

50. [Introduction] Time Frames

Scott McCloud is the Aristotle of comics, showing the way for contemporary thinkers who would seek to rigorously analyze emerging media.

What Aristotle did for Attic drama in the *Poetics*, McCloud has done for the neglected form of comics. He has explained what the most talented comic artists knew, although only Will Eisner had begun to articulate it—how the comic format works, and what its underlying structures and techniques are. He began by rigidly defining comics as “sequential art” (or, if further explication is necessary, “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence”). McCloud then found that, based on this definition, comics are as old as the ancient Egyptians. From there, he went on to consider many of the important higher-level techniques of the comic artist: How does the variation between generic and specific representation of people work? What “happens” in between the panels of the comic images we read? What are the uses of color in the comic art form? And, as is discussed in the chapter excerpted here, how can time be represented in a medium which is (although it is read over a period of time) purely spatial? It is hardly necessary to even mention that McCloud’s work has implications for combining text and image, but it provides other lessons and examples.

Many of those involved with new media are pleased by McCloud’s deft metacomical tricks, a number of which are represented in this chapter. Since McCloud uses a narrative medium suited to general exposition, he was able to write a comic about comics, and take advantage of this to illustrate (in every sense of the word) his points. Other similar attempts are not always as successful: although there have been buildings constructed mainly to comment on architecture, these are not usually popular or very habitable structures. While the first edition of George Landow’s *Hypertext* was issued by Johns Hopkins on disk as *Hypertext in Hypertext*, this edition never gained wide scholarly currency—not being as widely cited as the book it was based upon—and Landow’s *Hypertext 2.0* was not issued in a similar format. Some interest in hypertextual criticism of hypertext remains, as can be seen in the September 2002 special issue of the *Journal of Digital Information*, edited by Jill Walker and Susana Tosca. Perhaps this will build upon other nonfiction hypertext work to provide interesting results; it may also simply be dancing about dance.

Looking to *Understanding Comics* can provoke new media insight, but it’s certainly not the case that all of McCloud’s techniques can be easily dragged and dropped into the digital realm. What McCloud’s work nevertheless shows is that new forms, even those that have not been studied seriously for centuries or even decades, do indeed have certain conventions and rules, and that if the form being studied is considered with care and thought, these rules can be determined, benefiting those who work in the form, who are striving to improve the practice of their art.

—NM

See Brenda Laurel’s essay (038) for a direct application of Aristotelian dramatic ideas to new media.

Some new media practitioners have also begun to consider their own work as a type of sequential art. Given that thumbnails and storyboards are already used by many new media systems designers, perhaps viewing a particular path through such a system as a comics-like sequence is a logical next step. New media tends not to have the continual movement of the motion picture (storyboarding’s most high-profile application), but rather periods of reading and navigation more closely aligned with the experience of comics. In *Reinventing Comics* McCloud has also considered how the specific form of comics may be transformed by new media and what forms might emerge. It’s fitting, then, that Ted Nelson employed an underground comics format to communicate the user experience he wanted new media systems to have—an example of which appears in his 1974 *Computer Lib/Dream Machines*.

038
563

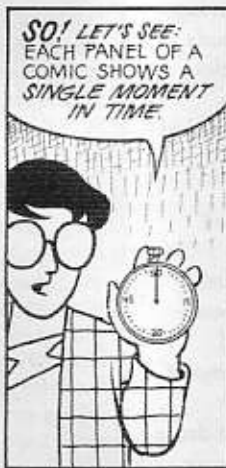
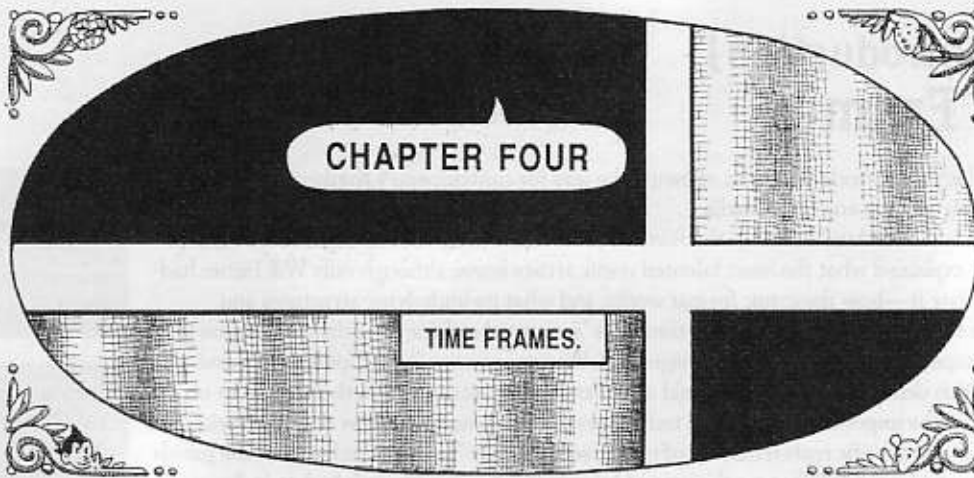
711

Further Reading

Eisner, Will. *Comics & Sequential Art*. Tamarac, Florida: Poorhouse Press, 1985.

Landow, George P. *Hypertext in Hypertext*. 2 3.5" disks; Macintosh and Windows versions. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994.

