
Ralph Randolph Duncan II

Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College

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Panel analysis: A critical method for analyzing the rhetoric of comic book form

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Panel Analysis: A Critical Method For Analyzing the Rhetoric of Comic Book Form

A Dissertation

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in

The Department of Speech Communication, Theatre, and Communication Disorders

by

Ralph Randolph Duncan II
B.A., Southeastern Louisiana University, 1980
M.A., Louisiana State University, 1985
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Abstract

This study devises a method of rhetorical criticism, panel analysis, for the comic book medium. Panel analysis focuses on how the unique form of the comic book medium communicates content. Panel analysis consists of three components: historical context, micro analysis, and macro analysis.

The historical component makes use of a humanistic historical approach to place a comic book or a body of comic book work in the contexts of the creator’s personal history and the evolution of the comic book medium. These contexts provide understanding of the origins of the various formal aspects of the work[s] being studied.

The micro component uses psychoanalytical, psychological, and semiological approaches to examine how meaning is produced in the individual panels of a comic book. The psychoanalytical approach analyses how recurring symbols and myths incorporated in the images and text of comic book panels might communicate meaning to the subconscious of the reader. The psychological approach analyses the psychological forces [intellectual meanings and emotional reactions] created
by shape, pattern, color, and the operation of gestalt principles. The semiological approach uses the linguistic concepts of semantics and syntactics to explain the "language" of comic books. Semantics analyses the individual visual signs in a panel. Syntactics analyses the encapsulation, framing, and composition of panels.

The macro component examines how montage, the combination of comic book panels, creates meaning and manipulates time. Creation of meaning is analyzed in the montage methods of simultaneity, contrast, parallelism, symbolism, and liet-motif. The use of montage to expand and compress time, and control tempo is also examined.

Panel Analysis utilizes scholarship in history, psychology, semiotics, and film criticism to construct a rhetorical approach to the most significant aspects of the comic book medium -- the panel and the blend of words and pictures. Panel analysis is a broad and flexible critical approach that can be tailored to the characteristics of a particular work, or the goals of the critic.
Chapter I
Introduction

Earlier in this century formalistic critical methods were developed for the analysis of the novel, poetry, film, and television.1 To date, no critical method exists for the art form of the comic book. Although comics predate graphic genres such as film and television, studies of comics remain historical or informational (content-centered).

The purpose of this study is to devise a formalistic critical approach that will enable future critics to obtain answers for three key questions that are in no way answered by the current content-centered approaches. First, what constitutes the communicative power of the form (by what specific mechanisms does the medium transmit a message)? Second, given an understanding of the limits and possibilities of the medium, can a coherent and useful theory of comic book criticism be developed? Third, might such a theory help explain aesthetic achievement and economic success of particular specimens of the art form?

While sociological, content-centered approaches are an important facet of the developing comics' scholarship, they fail to explain how the unique form of the medium communicates content. In discussing
criticism of the popular arts, critic Arthur Berger notes that "in many cases form has a 'content' of its own, and to neglect formal and structural matters is simple-minded." However, according to comics critic Michael Barrier, it is not only form, but all aspects of the popular arts that have been either neglected or belittled by scholars:

The popular arts are especially vulnerable to attack by those who write in academic prose, because so little real research has been done on them; true scholarship in the popular arts is practically nonexistent, and criticism of them is still in its infancy.

Popular art historian Maurice Horn finds this particularly true of scholarship for comics:

It is the fate of most new art forms to be greeted with derision. The laughter has been longest and loudest against the comics. No other form (except the movies) holds such fascination and appeal for the general public, none is so American in its expression, yet none has suffered so much neglect, scorn, and ignorance from the American art establishment.

A strong case can be made for giving the comic book serious scholarly attention. First, there is
the sheer size of the comic book audience. Second, there is the strong psychological appeal of the medium. Third, comic books have had widespread cultural impact. Fourth, comic books are a distinctly American art form. Fifth, the medium has a unique communicative power that has gone unexamined.

In 1942 comic book sales were in excess of twelve million copies a month. At army post exchanges in World War II comic books outsold Life, The Reader's Digest, and Saturday Evening Post combined ten to one. In 1946 sales passed sixty million a month. In the early 1950s more than one hundred million copies a month were sold. In the mid-1950s Senate investigations and self-imposed censorship drastically trimmed the crop of comics, but today there are signs of a revival, with more titles on the stands than any time since the fifties.

The numbers become even more significant when the possible effects of comic book reading are considered. Psychologists such as Fredric Wertham brought about the near-demise of the industry with their claims that comic books corrupt youth and debase culture. Other experts discount such far-reaching harms, but admit the powerful, addictive appeal that
comic books exerted by meeting adolescent psychological needs. Yet another point of view sees comic books as addressing a need in our society that is far deeper and broader than any adolescent fantasies of power. British psychotherapist Alan McGlashan, for instance, sees in some comics characters primordial, archetypal figures that serve modern-day mythic functions that mankind cannot seem to do without.7

Even if all of these speculations are discounted, there is direct evidence of the extent to which comic books have permeated our culture. Virtually since their inception comic book characters and concepts have flooded the other popular media, and if anything the flood seems stronger than ever in recent years. There are few Americans over the age of eight who do not know what is hidden beneath Clark Kent’s conservative blue suit.

Comic books are, after all, one of the few distinctly American art forms. Mass communication scholar Arthur Berger declares "Comics are an American idiom. They reached their greatest popularity and development here and reflect both our genius and our spirit."8 One might think that Americans would validate their native son with serious consideration. However, the comic
book has received its most serious attention, not here, but abroad. In Europe, South America, and Japan the comic book, if not placed among, is at least elevated nearer to the elite arts.

Japan in particular, with its cultural emphasis on compactness and speed, has enthusiastically embraced the medium. The comics attract creative young people who have the talent to succeed as novelists or painters, but instead choose the comic book as their medium. There are also professional comics critics and historians. One comic was even serialized in a monthly literary journal.9

However, what provides the strongest justification for further study of the comic book is the unique communicative power of the medium that has gone virtually unexamined. Comics creator Howard Cruse explains how the medium's power is linked to its form: "The interaction of the picture with precisely selected and arranged words can communicate important subtexts to the comic book reader. The effect is often subconscious, but its power demands that the verbal and pictorial elements of the comic not operate too independently."10 Arthur Berger has recognized the challenge of analyzing the medium: "In the case of comics, the images are graphic
and usually accompanied by language so that we are actually presented with a formidable and complex aesthetic problem in trying to interpret and explicate comics."

Few scholars have wrestled with this problem. In an article titled "A Call For Higher Criticism" comic book writer Paul Levitz states "what criticism of our medium needs is a frame of reference, and a sustained level of introspection." This study is an attempt to devise such a frame of reference and initiate sustained introspection.

The critical examination of an art form might, at first, seem to be more a concern of poetics than of rhetoric. However, this is a rhetorical study because the emphasis is on the techniques and devices employed by comic book creators to communicate ideas and attitudes to the minds of readers.

The neo-Aristotelian conception of rhetoric is limited to the theory and practice of discourse which is specifically designed to manipulate an audience. Contemporary rhetorical critics, such as Kenneth Burke, have attempted to expand the scope of rhetoric. Burke explains the distinction between the traditional, limited view of rhetoric and his own conception of rhetoric:
The key term for the old rhetoric was "persuasion" and its stress was upon deliberate design. The key term for the "new" rhetoric would be "identification," which can include a partially "unconscious" factor in appeal.

The basis of identification is that humans are in a natural state of division. Yet, as Burke points out, "men have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes that make them consubstantial." Identification is the enactment of this consubstantiality. Burke does not deny the role of persuasion in rhetoric, but rather expands the scope of the term "persuasion." "Wherever there is persuasion, there is rhetoric. And wherever there is 'meaning' there is 'persuasion.' "

This expansion of the scope of rhetoric allows for the rhetorical analysis of creative works. Burke claims that "art is a means of communication. As such it is certainly designed to elicit a 'response' of some sort." Works of imagination perform a rhetorical function because, by means of identification, they provide strategic and stylized answers to typical situations.

Burke believes it is the task of the rhetorical critic to seek the typical ingredients of art forms.
in order to understand how they function as "equipment for living." Rhetorician Marie Hochmuth Nichols argues for a similar role for the critic:

In his *The Language of Politics*, Harold Lasswell made the statement I wish a rhetorician had made. He remarked with some impatience that "the main incentive for studying the speeches of Wilson, Roosevelt or other orators has been to learn more about the technique of effective discourse." 19

This study is an attempt to learn more about the technique of effective comic book communication.

**Contributory Studies**

Few studies relate directly to the present endeavor. Of the studies that go beyond the historical approach, the vast majority deal with comic strips rather than comic books. While these are related forms they are unique enough (having different format, content, and audience) to warrant individual consideration. Those studies that do concentrate on the comic book almost invariably emphasize content over form.

The pioneering studies of the comic book are more fan-oriented than scholarly, but they do provide some foundations upon which the serious comic book scholar
can build. Coulton Waugh’s *The_Comics* [1947] is the first serious consideration of comic strips and comic books. Waugh is the first commentator to stress the medium’s unique blend of words and pictures. Dick Lupoff and Don Thompson’s *All_in_Color_for_a_Dime* [1970] is a collection of essays [many of which originated in small press fan publications] that combine personal reactions to the medium with attempts to formulate standards and aesthetics for the medium. *The_Steranko History_of_Comics* [1970-1972] by James Steranko is an, apparently, abandoned attempt at a comprehensive history of comic books. To date, only two volumes have been published. The work is limited to a consideration of mainstream, super-hero comic books. *Comix:_A_History_of_Comic_Books_in_America* [1971] by Les Daniels is not so much a history as it is a collection of critical essays. While the essays contribute little to critical theory of comic books, Daniels does provide brief coverage of the major developments of the medium. Maurice Horn’s *75_Yearsof_the_Comics* [1971] consists primarily of reprints from an exhibition at the New York Cultural Center. However, Horn’s introduction is an excellent attempt to define the principles of comic art. While his emphasis
is on comic strips, some of his general aesthetic theories apply to comic books as well. *The Comic-Book Book* (1973) by Don Thompson and Dick Lupoff is another collection of critical essays similar to their 1970 collection. Yet, this work is distinguished from their earlier attempt by a greater maturity and professionalism.

