comics are only visual, while film has sound as well. Language in film is usually presented in sound, rather than in the visual. Besides the fact that real sound is a more realistic presentation, a reader can take his or her own time to read words in writing. A film dictates its own reading time. It is therefore not common to make written words an important part of a movie; narratively significant written letters for example, are usually read out loud by characters as well as being shown, to make sure the reader does not miss the written message. Comics simply have no sound and must use written language. This is no problem, because a reader can determine his or her own reading speed. So, the fact that written language is far more important in comics than in film explains at least partly why direct thought is more common in the former (thought clouds) than in the latter (voice-over).

So, the lack of sound forces comics to some extent to include written language. But, by integrating written language into the image, comics have pushed the limits between words and image further than writing ever could. There are three elements that set written language in comics apart. First, writing is usually printed in a standardized typeface, while most comics are handwritten. This seeming reduction of the readability has been turned into a strength throughout comic book history. Using different handwritings for utterances by certain characters can replace writing's adjectives and film's voice. Second, the very simple fact that the size of the written words can be changed can be used for diverse effects. Third, colour can be applied to denote the mood of a character. In comics, the very shape of language becomes an object of play and irony, instead of its grammar and vocabulary. Armed with this great expressive potential artists have blurred the distinctions between images and language in the speech balloon[12].

The content of the balloon is not restricted to writing. Somewhere in the history of the speech balloon, authors must have realised that some of the written language in balloons resembled images already so much, that really placing images in the balloon was not that farfetched. The most recognized form of images within the speech balloon is used comically in censoring heavily cursing characters; their speech balloons are filled with skulls, explosions, thunderclouds and stars. These are usually just standardized symbols, which are actually not too distinct from the language normally found in speech balloons. However, more serious adaptations were invented for images in balloons as an effort to cut back on the usage of words. Actual representational images (not symbols) now regularly appear in

[12] Outside the balloon, comics have even more options in transforming written language at their disposal, but these have little to do with subjective narration.

speech balloons and thought clouds. Dutch artist Erik Kriek is an extreme exponent of this development; he completely stopped using written language in his *Gutsman* comics (1998 – present) in favour of images within the different balloons. With an image inside an image – a representation of a representation – the balloon actually becomes a new frame. Here the discussion becomes more about arthrology, and will therefore continue in the next chapter.

Word boxes

Although the thought balloon is a commonly accepted stylistic feature, it has also gone out of fashion in some circles over the past decade. Some artists seemingly felt the technique was too contrived or too conventional[13], and searched for alternatives. Balloons and onomatopoeia are not the only applications of written language. Many comic books apply angular boxes either superimposed over an image or within a frame of its own filled with words as well. Traditionally, these word boxes[14] mark a shift to words not attributed to a character, but to an extradiegetic narrator. In her examination of *Astérix*, for example, Khordoc notes word boxes always contain (extradiegetic) narrator's comments (163; Note that she calls word boxes a specific type of balloons). This makes sense, because word boxes have no tail connecting them to a character. The words in these boxes offer an explanation of the action in the images, or rather of the connections the reader should make between the images. Thus, the messages are often short connective words telling the reader that time has passed or to which location the story has turned, like 'Later on…' or 'Meanwhile, in…'. When such word boxes contain more words and occupy an entire frame, they interrupt the story totally to inform the reader of events for which there was no place in the images[15]. One could argue that the comic itself turns into writing at such points. Mention has already been made of the fact that overly verbose comics became regarded as outdated. Many artists felt they should let their drawings speak for themselves, instead of constantly commenting on them. But as the role of the extradiegetic narrator was reduced, American comic book artists in particular began using the word boxes for direct thought and speech. Nowadays, this use is widespread.

The stylistic function of direct thought and speech in the word box is significantly different from that of the thought balloon. The word box is less integrated in diegetic space, and has historically always been home to comments by the extradiegetic narrator. Note that the word box is usually placed in the upper left corner of the image, lined with the frame,

[13] Usage of the thought cloud has been parodied in several comics, notably in Grant Morrison and Chris Weston's notoriously self-conscious *The Filth* (2003) in which the reader sees a character's thought clouds for several pages, until he reveals he has 'a consciousness so focused and disciplined, it can actually manifest words in a *cloud* above my head. That's right, visible thought.' (230)

[14] They are usually referred to as text boxes, but our conception of 'text' might cause confusion.

[15] Jacques Martin's *Alex* series (1948 – current; Martin stopped in 1990) is a good example of heavy use of extradiegetic narration.

while balloons are placed in a location convenient for the image. Direct thought in a thought cloud is always simultaneous; the narrator allows us a glimpse of a character's thoughts. However, inside a word box direct thought usually takes a more retrospective mood, as if it were narrated after the events portrayed. It has already been noted that direct thought was rather rare in movies. The equivalent of word box comments in film, retrospective comments in voice-over, is more common. We shall call it retrospective thought. Retrospective thought is usually not synchronous to the action and is more restrained in its graphic applications.

Subjective use of word and image

David B.'s *l'Ascension du haut mal* features a good example of the functional difference between word boxes and thought clouds. Most of the comic's images are accompanied by word boxes, in which an older narrator looks back on his youth. The sentences are all in the first person and in the present tense, but the vocabulary and distance in the sentences clearly indicates these comments are not synchronous to the action. It is a clear example of retrospective thought. In the fifth panel of page 33 (figure 1) we see the main characters, two brothers, sitting on a table. They have agreed the older brother will write a war story, while the younger brother (the younger version of the narrator) will draw pictures for it. The accompanying word box reads: 'Il est l'aîné, je lui fait confiance. Il écrit et je dessine des massacres'. In the picture, we see the younger brother with a thought cloud[16] over his head, reading: 'BOUM! Les boulets déchiquètent les hussards…'. The first comment is more an explanation of the image, while the second is a direct representation of the young David's thoughts while he is drawing. We can easily imagine him drawing the explosions and thinking 'BOUM!'. The word boxes houses comments of an extradiegetic, and the thought cloud of an intradiegetic narrator here (both are homodiegetic).

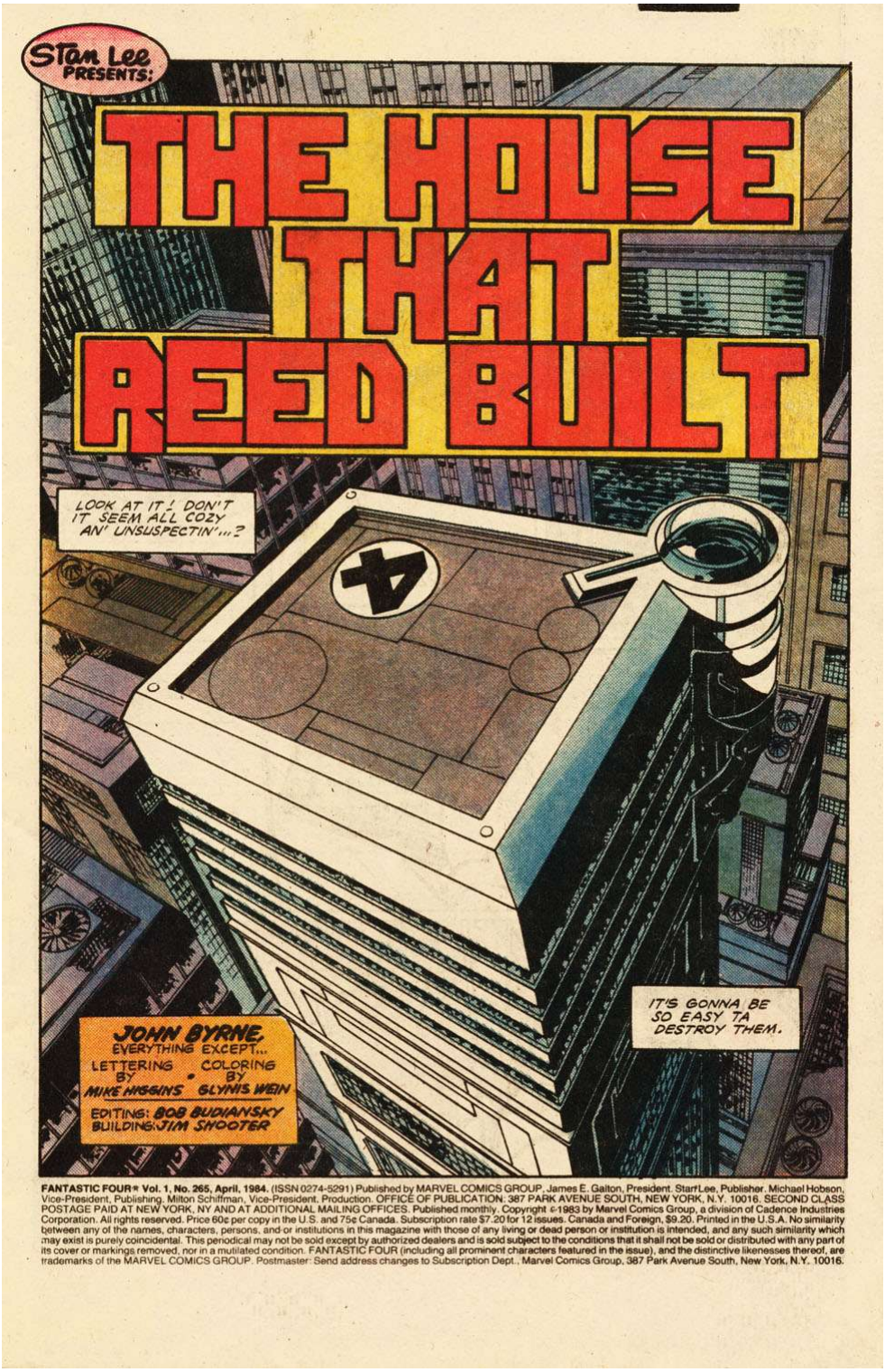
[16] Note that this thought cloud has an oval shape like a speech balloon, not cloud shaped. We can still easily see it is a thought cloud though, because it has does not have a typical speaking cloud's tail, but a thought cloud's series of circles connecting it to the character's head. Such variations on the form of a thought cloud are not unusual at all, and can be regarded as a personal touch of the implied author.

Figure 1: *L'Ascension du haut mal* vol. 1 page 33

However, the word box surely does not *necessarily* contain extradiegetic comments. This is merely a convention, and breaking conventions is one of art's traditions. In the first 11 pages of the *Fantastic Four* story (figures 2-12), Byrne tells us how the Trapster tries to break into the heroes' headquarters. Let us look at the first three pages for now. Most images are accompanied by white word boxes. The position of the arms is one of the hints that allow us to infer that the images are from a character's perceptual point of view. The word boxes are not always placed neatly in the upper left corner, where one would expect. The boxed words in the first three panels on page 3 reads '**Down!**', 'Now gotta eighty-six [dispose of] these **balloons** before some passin' super-do-gooder sees 'em an' comes to investigate.', 'There now…', 'Whassat?' and 'Blast, some kind of security eye-ball, I bet. Must be **new**. Wasn't here last time'. The comments here are definitely not retrospective. The very opposite is true: the words presented here are an attempt at a naturalistic and simultaneous representation of the thought process. Notice how the 'There now…' comment gets interrupted by the surprise over the security system. In his next comment, 'Whassat?', the pasting of the words together conveys the speeding up of his thoughts in a stream-of-consciousness-like way. The words are also written in popular dialect, as the 'eighty-six' comment makes clear. On these pages, the reader has to establish the link between the comments and the images; the word boxes have no tails pointing to a particular character. The relation is not ambiguous however, the comments on the landing and the gun make obvious that the perceptual point of view accords with the verbal first person.

On page 4, the narration shifts both verbally and perceptually to another 'character', the headquarters' security system. Then, on page 5, the character we have been following the first three pages is finally named and visualised by this system: it is the Trapster, a classic Fantastic Four foe (readers familiar with the substantial Fantastic Four mythology might have recognised the character earlier because of his trademark 'paste-gun'). In the first panel of page 8, the Trapster is hit with the electrical charge of a secured lock. Here, the word box takes another colour (orange) and the letters inside are much larger and bolder than before. These devices magnify the effect of the exclamation. The word itself; 'YEOW!', is another attempt at being as direct as possible. In the first panel of page 11, the Trapster makes his first comment in a speech balloon (which does have a tail, pointing to the centre of the image), affirming that the other comments were really internal (and not muttered by the Trapster to himself).

Beginning on page 4, the Trapster's images are interchanged with images we can not attribute to him. These images clearly have another perceptual point of view, since we see the Trapster from another position, but we will discuss the shift in visuals in the second chapter. Relevant now is that these images are also accompanied by word boxes, and the words there can also no longer be attributed to the Trapster. The letters have a different



FANTASTIC FOUR® Vol. 1, No. 265, April, 1984. (ISSN 0274-5291) Published by MARVEL COMICS GROUP, James E. Galton, President. StarrLee, Publisher. Michael Hobson, Vice-President, Publishing. Milton Schiffman, Vice-President, Production. OFFICE OF PUBLICATION: 387 PARK AVENUE SOUTH, NEW YORK, N.Y. 10016. SECOND CLASS POSTAGE PAID AT NEW YORK, NY AND AT ADDITIONAL MAILING OFFICES. Published monthly. Postmaster: Send address changes to Subscription Dept., Marvel Comics Group, 387 Park Avenue South, New York, N.Y. 10016.