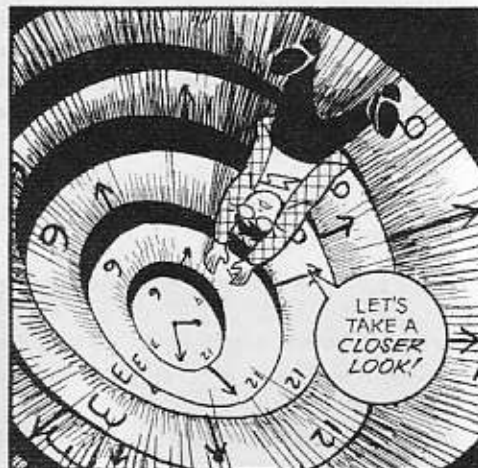
McCloud, Scott. *Reinventing Comics*. New York: Harperperennial, 2000.



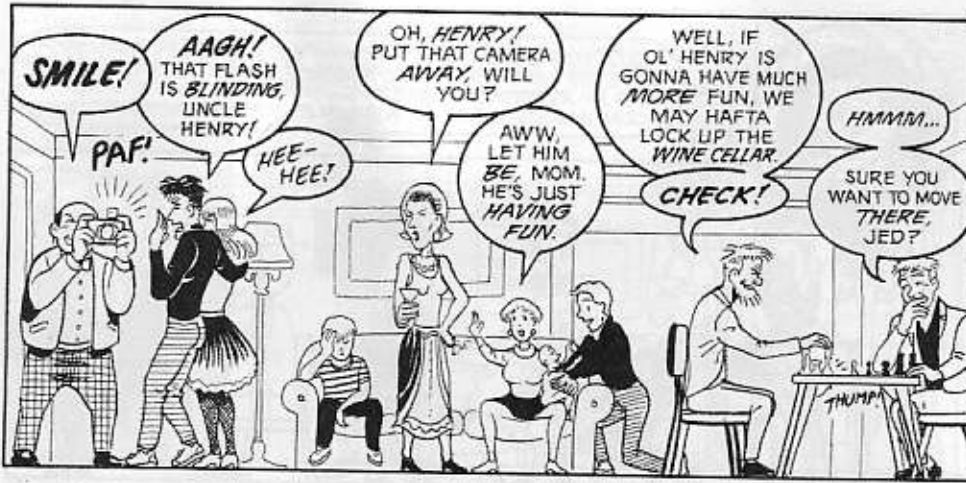
AND *BETWEEN* THOSE FROZEN MOMENTS -- BETWEEN THE PANELS -- OUR MINDS FILL IN THE *INTERVENING MOMENTS*, CREATING THE ILLUSION OF *TIME AND MOTION*.



LIKE A LINE DRAWN BETWEEN TWO POINTS.



Original Publication
 Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art. 94-117. Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993.

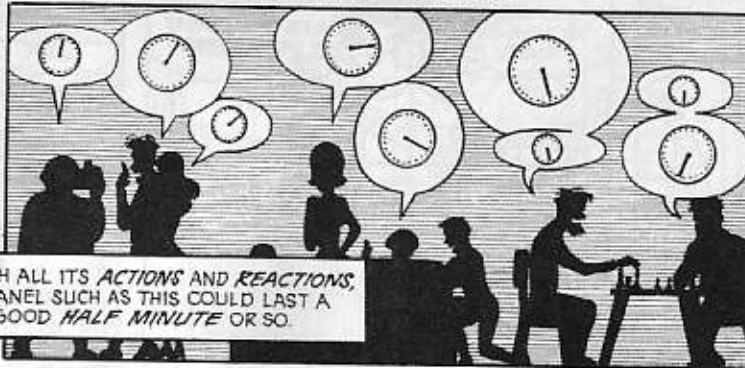


EVEN THE BRIEF SOUND OF A FLASH-BULB HAS A CERTAIN DURATION, SHORT TO BE SURE, BUT NOT INSTANTANEOUS!

FAR SLOWER IS THE DURATION OF THE AVERAGE WORD. UNCLE HENRY ALONE BURNS UP A GOOD SECOND IN THIS PANEL, ESPECIALLY SINCE "SMILE!" UNDOUBTEDLY PRECEDED THE FLASH.

LIKEWISE, THE NEXT BALLOONS COULD HAVE ONLY FOLLOWED THE BURST OF THE FLASHBULB, THUS ADDING STILL MORE TIME.

JUST AS PICTURES AND THE INTERVALS BETWEEN THEM CREATE THE ILLUSION OF TIME THROUGH CLOSURE, WORDS INTRODUCE TIME BY REPRESENTING THAT WHICH CAN ONLY EXIST IN TIME -- SOUND.





BUT HOW COULD THIS BE ANYTHING BUT A SINGLE MOMENT? OUR EYES HAVE BEEN WELL-TRAINED BY THE PHOTOGRAPH AND BY REPRESENTATIONAL ART TO SEE ANY SINGLE CONTINUOUS IMAGE AS A SINGLE INSTANT IN TIME.



BUT THE ACTIONS THAT WE SEE OCCURRING SEEMINGLY AT THE SAME TIME OBVIOUSLY CAN'T BE!



ANOTHER WAY TO LOOK AT IT: LET'S THINK OF TIME AS A ROPE.



EACH INCH REPRESENTS A SECOND.



SUCH A ROPE MIGHT BE SAID TO WIND SOMETHING LIKE THIS THROUGH OUR PANEL.

SIMPLIFIED OF COURSE, SINCE EACH BALLOON HAS ITS OWN TWISTS AND TURNS.



AND SINCE EACH FACE AND FIGURE IS DRAWN TO MATCH HIS/HER OWN WORDS--

SMILE!
PAF!
AAGH! THAT FLASH IS BLINDING, UNCLE HENRY!
HEE-HEE!

-- THOSE FIGURES, FACES AND WORDS ARE MATCHED IN *TIME* AS WELL.