A long neglected aspect of the comic book medium is examined in Mark Estren's *A History of Underground Comics* (1974). Underground comic books (often referred to as "comix") offer creators an opportunity for unrestricted experimentation that has produced work that is often aggressively offensive, occasionally innovative, and, in rare instances, the best, most meaningful work the medium has to offer. Estren's examination of the underground comic book's aesthetic quality and communicative power is only superficial. The work's main contribution to future scholarship is found in the footnotes, checklists, interviews, and reprints that make the vast and undocumented field of undergrounds more accessible to future researchers.

Much of the best critical analysis of the comic book medium is in sources that are not easily accessible (foreign and small press). One work that has been translated is *Comics: Anatomy of a Mass Medium* by
Reinhold Reitberger and Wolfgang Fuchs. The German scholars do attempt some critical analysis, but the work has been criticized for inaccuracies compounded by poor translation.

Only recently have rhetoricians begun to examine the form of the comic book medium. The first significant rhetorical study of comics is Kathleen Turner's article, "Comic Strips: A Rhetorical Perspective" (1977). Turner's work has limited application for the present study because her focus is strictly on comic strips, and she applies an essentially content-oriented methodology -- Ernest Bormann's fantasy theme analysis. William Neff's 1977 dissertation, "The Pictorial and Linguistic Features of Comic Book Formulas," does deal specifically with comic books. Neff details many of the conventions and commonplaces employed in the medium. Yet, his study is ultimately more a literary than a structural analysis.

Umberto Eco's essay on the myth of Superman in The Role of the Reader (1979) demonstrates how semiotic/rhetorical analysis can be applied to explain the readings derived from a comic book text. However, what Eco's semiotic analysis of Superman comic books ultimately reveals are literary elements such as plot and theme.
Randall P. Harrison’s focus is clearly on form in his 1964 dissertation, "Pictic Analysis: Toward a Vocabulary and Syntax for the Pictorial Code; With Research on Facial Expressions," and his follow-up book, *The Cartoon: Communication to the Quick* (1981). Groundbreaking as Harrison’s insights are, they are of only minimal utility in analyzing a comic book work. Harrison’s approaches are either too limited (with a pictic analysis that begins with the dot or line) or too broad (with a classification system and communication model for the cartoon).

Some of the most insightful analysis of how comic books communicate has come from scholars in Literature and Philosophy. Three articles that appeared in *The Journal of Popular Culture* are notable. While Robert C. Harvey’s "The Aesthetics of the Comic Strip" (1979) does not deal directly with comic books, it does touch on some principles of analysis and evaluation that are valid for comic books. In particular, Harvey’s discussion of the verbal-visual blend, genre criticism, and the narrative function of composition are useful to the critic of comic book communication. "The Funnies, the Movies and Aesthetics" (1985) by Earle J. Coleman attempts to explain the aesthetics of comic strips.
and comic books by analogy to film. Coleman stresses the coordination of pictures and words as central to all three mediums. Lawrence L. Abbott's 1986 article, "Comic Art: Characteristics and Potentialities of a Narrative Medium," is an ambitious structuralist study that builds on the theory set forth in the 1979 Harvey article. Abbott's most significant contribution to the scholarly dialogue on comic books is his theory of order of perception.

The most thorough analysis of the comic book form comes from long-time comic book writer and artist Will Eisner. Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* examines the elements of the art form with the insights of experience. This is more of a how-to book than a critical study, but if Eisner's knowledge of the workings of the medium could be combined with various critical approaches to communication we might begin to understand the communicative power and potential of the medium.

**Plan of the Study**

As Russell B. Nye points out, "the study of popular culture is still in the process of finding its methodology, primarily because it is a joint scholarly venture, involving several disciplines, borrowing and gaining something from each." This process would
seem to be in keeping with Kenneth Burke's belief that "the main ideal of criticism, as I conceive it, is to use all that is there to use." The emphasis of this study will be on the construction of a methodology -- panel analysis. The materials for building this critical framework will come from the rather limited scholarship on comics, studies of related media [film, television, advertising, and the graphic arts], and the author's own extrapolations at the numerous points that current criticism fails to address the unique aspects of the medium.

Panel analysis, as proposed in this study, consists of three major components: historical context [for considerations of form], micro analysis [elements within the panel] and macro analysis [combinations of panels]. The first component, historical analysis, examines events that affected the work of comic-book creator[s], artistic influences upon the creator[s] and the evolution of the comic-book medium itself. The second component of panel analysis, micro analysis, deals with meaning produced at the level of the individual panel. Aspects of this meaning will be examined in three different approaches: psychoanalytical [the effect of symbol and myth on the subconscious of the reader], psychological
[the effect of shape/pattern, color and gestalt principles] and semiological [those factors of composition that constitute the mise en scene]. The third component, macro analysis, details how montage [the combination/collision of panels] creates meaning and manipulates time. Brief applications of each component will be made to the works of Will Eisner.

The work of Will Eisner was chosen for analysis for three reasons. First, his career as a writer and artist has spanned virtually the entire existence of the medium itself. Second, during all those years he has been one of the most important innovators in comics. Both his longevity and his innovativeness result from Eisner's taking the comic book medium seriously. Comics were not merely a way to pay the rent or a stepping-stone in his career as they were with so many of the early creators. Eisner makes this clear in his own words: "I was trying to create an art form. I was conscious of that, and I used to talk about it. I remember when, especially in the days when Feiffer was working for me, we used to have long discussions about comics as an art form." 24 The third reason for selecting Eisner is that he was a master, quite possibly the master, of comic art.
Edward P. J. Corbett, in *Rhetorical Analysis of Literary Works*, observes that "the term choices gets us to the heart of rhetoric in general and of rhetorical criticism in particular." As a critical methodology, panel analysis provides the critic with a framework for evaluating the choices made by the comic book creator(s) in the composition of the work. The three components of panel analysis are historical analysis, micro analysis and macro analysis. The next chapter, historical analysis, examines how the medium evolved to its present form, and the specific influences that shaped the work of one of the innovators of the art form, Will Eisner.
There is no single historical approach. In the broadest sense, history is simply the study of the past. As a critical method for communication scholars, historians David Paul Nord and Harold L. Nelson contend that "history is an empirical study that uses various levels of generalization to describe, interpret, or explain collections of data." Yet, this definition still allows for a great deal of latitude as to the approach, or form of historical explanation employed by the historian.

Distilling the controversies over historical approaches, Nord and Nelson propose two "idealized types" that they term the humanist historian and the social science historian. Their definition of the humanist historian is one who "is interested primarily in unique events and sequences" and "seeks to understand an event by understanding its context in a particular place and time." They define the social science historian as one who "is interested primarily in general processes, seeks to understand an event by grouping it with similar events, and ultimately hopes to construct
generalizations and theories to explain classes of events without regard to space and time."

The humanist approach will be applied in this study. There has not been sufficient serious study of comic book art or artists to warrant the grouping and classification that is necessary in the social science approach. Furthermore, the individual nature of artistic endeavor demands a particularizing approach. Finally, the rationale for including a historical component in panel analysis is to provide a specific historical context for a particular creator's work.

While this critic feels the humanist historical approach is best suited to panel analysis, there are some weaknesses of the approach that must be considered. First, the humanist historian's understanding of the particular and the specific is always, by necessity, guided by generalizations. According to Consult Louis Gottschalk, generalization is an inherent and inescapable aspect of describing the past. Second, the humanist historical approach is not theory building in the same sense as the social sciences. While humanist historians hope to prepare their readers to meet the future, they do not seek to establish laws of human behavior that will predict the future.

However, the humanist historical approach does
have a number of strengths to recommend it. First, it can provide points of view not always accessible in a more statistical analysis. Second, the approach acknowledges the uniqueness of individuals. Third, humanist historians rely more on narrative than on historical analysis (i.e. hypothesis testing). Historical explanation as narrative holds the attention and provides general access to history. Fourth, the humanist historical approach can employ evocative, connective language that is "the ordinary discourse of educated persons." Not only is such language more accessible, but more appropriate than the value-free vocabulary of the sciences when the focus of study is human beings.

As a component of panel analysis the humanist historical approach is meant to provide a partial understanding of the origins of the formal aspects of a particular creator's work by placing the work in the specific historical contexts of the creator's life and the evolution of the comic book medium. The critic undertaking a panel analysis should at least briefly consider three contexts: significant events in the personal history of the comic book creator(s), artistic influences upon the creator(s), and developments within the medium itself. As a
demonstration of their use each of these contexts will be applied to the work of Will Eisner.

Eisner's work spans fifty-three years of the fifty-six year history of the medium. His work carries on many of the traditions of the significant comic strip artists who proceeded him and has influenced many subsequent comic book creators. Most importantly, Eisner is a self-conscious creator who has always attempted to understand and develop his art form.

Personal History

Will Eisner was born in 1917 to Jewish immigrants living in New York City. His talent came perhaps from his father who had been a landscape painter and muralist in Austria, but his desire was sparked by the grim reality of Bronx tenement life during the Great Depression. Eisner admits that "To me art, being a syndicated cartoonist, represented a way out of the ghetto. We were all looking for a way out. That was my primary motivation."11

In 1933, at age fifteen, Eisner had his first piece of art published. It was an illustration for an article in his high school paper about crime in the Bronx. The illustration was titled "The Forgotten Ghetto."12 When Eisner broke into the comic book field in 1936 he seemed determined to forget the ghetto.
His first works were fantasies of adventurous cowboys, private eyes, and buccaneers.

However, in 1940, with the debut of the weekly newspaper supplement, simply called *The Comic Book Section*, Eisner began incorporating some of the images of his childhood into his work. He produced the lead feature of the supplement -- *The Spirit*. The newspaper syndicate saw *The Spirit* as a way to benefit from the growing national market for comic books that was sparked by the appearance of Superman in 1938 and Batman in 1939. The syndicate also envisioned *The Spirit* as a superhero very much in the mold of these two characters.

Will Eisner was more interested in telling stories. His only concession to the superhero concept was a simple domino mask and a pair of gloves. Otherwise *The Spirit* wore a simple blue suit. He had no superpowers. He simply had a remarkable constitution and an obsession for justice. His adventures took place in a city that, as Eisner matured, was depicted with an increasingly gritty realism.