Figure 2: *Fantastic Four* # 265 page 1

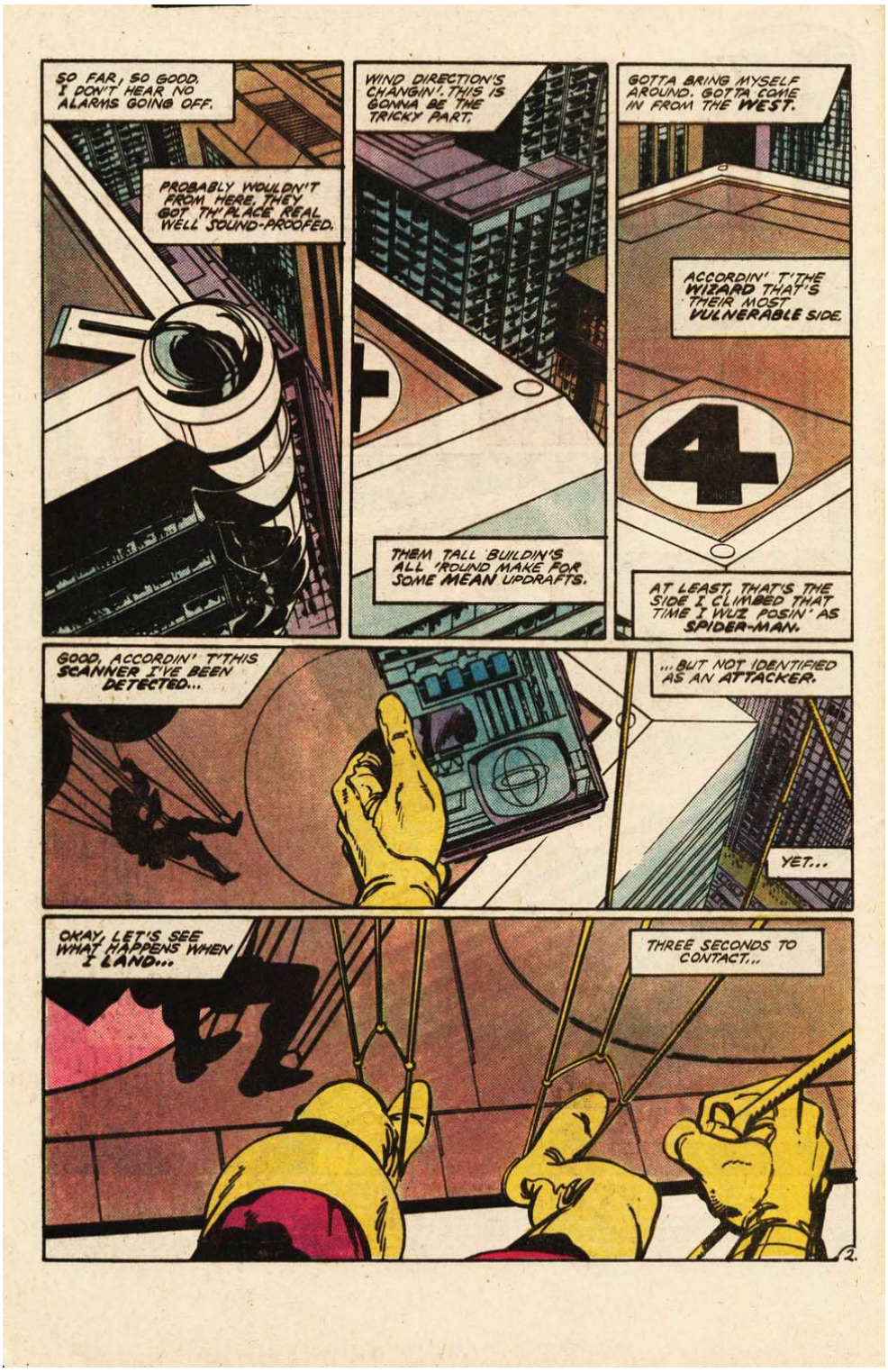


Figure 3: ***Fantastic Four*** **#265 page 2**

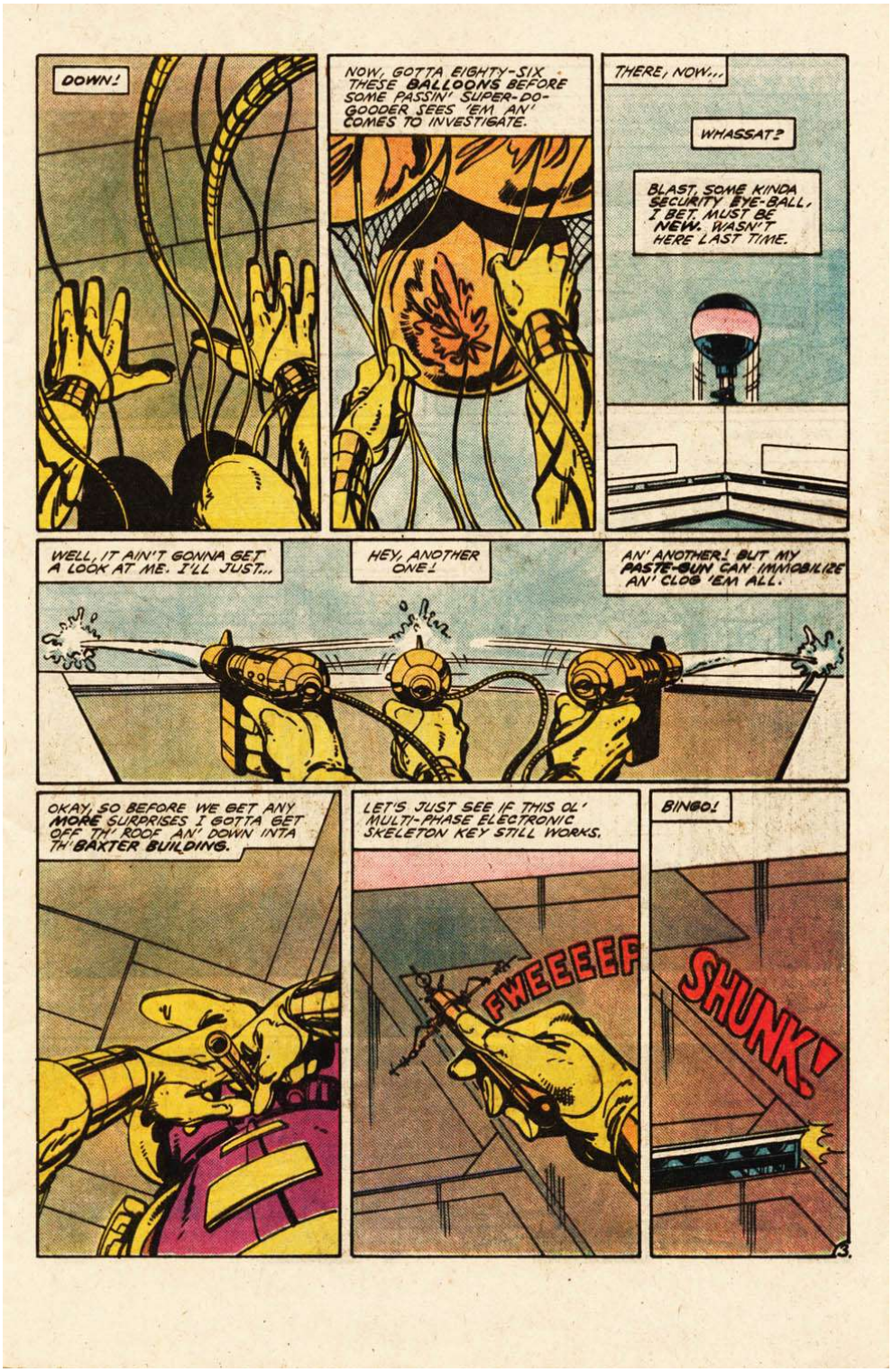


Figure 4: ***Fantastic Four*** **#265 page 3**

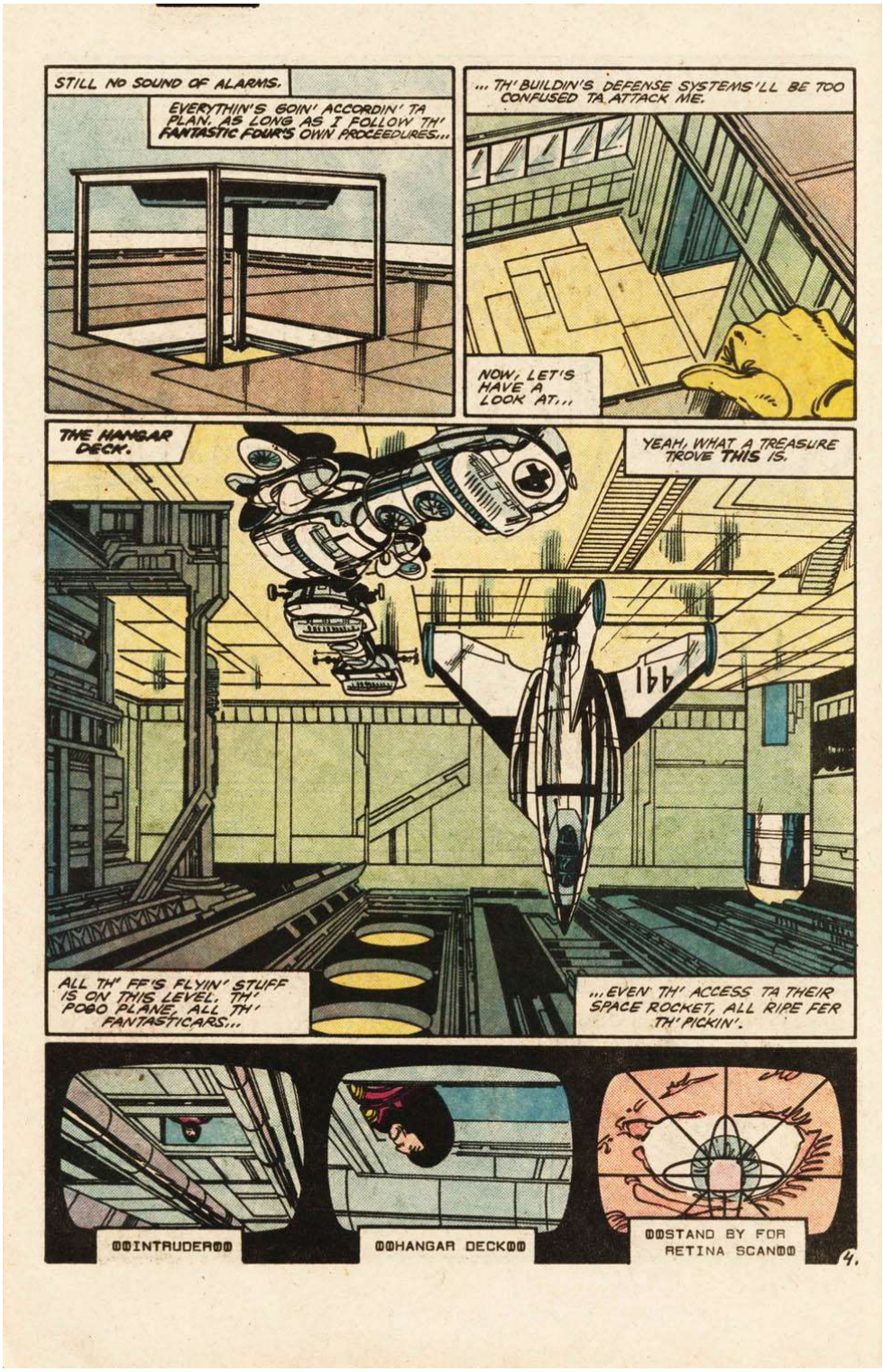


Figure 5: ***Fantastic Four*** **#265 page 4**

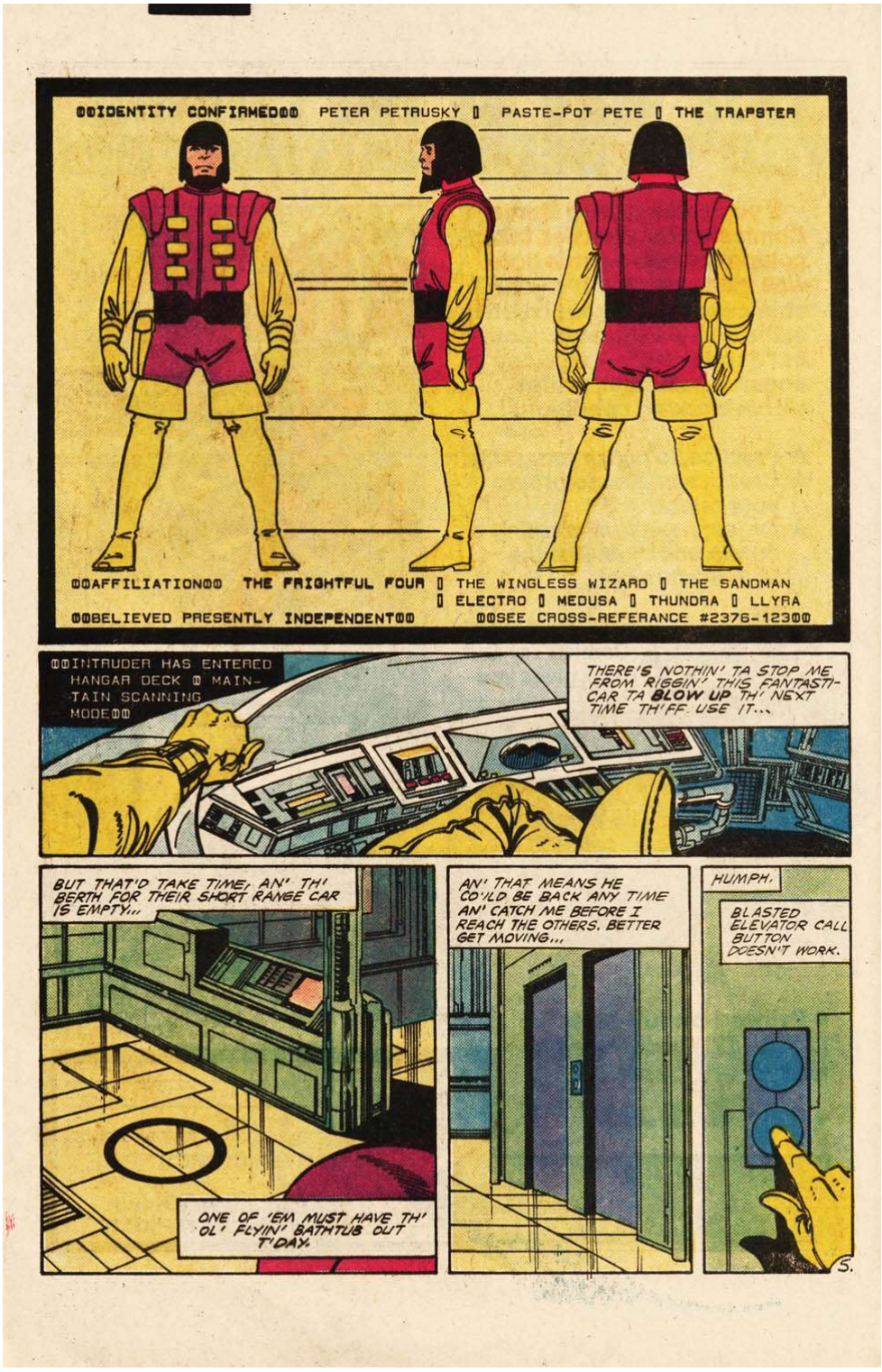


Figure 6: ***Fantastic Four*** **#265 page 5**

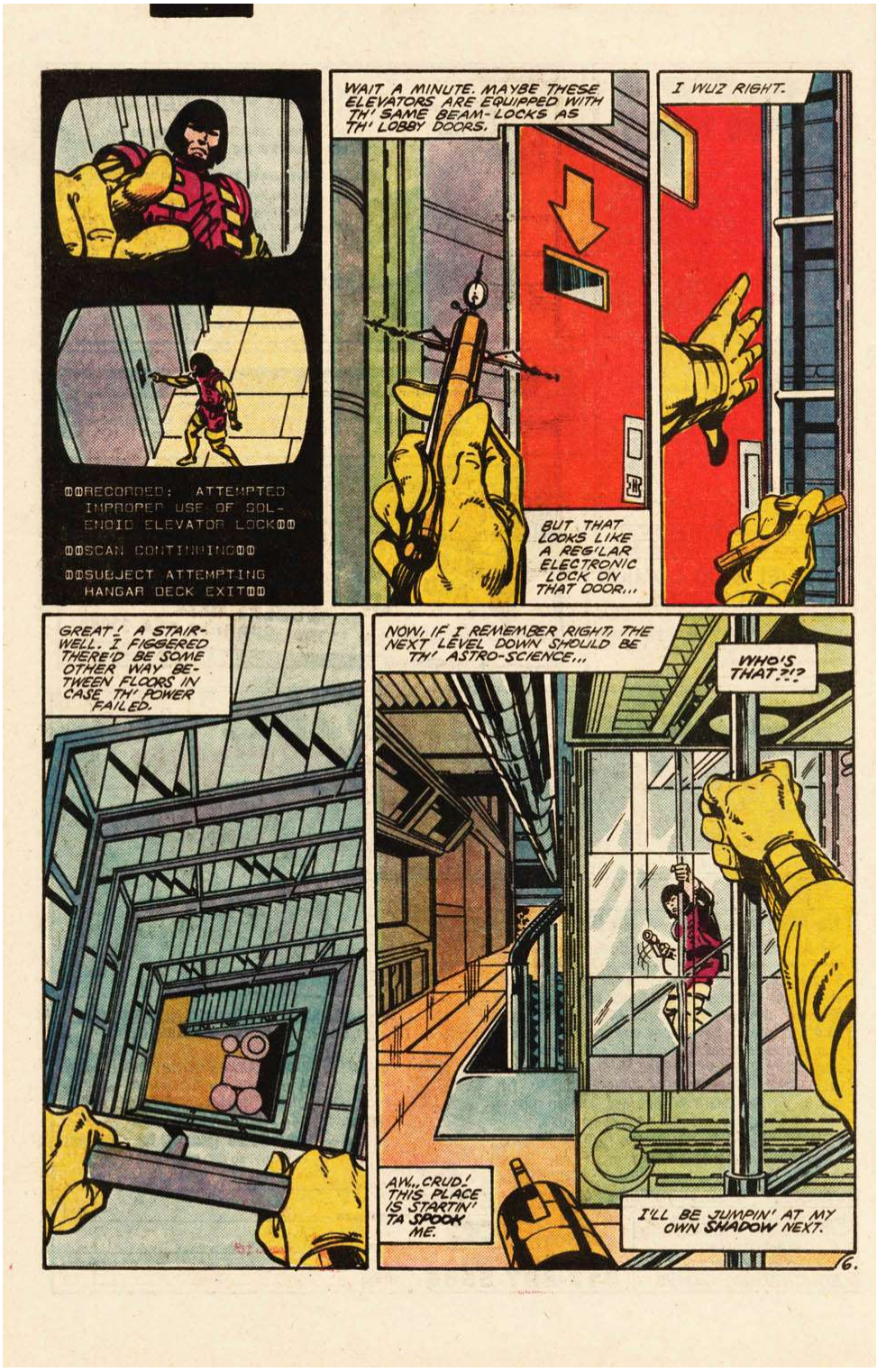


Figure 7: ***Fantastic Four*** **#265 page 6**

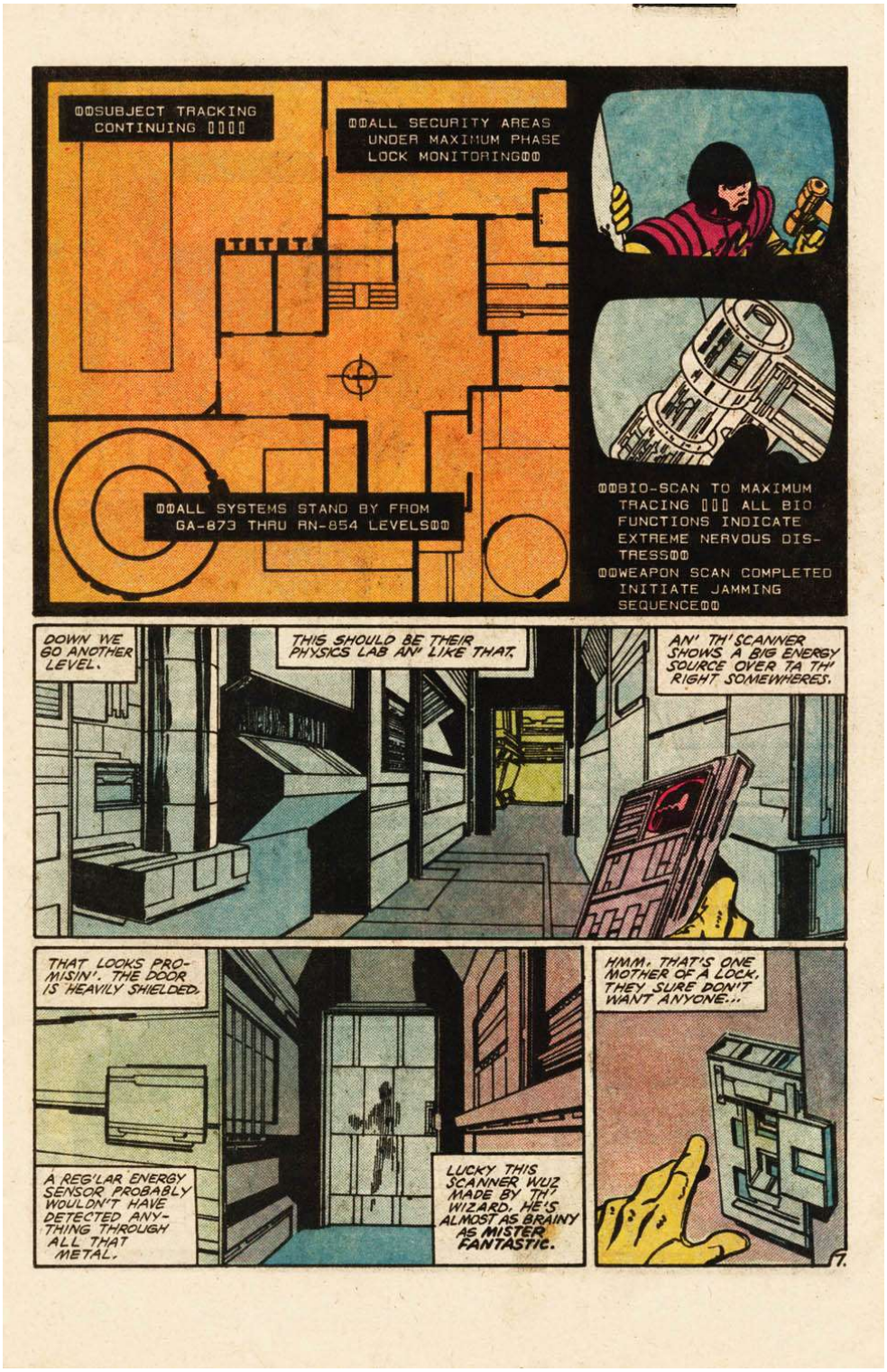


Figure 8: ***Fantastic Four*** **#265 page 7**

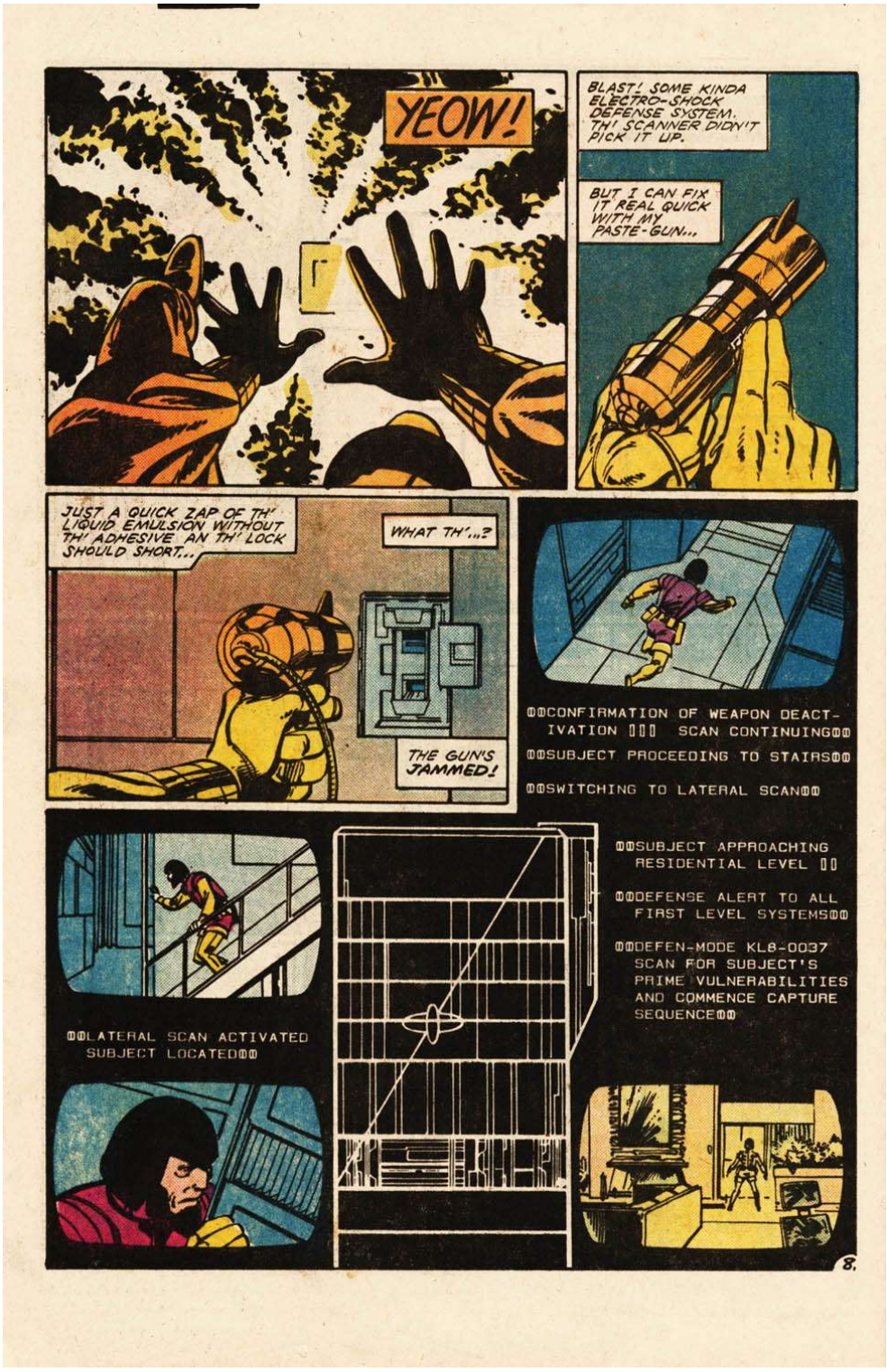


Figure 9: ***Fantastic Four*** **#265 page 8**

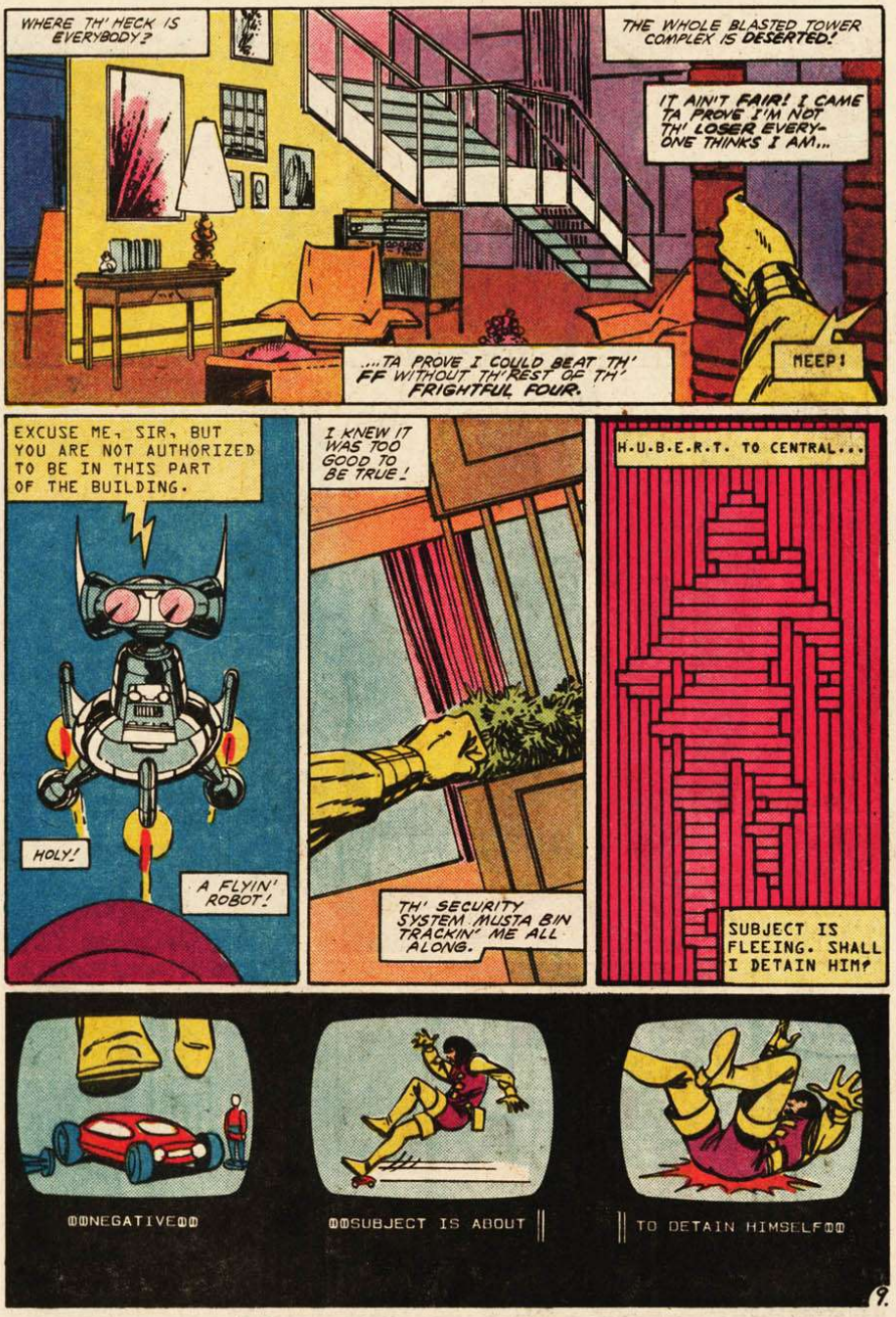


Figure 10: ***Fantastic Four*** **#265 page 9**

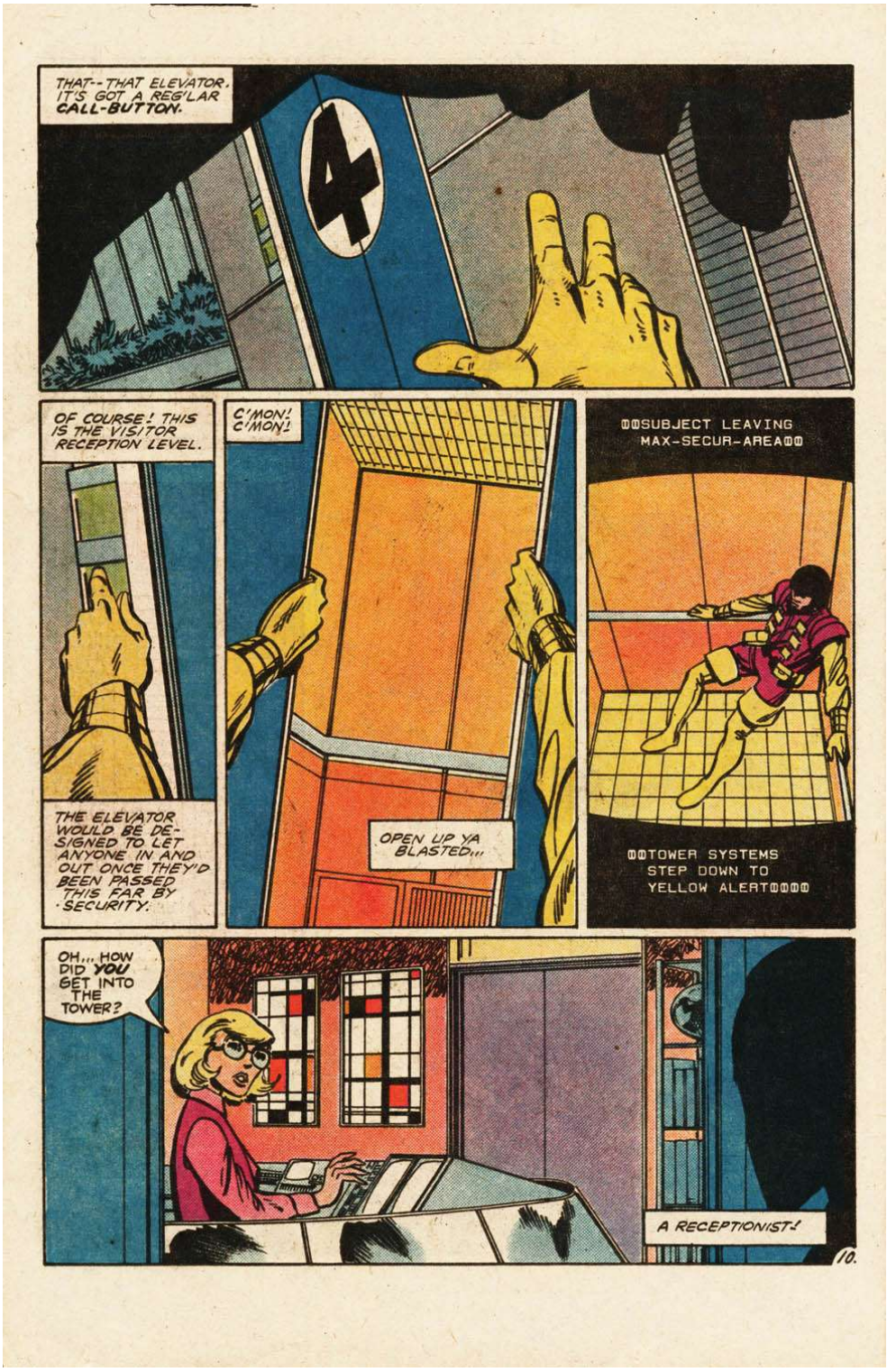


Figure 11: ***Fantastic Four*** **#265 page 10**

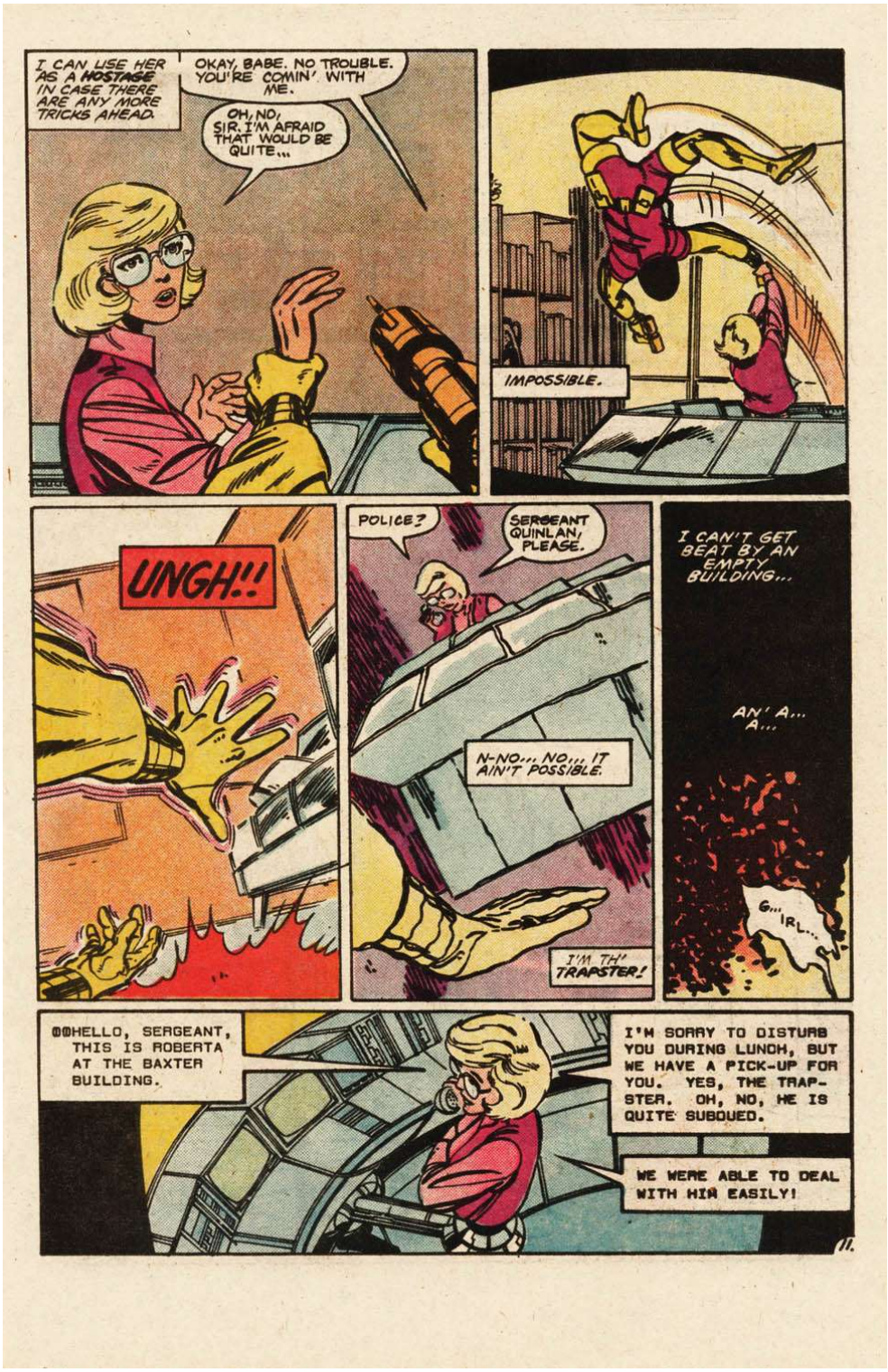


Figure 12: ***Fantastic Four*** **#265 page 11**

typeface, and are preceded by two meaningless symbols. The typewriter-like, angular letters look more mechanical, showing us how typeface and the supposed source of the words can be linked. The sentences are 'mechanized' accordingly linguistically. The computer system's comments are mostly fragments, like 'STAND BY FOR RETINA SCANS' (page 4, panel 6). Also striking is the fact that the word boxes themselves are (in most cases) black, while the letters are white. This is the inverse of the Trapster's boxes, contrasting the computer to the human. On page 9, another computer system is introduced in the form of the little robot H.U.B.E.R.T. The fourth panel on this page comes from this robot's perceptual point of view, as the comments make clear. The word boxes are now coloured yellow, but have the same typeface. Clearly though, this robot addresses the other computer ('TO CENTRAL') and it seems more capable of making complete sentences. Playing with typefaces, colour and the form of word boxes clearly opens a wide range of possibilities. While differing typefaces within a story are possible in writing as well, they are hardly ever used. This indicates again that images and written language are closer to each other in comics than in any medium.

While Byrne strays from some conventions by giving direct thought in word boxes, Ware breaks many more with his integration of word and image in *Jimmy Corrigan*. Let us turn to the scene where the main character, Jimmy Corrigan, is in the hospital after being hit by a truck (figure 13; there is no pagination). On this particular page, Jimmy is alone in the room and must urinate in a box for the doctor's examination. He has just met his dad for the first time, and is very confused over the entire situation. Immediately in our first panel, Ware displays his typical use of connective words: the first image has a vertical word box in which 'and so' is written downward, in large, coloured letters. In all panels, the images are accompanied by written language in various forms. Most of this language appears in neither clouds, nor balloons, nor boxes, but is simply written in diegetic space. The language even follows the surface of objects in diegetic space in some instances. In the tenth panel, in the upper right corner, the words 'He said I was a mistake' are written along the perspective lines of the wall, while the words 'Sitting right there ↳' is written similarly, seemingly *on* the floor. The reader is supposed to understand the comments are not actually written on these surfaces in diegetic space, and allow for some self-conscious playfulness on Ware's part.

The comments themselves are clearly direct thought, as the first two instances ('OW' and 'sharp edge plastic sharp') show. Most sentences are fragmented to show the ever-changing and associative nature of the thought process. But this is not only achieved linguistically. The typeface of Jimmy's comments changes from elegant into larger, bold letters when Jimmy forcefully tells himself not to think about women ('NO NO DON'T THINK'). In the twelfth and thirteenth panel, Jimmy thinks 'but HE'S the mistake I made coming HERE. Where I don't know HIM don't know ME mom', where all the words in low caps are in handwriting and the words in caps are larger and bold. The words in caps are

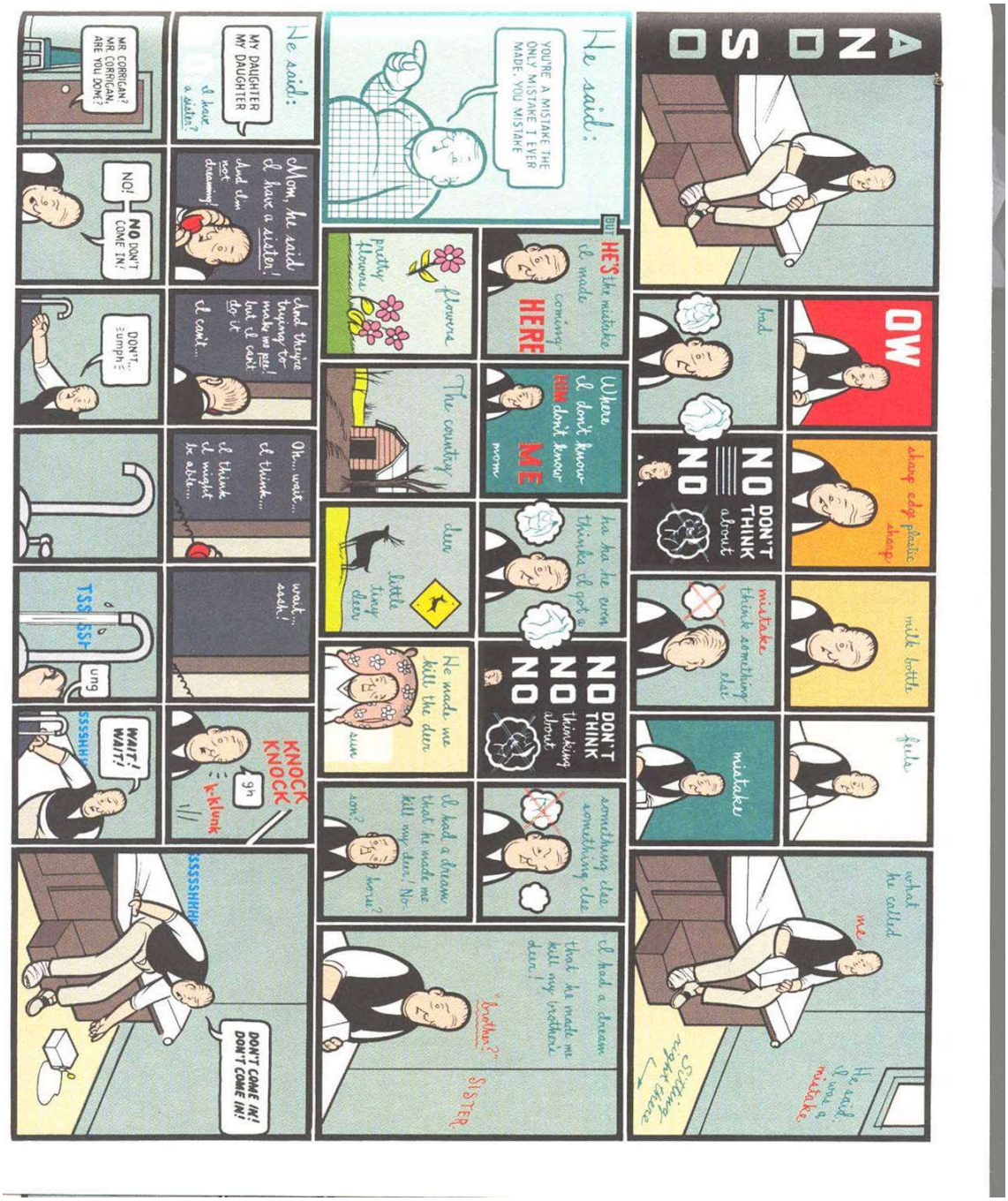


Figure 13: Jimmy Corrigan (page rotated)

also coloured red, to further underline their importance. The colour of the words in handwriting changes continuously to fit the changing background colours. The word 'mom' in these panels is written smaller, and thus gains significance as a small thought in the back of Jimmy's head. Ware does not restrict himself to written language; there are also several thought clouds on this page. Interestingly, Jimmy is seemingly talking to himself in the written language outside of thought clouds, while the thought clouds show his more primary thoughts in images. There are two thought clouds in panel 6, both with an image of a female body. In the next panel, Jimmy tells himself not to think about this, and there is again a thought cloud with a female body in it, this time crossed out. The images in the thought clouds come to pass for Jimmy's mind's eye unwanted, while the written language is the more rational voice of reason, telling him to think of something else[17].