THE PROPERTIES OF THE SINGLE CONTINUOUS *IMAGE*, MEANWHILE, TEND TO MATCH EACH FIGURE WITH EVERY *OTHER* FIGURE.

SINGLE *IMAGE*.

SINGLE *MOMENT*.

PORTRAYING TIME ON A LINE MOVING *LEFT TO RIGHT*. THIS PUTS ALL THE *IMAGES* ON THE SAME VERTICAL AXIS.

AND *TANGLES UP TIME* BEYOND ALL RECOGNITION!

SNAP! SNAP!

CRASH!

PERHAPS WE'VE BEEN TOO CONDITIONED BY PHOTOGRAPHY TO PERCEIVE SINGLE IMAGES AS *SINGLE MOMENTS*. AFTER ALL, IT DOES TAKE AN EYE *TIME* TO MOVE ACROSS SCENES IN *REAL LIFE*!

EACH FIGURE IS ARRANGED FROM *LEFT TO RIGHT* IN THE SEQUENCE WE WILL "*READ*" THEM, EACH OCCUPYING A DISTINCT *TIME* SLOT.

IN SOME RESPECTS THIS PANEL BY ITSELF ACTUALLY *FITS* OUR *DEFINITION* OF COMICS! ALL IT NEEDS IS A FEW *GUTTERS* THROWN IN TO *CLARIFY* THE SEQUENCE.

SMILE!

PA

AAGH! THAT FLASH IS BLINDING, UNCLE HENRY!

HEE-HEE!

OH, HENRY! PUT THAT CAMERA AWAY. WILL YOU?

AWW. LET HIM SEE, MOM. HE'S JUST HAVING FUN!

WELL, IF OL' HENRY IS GONNA HAVE MUCH *MORE* FUN, WE MAY HAP TA LOCK UP THE WINE CELLAR.

CHECK!

HMM...

SURE YOU WANT TO MOVE *THERE*, JED?

ONE PANEL, OPERATING AS *SEVERAL* PANELS.



NOT ALL PANELS ARE LIKE THAT, OF COURSE

A SILENT PANEL SUCH AS THIS COULD *INDEED* BE SAID TO DEPICT A *SINGLE MOMENT!*



IF *SOUND* IS INTRODUCED, THIS CEASES TO BE TRUE --



-- *BUT*, IN AN OTHERWISE SILENT *CAPTIONED* PANEL, THE SINGLE MOMENT CAN ACTUALLY BE *HELD*.



THESE VARIOUS SHAPES WE CALL *PANELS* HOLD IN THEIR BORDERS ALL OF THE *ICONS* THAT ADD UP TO THE *VOCABULARY OF COMICS*.



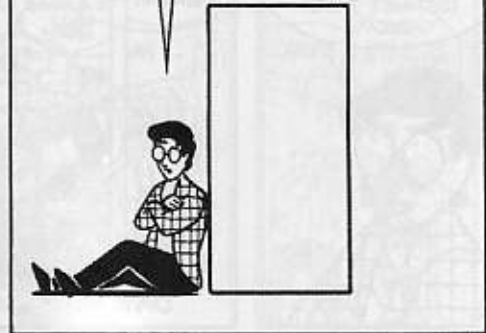
ALL EXCEPT *ONE*.



FOR JUST AS THE BODY'S LARGEST ORGAN -- OUR *SKIN* -- IS SELDOM *THOUGHT OF* AS AN ORGAN --



-- SO TOO IS THE PANEL *ITSELF* OVERLOOKED AS COMICS' MOST IMPORTANT *ICON!*



THESE ICONS WE CALL PANELS OR "FRAMES" HAVE NO **FIXED** OR **ABSOLUTE MEANING**, LIKE THE ICONS OF **LANGUAGE, SCIENCE** AND **COMMUNICATION**.



NOR IS THEIR MEANING AS **FLUID** AND **MALLEABLE** AS THE SORTS OF ICONS WE CALL **PICTURES**.



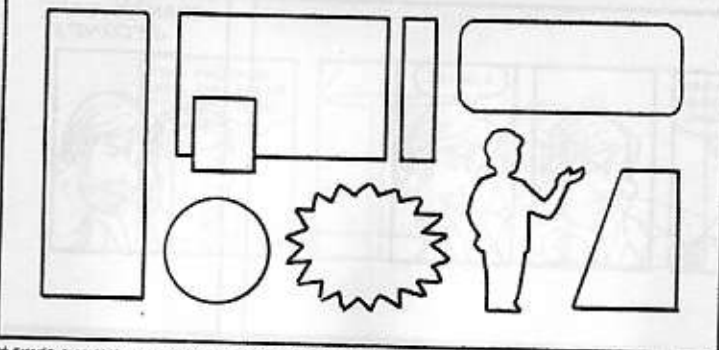
THE PANEL ACTS AS A SORT OF **GENERAL INDICATOR** THAT **TIME** OR **SPACE** IS BEING **DIVIDED**.