*The Spirit* itself was radically altered by an event that took place during its run -- World War II. When Eisner was drafted in 1942 the look of *The Spirit* underwent a change as one of Eisner's assistants,
Lou Fine, took over for the duration of the war. Yet, Fine was true to the style Eisner had set for the book, and it was a subtle change compared to what happened when Eisner returned from the Army. Many of the early stories were highly imaginative and fantasy-oriented. When Eisner returned from the war, he brought a greater realism to the stories.13

Despite the fact that the stories were often built around outlandish inventions and mystical items sought by wildly eccentric characters drawn in Eisner's "cartoony" style, the people in *The Spirit* had very human emotions and problems. The self-professed core of Eisner's art "is the human condition."14 For Eisner that usually means the condition of humans crowded together by big city life. Eisner scholar Catherine Yronwode comments that the humanism and realism in *The Spirit* gradually predominated:

One of the elements which gave *The Spirit* its long-term appeal was Eisner's loving and passionate homages to the city he was born and raised in. New York, or more properly, Brooklyn and The Bronx, was, in Eisner's metaphoric world, transformed into a stage upon which the most wide-sweeping and the most intimate dramas of human life were enacted.15

Eisner had used his art to escape from the tenements
of New York; both imaginatively and literally. Yet, once he had distanced himself enough, he used his art to return to those childhood experiences and explore what they meant personally to him, and universally to all of us.

However, his full rememberance of the ghetto and articulation of its themes did not come until forty years after he left it behind. From 1951, when he quit producing The Spirit, to 1976, when he began A Contract With God And Other Tenement Stories, Eisner devoted himself to "the application of the comic book art form in other areas -- education, instruction and other pragmatic directions."16 A recent marriage, the pressure of weekly deadlines, and the success of his commercial art ventures all combined to steer Eisner away from traditional comic book art.

His return to the field in 1978, with the publication of A Contract With God, presented an alternative to the traditional comic book. The comic book industry was dominated by the two largest companies, Marvel and DC, who accounted for over 95% of the market and produced almost exclusively standard, cookie-cutter superhero adventures aimed at adolescents.17 Eisner's 192 page graphic novel did not resemble other comic books in either form or content.
The book is comprised of four short stories about Bronx tenement life in the 1930's. The stories deal with what Eisner calls "eyewitness fiction." Eisner explains what he wanted to accomplish:

In this book, I have attempted to create a narrative that deals with intimate themes. In four stories, housed in a tenement, I undertook to draw on memory culled from my own experiences and that of my contemporaries. . . . Fundamentally, they are not unlike the world of today for those people living in crowded proximity and in depersonalized housing. The importance of dealing with the ebb and flow of city existence and the over-riding effort to inhabitants.

The evolution of an artist's work is guided not only by the events in his life, but also by the other artists whose work he admires and emulates. The second historical context that should be considered is the artistic influences on the comic book creator.

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Artistic Influences

As noted earlier Eisner's first comics endeavors were escapist fantasies. In 1935, while still in high school, Eisner developed a humorous detective/adventure strip, Harry Corey, which he hoped to market to a newspaper syndicate. According to Yronwode, "Will freely admits that his first efforts were 'a cold swipe' of Elzie Segar's Thimble Theatre, featuring
Popeye.\textsuperscript{20} Eisner's first major work was a weekly newspaper strip, \textit{Hawks_of_the_Seas}, that ran from 1936 to 1938. Not surprisingly, the literary influences he cites for that period in his life are Robert Louis Stevenson, Rafael Sabitini, James Fenimore Cooper, and the adventure-filled pulp magazines of the day. The look of the strip was influenced by early Howard Pyle and N.C. Wyeth illustrations in \textit{Treasure_Island} and \textit{Captain_Blood}.\textsuperscript{21}

Eisner's move toward more realistic subject matter and renderings reflected his growing interest in the work of comic strip artists Milton Caniff and Harold Foster.\textsuperscript{22} During the period he wrote \textit{The_Spirit} Eisner claims "My writing was influenced almost universally by short story writers. O. Henry, Ambrose Bierce and de Maupassant."\textsuperscript{23} With \textit{The_Spirit} Eisner staked out the graphic short story as his art form.

The manner in which those stories were told was profoundly affected by Eisner's interest in film. In his history of comic books Jim Steranko quotes Eisner as saying, "I grew up on the movies, that's what I lived with. The movies always influenced me."\textsuperscript{24} Eisner relates how what he learned of film language carried over into his comic book work:
I used to go down to the New School and spend hours looking at those old Man Ray experimental films; and it gradually dawned on me that the films were nothing but frames on a piece of celluloid, which is really no different than frames on a piece of paper. And pretty soon, it became to me film on paper, and so, obviously, the influence was there.25

**Developments Within the Medium**

The development of cinematic storytelling in both film and comics relates to the third historical context to be considered, developments within the comic book medium. Three aspects of this development should be considered: the narrative traditions from which comics books grew, the special relationship comics have to film, and the evolution of the comic book medium itself.

The narrative ancestors of the comic book form are folk tales or myths, pulp magazines, and comic strips. What folk tales contributed to the development of the comic book were larger-than-life heroes and clear battles of good versus evil. The mainstay of the modern comic book, the super-hero, is a product of this lineage. German comics critics Reinhold Reitberger and Wolfgang Fuchs make this claim for the prototype of comic book super-heroes:
Superman is as old as the ages. Achilles and Siegfried stood at his cradle -- and they are all three invulnerable, except for Achilles' heel, the spot on Siegfried's back and Superman's susceptibility to kryptonite.

The pulp magazines incorporated the same type of mythic heroes and conflicts into their action-adventure tales. However, the pulps made three additional contributions to the development of the comic book. First, pulp magazine publishing houses provided the seed money that got the new industry going. To many pulp publishers comic books seemed a logical addition to their line. In the decade of the forties a number of them were able to make the transition to being solely comic book publishers as the pulp industry quietly faded away. Second, the pulps were heavily illustrated and their often lurid, but always dramatic style had its impact on the work of comic book artists. Third, even that most distinctive inhabitant of the comic book, the costumed super-hero, was foreshadowed in the pulps. One can easily discern the makings of Superman and Batman in such pulp heroes as Doc Savage and The Shadow.

Comic strips were the direct predecessors to the comic book form. In their survey of comic books
produced for the Smithsonian Institution, comic book historians Michael Barrier and Martin Williams claim "many ingredients of the comic book -- the comic-strip form, the extended narrative, the page as a basic unit along with the panel -- were thus present in newspaper strips from around the turn of the century." 29

Eisner's early work reflected all these traditions. Eisner's first works in the comics field [Harry Karry and The_Flame] were originally conceived in comic strip form. Much of the work Eisner produced for comic books in the late 1930s was produced in a Sunday comic page form. Elements of folk tales and pulp magazines were also evident in his comics. When he went to work for Quality Comics in 1939 Eisner created and oversaw the production of numerous super-hero titles [including Qallman, The_Black_Gandac, Uncle Sam, and Blackhawk]. Aside from an increasingly "cinematic" style Eisner's work was not much different from all the other titles being produced in those days. Even his concern with "camera angles" came from his admiration for the work of comic strip artist Milton Caniff. 30

When Eisner began working on the The_Spirit, where he had a freer creative hand, he did not break with all these traditions, but he did deviate
significantly. Certainly the creation of The Spirit owed something to the pulp heroes of previous years. Perhaps even some of the film noir and vigilante elements could be attributed to The Batman. However, The Spirit was not always as deadly serious as the heroes of the pulps and other comic books. The stories ranged from gritty and violent to whimsical. In fact, the hero would sometimes literally put his tongue in his cheek.

The Spirit also began to take on a look radically different from other comic books. Free from the boxes-all-in-a-row limitation of the comic strip artist, Eisner began to experiment with the language of panels.

Eisner’s use of layout and composition in these stories established the comic book as a medium distinct from its comic strip origins. He expanded or compressed panels to manipulate pace and emotional impact. He gave them narrative shapes or totally eliminated the borders, letting the panel be defined by shading or simply the words and pictures that filled a space. All of these techniques are evident in the 1948 Spirit story reprinted in Appendix A. The much later work (1988) reproduced in Appendix D provides an example of how far Eisner’s experimentation and innovation has evolved the comic book medium from the traditions

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it mirrored in its embryonic form. Neither the content nor the form of *A Life Force* bear much resemblance to pulp magazines or comic strips.

However, the relationship between film and comic books has been central to Eisner's work throughout his career. The influence of film has been one of the prime factors in the development of the comic book form. Many comic book creators have, like Eisner, come to think of their creations as "film on paper." Milt Caniff, Bernard Krigstein, and Jim Steranko, were among the artistic pioneers in the comic book field who diligently experimented with "cinematic" techniques in their comic book storytelling.

The influence also worked in the other direction. At a time when the cinema consisted of reconstructed news events and a few movies viewed by very few people, cartoonist Windsor McCay was creating a new language of visual storytelling in his full-page strip, *Little Nemo in Slumberland.* McCay later became one of the pioneers of the animated film. And quite a few other filmmakers, from Fritz Lang to Federico Fellini, have admitted being influenced by the comics. Historian Maurice Horn cautions that giving a storytelling device the label "cinematic" does not
necessarily mean it was first used in filmmaking:

It is well to point out at this juncture that many techniques which came to be called "cinematic" originated in the comics. Montage was the rule in the comics well before Eisenstein came along, and the techniques of cutting, framing and panning were used by such early practitioners as Opper, McCay and Feininger. As for the "audio," the comics had ample time to develop the voice-off, the voice-over and overlapping dialogue during the 30 years when the movies had at their disposal only the barbarous subtitle.34

Comic book artist and historian Jim Steranko observes that "in retrospect, it seems as though comics and the cinema have simultaneously evolved in form."35

Aside from the influence of film, five developments have had a significant impact on the form of comic books. Those developments are the introduction of Superman, the recognition of comic books as a viable art form, the increased number of older comic book readers, the graphic novel format, and the work of Will Eisner.

The appearance of Superman in Action_Comics number 1 in June of 1938 created the basic mold (superhuman powers, colorful costumes, secret identities, and vigilante justice) in which, until very recently,
Russell B. Nye describes Superman's impact on the medium:

When Superman came out in *Action Comics* in 1938, the market exploded. There had been nothing like him since the early dime novels. He was created by comic books, and in turn he created a new genre of them -- the supernaturally endowed hero who was judge, jury, and executioner, the crime-fighting god disguised, omnipotent, triumphant.36

Superman defined, and at least for a few decades, dictated the content and form of the comic book. To the general public the comic book became, and probably still is, synonymous with the concept of the super-hero. In 1987 there were 99 super-hero comics being published per month.37 No one who seriously intends to study the comic book can overlook the influence of the Superman character on the history of the medium.