It is clear now that words in comics often have a graphic dimension; changes in shape, size and colour are usual techniques to add effect. Uspensky recognized four planes on which subjective narration manifests itself in words:

- The ideological;
- The phraeseological;
- The spatial & temporal;
- The psychological plane (6)

Analyzing words in comics requires another plane: the *graphic*. To understand them, we have to take their form into account. When words enter the graphic plane, they become images to some extent. The different typefaces give emphasis to character narration, just like adjectives do: 'He told himself gravely: "Now we will have to wait".' Thinking 'gravely' can be expressed by typefaces, or even the shape of the thought balloon in comics. The relation of words to the image is also very important: their placing, the devices used to place them in diegetic space and the source of both the image and the words can all be considered. The last of these requires some elaboration. In the *Fantastic Four* example, the source of both the image and the words was linked most directly – the direct thought of the words stems from the same character as the perceptual focalisation in the images. In the scene from *Jimmy Corrigan* the words are direct thought, but the perceptual point of view in the image is not that of the character (in most of the images). Still, the images have some emotive focalisation – notice for example the changing background colour in panel 2 – 5. We explained in our introduction that focalisation in images is not restricted to perceptual point of view, but can take all kinds of forms. Long scenes with perceptual point of view in images are quite rare in both film and comics. Other, less obvious forms of focalisation, however, are very common. We will discuss this more explicitly in chapter 2.

[17] For a thorough analysis of the role of words and images in the work of Chris Ware, we recommend 'The comics of Chris Ware' in the *The language of comics: Word and image* (2001) by Gene Kannenberg, Jr.

The distinction between the narrator and the focaliser can be observed in the words. Because comics mainly contain direct language and little structuring sentences, focalisation is rarer there than direct thought or speech (it is far more common in writing). Comics usually do not have enough room for long narrator comments, in which focalisation occurs[18]. It seems that focalisation in comics is usually in the images, and direct thought in the words. The danger in such an analysis, however, is in being too strict in separating word and image in comics. Just saying that the image in *Jimmy Corrigan* is focalised and the language is direct thought is not accurate. We have discussed how Ware places narrated words *in* the image (without balloons or other markers) and how the words in this scene have an image-like quality. The strong direct thought thus penetrates the more neutral image, not by its meaning, but by its presence and, in effect, adds to the subjectivity. The meaning of the image is not just enhanced or elaborated on by words, it is changed as well.

Now, for an interesting example of the tension between words and images, let us take another look at *l'Ascension.* We mentioned that most of the word boxes in this comic contain comments by an adult David reflecting upon his youth. We will look at page 48, which has seven panels, all accompanied by a word box (figure 14). The words in the first word box acknowledge the presence of the narrator clearly, when the reader is invited to 'play' and recognize the elements of ying and yang in the image. The narrator makes perfectly clear he is telling a story by addressing the audience directly, and that he is using images as well as words to do so. The relation between word and image is different in the other panels, though. The words in panel 2 through 7 are a rather straightforward description of macrobiotics. The images here are depictions of the associations David has with the words. These words could function in their own right as a rather dry summary. It would be very difficult, however, to understand the relation between the images without the words. Panels 2 through 7 have a strong associational and allegorical character. David relates 'la grande vie' in the box to internal organs in the image, and subsequently imagines ying and yang as the two sides of the brain. He then continues to regard the role of cereals; first as a character fighting a monster, and then as a cure for an actual disease (obesity). In the last two panels he focuses on sleeping; first simply on the act, then on what is happening inside the sleeper's head. To understand this, the words are required. The presence of the images is not optional to the story however; they give the reader a crucial insight in David's thought process. A very