THE **DURATIONS** OF THAT **TIME** AND THE **DIMENSIONS** OF THAT **SPACE** ARE DEFINED MORE BY THE **CONTENTS** OF THE PANEL THAN BY THE PANEL **ITSELF**.*



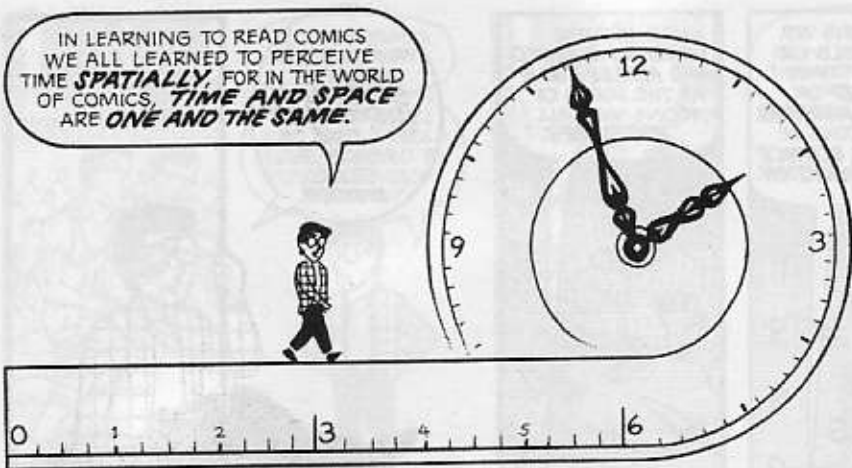
PANEL **SHAPES** VARY **CONSIDERABLY** THOUGH, AND WHILE DIFFERENCES OF SHAPE DON'T AFFECT THE SPECIFIC "**MEANINGS**" OF THOSE PANELS VIS-A-VIS TIME, THEY **CAN** AFFECT THE READING **EXPERIENCE**.



WHICH BRINGS US TO THE STRANGE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TIME AS **DEPICTED** IN COMICS AND TIME AS **PERCEIVED** BY THE READER.



*EISNER DISCUSSES THIS UNDER THE HEADING "FRAMING TIME" IN *COMICS AND SEQUENTIAL ART*



BUT IF THE CREATOR OF THIS SCENE WANTED TO *LENGTHEN* THAT PAUSE, HOW COULD HE OR SHE DO SO? ONE OBVIOUS SOLUTION WOULD BE TO ADD MORE PANELS, BUT IS THAT THE ONLY WAY?

D'YA THINK THE SOK COULD FINALLY DO IT THIS YEAR?

I GUESS.

IS THERE ANY WAY TO MAKE A SINGLE SILENT PANEL LIKE THIS ONE SEEM *LONGER*? HOW ABOUT WIDENING THE SPACE *BETWEEN* PANELS? ANY *DIFFERENCE*?

HEY, I DESERVE A BETTER JOB! I COULD BE A BRAIN SURGEON!

I GUESS.

WE'VE SEEN HOW TIME CAN BE CONTROLLED THROUGH THE *CONTENT* OF PANELS, THE *NUMBER* OF PANELS AND CLOSURE *BETWEEN* PANELS, BUT THERE'S STILL *ONE MORE*.

AS UNLIKELY AS IT SOUNDS, THE PANEL *SHAPE* CAN ACTUALLY MAKE A *DIFFERENCE* IN OUR *PERCEPTION* OF TIME. EVEN THOUGH THIS LONG PANEL HAS THE SAME BASIC "MEANING" AS ITS SHORTER VERSIONS, STILL IT HAS THE *FEELING* OF GREATER LENGTH!

THAT MADONNA, MAN, SHE'S ONE HOT GASE!

I GUESS.

EVER NOTICED HOW THE WORDS "SHORT" OR "LONG" CAN REFER EITHER TO THE **FIRST** DIMENSION OR TO THE **FOURTH**?

IN A MEDIUM WHERE TIME AND SPACE **MERGE** SO COMPLETELY, THE DISTINCTION OFTEN **VANISHES!**

THE **PANEL BORDER** IS OUR **GUIDE** THROUGH **TIME AND SPACE**. BUT IT WILL ONLY GUIDE US **SO FAR.**

AS MENTIONED, PANELS COME IN MANY SHAPES AND SIZES, THOUGH THE **CLASSIC RECTANGLE** IS USED MOST OFTEN.

MOST OF US ARE SO USED TO THE STANDARD **RECTANGULAR** FORMAT THAT A "**BORDERLESS**" PANEL SUCH AS THIS CAN TAKE ON A **TIMELESS QUALITY.**

HEY, ARE YOU EVEN LISTENING TO ME?!

I GUESS.

WHEN THE **CONTENT** OF A SILENT PANEL OFFERS NO CLUES AS TO ITS **DURATION**, IT CAN ALSO PRODUCE A SENSE OF **TIMELESSNESS.**

BECAUSE OF ITS **UNRESOLVED NATURE**, SUCH A PANEL MAY **LINGER** IN THE READER'S MIND.

AND ITS PRESENCE MAY BE FELT IN THE PANELS WHICH **FOLLOW** IT.



IN COMICS, AS IN FILM, TELEVISION AND 'REAL LIFE,' IT IS ALWAYS **NOW**.

THIS PANEL AND **THIS** PANEL **ALONE** REPRESENTS THE **PRESENT**.

ANY PANEL **BEFORE** THIS-- THAT **LAST** ONE, FOR INSTANCE-- REPRESENTS THE **PAST**.

LIKEWISE, ALL PANELS **STILL TO COME**-- THIS **NEXT** PANEL, FOR INSTANCE-- REPRESENT THE **FUTURE**.

BUT **UNLIKE** OTHER MEDIA, IN COMICS, THE PAST IS MORE THAN JUST **MEMORIES** FOR THE AUDIENCE AND THE FUTURE IS MORE THAN JUST **POSSIBILITIES!**

BOTH **PAST** AND **FUTURE** ARE **REAL** AND **VISIBLE** AND **ALL AROUND US!**

WHEREVER YOUR EYES ARE FOCUSED, THAT'S **NOW**. BUT AT THE SAME TIME YOUR EYES TAKE IN THE **SURROUNDING LANDSCAPE** OF **PAST** AND **FUTURE!**

LIKE A **STORM FRONT**, THE EYE MOVES OVER THE COMICS PAGE, PUSHING THE WARM, HIGH-PRESSURE **FUTURE** AHEAD OF IT, LEAVING THE COOL, LOW-PRESSURE **PAST** IN ITS WAKE.