Eisner was one of the first creators in the comic book industry to consider the medium as a serious form of expression. He believed that the medium "had far more dignity and far more structure than it was getting credit for."38 When he began work on *The Spirit* he made a conscious effort to define and refine
the medium. According to Eisner, bringing respectability to his chosen art form was a constant concern: "Comics before that [The_Spirit] were pretty much pictures in sequence, and I was trying to create an art form."39 In all of Eisner's interviews and essays he reiterates the belief that comic books are a valid medium of artistic expression, and will eventually enjoy public acceptance.

Certainly Eisner's dream has not been fully realized. The overwhelming public perception is still that comic books are "junk" literature for juveniles. Yet there are signs of a growing respect for the potential of the medium. In 1986 The_Comics_Journal reported that "Three recent reviews of comics, one in a highly-visible magazine distributed nationwide, two in weekly arts and literary papers, have approached comics, through analyses of creators and their works, as adult fare and an art form."40 The coverage has accelerated since then.41

In 1987 the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of American History opened a year-long exhibit entitled "Superman: Many Lives, Many Worlds." In conjunction with the exhibit, the Smithsonian presented a two-day
symposium on "The Super-hero in America." The same year a number of national bookstore chains began to carry popular comics (such as Frank Miller's Dark Knight and Alan Moore's Watchmen) collected in trade paperback format. Also in 1987, Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel, Maus: A Survivor's Tale, was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award in biography. A quotation from a Washington Post review that appears on the back cover of Maus describes the book as "A quiet triumph, moving and simple -- impossible to describe accurately, and impossible to achieve in any medium but comics."42

Both a cause and a consequence of the increased respect are comic books aimed at an older readership. An article in the September 30, 1987 New York Times quotes Buddy Saunders, one of the nation’s leading comic book retailers: "If we had to give up every customer below the age of 15, we would survive. If we had to give up everyone above the age of 17, we’d be out of business."43 In the January 16, 1987 State Times, comic book specialty store owner Linda Webster claims "We host doctors, lawyers, accountants, professors and legislators on a regular basis. But graduate students are the largest percentage of our clientele."44 In 1987 the adult comic book market in North America
was estimated at $60 million annually.45

The older readers were attracted not only by more sophisticated content, but also by new formats. The majority of comic books are still flimsy, gaudy and printed on cheap paper. However, in the last ten years the major comic book publishers have begun to issue many of their adult-oriented books in formats that feature more pages, higher quality paper and better printing. The most significant of these formats is the graphic novel [e. g. - Eisner’s *A Contract With God*, Spiegelman’s *Maus*]. The graphic novel allows the creator more pages in which to develop a story. Because the price of a graphic novel tends to be prohibitive to younger readers, the creator can target a more adult audience. The format allows the older reader, who might be embarrassed to purchase a comic book, to be able to buy something that does not look like a comic book. Since the format more closely resembles what is generally thought of as a book, it gives comic books more credibility with reviewers and the general public.

Eisner’s *A Contract With God* was not the first use of the graphic novel format, but it was groundbreaking in that it deviated from the usual adventure material to present more realistic and intimate human
dramas. The seeds of Eisner's "naturalism" can be found some forty years previous in his attempts to portray subtle human emotions in his *Spirit* stories. He has been credited with "bringing emotional maturity to the sterile adolescence of super-hero power fables."46

In addition to his own contributions to the field, Eisner has advanced the evolution of the comic book form through the influence he has exerted on other creators. Comic book historians and critics Don Thompson and Dick Lupoff cite *The Spirit* as a major influence on subsequent comic book art:

The art was stunning and experimental -- to such an extent that other comic-book artists studied his work. The influence of the strip was enormous in the world of cartoonists -- and many fledgling artists studied the techniques that Eisner's work-force developed over the strip's dozen years.47

Alan Moore, perhaps the most critically acclaimed comic book writer of the 1980's, believes that Eisner's contribution to the medium goes beyond mere influence on specific artists:
He [Eisner] is the single person most responsible for giving comics its brains. He's given us a way to see and to think about comics. He has helped to provide an understanding of its workings that we must have if we are to take the medium forward rather than allowing it to stagnate.

Conclusion

The humanist historical approach places a particular comic book or a body of comic book work in the contexts of the creator's personal history and the evolution of the medium. These contexts are valuable to the critic for understanding the origins of the formal aspects of the work(s) studied, as well as for placing various aspects of form in chronological comparison to developments in the creator's career and the medium as a whole.

The historical component of panel analysis is a form of auteur criticism; that is, it treats the comic book as the artistic product of an individual. In the case of Will Eisner, who is both writer and artist, the auteur method is both feasible and logical. However, the majority of modern comic books are the result of a collaboration between editors, writers, artists and colorists who all work fairly independently.
This situation creates new considerations for the establishment of historical contexts.

This critic has two suggestions to offer. First, priority should be given to applying panel analysis to the work of other auteurs such as Jack Kirby, Frank Miller, Art Spiegelman, Dave Sim, and Howard Chaykin. Arguably, the best work in the field has been produced by creators who have control of both story and art. Such auteurs also each have a distinctive style that makes formal tendencies easier to identify. In addition, there has been more written about these popular creators, and therefore more data available for constructing historical contexts. Second, when a non-auteur work is studied, historical contexts should be established for each of the collaborators (even coloring and lettering are significant aspects of the art form) to the degree that information is available.

While panel analysis, being primarily a formal approach, does not include a sociological component, it should be noted that many comic book creators in general, and particularly those of notable accomplishment, fall within certain sociological categories. Like Eisner, many of the best comic book creators are urban, ethnic, and not professionally
trained in art schools.

The context of the development of the medium is a constant in that the same elements are present (although subsequent critics might well perceive evolutionary influences not discussed in this study), but can be particularized to explain the influences that operate on and are produced by a certain work. Folk tales, pulp magazines, and comic strips provide the narrative traditions for comic books in general, but specific aspects of the tradition should be stressed in relation to the work under consideration. A special evolutionary relationship exists between film and comic books. Many developments and techniques have been shared in both directions. Those to be stressed in a particular historical context depend on the "cinematic techniques" used by the comic book creator(s) being studied. In the evolution of the comic book medium, the creation of Superman, the increasing recognition of comic books as an art form, the older readership in recent years, and the influence and innovation of Will Eisner are all significant developments. Yet, not each of these developments is equally significant in shaping the form of every comic book. All these aspects should be acknowledged, but the
critic has to decide which were most directly influential on the work under study.

Once the subject of the panel analysis is situated in the contexts of the personal history of the creator[s] and the development of the medium, the critic is ready to move on to the micro analysis component. This component is a consideration of how meaning is produced in the individual panels of a comic book. Micro analysis will be developed over the next three chapters by applying psychoanalytical, psychological, and semiological approaches to meaning at the panel level.
Psychoanalytical criticism as it is applied in panel analysis is an examination of the meaning communicated to the subconscious of the reader by the symbols and myths incorporated in the images and text of individual comic book panels. This chapter will use frequently recurring symbols and myths to demonstrate how psychoanalytic criticism can account for a degree of the meaning present in a comic book panel.

As communication scholar George N. Gordon points out, psychoanalysis "was not conceived as a method of communication analysis." However, there is still justification for including the psychoanalytic approach in panel analysis. First, communication analysis is concerned with the relationships between messages and audiences, and psychoanalytic criticism helps illuminate these relationships. Second, psychoanalytic criticism seems quite appropriate for the comic book medium. In *Signs_in_Contemporary_Culture* Arthur Asa Berger suggests that the comics medium "demands a psychoanalytic approach if we are to understand things fully." Comics scholars Reitberger and Fuchs believe that "of all
the mass media, comics mirror the American Collective
Subconscious most faithfully," and that "comics in
turn manipulate and exploit the subconscious."3
Third, the psychoanalytic approach is justified because,
as Percy Cohen states, "it can explain a great deal
that has not been otherwise explained."4 A portion
of the meaning that a reader gleans from a comic book
can be dependent on the reader's subconscious reaction
to the symbols and myths that appear in the work.

Symbols

The psychoanalytic critic is primarily concerned
with those symbols that speak directly to the sub­
conscious. Carl Jung explains the nature of subconscious
symbols and the inherent inability of an individual
to know their own inner symbol system:

There are, moreover, unconscious aspects
of our perceptions of reality. The first
is the fact that even when our senses react
to real phenomena, sights, and sounds, they
are somehow translated from the realm of
reality into that of the mind. Within the
mind they become psychic events, whose ultimate
nature is unknowable (for the psyche cannot
know its own psychical substance).5

Aniela Jaffe' explains how subconscious perceptions
of reality, "psychic events," become the substance
of artistic expression:
Man, with his symbol-making propensity, unconsciously transforms objects or forms into symbols (thereby endowing them with great psychological importance) and expresses them in both his religion and his visual art.6

Art is "successful," that is, produces identification or evokes an emotional response, when the artist uses objects or forms that his audience can, often unconsciously, react to as symbols of psychological importance. Jaffe' identifies three significant, recurring forms that would seem to be a part of human-kind's Collective Subconscious: "The symbols of the stone, the animal, and the circle -- each of which has had enduring psychological significance from the earliest expressions of human consciousness to the most sophisticated forms of the 20th-century art."7

The stone, the animal, the circle and the rectangle are merely four examples of subconscious symbols, chosen because of their prevalence in works of art in general, and comic books in particular. There are undoubtedly many others images in a given comic book that act on the subconscious of the reader as symbols. This symbol set differs with each individual.

The Stone

When Jaffe' speaks of the symbol of the stone
she does not refer to the refined product of the sculptor's art, but rather the raw, blockish form that seems to retain its primeval identity despite the use to which it is put. M. L. von Franz speculates on the strange attraction humankind has for such forms:

For while the human being is as different as possible from a stone, yet man's innermost center is in a strange and special way akin to it (perhaps because the stone symbolizes mere existence at the farthest remove from the emotions, feelings, fantasies, and discursive thinking of ego-consciousness). In this sense the stone symbolizes what is perhaps the simplest and deepest experience -- the experience of something eternal that man can have in those moments when he feels immortal and unalterable.8

The yearning for this experience is obvious in the use of monuments and simple headstones to create an "immortal" memory of one deceased. And the symbolic power of the stone is undeniable when we view Stonehenge, Easter Island, or any of the pyramids.