[18] *Jimmy Corrigan* has a shift from focalised writing to direct subjective writing in the story of the youth of Jimmy's grandfather.

Figure 14: *L'Ascension du haut mal* vol. 1 page 48

interesting question here is whether these images are focalised by the narrator (the adult David), or the character (the younger David). On the one hand, the narrator comments on the images as if he is directly responsible for them (in the first panel). However, the images also have a childish naivety and grotesqueness, which seems more likely to stem from the young David – the awkward perspective of the legs of the monster in panel 4 is a good example. This ambiguity in focalisation often arises in retrospective stories. It reminds us that memories are always influenced by our present perception.

Emotions

We have discussed how thoughts are displayed verbally. The more primary emotions are usually presented graphically in body language however, and entire codes have been developed for this. Film actors usually exaggerate their bodily movements to convey the emotions and mood of their character. Comic characters can be manipulated more easily, because they are drawn, and their stances are usually exaggerated even further. Of course, this is taken to its limits in humoristic comics; humoristic films have the most expressionistic body language as well. Albert Uderzo (*Astérix*), Franquin (*Gaston, Spirou*) and Carl Barks (*Donald Duck, Uncle Scrooge*) are artists renowned for their mastery of expressionistic posing. The poses are not to be understood normally as representations; they can only be decoded in the light of comic conventions. The character's bodies become symbols, which shows that images also resembles language in comics. A standardized set of exaggerated poses reads almost like an alphabet, where each has a distinct meaning for an experienced reader. We should not think more serious comics shun away from presenting their characters in nearly ridiculous poses. Comics may not be a medium of gesture like ballet or pantomime (Metz; 26), but Eisner makes 'a micro-dictionary of gestures' and even maintains that '[i]n comics, body posture and gesture occupy a position of primacy over [words]' (102 – 103).

The important question here is whether posing is a form of subjective narration. Eisner thinks so, as he calls posing 'external evidence of internal feelings' (102). If we follow this line of thought, the entire appearance of characters can be labelled subjective narration. Characters can never look completely naturalistic in a drawing. Their appearance, and the posing which follows from it, is only subjective narration when it is clearly coming from the point of view of another character. Let us look at page 44 of *L'Ascension du haut mal* for an example of this (figure 15). David tells us how his parents turn to macrobiotics to fight his brother's epileptic, and they are introduced to 'Maitre N.'. The accompanying word box reads: 'Quand je le vois, il me fait penser à un gros chat'. Throughout the entire story, Master N. is drawn like an anthropomorphic cat with clothes on. Because the adult David narrates the entire story, we can even argue that the appearance of every character is influenced by his opinion of that man or woman.

Figure 15: *L'Ascension du haut mal* vol. 1 page 44

But the distinctions are not always so clear cut. On page 46 and 47 of *Gaston 13: Lagaffe mérite des baffes*, Gaston has a dream of being on an island, where he encounters the frightening businessman De Mesmaeker (figure 16-17). Rudely awakened from his dream, Gaston is still so angry with the man, he assaults him in the last panel. In Gaston's dream (panel 5 of page 47), De Mesmaeker is drawn like a corpulent, aggressive caricature. If this is the first Gaston story someone reads, that reader could be tempted to think the caricature of De Mesmaeker stems from Gaston's imagination (like all the dream-images). However, in the last two panels of the story (7 and 8), De Mesmaeker still looks like a corpulent, aggressive caricature. The idea that this exaggerated appearance stems from Gaston's opinion cannot be sustained; these caricatures are normal for the *story reality* of this series. The same goes for posing; dynamic posing is normal in the story reality of most comics. The narrator is usually responsible for the character's appearance, and we should not mistake comics' rather typical character depictions for subjective narration. For appearance or posing to be part of subjective narration, it has to be explicitly clear from the context that we should understand it as such. Maître N.'s appearance is a departure from story reality, De Mesmaeker's is not. Still, it can be very hard to determine whether a character's appearance is consistent with a story's reality, when that reality is not stable. Aside from such borderline cases, we will see examples of subjective appearances as we discuss changes in drawing style from one image to another in chapter 2.