-3	-2	-1		+1
----	----	----	--	----

WHEREVER THE EYE HITS **LAND**, WE EXPECT IT TO BEGIN MOVING **FORWARD**.

BUT **EYES**, LIKE **STORMS** CAN **CHANGE DIRECTION!**



YET WE SELDOM DO CHANGE DIRECTION, EXCEPT TO RE-READ OR REVIEW PASSAGES. IT'S LEFT-TO-RIGHT, UP-TO-DOWN, PAGE AFTER PAGE.



THE IDEA THAT THE READER MIGHT CHOOSE A DIRECTION IS STILL CONSIDERED EXOTIC.

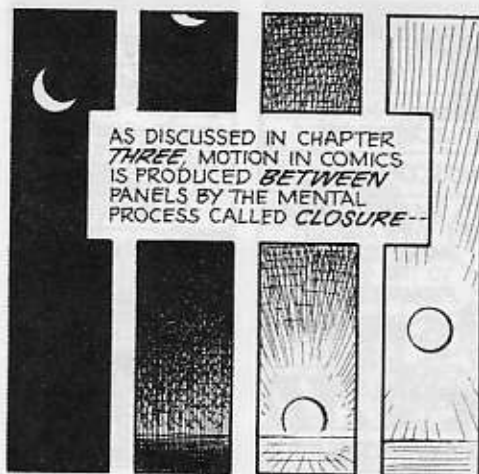
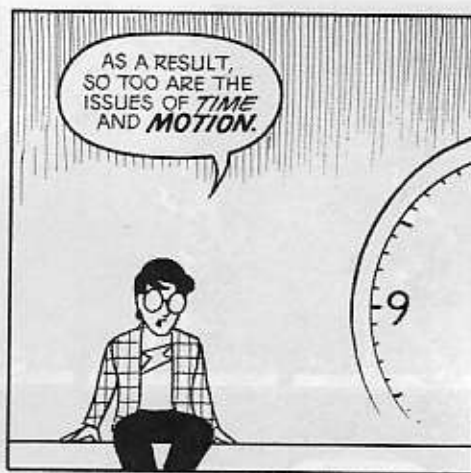
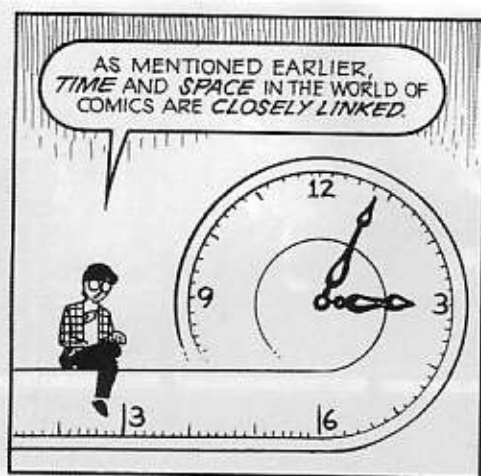


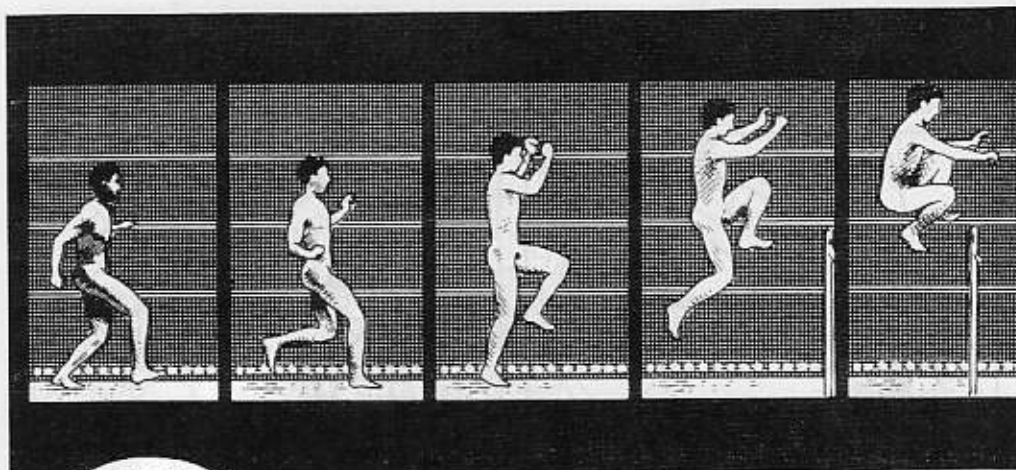
THIS MAY, IN PART, BE THE INFLUENCE OF OTHER MEDIA LIKE FILM AND TELEVISION WHERE VIEWER CHOICE HAS NOT GENERALLY BEEN FEASIBLE.



CONDITIONED AS WE ARE TO READ LEFT-TO-RIGHT AND UP-TO-DOWN, A MISCHIEVOUS CARTOONIST CAN PLAY ANY NUMBER OF TRICKS ON US.







IN THE LAST QUARTER OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY IT SEEMED LIKE EVERYONE WAS TRYING TO CAPTURE MOTION THROUGH SCIENCE!

BY 1880, INVENTORS THE WORLD OVER KNEW THAT "MOVING PICTURES" WERE JUST AROUND THE CORNER. EVERYONE WANTED TO BE FIRST!

EVENTUALLY THOMAS EDISON, THAT OLD SCALLYWAG, FILED THE FIRST PATENT ON A PROCESS USING STRIPS OF CLEAR PLASTIC PHOTOS AND FILM WAS OFF AND RUNNING!