Comic books, like any visual medium, can use the representation of the stone as visual shorthand for the enduring and immortal. In most comic books there is an unintentional, yet effective use of the stone symbol. The majority of comic books are set in New York, or in some mythical "Metropolis" that is a thinly
veiled imitation. Super-heroes leap, swing, and fly about the stone spires of the city. Friends and enemies come and go in the life of the hero, but the skyscrapers remain a constant background. They give some assurance of the enduring nature of civilization, and in some cases, they even lend an air of immortality to the heroes that move among them.

Because the urban setting (portrayed with gritty realism) is so central to Eisner's work, his use of the stone symbol is more pronounced than that of most comic book artists. The first four pages of Appendix E are from Eisner's *New York...the Big City*. Virtually every page in this celebration of big city life has a brick wall backdrop or buildings towering over the human inhabitants. On the one hand, these stone edifices, because of their enduring nature, provide a type of security, a place where generations live out their lives with a sense of stability. On the other hand, they provide a counterpoint to the frailty of human existence. Both of these symbolic functions are potentially present in pages ten through fifteen of Appendix D. Jacob's brush with death and search for meaning take place before the durable brick walls of the alley.
Primitive humans envied the strength, stealth, and cunning of animals. They sought to acquire these qualities by slaying the admired animal and wearing its skin, horns, or claws when they practiced ritual magic or waged war. Jaffe' cautions that modern humans are not as far removed from this condition as they might believe:

The animal motif is usually symbolic of man's primitive and instinctual nature. Even civilized men must realize the violence of their instinctual drives and their powerlessness in face of the autonomous emotions erupting from the unconscious.9

Perhaps nowhere in art are these instinctual, animalistic drives given substance more than in the heroes and villains of the comic books. With comic book characters the animal motif goes beyond merely the wearing of symbolic garments. Many comic book characters are a melding of man and beast; these characters actually possess the abilities of the creatures whose names they take. They are humankind's subconscious urges personified.

Certainly not all heroes of the comics are animal symbols. Yet throughout the history of the medium there are many examples, representing a surprisingly
wide range of creatures (to name only a few: Hawkman, Spider-Man, The Wasp, The Black Panther, Cat Woman, and even Ant-Man). What demonstrates the power of this symbol, and should prove most interesting to the psychoanalytic critic, is the fact that far and away the most popular comic-book hero from the mid-seventies to the mid-eighties was Wolverine, a borderline psychopath given to bestial, berserker rages.10

A purer example of primitive, subconscious urges than Wolverine is found in The Batman, the hero who captured the collective imagination over fifty years ago, and eclipsed Wolverine in popularity in the latter half of the eighties. The Batman went through a science fiction phase, a campy phase (in imitation of the television show), and long periods of being a generic costumed hero, but he has always been most popular with readers when he is portrayed as a vicious, relentless creature of the night.11 In the symbol of the bat both primitive animalistic urges and primitive fear of what waits in the shadows just beyond the glow of the fire or the glare of the street light combine in a frightful manifestation.

Will Eisner’s hero, The Spirit, is a notable exception to the animal motif. As Eisner moved from adventure stories to quieter human dramas, the animal
symbol became an even less appropriate motif in his work.

However, there are at least a few examples of Eisner's use of the animal symbol. Two of the recurring villains in The Spirit are The Octopus and Mr. Carrion. They follow in the tradition of comic-book characters who represent a merging of human and animal; their activities or personalities display characteristics of the creatures after which they are named. By associating these criminals, by means of their names, with the baser human instincts, Eisner places them in contrast to the more humanistic and spiritual hero.

Another example comes from one of Eisner's later works. In A Life Force he consciously, and perhaps heavy-handedly, uses the cockroach as a metaphor (see Appendix D, pages 12 through 19, and Appendix E pages 5 and 6). The animal symbol here evokes humankind's envy of what is perceived as superior qualities in another creature; in this case, an indomitable will to survive. What Jacob admires most about the cockroach is its determination and ability to survive. Whereas primitive humans killed animals to acquire their admired qualities, Jacob, a symbol of humanity's strength, saves the life of the cockroach. With this action, as with his whole life, what Jacob affirms is simply
the struggle itself.

The Circle

Jaffe' cautions that "the frequency with which the square and the circle appear must not be overlooked. There seems to be an uninterrupted psychic urge to bring into consciousness the basic factors of life that they symbolize." However, comic book panels are rarely in the shape of a circle. On the other hand, the circle’s complementary symbol, the square (or more accurately, the rectangle) is a basic building block of the average comic book.

Dr. M. L. von Franz explains the circle as symbolic of the Self, the totality of the psyche, including the individual’s relationship to humankind and the individual’s relationship to nature. Jaffe' concurs with this interpretation of the circle, but carries the analysis one step further, to explain the relationship between the circle and the square:

The circle is a symbol of the psyche (even Plato described the psyche as a sphere). The square (and often the rectangle) is a symbol of earthbound matter, of the body and reality. In most modern art, the connection between these two primary forms is either nonexistent, or loose and casual. Their separation is another symbolic expression of the psychic state of 20th-century man: his soul has lost its roots and he is threatened by dissociation.
To reduce these interpretations to their simplest terms, the circle symbolizes the spiritual, the rectangle the physical.

It might at first seem a contradiction of Jaffe's conclusions that such a fanciful and non-realistic medium as comic books should rely on the square (the shape of the vast majority of panels) as its basic building block. The rectangle is the predominant feature of comic book form for three reasons. First, the rectangular panel is simply a holdover from the comic strip, where the strictly defined and limited space necessitated rectangular panels. Second, rectangular panels provide an easily decipherable structure for readers trained on the comic strips. Third, most comic books deal with violent, physical adventure rather than philosophical or spiritual concerns. The square is a fitting symbolic container for such earthbound material. Those comic books that aspire to more meaningful, more philosophical material occasionally break from the traditional mold of the square, and use the circle as a framing device.

The overwhelming majority of panels used in Eisner's *Spirit* stories were developed within rectangular frames. Most of the time, no doubt, this choice of frame shape was a result of the first two factors mentioned above. However, even as far back as his work on *The Spirit*,
Eisner consciously varied panel shape as a reflection of content. For example, in the gritty, violent "Black Alley" (Appendix C) he uses exclusively the rectangular panel shape that Aniela Jaffe identifies as symbolic of "earthbound matter, of the body and reality." In the more fanciful "Mrs. Paraffin" (Appendix A) half the panels either have no border at all, or a file card shape to indicate testimony being given.

Eisner's later, graphic novel work continues the move away from the traditional panel shapes. In "Life...Force" (Appendix D) Eisner presents more spiritual, philosophical content. In keeping with the emphasis of the spiritual over the physical, panel borders of any shape are often discarded. Instead, the limits of the actions depicted, backgrounds, or patches of shading define a panel.

Eisner has seldom used circular panels. When he does they usually serve a narrative function (such as a shot through a round airplane window so as to identify the location of the action). In the examples presented in this study the only significant image of the circle that appears is the discarded, open tin can on page 19 of Appendix D.

As mentioned earlier, the stone, the animal, the circle and the rectangle are not the only subconscious
symbols appropriate for psychoanalytical analysis. They were selected as examples for application because of their pervasiveness and apparent power. While it is probable that these symbols could be profitably examined in any comic book, the critic undertaking a panel analysis should not hesitate to look for other symbols specific to the work being studied.

Myths

In their fifty-some year history comic books have conveyed many myths. However, the purpose of this study is to create a framework for criticism rather than to exhaustively apply that framework. Therefore, only one myth will be examined in this section. The dominant myth found in comic books, as in most Western narrative, is the hero myth.

No myth has been more popular or enduring than the hero myth. Psychologist Joseph L. Henderson discusses the pervasiveness and importance of this myth:

The myth of the hero is the most common and the best-known myth in the world. We find it in the classical mythology of Greece and Rome, in the Middle Ages, in the Far East, and among contemporary primitive tribes. It also appears in our dreams. It has an obvious dramatic appeal, and a less obvious, but nonetheless profound, psychological importance.17

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The hero myth is, of course, the very substance of most comic books. The first protagonists of the comic books were the buffoons and funny animals of the comic strips. These characters were reflections of a variation on the hero myth, the trickster. They were soon displaced by the heroes of the pulp magazines, cowboys, detectives, and Indiana Jones-style adventurers. These stereotypes, encrusted as they were with mythological traits, brought the mainstream hero myth to comic books. However, it was the super-hero that gave comic books both their financial success and their identity.

With the super-hero we find the hero myth in its purest, almost classical form. Reitberger and Fuchs explain how the super-hero reflects ancient traditions:

Each super-hero chooses in the beginning of his career a disguise and a battle name. Usually he decides to frighten his adversaries, so as to defeat them psychologically as well as physically. He dons a mask and in doing so reaches back to the age-old custom of exorcising demons and evil spirits by frightening them with a terrifying disguise. Today the villains stand in the place of evil spirits. The super-hero’s disguise has therefore a mythical element.18

Over thirty years ago British psychotherapist Alan McGlashan recognized that the comic book’s ties to
mythological tradition went beyond mere surface resemblances. He argued that some of the heroes of the comics were "modern-day incarnations of primordial figures." It is not surprising, then, that, as comic book historians Dick Lupoff and Don Thompson point out, "comic book characters have become part of the myth-structure of much of the world: not only is Superman more widely known than Paul Bunyan, but even Clark Kent has achieved the same stature."20

For the psychoanalytic critic it is not enough merely to identify comic books as modern-day examples of the ancient hero myth. The critic must examine the general significance of this myth, the specific psychoanalytic function of the comic books that perpetuate the myth, and how the myth functions to make the comic book medium intelligible and compelling to the reader. As with symbols, the meaning that a myth communicates to the subconscious varies from reader to reader. There may well be a wide range of very personal needs that are answered by the hero myth. This critic offers as generalized functions of the hero myth in comic books, responses [what Kenneth Burke would call strategic and stylized answers] to five subconscious needs: the adolescent longing for power, the development of identity, the need for a protector, the need for escape,
and catharsis. 21

Henderson explains the psychological state that creates a need for heroes such as the comic books portray:

As a general rule it can be said that the need for hero symbols arises when the ego needs strengthening -- when, that is to say, the conscious mind needs assistance in some task that it cannot accomplish unaided or without drawing on the sources of strength that lie in the unconscious mind. 22

Certainly adolescence is a time when the ego needs much assistance and guidance. Thus, to use Kenneth Burke's conception of literature, comic books serve "as equipment for living." 23 In this case they are less a source of answers to problems than they are a fanciful escape from problems. Heroes such as Superman serve a compensatory function [a power fantasy] for adolescents who have little power over their own environment.