It is not only in posing or appearance that emotions or moods are presented graphically. Sometimes the emotions take shape external to the character, and are projected in diegetic space. The elements we will discuss in this chapter belong to another set of highly coded elements. They differ from other visual thought projections in diegetic space because of their standardization as symbols. We find them both in- and outside of thought balloons, often near character's heads. Examples are: sweat drops flying from the head of an embarrassed character, stars from a hurt character, steam clouds from an angry character or a light bulb from a character with an epiphany (check the entire *Gaston* comic for many examples). Obviously, these elements are not words, but they are not true images either.

Metz names five facets in which images differ from words:

- 'Film images are […] infinite in number';
- 'They are in principle the invention of the speaker';
- 'They yield to the receiver a quantity of indefinite information';
- 'They are actualized units';
- 'Only to a small degree do they assume their meanings in paradigmatic opposition to other images that could have appeared at the same point along the filmic chain' (26).

Now, light bulbs and stars have their variations, but are definitely not infinite in number. They are not inventions of the speaker, are only halfway actualized (they are not truly 'statements',

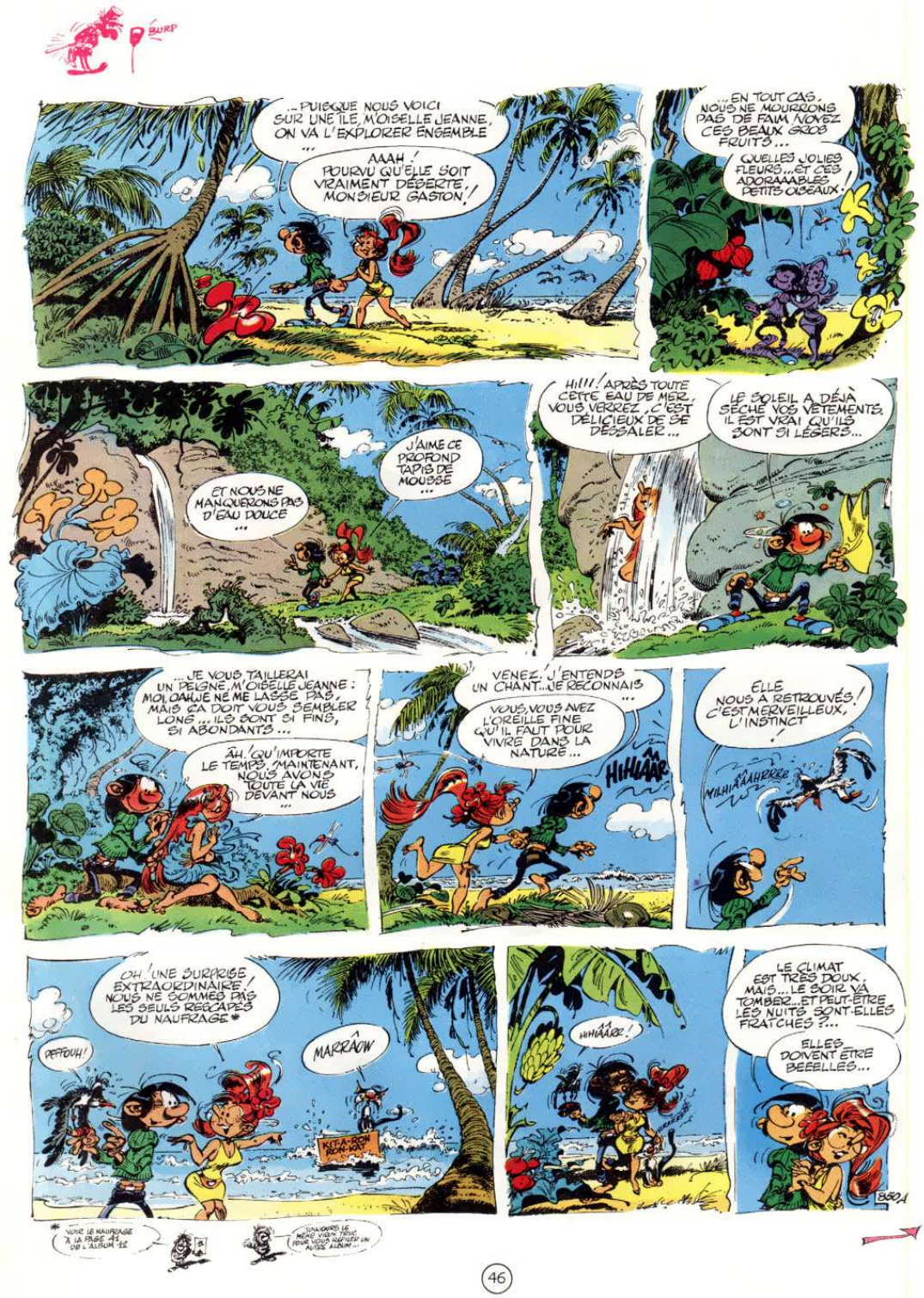


Figure 16: ***Gaston*** **vol. 13 page 46**

Figure 17: *Gaston* vol. 13 page 47

like normal images), and are heavily dependant on context for their meaning. That is why they are symbols, somewhere between words and images. In Japan, these emotive symbols developed independently, up to the point where some are actually unrecognisable for readers only familiar with European and American conventions – stressing the importance of context for their understanding. A bleeding nose in manga usually means a character is sexually aroused, for example. Like thought clouds or speech balloons, neither the bleeding nose nor the stars and the sweat drops exist in diegetic space for other characters to see (although many several meta-textual or, if you will, postmodern jokes refute this basic assumption). Emotive symbols can fill the entire background of an image, for example with flames of anger, or lines of shock.

The source of emotive symbols is a single character, and they stem from his or her feelings, so they are examples of subjective narration. The fact that they are on the border of word and image makes it hard to say whether they are direct thought and speech (they occur in speech clouds too) or emotive focalisation. What is more, we can also argue that they fall in the same category as exaggerated posing and appearance. The narrator does not express subjectivity through them because, far from being individualised and personal, emotive symbols are a standardized set, highly bound by conventions. Other characters do not see the excessive sweat drops on Gaston's head, but neither does the character himself experience his anxiety like that. Thus, we could also conclude that the sweat drops and other emotive symbols are *inferred* by the narrator, to express vividly what the character *should* be feeling. Recognising and analysing symbols remains a complex matter.

It is important here to note again that the conventions of posing and emotions are not only typical of comics, nor are they only possible in comics. Many of the observations made here hold true for animation as well. Even the most outrageous examples of deforming characters in screwball manga are literally used in similar anime, for example.

Conclusion

Like film in its early, mute days, comics had to include written language in their medium. Trying to compete with writing's richness was nigh impossible, as it would make comics overly verbose. However, comics developed its own richness with written language, by allowing the letters to integrate with the images. The result is a highly coded medium with high expressive potential. The marriage between written language and images may not define comics as a medium per se, but it has become one of its most interesting and widely recognized features. Subjective narration in this medium can only be understood from a thorough understanding of comics' conventions. The thought cloud is the most well-known form of subjective narration in comics. Trying to study just the image or just the written language is not enough to understand devices like it. Even looking at comics with the two

approaches of word and image combined is not enough, as the sum amounts to more than its parts.

The integration of word and image is not solely a shift of the first towards the latter. Some images have been symbols, and become bound by conventions as representations of representations in a language-like way. The human figure itself becomes a symbol for that character's attitude, or mood. We are so accustomed to many of these that we tend to forget we really *read* comics, and that we had to learn this before we could do so. A first-time look at manga's alien emotive symbols is the best affirmation of this assumption. Standardization and conventions did not lead to an evolutionary dead end; continuous meta-textual play and evolution actually opened a wealth of possibilities. The word-like quality of the image gives comics a certain kinetic energy and dynamism. The grotesque or simplified look of characters may seem an instance of subjective narration, but it is usually not. Only when the image is explicitly attributed to a character's point of view can we take an appearance as subjective narration. Otherwise, this appearance is the view of the narrator on a particular diegetic world. The case with emotive symbols is harder to crack, but we will hold them as instances of focalisation. Note that we have only dealt here with the parts of the image that have attained a linguistic sense, usually in the way characters are depicted. Besides that, the image is used to convey subjective narration a lot, as we will see when we come to discuss transitions from image to image.

Chapter 2: Image to image

Introduction

To discuss image to image transitions, some basic ideas of comic theory need to be laid out. Still images are placed in a spatial sequence. The space between these images is usually referred to as *gutters*. *Closure* is the process in which a reader fills in this blank between the images by inferring what happened between them. McCloud explains:

> Comic 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. [67, writer's emphasis removed]

Some relations between images can ask for more closure than others - McCloud lists six degrees of continuity between images:

- Moment-to-moment;
- Action-to-action;
- Subject-to-subject;
- Scene-to-scene;
- Aspect-to-aspect;
- Non-sequitur (70-72).

But things can get more difficult than this. Single comic images often have a temporal dimension of their own. The most obvious example of this is the speech balloon: the speech act does not happen in a single moment. Sometimes a single image also depicts both cause and effect, especially in dialogue, with multiple speech balloons. Other images have a character walking in several places on the same background image. For such temporal progression within the image, we can say that single images (or panels) often contain several *virtual* images.

If closure is the way a reader fills in the blanks, montage is the technique that creates the blanks. But where closure refers only to images following each other in a linear way, montage can create non-linear relations as well. Montage in comics is very different from film. Film images continuously replace each other; comic images remain on the page. John Berger (2000) has a remarkable analysis of the effects of this distinction:

> Eisenstein once spoke of a 'montage of attractions'. By this he meant that what precedes the film-cut should attract what follows it, and vice versa. The energy of this attraction could take the form of a contrast, an equivalence, a conflict, a

> recurrence. In each case, the cut becomes eloquent and functions like the hinge of a metaphor. […] Yet there was in fact an intrinsic difficulty in applying this idea to film. In a film, with its thirty-two frames per second, there is always a third energy in play: that of the reel, that of the film running through time. And so the two attractions in a film montage are never equal. […]
>
> In a sequence of still photographs, however, the energy of attraction, either side of a cut, does remain equal, two way and *mutual*. Such an energy then closely resembles the stimulus by which one memory triggers another, irrespective of any hierarchy, chronology or duration.
>
> In fact, the energy of the montage of attractions in a sequence of still photographs destroys the very notion of *sequence* – the word which, up to now, I have been using for the sake of convenience. The sequence has become a field of coexistence like the field of memory.
>
> Photographs so placed are restored to a living context: not of course to the original temporal context from which they were taken – that is impossible – but to a context of experience. And there, *their ambiguity at last becomes true.* [173 - 174]

Although Berger speaks of photographs, there is no problem at all in extending his conclusions to all still images of comics – especially in the light of our rejection of a strict split between photos and drawings. Berger's remarks are essential, because they acknowledge that a spatial sequence of images works very differently from a temporal sequence. One could conceivably make an entire comic book out of film stills, but this radically changes the way the sequence is read and understood.

It was already mentioned that several scholars point out that time is of lesser narrative importance in a spatial sequence of images – up to the point where Uspensky claimed space is the only factor in such narratives. Our conception of narratives does not allow to go that far, but one must realise that comic images are paradoxically less *and* more dependent on each other than film images. On the one hand they are more dependent on each other in the overall arthrology; they do not only relate to the image that follows or precedes them, but also to other images on the page, or in the book. There are ways to read comics in several directions unheard of in film. On the other hand, the images are in a sort of existential limbo; the degree of continuity between images that follow each other is smaller in comics than in film. It is very common for comics to have their characters posited against a background in one image, and in a blank space in the next. Actually, only a few artists draw a continuous background in all their images. Omitting it can single out an image, and give it extra meaning within a sequence.

It is very common for comics to have images which have only a few elements in common with the preceding image, while they obviously depict the same narrative space and

time. Lefèvre notes that the comics' reader accepts that 'the fictive world can be incoherent as long as the narrative concept is respected'. As long as the progress of the story is not hampered, the reader will accept inconsistencies. This explains the presence of odd elements, like emotive symbols in comic images – they usually exist only in a single image. In film, only anime, and then only the outrageously humoristic, has some similar changes in background and character appearance from one scene to another. We called the fact that comic images are both less and more dependent on each other paradoxical, but it is perfectly logical: The fact that comic images are less dependent on the preceding and following images frees them largely from the oppression of linear reading, and opens the way for non-linear ways of understanding. That is what Berger means when he notes that the field of comic (photo) images is one of co-existence and ambiguity, like memory. Several manga translations of late in both America and Europe have chosen to retain the left-to-right reading of the pages. This testifies that comic readers can easily accept new ways of reading. As a side note, remember that non-linear reading falls under narration in our notion of it, which makes these observations relevant for our thesis.

Perceptual point of view

Perceptual point of view is a specific way of representing space in a narrative. It is an instance of spatial focalisation. The technique can occur in writing, but is less interesting and relevant there. We will focus on perceptual point of view in visual media. An image always has a fixed angle from which it represents diegetic space (aside from blurred photographs and some cubist works). When this angle approximates the angle of a character looking, we speak of perceptual point of view. A point-of-view shot in film is usually preceded or followed by a shot of the character that is looking, to make clear whose gaze the reader is following. Experience has conditioned moviegoers to interpret a shot of a character and a shot of something that character could be looking at as perceptual point of view – the implied author tells them to do so. Let us take another look at Branigan's (1996) discussion of internal focalisation, which 'ranges from simple perception (e.g., the point-of-view shot), to impressions (e.g., the out-of-focus point-of-view shot depicting a character who is drunk, dizzy, or drugged, to "deeper thought" (e.g., dreams, hallucinations, and memories)' (103). Sometimes we gain not only a character's angle of vision, but also his or her experience - which influences the image.

Point-of-view shots are probably one of the most debated topics of film studies. Many researchers have deployed heavy psychological artillery to interpret these scenes. As we said before, this thesis is supposed to be more descriptive than interpretative, so we will take as practical a stance as possible. Noël Carroll (1993) has a very interesting approach to the problem. He asserts that 'point-of-view editing is a representation rooted in our recognition of an innate perceptual behaviour that moves from a gaze to its target. This perceptual

behaviour occurs naturally in situations where we are gathering information about our environment' (130). He continues that ''[t]he point/object shot specifies the emotion in question as a particularized emotion by supplying the viewer with the object or cause of the emotion as the target of the glance' (137) and concludes that point-of-view editing serves the purposes of movie narration so well because […] it guarantees fast pick-up and a high degree of accessibility to mass, untutored audiences, crucial desiderata of any device in the economy of movies (138). We believe that Carroll offers a very workable explanation of the fact that point-of-view shots are so universally understood – and this can be easily extended to other media. A glance image followed or preceded by an object image is common in comics as well and easily understood by any reader.

Page 27 of *No. 5* volume 2 shows us the effectiveness of conventional perceptual point of view (figure 18). In the first panel, we see the character No. 5 lying on the ground, looking through the scope of a sniper rifle. Panel 2 and 3 have are encircled by a black edge, and two diametrically opposed black angles form a cross right over the image. The image depicts another character, in a long shot in panel 2 and in a medium shot in panel 3, as a film theorist would say[19]. A reader should understand that the cross and the circle depict vision through the sniper scope of No. 5. To make it even more obvious, panel 4 shows an extreme close-up of the eye of No. 5, looking through the scope. With No. 5's finger on the trigger in panel 5, it is easy to understand how this scene uses perceptual point of view to build tension. We can call this technique in comics a point-of-view sequence.

We will continue to discuss the first 11 pages of *Fantastic Four* 265, because they are a rare example of a lengthy point-of-view sequence (figures 2-12). The angle of vision the reader adopts here is clearly no approximation of that of the Trapster – it is supposed to be his actual vision. The hands and feet on the edges of the image make that much clear. Remarkable is that the shape and size of the frames continues to change throughout the scene, although we can assume that the field of vision of the Trapster is not altered. Apparently, aesthetic sense overrules the desire to be consistent here. Page 6 has the requisite shock at seeing a mirror-image, which would fit nicely in a psychoanalytic reading. Page 11 shows that the internal focalisation in this scene goes further that this scene goes further than simple perception; we have the character's impressions as well. The lines are blurred in the fourth

[19] A long shot shows an entire character against a dominating background, and a medium shot shows a character from the waist up.