MY STROBOSCOPE IS SUPERIOR IN EVERY WAY TO THE OBSOLETE ZOETROPE!

BAH! MY PRAXINOSCOPE IS BETTER!

FOOLS! MY KINEMATOSCOPE WILL SHOW YOU!

HA! CHILD'S PLAY! THEY ARE BUT MERE TOYS NEXT TO THE AWESOME PHANTASMATROPE!

FRAUDS ALL! MY ZOÖPRAXINOSCOPE WILL--!



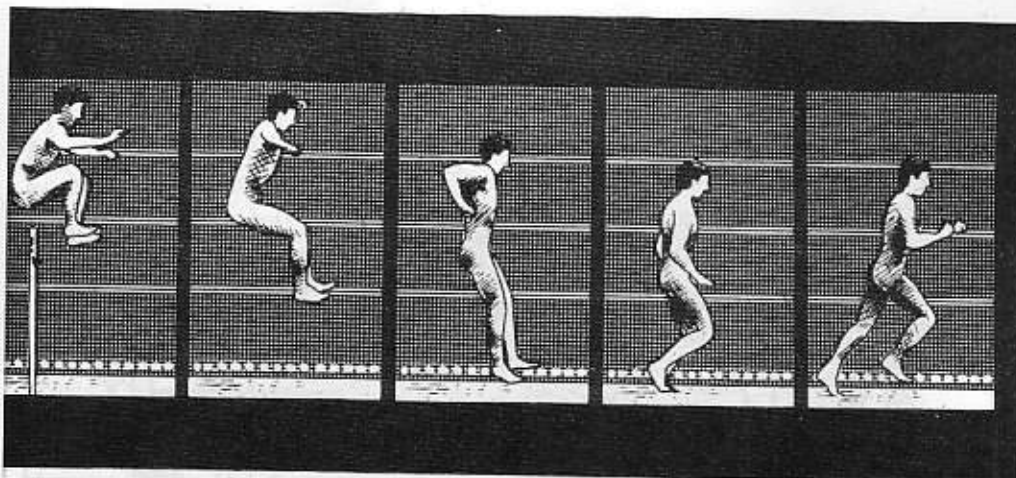
AS THE MOVING PICTURE BEGAN ITS SPECTACULAR RISE, A FEW OF THE MORE RADICAL PAINTERS OF THE DAY EXPLORED THE IDEA THAT MOTION COULD BE DEPICTED BY A SINGLE IMAGE ON CANVAS.

THE FUTURISTS IN ITALY AND MARCEL DUCHAMP IN FRANCE BEGAN THE SYSTEMATIC DECOMPOSITION OF MOVING IMAGES IN A STATIC MEDIUM.

Girl Running on a Balcony by Balla

Nude Descending a Staircase #2 by Duchamp

IT WASN'T A BAD IDEA!



COPIED FROM PHOTOGRAPHS TAKEN BY EADWEARD MUYBRIDGE

IF YOU'RE GOING TO PAINT A WORLD--

-- FILLED WITH MOTION --

-- THEN BE PREPARED TO PAINT **MOTION!**

DUCHAMP, MORE CONCERNED WITH THE **IDEA** OF MOTION THAN THE **SENSATION**, WOULD EVENTUALLY REDUCE SUCH CONCEPTS AS MOTION TO A **SINGLE LINE.**

DUCHAMP SOON MOVED ON, THE FUTURISTS **DISBANDED** AND FINE ARTISTS GENERALLY **LOST INTEREST** IN THIS **OTHER** TYPE OF "MOVING PICTURE"

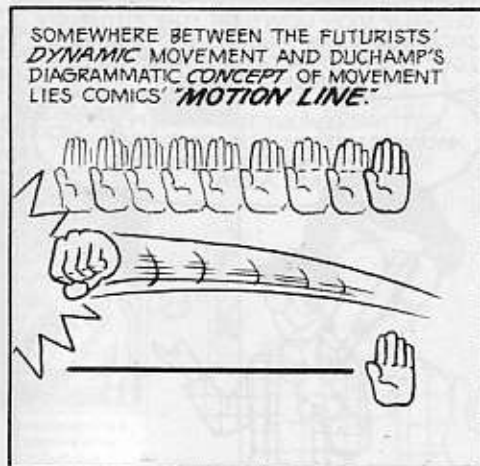
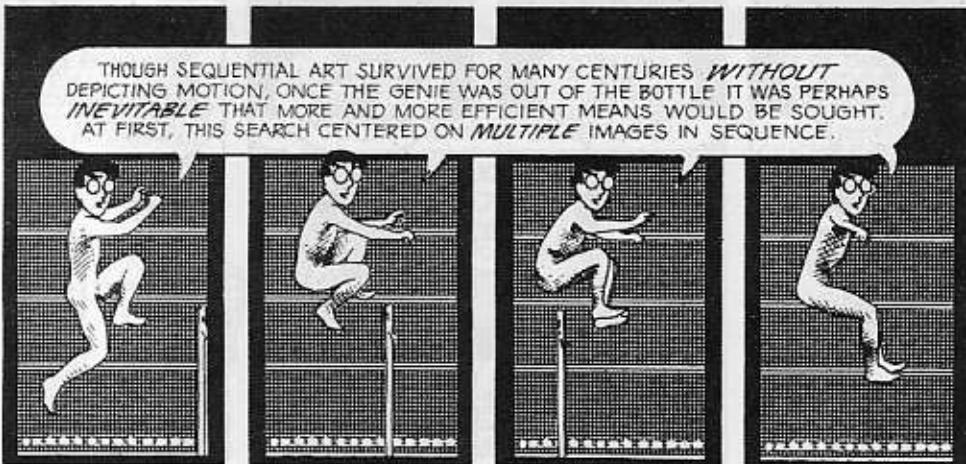
BUT THROUGHOUT THIS SAME PERIOD **ANOTHER** MEDIUM, LESS **CONSPICUOUSLY** HAD BEEN INVESTIGATING THIS SAME AREA.