Reitberger and Fuchs explain how the heroes of the comic books function as dreams made tangible for many immature readers:

The "little man" likes to project his wishful thinking into the shape of a big, strong man. Super-heroes are no more than the expression and fixation of narcissistic self-aggrandisement; they show how the adolescent reader,
or the infantile grown-up sees himself in his dreams. Super-heroes fulfill the youngster's longings to be like the heroes of legend, fairy-tale and myth, and offer him a perfect identification figure.24

As evidence of this relationship between adolescent longings and comic-book heroes Rietberger and Fuchs point out that "characters like Superman, Captain America and Batman were invented by their creators when they were still of school age."25 Ted White gives further evidence when he claims "Superman was a myth-figure: he was our dreams personified, even as he must have been Siegal and Shuster's"26

Eisner’s creation, The Spirit, is much less of a dream personified. The Spirit has no special powers. For every clear-cut victory for justice (as in "Black Alley," Appendix C), there is a failure (as in "Mrs. Paraffin," Appendix A). In other instances, The Spirit is merely in the background as some drama is played out (as in "Foul Play," Appendix B). He does not exhibit the power to control his environment that the adolescent reader often craves.

However, The Spirit does serve the second function of the hero myth, the development of identity. The search for identity is the overriding challenge of adolescence.27 According to Erikson, adolescents solve
their "identity crisis" by testing various identities until they find one in which they are secure. 28 Psychologist Joseph L. Henderson believes "the essential function of the heroic myth is the development of the individual's ego-consciousness -- his awareness of his own strengths and weaknesses." 29 Through identification with heroic figures in fiction adolescents discover and affirm their own identity. While Superman is a perfect response to the power/control need, his one-dimensional, flawless character makes him a poor model for psychological maturity. 30 The Spirit, because of Eisner's concern with the human condition, is a more realistically human hero: he presents the young reader with virtues to emulate and foibles to avoid.

The third subconscious need fulfilled by the hero myth is the need for a protector. Most comic book heroes have a regular supporting cast of people to be rescued. Superman has Lois Lane, Jimmy Olsen, and at least half a dozen others. The Spirit has Ebony White, Ellen Dolan, Commissioner Dolan and a number of femme fatales. Even kid sidekicks such as Bucky, Toro and Robin (with whom adolescents presumably identify) spend much of their time in need of rescue. The heroes who operate as a deus ex machina for those around them appeal to both adolescents and adults, who long for
someone to rescue them from their problems or protect them in an increasingly violent world. Reitberger and Fuchs claim comic book heroes "express in today's idiom the ancient longing of mankind for a mighty protector, a helper, guide, or guardian angel who offers miraculous deliverance to mortals."31

When such deliverance does not occur, those beset by problems can use fiction as a means of temporary escape. The hero myth provides escape not only from the anxiety produced by problems, but also from the boredom of mundane existence. Traditionally, comic books have provided a fictional world in which happy endings were institutionalized. Until recently, the majority of comic books were submitted to the Comics Code Authority (an industry created regulatory board that was established as a response to the Congressional hearings of the 1950s) for approval prior to publication.32 M. Thomas Inge describes the effect the code has had on the medium:

Guidelines prohibit displays of sex, adultery, divorce, drugs, corrupt authority or unpunished crimes. Submission to the authority requires a medium mainly irrelevant to reality; thus characters escape into a world of fantasy, dominated by super-heroes, a world in which both might and right are on the side of morality.33
Although the Code restrictions have become more liberal since Inge’s commentary, they still force comic books into the mold of escapist literature. They still enforce a use of the hero myth through which, to quote Jung, “the ordinary man can be liberated from his personal impotence and misery and endowed [at least temporarily] with an almost superhuman quality.”

Will Eisner has produced most of his work outside the confines of the Comics Code Authority. *The Spirit* did have to conform to the demands of the newspaper-syndicate, and there are many issues that offer standard escapist, hero adventures (“Black Alley”, Appendix C is an example). However, there are also many issues in which there is no use of the hero myth because the hero [*The Spirit*] barely puts in an appearance. The timid milkman in “Foul Play” [Appendix B] does not operate as role model, protector, or liberator from mundane existence. Instead, in this story, as with most of his later work, Eisner focuses on very human problems and failings as opposed to superhuman fantasy. Much of Eisner’s comic book work is not so much an escape from reality, as a celebration of reality.

Because of his focus on human concerns Eisner’s work seems well suited to serve as a catharsis. According to Sigmund Freud, aggression is “an innate, independent,
instinctual disposition in man." Catharsis is the release, either directly or indirectly, of built-up aggressive energy. The hero myth allows a fictional character to undergo our suffering and act out our anger, thereby reducing our aggressive drive.

The catharsis normally provided in comic books is anger-based and extremely violent. From Gilgamesh to Hercules, Davy Crockett to Superman, might used in the service of right has been a component of the hero myth. The violent acts performed by heroes in the course of their adventures can serve for readers as a vicarious release of their own pent-up aggression. The Batman is perhaps the purest example of a cathartic hero. Fear of violent crime and anger toward criminals are common conditions of life in modern America. The Batman, with what comic book writer/artist Frank Miller refers to as "a hearty sense of malice," vents our collective anger on the criminals and strikes fear into their hearts.

Eisner provides a catharsis, more akin to that associated with drama, based on common suffering and anxiety. The hero of many of Eisner's stories is often a common man, heroic only in that he is the protagonist of the story and a fellow soldier in the struggle of life. In "Foul Play" [Appendix B] the unnamed milkman
contends with the alienation and anxiety of big city life. In "A Life Force" (Appendix D) Jacob deals with the fear of death and a meaningless existence. The aggression that the reader has stored from these anxieties is released vicariously through the hero of the story.

**Conclusion**

The psychoanalytic aspect of micro analysis is, at best, imprecise and incomplete. Yet, the approach does seem well suited for the strong visual symbols and blatant myths of the comic book medium. The approach also articulates aspects of artistic communication that are not explained by other critical approaches. Psychoanalysis offers a unique perspective on the juncture of art and communication, and should be one of the critical methods used to construct the model of the whole.

The psychoanalytical method can be profitably applied to comic books in examining how the symbols and myths contained in the text and images of comic books communicate meaning to the subconscious of the reader. However, any speculation about the effect of the work has to be generalized and cautious, since each individual has a different subconscious symbol set. That is why this study uses as examples symbols and myths that recur frequently and for which there
is some consensus about their meaning.

The next aspect of micro analysis to be considered is the psychological significance of selected visual elements of the comic book panel. Chapter four will investigate the psychological effects and meanings produced by shape, pattern, and color. Selected gestalt psychology theories of visual perception will also be applied to the comic book panel.
Chapter IV
Psychological Analysis

The psychological aspect of micro analysis is concerned, not with the effect of recognizable symbols on the subconscious, but with the organization and meaning applied to compositional factors. In the application of this approach, gestalt theories of perception and visual communication will be applied to the comic book panel, and three compositional factors will be considered: shape, pattern and color. These are not the only compositional factors that have psychological significance. Nor are they to be exhaustively analyzed in this study. They are offered only as representative examples of how the psychological aspect of micro analysis can be applied.

Gestalt

In his introductory psychology text Donald R. Hoffeld claims that "the major contribution of Gestalt psychologists to modern psychology was their stress on the fact that perceptual experience takes place in meaningful, organized wholes."¹ Dondis heralds gestalt as a major breakthrough in the understanding of visual communication:

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Artists, art historians, philosophers, and specialists from various fields of the humanities and social sciences have a long history of exploring how and what it is that the visual arts "communicate." I believe some of the most meaningful work has been done by "Gestalt" psychologists, whose major interest has been in the principles of perceptual organization, the process of making wholes out of parts.2

Psychologist R. W. Pickford, along with colleagues, Wyburn and Hirst, has identified four basic principles of Gestalt form perception.3 As Pickford describes it, "the first principle is that of 'figure and ground' by which every perceptual experience is essentially a pattern related to a background of other experiences or their absence. It is clear that this applies throughout the visual arts."4 At one level this is simply a matter of what is intended as, or becomes the focus of attention. For example, in a comic-book panel of Superman flying over Metropolis, Superman would be the figure and the city the ground. At another level, the entire work of art is the figure (because it is the focus of our attention), and the ground consists of what psychologists term the Set. According to Hoffeld, "set implies a bias or a predisposition to view things a certain way."5 Thus, the reader's reaction and interpretation of the Superman panel could be influenced by any number of factors from attitudes about big cities.
to color preferences.

The second principle of gestalt perception is grouping. Humans have a natural tendency to try to make sense of any visual stimuli they encounter. One way in which this is accomplished is by breaking the stimuli down into meaningful units based on similarity, differentiation, proximity, etc. Traditionally comic books have been simplistic and concrete enough that all the stimuli presented is quickly and obviously grouped. However, some artists, most notably, Will Eisner, have abandoned the traditional panel borders that clearly segregated and grouped images. In addition, the often abstract and expressionistic work of artists such as Bill Sienkiewicz and Jon Muth makes more demands on the reader to differentiate the components in order to make sense of the whole.

The third principle of gestalt perception is closure, or the tendency for incomplete structures to be completed in perception. The simplest example of this is when a viewer looks at a drawing in which the lines do not quite meet, and mentally fills in the gaps to perceive a "completed" picture. In the perception of comic book form closure occurs between consecutive panels. The process is very similar to what Kohler observed in his experiments with apes.6 The ape in the cage

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had two mental pictures — one of himself and the banana outside the cage, beyond his reach, and one of himself and the stick inside the cage — between which he made closure to come to an insight of the whole situation and how to solve his problem. The comic book reader looks at two consecutive panels which depict events separated by any span of time and space, and performs closure by mentally filling in the "implied" events between the panels, to create a completed, whole story.