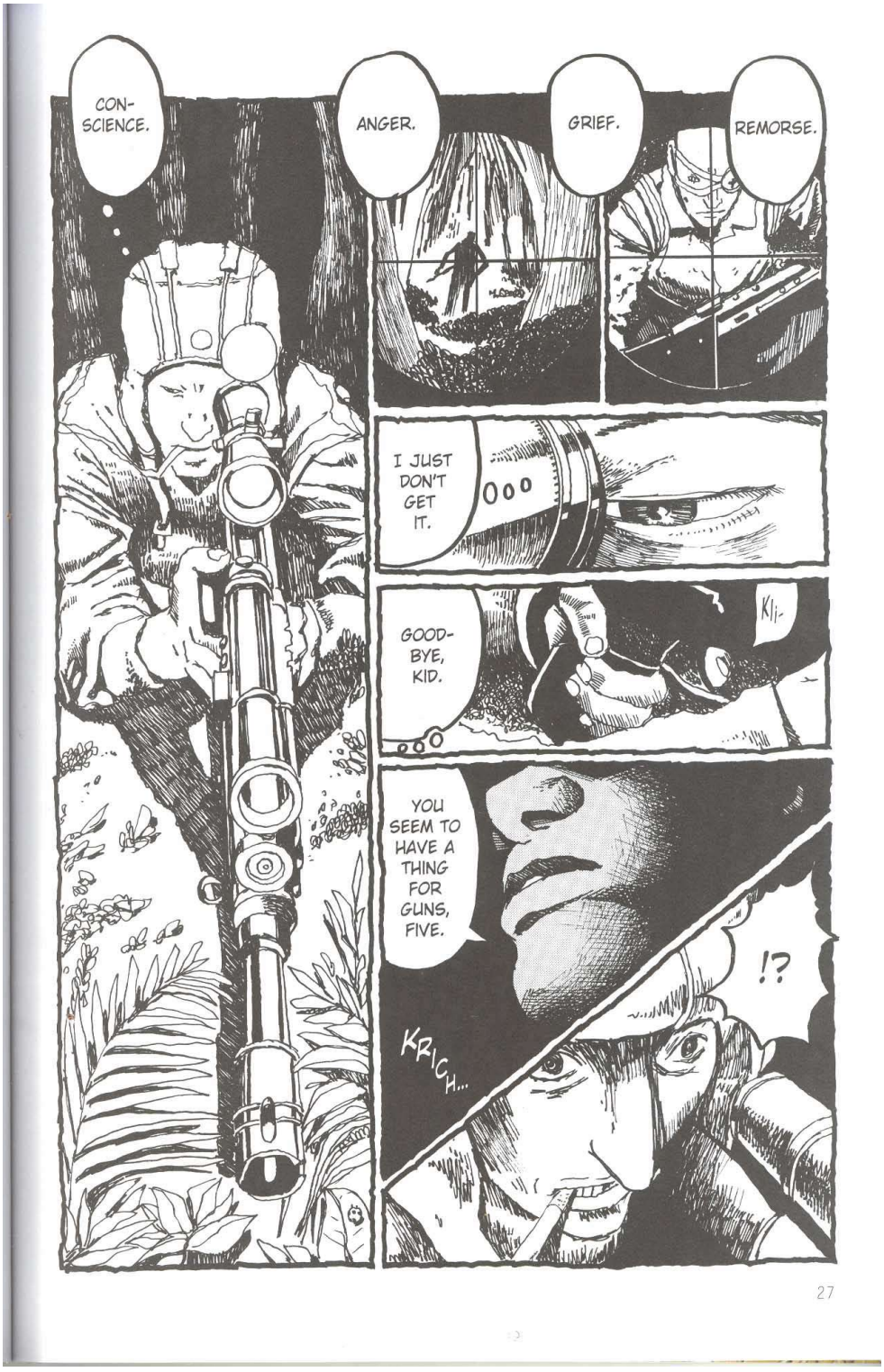


Figure 18: *No. 5* vol. 2 page 27

and fifth panel, as the Trapster hits the floor. Panel 6 is almost entirely black, as he passes out.

Besides the Trapster's perceptual point of view, there are also images originating from the security computer system of the house. It is hard to speak of a true perceptual point of view here, because a computer does not have a conventional gaze. It has a consciousness to some extent notwithstanding, which recognizes and analyses information, allowing us to treat it as a perceptual point of view. The first three panels stemming from the computer, on the bottom of page 4, apply a technique we have already seen in *No. 5.* There is a black shape around the images, resembling the outline of a monitor – which indicates these images were taken with a security camera. The third of these images shows that the camera gaze has some special features: it is an extreme close-up of the Trapster's eye, with several black lines centring on the pupil. The camera gaze is obviously not unmediated; the computer is processing the data it is receiving. The next computer panel, on page 5, is not a direct recording, but a glimpse of the computer's memory. It has found a file on the Trapster and displays it. Within the story, this panel also functions to show the Trapster clearly to the reader. On page 7, we can see how the computer analyses several sources of visual input at once. Within a single panel, there are three frames; the first of which shows a blueprint of the building with the Trapster's location, the second an (apparently) unmediated image of the Trapster from the security camera (again the frame has a monitor shape) and the third a close-up of the Trapster's gun, in a kind of x-ray vision, also from the security camera.

On page 9 the reader adopts the field of vision of yet another computer – panel 4 is drawn in crude pixels and red tones. Two panels earlier, the reader saw a robot with red eyes from the Trapster's gaze, to which we can ascribe panel 4. We mentioned that the computer consciousness seems to be analysing several sources of visual input at once. When we look again closely at the first three images from the security camera (bottom of page 4), we can see that they all depict the same moment from a different angle. Now, on the bottom of page 9, there is a highly similar three-panel series of images from the different security cameras. But there obviously *is* temporal progression between these images, depicting a classical gag (1: Steps on toy car. 2: Slips on toy car. 3: Falls over). These sequences are meant to represent the computer's consciousness, but they are also placed in legible and interesting sequences for the reader's sake. Just as we mentioned how the edges of the Trapster's field of vision do not change, but those of the frame do, concerns of aesthetics and legibility here are at least as important as convincing subjective narration.

Drawing style

We have already pointed out that readers might recognize an implied author in drawing style. Some comic book fans are capable to recognize the 'handwriting' of their favourite penciller. Drawing style refers specifically to the representation, not the object represented.

We have to repeat that genre is an important part of the implied author. This is especially relevant as far as drawing style is concerned; many readers will place a comic within a certain genre on the basis of the drawing style. It is hard to imagine *Fantastic Four* drawn by Franquin – but Franquin and Byrne are obvious proponents of a certain genre. David B.'s drawing style might seem fit for a humoristic narrative, but his story obviously is not. Drawing style can place a comic in a certain genre, but this is definitely not necessary. The very opposite is possible as well; a very counter-intuitive drawing style can also add irony to a narrative. We mentioned that some pencillers do not have a consistently recognisable drawing style in chapter 1. This can also complicate analysis. So, observing drawing style can be interesting, but it also requires caution.

Matsumoto is one of those artists with a rather (purposefully) unstable drawing style. This makes the story reality of *No. 5* difficult to analyze, but it has interesting examples of how drawing style can have a narrative function nevertheless. Let us look at page 31 of No. 5 (figure 19). The bottom panel of the page portrays various characters, one of which is the child-woman Matrosjka. Above her head is a thought cloud with an image of a cat, a sun and hearts in it. In our analysis of Jimmy Corrigan in the first chapter we also saw a thought cloud with an image in it – but that image was drawn in a style consistent with the rest of the images. For the image in Matrosjka's thought cloud, this is obviously not the case. The cat and the other objects are drawn with an infantile handwriting – shaky and two-dimensional. We only have to compare the cat in the thought cloud with that on the head of No. 7 to see the difference. Here, the drawing style refers to the state of Matrosjka's mind. This was a rather simple example, as it was framed within a thought balloon.

Now, on page 5 through 9 (figure 20) the reader is shown a television animation about the Rainbow council (it turns out that No. 1 is watching it). In this sequence, the drawing style refers to a more conventional anime/manga style, with slicker lines, for example (although *No. 5* technically is a manga, coming from Japan, the style is a far cry from traditional manga). The character designs reminisce of Osamu Tezuka, a near-legendary pioneer of manga style. On page 37 through 40 there is a Dali-esque dream sequence from No. 5. In his dream, No. 5 sees No. 1 flying overhead in a point-of-view sequence. No. 1 is drawn in the same cartoon-like style we already saw on page 9, and not like he looks in the normal story's continuity. The reader can understand how No. 5 idealizes No. 1 as a simple cartoon character, as opposed to the story's reality, where No. 1 has become his enemy.