I'M SURE YOU CAN ALL GUESS WHICH MEDIUM I MEAN!



FROM ITS *EARLIEST DAYS*, THE MODERN COMIC HAS GRAPPLED WITH THE PROBLEM OF SHOWING MOTION IN A *STATIC MEDIUM*.

HOW DO YOU SHOW THIS ASPECT OF TIME IN AN ART WHERE *TIME STANDS STILL*?



IN THE BEGINNING, MOTION LINES--OR "ZIP-RIBBONS" AS SOME CALL THEM-- WERE *WILD, MESSY*, ALMOST *DESPERATE* ATTEMPTS TO REPRESENT THE PATHS OF MOVING OBJECTS THROUGH SPACE.

POPEYE AND BRACCO THE MONK © KING FEATURES SYNDICATE, INC.



OVER THE YEARS, THESE LINES BECAME MORE *REFINED AND STYLIZED*, EVEN *DIAGRAMMATIC*.



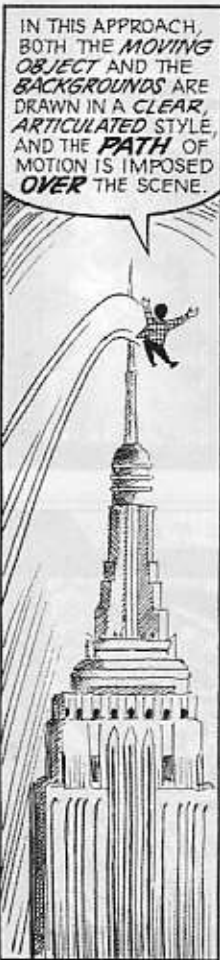
EVENTUALLY, IN THE HANDS OF *HEROIC FANTASY* ARTISTS LIKE *BILL EVERETT* AND *JACK KIRBY*--



-- THOSE SAME LINES BECAME *SO* STYLIZED AS TO ALMOST HAVE A *LIFE* AND *PHYSICAL PRESENCE ALL THEIR OWN!*

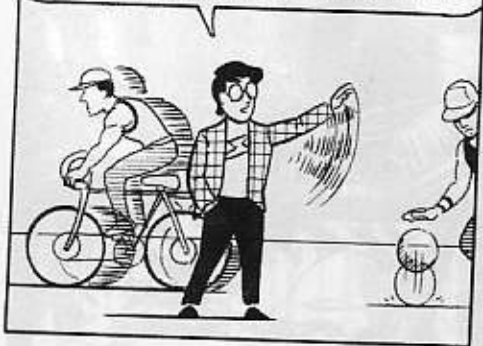


ART (CENTER AND ABOVE RIGHT) © D.C. COMICS. (LEFT AND RIGHT) © MARVEL ENTERTAINMENT GROUP INC.

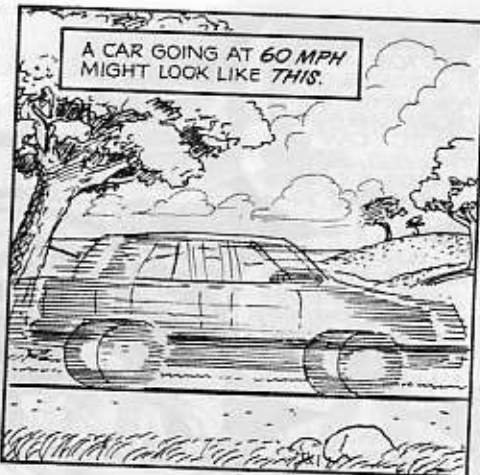


* MULTIPLE IMAGES CAN BE FOUND IN THE WORK OF KRIGSTEIN, INFANTINO AND OTHERS.

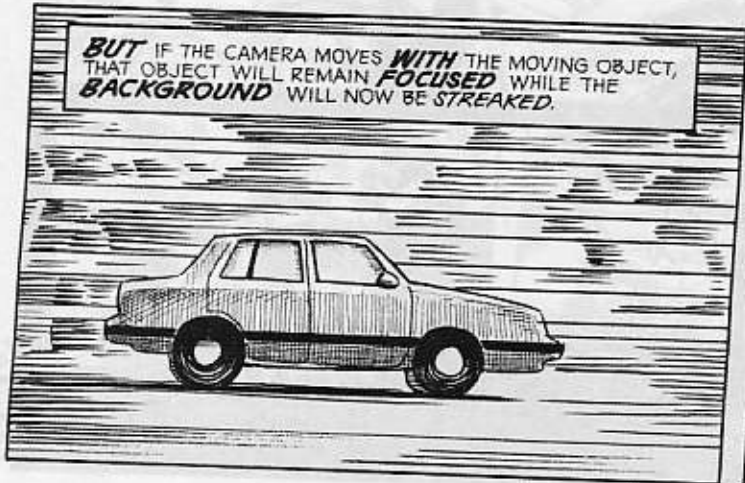
COLAN, WHO WAS ALSO A *FILM-BUFF*, WAS OF COURSE AWARE THAT WHEN A CAMERA'S SHUTTER SPEED IS TOO SLOW TO FULLY FREEZE A MOVING OBJECT'S IMAGE, AN INTERESTING *BLURRING* EFFECT OCCURS.



A CAR GOING AT 60 MPH MIGHT LOOK LIKE *THIS*.