The fourth gestalt principle of perception is that of Gestalten, or "good gestalt." Pickford explains what constitutes good gestalt:

According to this principle a stronger or more adequate pattern in perception will tend to take precedence over weaker patterns. Very often good Gestalten are simple structures, like circular, square, or rectangular patterns. While some are apparently based on simple geometrical organizations, others are based on familiarity, or the power of emotional expression.7

Basically, good gestalt occurs whenever an organized and meaningful whole can be perceived. The ape who perceived that he could use the stick to reach the banana achieved good gestalt. Good gestalt is achieved in a comic book when the reader can organize the individual elements [line, image, panel, etc.] into
a meaningful whole (i.e. - a narrative that makes sense).

The four principles of perception outlined above can be used by the critic as one standard of effectiveness; that standard being whether or not the composition of the comic book provides a psychologically satisfying whole. Yet, Pickford warns that "while Gestalt principles enter constantly into art and are always involved in it, they do not in themselves necessarily provide principles of aesthetic merit or of the most expressive qualities of form and design." As applied here, gestalt is a functional concept dealing more with understanding than with aesthetic merit.

Psychological meanings are very individualized. Pickford points out "the very great influence of mental attitudes, associations and spontaneous interpretations." The meanings attached to shapes and patterns will not only vary from individual to individual, but the meaning assigned by each viewer might well vary over time as the emotional state of the individual varies. As with the psychoanalytical approach, the meanings presented here are generalizations based on the most frequent interpretations produced by psychological research.

Shape

Two basic shapes that have been repeatedly researched and found to have some consistency of interpretation
are the curve and the angle. Dondis claims that "curved directional forces have meanings associated with encompassment, repetition, and warmth." Hevner conducted some of the earliest experiments along these lines. He found that people tended to interpret curves as serene, graceful and tender-sentimental, and angles as robust and either rough or dignified. In summarizing the results of such research, Pickford found that "facts of a very elementary kind emerge, such as the tendency for a preference for circles and the feeling that curves and circles are beautiful, while angular figures may be ugly." By the very terminology used it is obvious that these shapes have connotative associations with stereotypes of the female [for the curve/circle] and the male [for the angle/square].

Some of the more standardized meanings attached to compositional factors are the result of Lipps' principle of einfühlung, or empathy. According to this theory "we 'feel into' represented objects the movement or the pressure of weight which they must exert." As an example of how movement is "felt" Pickford discusses the meanings assigned to upward and downward sloping lines:
...rising lines may seem cheerful or agitating and it is because of the impression we have, owing to empathy, of the activity and energy seeming to make them rise. Downward sloping lines and curves may seem sad or lazy because of the impression, again due to empathy, of the lack of energy or activity which lets them droop.15

Pickford also gives examples of how the pressure of weight can be felt in two dimensional renderings:

A wispy and ribbon-like cloud suggests the force of the wind blowing it rapidly. A big stone resting on another suggests the pressure of the lower stone in holding it up and gives the impression of upward against downwardly acting forces. Where a depression occurs in an object resting against another, we have the impression of elasticity and so on.16

From the research done by psychologists to determine how visual stimuli communicate, and what they mean, there is rather definite confirmation of which forms are most preferred. It is confirmation rather than discovery because some of these forms have been recognized as effective visual composition for centuries.

One such shape that has a long history of use and ranks high in preference is Hogarth's "line of beauty." This pattern is "a balanced double curve like the curve of a woman's back."17 Pickford describes some of the forms the line of beauty can take:
This may be built into many kinds of pictorial compositions, from those involving the human figure in various ways to landscapes with curves, hills, waves, the paired bow-shaped structure of lips, and so on. As with the golden section, it is not an absolute or fixed form according to the preferences for it and use of it, but represents a central tendency round which there may be a variety of different forms all approximating it to some extent.18

The line of beauty carries all the connotations of a regular curve, but with greater visual appeal.

Generally, Eisner's style makes more use of the angle than the curve. This seems appropriate, since most of his stories are set amid the hustle and bustle of the big city. However, in the "Our Block" vignette (pages 2 through 4 of of Appendix E) from New_York. the_Big_City, Eisner contrasts life in the city with that in the suburbs. Angular bricks, windows and landings dominate the composition in Eisner's portrayal of robust tenement life. In the panels depicting suburban life curves -- the moon, the bed, the doors and especially the arching trees -- help to create a sense of comfortable serenity, that for Rosa and Angelo translates into dullness.

Pattern

Long before psychologists confirmed their effectiveness certain patterns and proportions were employed
by artists to attract and direct the eye of the viewer. One such techniques that seem particularly appropriate for the analysis of comic book art is the felt axis.

Because of man's innate need for balance, the felt axis is an unavoidable component of any visual communication. Dondis believes that "the most important psychological as well as physical influence on human perception is man's need for balance." He explains how this principle operates in all visual communication:

In visual expression or interpretation, this process of stabilization imposes on all things seen and planned a vertical "axis" with a horizontal secondary referrent which together establish the structural factors that measure balance. This visual axis is also called a felt axis which better expresses the unseen but dominating presence of the axis in the act of seeing. It is an unconscious constant.

Since the eye seeks out the felt axis in any visual field, the location of the axis does much to determine how we encounter and interpret what we see. According to Dondis, "the axis area of any field is looked at first; it is where you expect to see something." For example, in a triptych, the eyes naturally focus first on the middle panel. After the axis is located the eyes shift to the lower half of the field, "being drawn to that locus in the secondary step of establishing
balance through the horizontal reference." Thus the felt axis creates a natural dominance within a field for the left over the right, and the lower half over the upper half.

The "leveled composition" described above conforms to our unconscious expectations, and presents a rather calm, serene field. However, by placing the main visual material in the upper half of the field or on the right an artist can manipulate the composition so that a feeling of stress is created. Dondis explains that "the visual elements that are placed in areas of stress have more weight than those that are leveled." By "weight" Dondis means that which has the ability to attract the eye. Another way in which stress can be created is by violating the horizontal-vertical reference with diagonal direction. This composition is the antithesis of the stability expected in the felt axis, and can create a sensation Dondis describes as "threatening and almost literally upsetting."

The mind perceives first a vertical axis, and secondly a horizontal axis. The eye is drawn first to the vertical center of a comic book panel. For example, on the first page of "Black Alley" [Appendix C] while the figure of The Spirit is rather small, the reader is immediately drawn to it because it is
situated along the vertical axis. On page six, panel four of the same story the oncoming train is more dramatically felt for being on the vertical axis of the panel.

After the vertical axis is located, the eyes shift to the lower left of the field. Pages twelve and thirteen of A_Life_Force (Appendix D) illustrate how the felt axis can be used effectively in leading the reader through the elements of a panel. In the first panel on page twelve the narration is placed along the vertical axis, and leads our eyes down along that axis to the figure of Jacob. Our eyes naturally go next to the lower left field, and the second actor in this drama, Izzy the cockroach. In the remaining three panels of page twelve Jacob dominates the vertical axis (notice that his face is always in the middle of the panel). Even though there is nothing in the lower left field of these panels, the fact that we look there second helps to create the impression of Izzy just "off panel."

In the single panel on page thirteen the center of Jacob's face occupies the vertical axis. However, there is nothing in the lower left field except Jacob's hand. The struggling Izzy is in the lower right field. Thus, the natural, "leveled composition" is violated, and the panel (obviously meant to be a dramatic moment,
since it takes up a full page] is given more impact. When a main visual element [i.e. - the figure rather than the ground] is placed outside the balance of the felt axis the element itself is more noticeable, and a greater sense of stress is created in the panel. Another example of this stressful pattern can be found in panel six, page four of "Foul Play" (Appendix B). The reader would not get the same jolt from the panel is the ringing phone was placed to the left of the vertical axis.

While this section of panel analysis is devoted to the psychological influence of visual pattern, it should be noted that most comic book panels also have a verbal element. Visual patterns and text work in conjunction to control the eye movement, and thus, the order of perception of the reader. Lawrence Abbott, in his study of the narrative characteristics of the comic book, observes that "Ideally the text works mutually with the drawing to arrive at a unified meaning for the whole, yet the text often serves as the dominant force in overall perception."25 A more detailed discussion of the prose element of the comic book, and the verbal-visual blend will be presented in the semiological analysis in the following chapter.
Color

Dondis considers color to be an invaluable component of visual communication because it is "loaded with information and one of the most pervasive visual experiences we all have in common." Maholy-Nagy explains something of the nature of this experience:

Color is embedded in tradition and symbolism. From the time of the first flags and emblems, creating the romance of heraldry, the customs of religions, peoples and nations have been given meaning by hues of the spectrum. Even the color of ice cream to a child or a girl's dress to a sweetheart can produce lifelong symbolic fixations.

Maholy-Nagy makes two important points: color has a great deal to do with how we interpret our visual experiences, and the interpretation of colors themselves can be very individualized and emotional.

However, psychologists have long attempted to discover some generalized meanings of color. In a series of studies beginning in 1907 Edward Bullough determined four ways in which people react to color. He found that people tend to be influenced predominately by one aspect of color. Bullough classified these reactions as the objective aspect (pleasing if saturated, pure or bright; displeasing if thin, mixed or dull), the physiological aspect (pleasing if stimulating,
soothing or warming; displeasing if depressing, dazzling or otherwise emotionally disturbing), the associative aspect (pleasing or displeasing, depending on what it reminds a person of), the character aspect (giving colors personifications such as fearless, energetic, stubborn, teacherous, etc.)

Some of the research that followed could not be easily categorized under any of these aspects. For example, Bullough (1907) himself, and later Marion Monroe (1925), both found that darker, more saturated colors are perceived as heavier.29 This reaction could be explained by any of the four aspects. However, the majority of the research done on color meaning focused on the character aspect. Pickford summarizes the results of three of the major studies -- Odbert, Karwoski, and Eckerson (1942), Wexner (1954), Murray and Deabler (1957) -- that sought to determine personified meanings of color:

Red - exciting, defiant, powerful
Green - leisurely, secure, calm, tender
Yellow - playful, cheerful
Blue - tender, secure, calm
Orange - gay, distressed
Purple - solemn, dignified
Black - sad, distressed, powerful 30

Something of the difficulty of establishing standardized
meanings is demonstrated by how Pickford's own findings -- "red was happy and exciting, while blue was serene, sad and dignified" -- differ from those he reported above. Dondis also has slightly different findings that cross a number of Bullough's aspects. His research indicates that "yellow is the color considered closest to light and warmth; red is the most emotional and active; blue is passive and soft."32

These varied findings should not be surprising. Denotative meanings of color can at best be generalizations. As Moholy-Nagy's "symbolic fixations" and Bullough's associative aspect indicate, connotations play a large role in our interpretations of color. However, as Dondis points out, the research done on color meaning still has some validity, but we must also recognize the subjective aspect of the meanings:

Color not only has universally shared meaning through experience, but it also has separate worth informationally through symbolically attached meaning. In addition to the highly negotiable color meaning, each of us has our own personal and subjective color preferences.33

The other area of color psychology that has been studied extensively is the subjective color preference. Of course, preferences are usually closely linked to
the meanings assigned to colors. Yet, there is not always as much of a correlation between meaning and preference as might be expected. In 1941 Eysenck summarized the results of a number of color preference experiments, with a total number of 21,060 subjects, and found that the average preference was for blue, while yellow was the least liked color. It is not surprising that blue, which is so often considered secure, would top the list. However, it might be expected that a more negative color, such as orange or black, would be at the bottom of the list, rather than yellow.