Figure 19: *No. 5* vol. 2 page 31

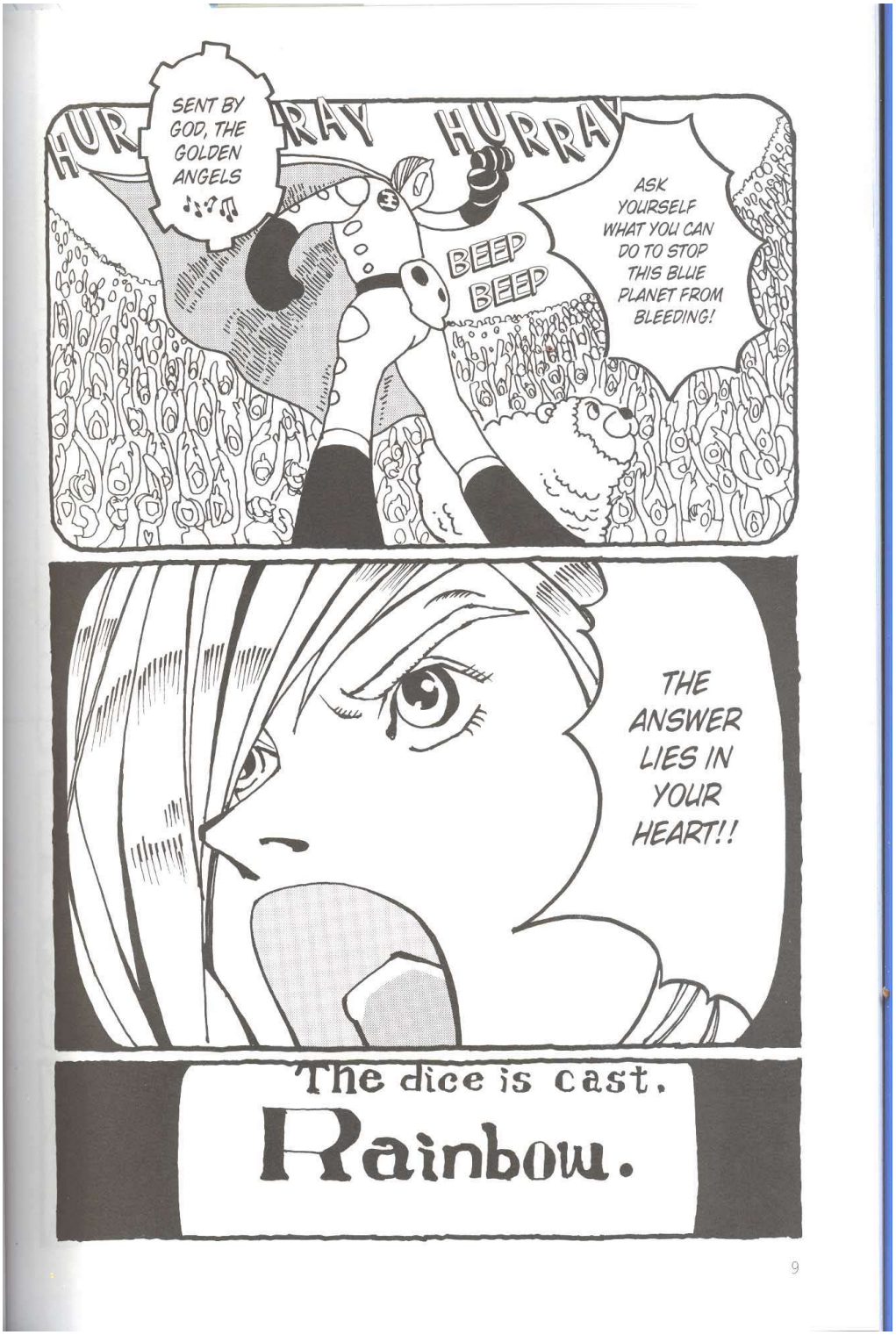


Figure 20: *No. 5* vol. 2 page 9

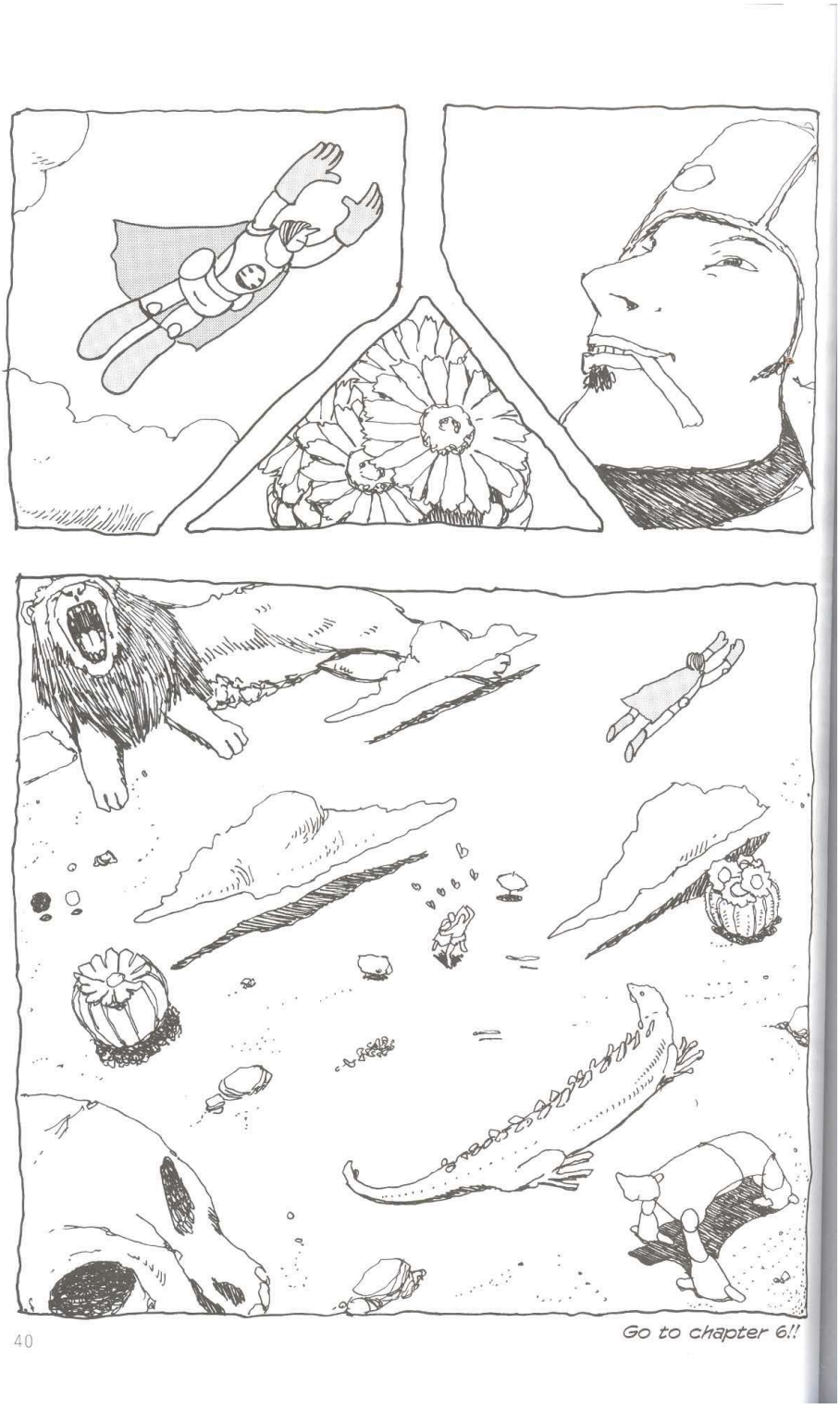


Figure 21: *No. 5* vol. 2 page 40

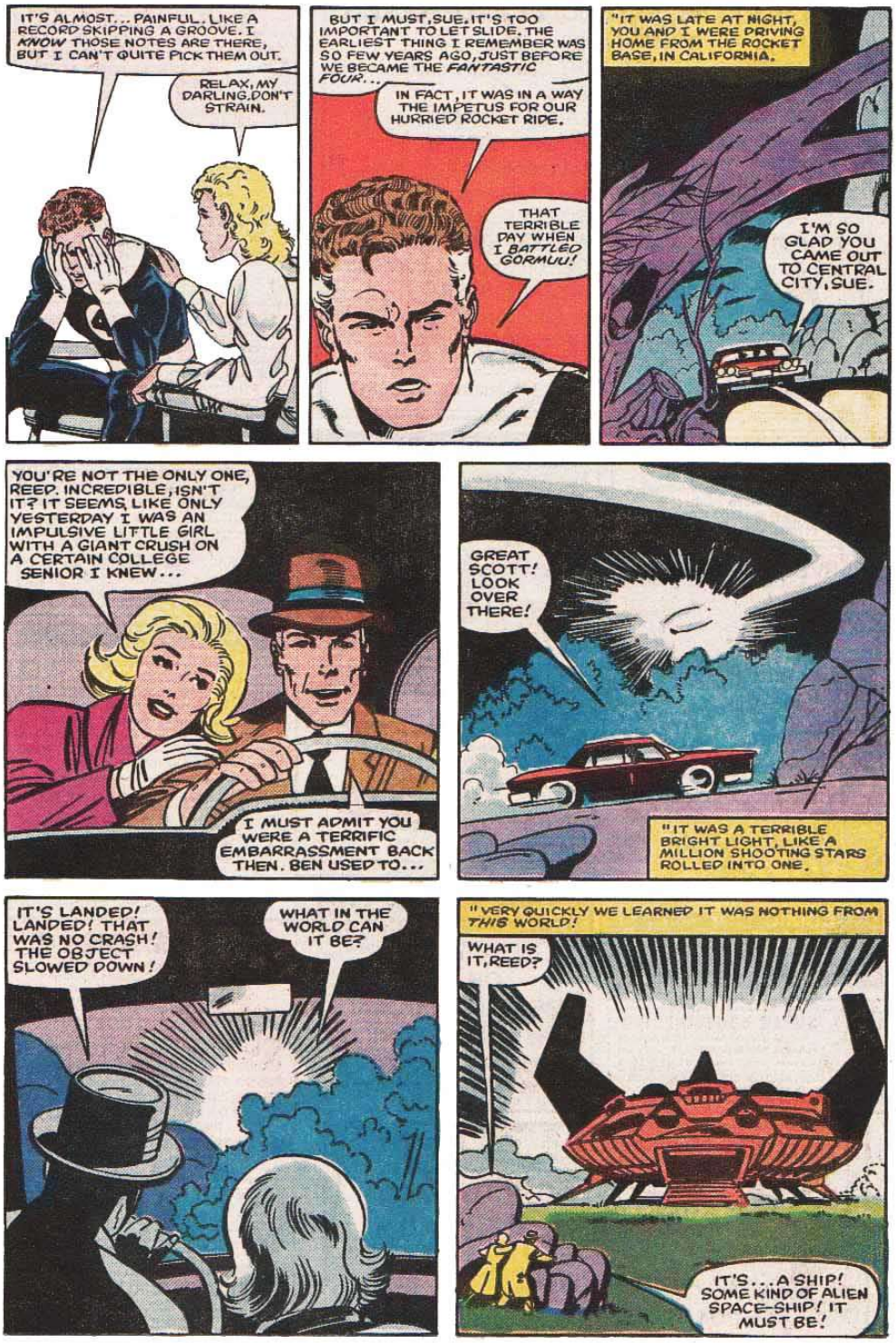


Figure 22: *Fantastic Four* #271 page 9

In *Fantastic Four* 271, Reed Richards (leader of the team) recounts a story from before the beginning of his career as a superhero from page 7 through 15 (figure 22) – all the images are focalised by Reed, and the words are narrated by him. Reed's story begins on the third panel of page 7. His extradiegetic homodiegetic narration is found in the word boxes, while the accompanying images show the story in flashback. Immediately in the third panel, where the story begins, a change in drawing style is observable. It might not be immediately apparent to a reader not familiar with superhero books, but to a regular reader, it is very clear how Byrne has altered his drawings to fit the story. To fully explain this, a short introduction to superhero continuity is needed. Superhero comics have been published since the 1930s, mainly in America. Most titles appeared as monthly magazines. The most successful superheroes have been in publication for more than half a century. This long time span, and the demanding work schedule of monthly publication ensure that hardly any superhero character has ever been presented by the same creative team. Tales of iconic characters like Superman have been written, pencilled, inked and coloured by hundreds of artists. It is a fine example of what Baudrillard would call a hyper-reality; a large number of texts referring mainly to each other. The decades of superhero history have seen many different drawing styles. Some artists became so popular that their drawing style became synonymous with a certain period. Jack Kirby is one of those well-known, influential artists; his style became a trademark for superhero comics of the 1960s.

Now, in Reed's tale, Byrne's drawing style refers directly to Kirby's highly recognisable, angular and dynamic drawing style. In fact, some of the panels are almost facsimiles of panels from the story 'I challenged…Groot' by Jack Kirby and Dick Ayers in *Tales to Astonish* 13 (1960) – compare for example page 7 of *Fantastic Four* 271 with page 2 of *Tales to Astonish* 13. A reader not familiar with that particular story, or even with Jack Kirby at all can still recognize the reference to the 1960s style, because Kirby's work became so iconic. A date is never mentioned in Reed's story, but the drawing style allows the reader to infer it. Of course, the story's theme, the language ('Great scott!'), and some of the ideological and scientific naivety all help to establish this sense. The result is rather odd; do Reed's memories take place in another reality than the present? Reed is telling the story to Sue, but the drawing style is obviously is only a message to the reader. Something similar can occur in film, when focalised memory images are in black and white. A character does not have memories in black and white, but it helps the viewer to establish the temporal hierarchy.

Framing

A frame is a single, demarcated image. For us, frames and framing refer specifically to the edges of the images; their shape, their size, and their position relative to others. Movie

frames usually have the same shape[20], while they do not (necessarily) in comics. Comics use all kinds of frames in different relations nowadays (using frames of the same shape and size continuously used to be more common when comics were usually found in newspapers). According to Groensteen, framing can have six different functions:

- 'La fonction clôture'; the creation of boundaries to 'close' the image;
- 'La fonction séparatrice'; the creation of gutters to divide images from each other;
- 'La fonction rythmique' deals with the way the frames influence the story velocity and tempo;
- 'La fonction structurante', or lay-out;
- 'La fonction expressive' describes frames that have a relation to what they depict – which is the most interesting function for our study of subjective narration;
- 'La fonction lecturale', dealing with the act of reading (49-68).

Peeters has a somewhat different approach. He takes a look at the relation the frames can have with a story and comes to four types of utilisations:

- 'Utilisation conventionelle', or the waffle iron. Frames have a fixed shape and size, and the story matter does not influence them;
- 'Utilisation décorative'. The frame's shape and size primarily depends on aesthetics;
- 'Utilisation rhétorique'. Frames are used foremost to tell the story effectively (the most common);
- 'Utilisation productrice'. The frames themselves produce the story, instead of just serving it (51-70).

While such distinctions may seem very clear-cut, they are not. Jacques Aumont (1987) notes that, in film, 'it is impossible to locate the narrative processes exactly; they shift over montage-figures, but also nest in framing, 'penetrate' the represented self' (66; our translation from Dutch). It is impossible to tell whether a frame is shaped as it is for legibility or design – or both. The different functions 'nest' in all facets of a text. Framing can be influenced by purely aesthetic considerations as much as storytelling ones, and the frames can have all kinds of functions at the same time. More importantly, recognizing all these functions is personal interpretation. Caution is needed before ascribing all kinds of functions to frames.

We mentioned that one image can have little in common with other images in the same sequence. Although these images depict a scene in the same diegetic space and time they appear totally different. The differences are not only in the image, but also in the frame; some images have distinct frame edges, while these are omitted for others. For example,

[20] Even in mainstream movie projects, the last few years have seen some interesting experiments with multiple frames, like the *24* TV series (2001 - , various) and the *Hulk* movie (2003, Ang Lee). The latter was based on a comic book, and we can assume that the comic book from inspired the movie's use of frames.

when we look at page 22, panel 4 of *Gaston,* we can see officer Longtarin blowing on his whistle against a complete white background. The frame edges are left out together with the background, putting all focus on the figure of Longtarin. Comic readers can follow the chain of events despite the incongruities between the images. Omitting the edges of the frame in this particular example can have a number of different functions. With some goodwill, we could even say that it adds to Longtarin's emotion (anger) – which would be an example of expressive utilisation. We should not be too quick in ascribing a single function to a frame. We are searching for expressive frames as examples of subjective narration, but cannot neglect other concerns (rhythm, legibility).

Frames can be used for subjective narration in different ways. Many small panels on a page can give a scene a sense of velocity and fear, like a quick montage can in movies. It is rather uncommon to manipulate the shape of the frames in movies, but, as we said, it is common practice in comics nowadays – also for subjective narration. Let us take for example the dream sequence, of which we find an example in *No. 5* (37-40; figure 21) and *Gaston* (46-47, figures 16-17). Despite the obvious differences between these titles, it is remarkable to see how both frame dreams in almost the same way. The frame's line is drawn less straight and thick, to mark the focalisation of the mental image. The shape of the frame, usually a fixed border, is altered here directly for the sake of the narrative. In a sense, the frame functions also like a thought cloud here. We mentioned that images are sometimes placed within a thought cloud or speech balloon – which then functions as a new frame. We also mentioned that word boxes sometimes occupy an entire frame. Clearly, the line between frame and balloon/cloud can be a thin one.

Subjective image transitions

We can find some very interesting image transitions on page 112 and 133 of *No. 5* (figures 23-24). No. 1 is having a conversation in his mind with No. 4, a psychic twin. Panels 1, 2 and 3 on 112 and 1 and 2 on 113 have a completely different background. The only constant element is the presence of No. 1, who remains at the centre of the image, albeit from different angles (respectively in close-up, three long-shots and a medium close-up). The setting is allegorical; No. 4 tells No. 1 'We're simply retrieving the person he was before the one he is now' (112), while there is a zodiac disk behind them, symbolising personality and identity. The second panel on page 113 shows No. 1 in (supposedly) normal diegetic space, with his eyes closed and his fingers on his temples, asking to have a normal conversation. The entire background is white in this panel, offering a stark contrast to the crowded preceding panels.

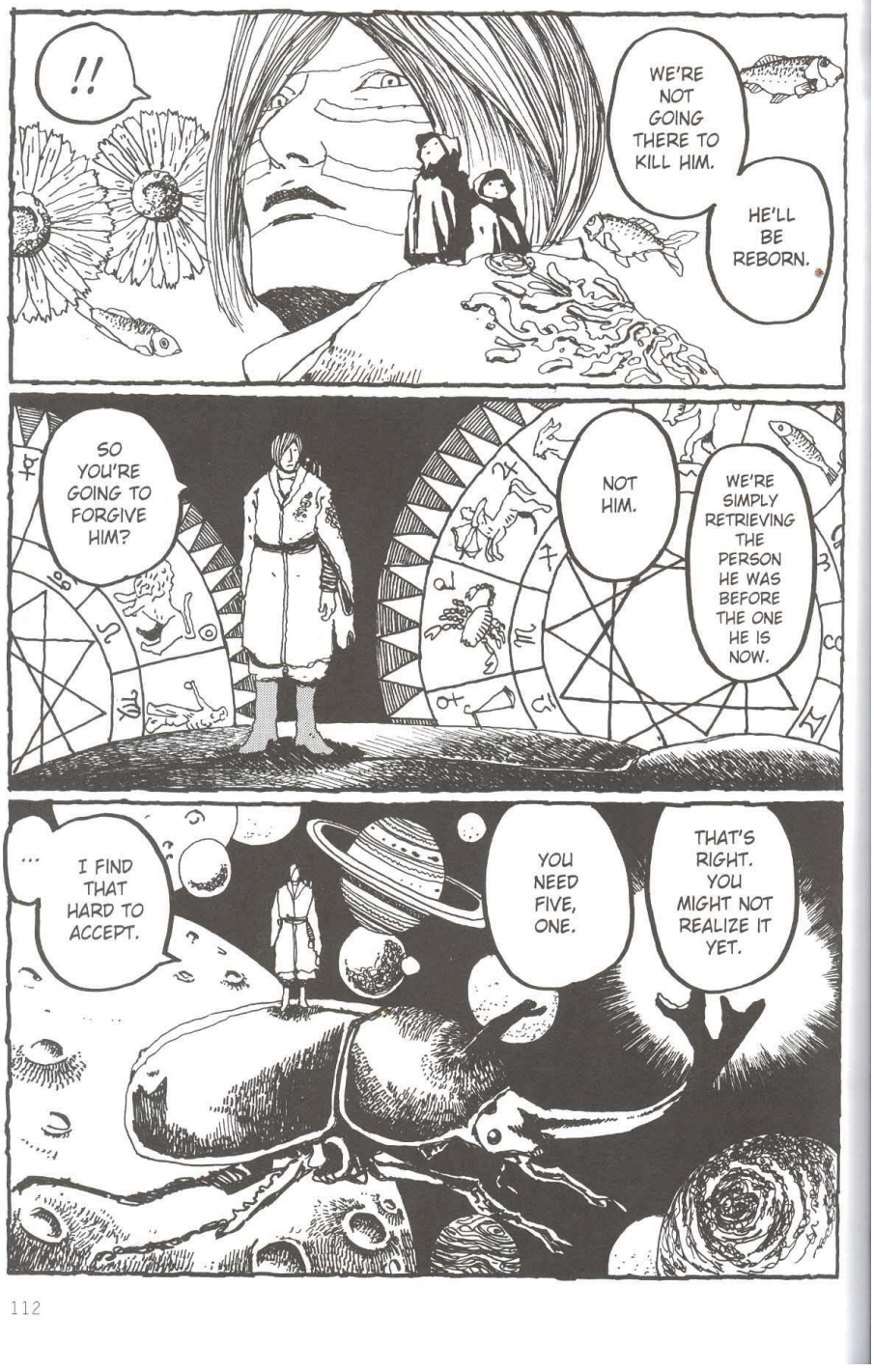


Figure 23: *No.5* vol. 2 page 112

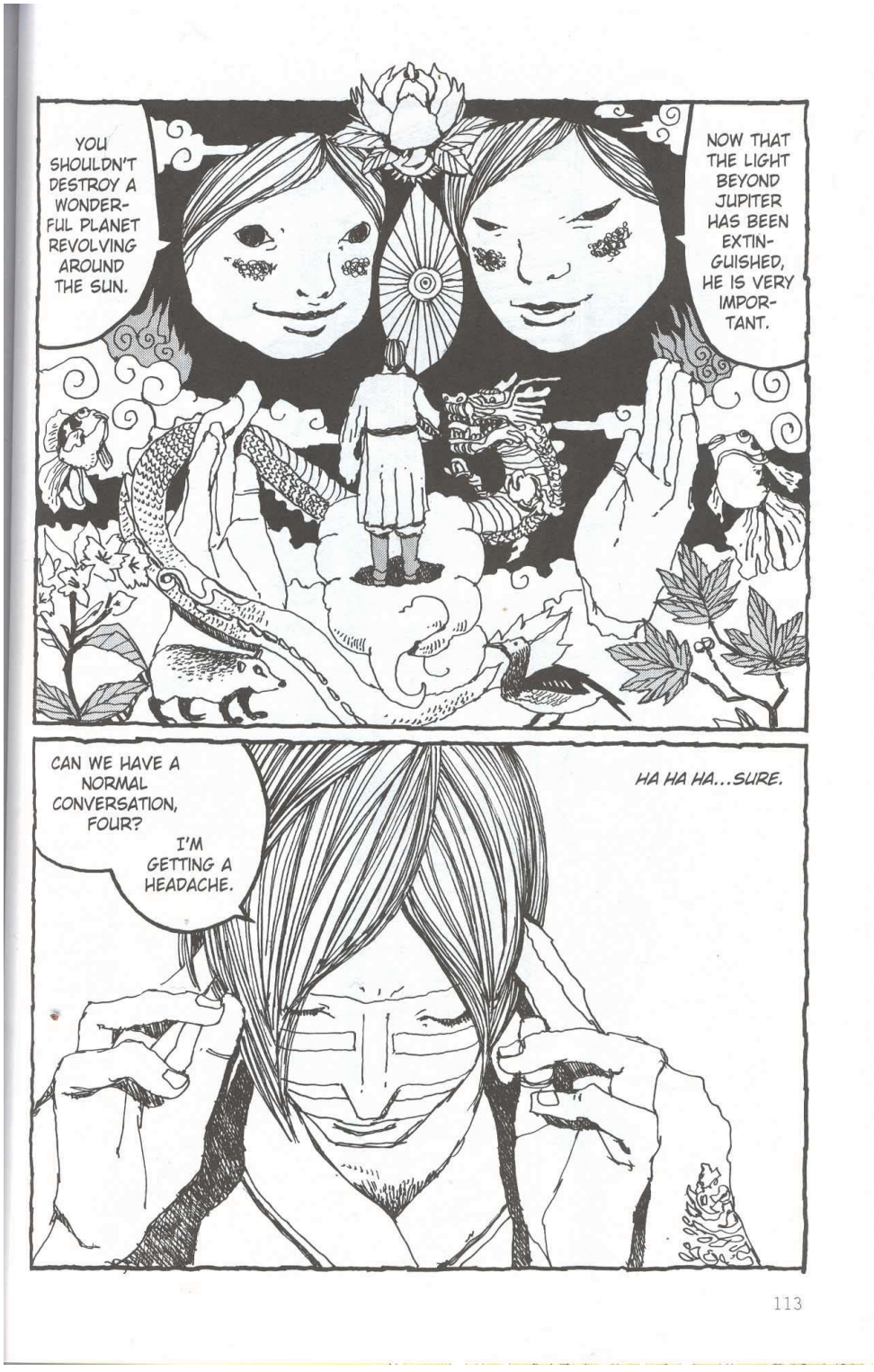


Figure 24: *No. 5* vol. 2 page 113

Showing these images in a film sequence would drastically alter the nature of the sequence, because film *has* to choose a transition between the images, a way in which on background changes into another. Even if film chooses to changes the background abruptly from one image to another (a jump cut, with the zodiac disks and the planets offering a graphic match), it has presented the reader with a particular type of transition – it tells whether the background changes abruptly, or blurs into something else. The comic leaves the change entirely in the mind of the reader, who has to use his or her imagination to fill in the gaps. There remains a sense of temporal continuity, because there is an important constant element (No. 1) and a conversation, despite the changes in background. McCloud's six types of image transitions are not sufficient to analyse this scene. In his terms, these panels have action-to-action transitions ('a single subject in distinct […] progressions'; 70). But there is much more going on in this scene then simply the passing of time. When we focus only on the characters and diegetic time, we neglect the changes in the rest of the image. To understand image transitions, we have to pay less attention to the story, and more to the actual changes in the image and around them.