BUT IF THE CAMERA MOVES *WITH* THE MOVING OBJECT, THAT OBJECT WILL REMAIN *FOCUSED* WHILE THE *BACKGROUND* WILL NOW BE *STREAKED*.



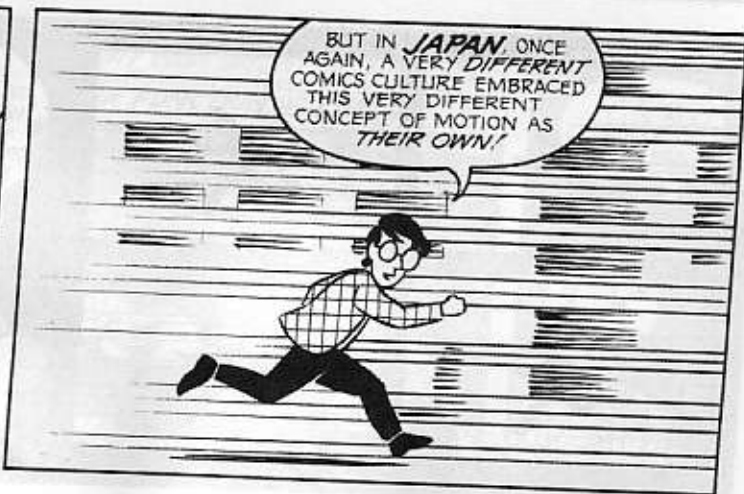
AMERICAN COMICS ARTISTS TOOK LITTLE OR NO INTEREST IN THIS KIND OF *PHOTOGRAPHIC TRICKERY*.



AND IN *EUROPE* WHERE MOTION LINES WERE USED ONLY *SPARINGLY* IT WAS LIKEWISE IGNORED.



BUT IN *JAPAN*, ONCE AGAIN, A VERY *DIFFERENT* COMICS CULTURE EMBRACED THIS VERY DIFFERENT CONCEPT OF MOTION AS *THEIR OWN!*



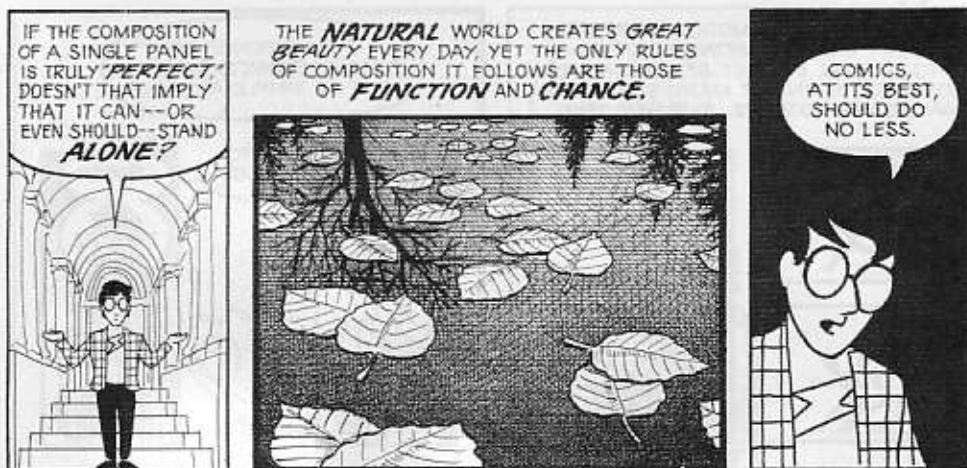
"SUBJECTIVE MOTION," AS I CALL IT, OPERATES ON THE ASSUMPTION THAT IF OBSERVING A MOVING OBJECT CAN BE INVOLVING, **BEING** THAT OBJECT SHOULD BE **MORE** SO.

JAPANESE ARTISTS, STARTING IN THE LATE 60'S, BEGAN PUTTING THEIR READERS "IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT" WITH PANELS LIKE THESE.

AND STARTING IN THE **MID-EIGHTIES**, A FEW AMERICAN ARTISTS BEGAN TO ADOPT THE EFFECT IN THEIR OWN WORK, UNTIL BY THE EARLY **NINETIES** IT HAS BECOME FAIRLY COMMON.

©石井いさみ?

ARE THESE THE **ONLY** WAYS WE CAN PORTRAY MOTION IN A SINGLE PANEL? THINK ABOUT IT.



AS WE'VE SEEN, THE INTERACTION OF *TIME* AND *COMICS* GENERALLY LEADS US TO ONE OF TWO SUBJECTS: **SOUND** OR **MOTION**.

SOUND BREAKS DOWN INTO **TWO** SUBSETS: **WORD BALLOONS** AND **SOUND EFFECTS**.

BOTH TYPES ADD TO THE **DURATION** OF A PANEL, PARTIALLY THROUGH THE NATURE OF *SOUND ITSELF* AND BY INTRODUCING ISSUES OF **ACTION** AND **REACTION**.

MOTION ALSO BREAKS DOWN INTO TWO SUBSETS. THE **FIRST** TYPE-- **PANEL-TO-PANEL CLOSURE**-- WAS IMPORTANT ENOUGH TO MERIT ITS OWN **CHAPTER**.

THE **OTHER** TYPE-- **MOTION WITHIN** PANELS-- CAN BE **FURTHER** DIVIDED INTO SEVERAL DISTINCT **STYLES**. I'VE COVERED THE ONES I KNOW, BUT THERE MAY BE MANY **OTHERS**. **TIME** WILL TELL.

THE WORKINGS OF *TIME IN COMICS* SHOULD BE AS SIMPLE AS--

ONE-- TWO-- THREE--

-- BUT THEY'RE NOT.

TICK TICK TICK