Another good example of image transitions is found on page 32 of *Gaston* (figure 25). We are concerned with the second gag on this page, which consists of only three images. The first of these images has no frame outlines. The image within depicts a warped reality; officer Longtarin is much more decorated and has more posture than in the series' normal continuity – one need to only look at other gag on this very page to see this. Also, the image features a ridiculous overabundance of stop signs and red traffic lights. A reader can understand that this is an ideologically focalised image of Longtarin, depicting his power-fantasy. Notice how Gaston, in his trademark car, intrudes the image from the right. A reader will read from left to right to see Longtarin and his fantasy first, and then Gaston's entrance. Heavy smoke clouds and three different, large onomatopoeia make clear that Gaston's presence is a dissonant element in the image.

The second image, then, is remarkably 'silent': there are no onomatopoeia, but the smoke clouds and the entire background are left out as well. The first image implies frames because of the border between coloured diegetic background and white gutter space. This white space completely encloses the two characters in the second image, putting all focus on them. While the first image offers a scene setting, the second focuses completely on a single hilarious moment. We could interpret the short sequence as a humorous depiction of the struggle between the forces of authority and 'heterogeneous' elements (as Bataille would say) in society. Be that as it may, the third image is placed beneath the middle of the first and second. It has a full black outline, marking the fact that the images have returned to normal diegetic space. The image shows Longtarin just awoken, sitting up straight in his bed, which makes clear that the preceding images came from a dream of his. Notice how this third

Figure 25: *Gaston* vol. 13 page 32

image is enclosed by large white gutters left and right. The black outline, the fully realized background and the placing (a single image with blank spaces next to it) sets this image apart from the others and singles it out as the conclusion of the gag. The image itself focuses on the terrified Longtarin, who has a central place.

Another example we will examine is near the end of *Jimmy Corrigan* (figure 26). Jimmy is sitting in a train, returning home from his mother's nursing home, where she just announced to him that she is involved in a new relationship (there is no pagination). Panels 2, 3 and 4 have similar images. The near-repetition of a very trivial image (someone staring out of a window) establishes a sense of boredom. It is at least partly subjective framing, because the type of transitions point to Jimmy's trapped feeling and despair. Panel 5 ends this horizontal strip with a point-of-view sequence; in panel 4 Jimmy is looking at the window, and panel 5 shows a close-up of his reflection in the window. Although Jimmy is looking out the window, his gaze is primarily inward, as the next sequence underscores. It is a sequence of eight panels in pairs of two in a vertical column. All the pairs consist of one image in a round frame without an outline, and one image in a cubic frame with black outlines. In the cubic frame we can see circles coming from Jimmy's head to form a trail to the round frame. Obviously, the round frame is an extended thought balloon, and the image within it is internally focalised. This interpretation is helped by the fact that the image within the circle-frame is drawn in shades of blue. Throughout this comic, Ware has used this technique to depict internally focalised mental images. So, this sequence presents four juxtapositions of a 'real' image in diegetic space (R) and a thought image (T). Notable is the pattern in which this is done:

T1/R1

R2/T2

T3/R3

R4/T4

Notice that in T2, Jimmy is sitting in his chair at home, and that this image is followed by a small question mark in the lower right corner. T3 and T4 are basically repetitions of T2, but each is followed by a larger question mark. Again, Ware plays with the limits of images and words by having a linguistic sign follow an image. In effect, the image starts to function as a sentence ('What will I do when I get home?'). The repetition of T2 with the growing question mark, combined with the growing despair of Jimmy in the R images (culminating with him burying his head in his hands in R4) makes this sequence particularly harrowing. Although the framing is in service of depicting Jimmy's state of mind, there is more to it. The T and R images are also placed in a pattern in a decorative utilisation. Furthermore, the entire page lay-out is important here. The upper strip and the vertical strip in the lower left enclose panel 14 (which contains just the word 'and') and panel 15. Now, the (relatively) enormous

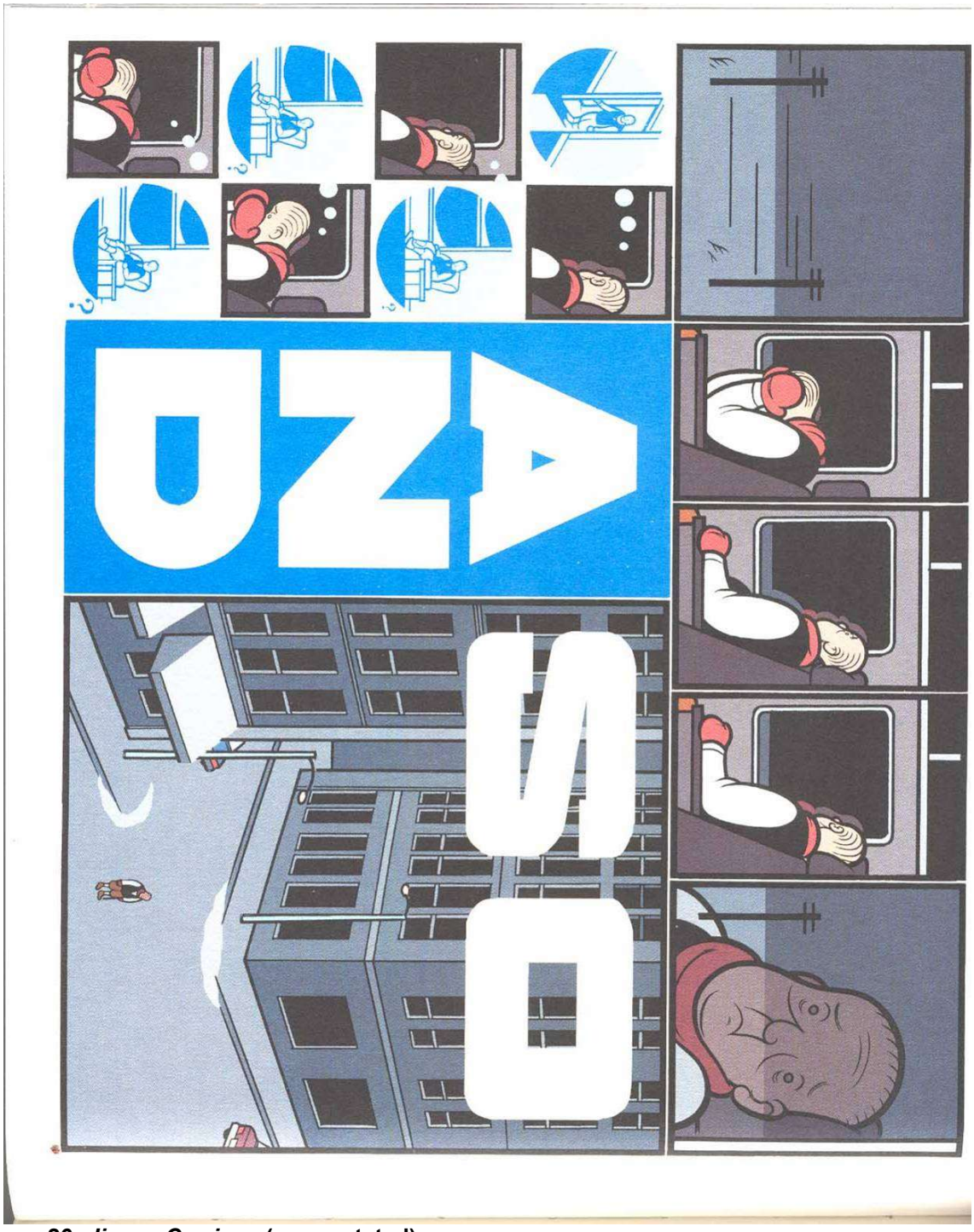


Figure 26: ***Jimmy Corrigan*** **(page rotated)**

presence of the connecting words ‘so’ and ‘and’ in panel 14 and 15 further emphasizes the lower right corner of the page. That lower right corner is a part of panel 15, and shows the reader an extreme long-shot of Jimmy, in his own on the street. Framing and lay-out in comics can serve several different functions, some narrative, other non-narrative.

Conclusion

To understand subjective narration in comics, we have to understand comics. Comic panels are not the equivalent of a series of movie stills, nor are they just drawings accompanying a story. They have wholly unique qualities, which create a reading experience unlike any other. Comics can be considered the art of omitting. Between every two images there is an interval which requires a mental filling by the reader. There is no fixed way one image connects to another; so ambiguity and interpretation are requisites. Images do not only connect to each other from left to right, but in every possible direction. Temporal hierarchy (as in film) is replaced by spatial equality. Notice that we are referring to space on the page, not diegetic space within the images – this is often *less* important than it is in film. Form is often at least as important as the story of a comic. Placing panels on a page requires making choices of pacing and lay-out. Simply looking at stories is not enough to criticize a comic, because it overlooks many of such intricacies. To be fair, only a small percentage of the comics actively taps into the possibilities, but such is the case in every medium.

The inherent ambiguity and the many possible connections between the images functions like our memory in some respects, which gives comics very interesting options for subjective narration. Image-to-image transitions can be used in a variety of both conventional and non-conventional ways to portray subjectivity. On the one hand, these techniques are similar to other media (point-of-view sequences), on the other hand they can be unique for the medium (framing techniques). Our examples have shown that subjective narration is just as common in comics as in any other medium. It might show up in other places than in other media, and take some adjusting to recognize – but it can be found in any comic genre.

Ascribing certain narrative functions to frames and their placing requires caution. We have seen that framing often has different functions and can work on several levels. Our examples of subjective framing showed that the narrator can be just as concerned with legibility and aesthetics as with rendering consistent subjectivity. Therefore, researching a single topic in comics should not blind one for other elements. There were more things to our exemplary scenes than just subjective narration, and these have to be taken into account to fully understand them.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, we have tried to reveal what is unique about comics. First, we saw how comics operate on the border of word and image. It uses a highly coded set of symbols, which offers an interesting territory for anyone studying the difference between words and images. In this respect, comics are the true inheritors of pictorial languages like hieroglyphs. Second, we saw how comics' spatial sequences of images are different from temporal ones. This lead us to conclude that there is much more to a comic than its story. Reading comics requires commitment: a reader has to decode its symbols and provide closure for its gutters. However, many of its readers are youngsters, so this seems not to bother its audience. Maybe it actually is the coding and the non-linearity that creates an overall playfulness that is particularly exciting for children, like a secret language. This is of course not to say that comics are a children's medium – far from it. We have also tried to show how comics apply their expressive potential to tell any kind of story.

We divided subjective narration into speech representation, thought representation and focalisation in our introduction. We first focused on thought and found it in the thought balloon. The last decades have seen fewer thought balloons – but hardly fewer direct thought. The balloon may have gotten out of fashion, but there are plenty alternatives. Writing usually has more words at its disposal for direct thought in comparison. But direct thought in comics cannot be analysed solely by the meaning of the words. Often, they also function on a graphic plane, and can be quite close to images. This makes comics' direct thought more expressive than informative. These qualities should not be overlooked in any analysis. In comics, content is often found on the surface.

We have seen different instances of focalisation, mainly in comics' images. Perceptual focalisation, especially the specific spatial point-of-view sequence, is just as common and effective in comics as in film. Psychological focalisation is perhaps even more common in comics than in film, because the comic page has so much room for expression. The shape of the frames, their lay-out and the pacing of the story allow for at least as much psychological focalisation as editing does. On top of that, the spatial equality of comic images allows for greater changes from image to image than film's temporal hierarchy does. The independence of the comic image permits the incorporation of expressive elements like emotive symbols or backgrounds. A reader generally knows more about the state of mind of a comic character than of a film character. One needs to understand the working and effects of comic sequences to recognize the focalisation that they help create.

So, comics have fewer words than writing, but use them in another way. Comics have fewer images than film, but use them in another way. Despite a reputation as a shallow medium, comics' subjective narration can be just as nuanced and profound as in other media. Some techniques of subjective narration are similar in different media; point-of-view

sequences in film and comics are very much alike. Just like in writing, direct thought is based on direct speech in comics. Other techniques are not unique, but typical of comics; representing both speech and thought in all kinds of balloons is the most widely recognized of them. Comics share such symbols with cartoons and animation, but in neither has it blossomed into such a fully developed system. Truly unique subjective narration is found in comics' space, which allows different readings, almost like the human mind. We feel there still lays great potential for subjective narration in comics. If we can imagine a stream of consciousness in words, then surely we can imagine one in images and words. For such a purpose, comics might be even more apt than movies.

Despite all the differences, it is also remarkable to see how much techniques of subjective narration have in common in different media, and how widespread they are. The subtle devices of subjective narration are not restricted to intricate and difficult stories. Action and humour stories with simple narrative structures use both direct thought and focalisation to great effect too. It is quite logical that subjective narration is so common and universally recognized. It is a great tool for immersing an audience in a story. The main reason for creating stories has always been to entertain or persuade an audience. Subjective narration is one of the storyteller's foremost strategies. Humans simply are rather self-centred; they enjoy stories about other humans or other creatures behaving like humans. Human characters are usually at the centre of a story, and narrating subjectively brings them closer to the reader. That reader is no longer a neutral observer of a story, but becomes able to experience it with a character. Subjective narration is essential to create a true reading *experience*. This makes subjective narration one of the elements that set stories apart from other texts (cf. Fludernik).

It is tempting to see writing, comics and film as evolutionary steps in storytelling. Comics add images to the words of writing. Films add movement and sound to the images of comics. But just like we know that writing is not inferior to film, comics do not merely foreshadow film, or present a dead-end. Writing has shown an incredible vitality by focusing on its strengths in storytelling rather than its weaknesses. We would argue that film has been as important for the development of modern writing as photography has been for modern painting. If comics want to thrive as a medium, they must focus on its strengths, rather than try to emulate those of other media.

This thesis is not meant only for researchers who are already familiar with comics. We also hope to show to other media researchers how to understand the qualities of comics and analyze them. Any media researcher needs to be familiar with the conventions and standards of the medium – but a little more so with those of comics. Knowing how to read thought balloons and gutters is one thing, but one needs to be able to place them in a tradition, and see where they follow or deviate from the norms. To get a good grasp of what comics are about, one needs to set aside prejudices about content; quite simple stories like

Gaston conjure up a host of narrative tricks. In general, any comics' researcher should not be too preoccupied with the story as a chain of events. We can hardly call the misfortunes of *Jimmy Corrigan* spectacular, but the book is full of fireworks in style and presentation. Luckily, modern media researchers seem to understand that any cultural artefact can be interesting as a statement about the society it came from. Again, this is not to say that comics have little artistic value, but that their merits often lie outside of the story, in the sprawling playfulness of the medium's space.

Narration in general and subjective narration in particular have had a lot of academic attention, but will always remain a fruitful topic of discussion – simply because stories are at the core of our society. In the field of comic analysis, much remains to be done. The finesses of narrativity and non-narrativity in comics need to be described and analysed more thoroughly. The presentation of characters and drawing style in general (both in and out comics) is an intriguing subject. The geographical differences in conventions and appreciation demand a broad international reception-research. Also, there simply are many incredibly interesting albums, series and artists that deserve serious attention. But most importantly, we hope that future comics research will lose the self-explicatory tone this thesis still has. We hope comics will soon be taken for granted as a research object, both in and out of academic circles.

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