For all the research that has been done in the area, there is nothing approaching a comprehensive understanding of how and what color communicates. Perhaps one of the limitations has been that most of the research has utilized the introspective approach. Dandis admits that "our knowledge of color in visual communication goes very little farther than collecting observations of our reactions to it. There is no single, ultimate system of how hues relate to each other."35

Two related factors that influence the interpretation of visual stimuli are age and maturity. For example, Woods (1956) hypothesizes that color preference varies with age, intelligence and sex.36 The more "primitive" the individual, the more likely they are to prefer
variety, intensity and contrast in color combinations. Those who are "more highly developed and socially orient-ed" prefer subtle color relationships. Moholy-Nagy makes a similar observation:

Color preferences seem to go along with certain personality traits. Most people are born with a natural liking for the colors at the two ends of the spectrum -- red and blue. Children and primitives are particularly attracted to vivid, vital primary colors, especially red and yellow.37

Studies of color preference have consistently shown that around the age of six the most popular color changes from red to either blue or green, in line with the average adult preference.38

The most distinctive aspect of the comic book medium is the blend of prose and pictures. An important aspect of this blend is how well the colors used in a particular panel match psychologically with the words used in that panel. While black and white comic books are becoming increasingly popular with the smaller companies (because they are cheaper to produce), the majority of mainstream comic books still have colored pictures. The block lettering often used in comic books to indicate vocal emphasis or some sound effect (there are extensive examples of this in "Foul Play,"
Appendix B] permits even some of the prose to be colored. Comic book colorist Glynis Oliver explains how color can be used to reflect and enhance content:

I try to have the color reflect the emotion going on at that point in the story. It helps the story to flow. Generally anger, violence or any impact panel will have a hot color like red, yellow, or orange. Cool colors such as blue and purple are used when the mood is sad and depressed. Green is somewhere in the middle, and is a good neutral background. Night scenes are usually done in a range of cool colors.39

Comic book coloring attempts to respond not only to color meaning, but the the second area of color psychology, color preference. It has generally been found that young children prefer vibrant colors such as red or yellow. As most people mature their preference changes to blue. Notice that these are the exact colors of Superman’s costume. Perhaps this color scheme contributed to his success. In turn, his success has institutionalized these primary colors for comic book hero costumes. Oliver comments on the color choices that have traditionally been used to separate the heroes from the villains in comic books:

Usually I use a strong color like red on someone I want to be noticed. It has the most impact on the printed page. The other
primary colors are useful too (yellow and blue). Most of the heroes' costumes are a combination of red, yellow, blue or white. The villains, on the other hand, generally wear combinations of green, purple and orange; the secondary colors. There are exceptions of course -- like The Hulk.

The exceptions to traditional coloring have increased in recent years. First, there is the practical consideration of primary color schemes being exhausted by the proliferation of comic book characters in the forties and fifties. Second, beginning in the sixties, many comic book protagonists were portrayed, like The Hulk, as either anti-heroes or at least morally ambivalent. However, for the traditional and morally pure heroes in the mold of Superman, Spiderman, and Captain America bold primary colors are still an important part of the visual communication of the heroic theme.

Color work by Will Eisner is not readily accessible. Most of the reprints of The Spirit are in black and white. Even though the covers of these reprints are in color, they are colored by someone else. Eisner's graphic novel work is done in black and white, or sepia and white. It also seems to be true of Eisner's work that he relies more on shading and "lighting" effects to convey mood, than he does on color.

However, what evidence there is of Eisner's use
of color in comic book work indicates that he follows the conventions that have been in place for at least fifty years. Using color to reflect content, Eisner tends toward the bright, primary colors for his light-hearted stories, and toward the darker, heavier colors for his "film noir" stories. Using color to delineate character types, Eisner dresses The Spirit in a blue suit, white shirt and red tie, while the recurring villain, The Octopus, gets a purple outfit.

Conclusion

The psychological aspect of micro analysis suffers from the same imprecision of the psychoanalytical aspect. First, in using this aspect to evaluate the skill of the artist in employing the comic book form, artist intentions must be second-guessed. Second, effects on the reader have to be generalized because the influence of the psychological factors discussed above depends on the attitudes and associations the reader brings to the reading.

However, the psychological component can still be of value to the critic applying panel analysis because psychological research provides inductive support for the generalizations of how readers organize and apply meaning to certain compositional factors. First, the four basic principles of gestalt form perception --
figure and ground, grouping, closure (or the completion of incomplete structures) and "good gestalt" — help explain how comic book readers make meaningful wholes out of the various parts of the comic book form. Second, certain compositional factors, such as shape, pattern and color have strong recurring, perhaps even subconscious, associations and interpretations.
Chapter V
Semiological Analysis

Rhetoricians of the twentieth century have had to broaden the scope of their investigation. Spoken and written language are no longer recognized as the only, or even the most pervasive, form of communication. The proliferation of mass media provides many unique 'languages' or 'rhetorics' for study. Rhetoricians Martin Medhurst and Thomas Benson, in their 1984 study of the rhetoric of media, make a call for a new literacy:

Today we are bombarded by messages from radio, television, film, newspapers, magazines, and a host of other media which bring with them a "rhetoric" all their own. Just as the linguistic capacities of the ancient rhetoricians determined, to a large degree, how their discourses were formed, so today the capacities of the different media present rhetorical opportunities and choices, some unique to themselves, and some shared with public speech and other media. It is important that we learn more about these new "languages" as some have called them, if we are to be able fully to understand and appreciate the messages they bring.

Semiotics is a critical approach that uses modern linguistic theories as a model for describing these new languages. As film theorist James Monaco explains it, "the approach of semiology is to study arts and
media as languages or language systems -- technical structures with inherent laws governing not only what is 'said' but also how it is 'said.'"2

In one of the seminal works of semiology, *Foundations of a Theory of Signs* (1946), Morris proposes three aspects of semiotics: pragmatics, semantics and syntactics.3 Morris defines pragmatics as "that portion of a semiotic which deals with the origin, uses, and effects of signs within the total behavior of the interpreters of signs." As he conceives it, semantics deals with "the signification of signs, and ... the interpretant behavior without which there is no significance." Syntactics he defines as dealing with "combinations of signs and the ways in which they are combined." Morris' concept of pragmatics goes beyond the scope of this study.

Two of Morris' three aspects of semiotics can be applied at the micro level: semantics and syntactics. Semantics, can be used to analyze the meaning of individual signs that appear in a panel. Syntactics can be used to explain how the systematic arrangement of signs in a panel create meaning.

**Semantics**

The key term in the concept of semantics is the sign. A sign, as defined in semiology, is "the basic
unit of signification composed of the signifier (which carries the meaning) and the signified (which is the concept or thing signified).” 4 Roland Barthes provides an explanation of these components of semiological systems:

We are dealing, in any semiological system, not with two, but with three different terms. For what we grasp is not at all one term after the other, but the correlation which unites them: there are, therefore, the signifier, the signified and the sign, which is the associative total of the first two terms.5

As the central term of this system the sign has been subjected to further dissection and definition. Edward Booth-Clibborn and Daniele Baroni maintain that for analytic purposes a sign can be divided into three dimensions: form, objective definition and significance.6

The form is how it looks to the viewer [e.g. - two intersecting lines]. The objective definition is what it represents [e.g. - a cross, dagger, etc.]. The significance is what the sign means in the particular context in which it appears. A written X, for instance, might have an identical form but mean rejection [an X on an exam] or acceptance [an X in the voting booth], depending on the context.

Peter Wollen, in his semiotic analysis of the
cinema, offers a classification of signs based on the nature of the relationships they manifest. Wollen identifies three types of signs: the icon, reproduces the likeness of something; the index, has an inherent relationship to something [e.g. - sweat to indicate it is hot]; the symbol, an arbitrary sign represents something through convention or individual association.7

The iconic sign is the most direct of signs, in that the drawing [in the case of comic books] represents the item that it is drawn to look like. However, the style in which the iconic sign is rendered can have an indirect influence on the interpretation of the story content. In his study of sequential art Will Eisner discusses some of the implications of rendering style:

The cartoon is the result of exaggeration and simplification. Realism is adherence to most of the detail. The elimination of some of the detail in an image makes it easier to digest and adds to humor. Retention of detail begets believability because it is closest to what the reader actually sees.8

Will Eisner has a very expressive cartoon style. The items represented in his panels are easily identifiable, but a great deal of the detail is left out. In the "Our Block" vignette [Appendix E] people,
buildings and cars are all recognizable for what they are, even though they are rendered in a cartoon style. In Eisner's storytelling (particularly his graphic novel work) the ideas and emotions are more important than the objects represented. Eisner explains his preference for the cartoon style:

To me, the important thing is mood. Ultra realistic art tends to draw attention to itself. That's exactly the point I want to avoid.9

According to Eisner, "the cartoon is a form of impressionism."10 Eisner's use of the term "impressionism" here seems to borrow its meaning from the musical style, rather than from painting or literature; that is, composition used to evoke moods or impressions.

In an index sign the signifier does not look like the signified, but instead has a inherent relationship to it. An example of an index sign for love is the sighing and batting of the eyes, commonly used in silent films. These actions have a relationship (albeit exaggerated) to the way people act when they are in love. This example illustrates the two ways in which index signs convey meaning. The physical actions associated with love are recognizable because they are encountered repeatedly in reality; they are
commonplaces. A viewer or reader learns to recognize the exaggerated physical actions associated with love because they are repeated in numerous films or comics; they are conventions. Index signs are either commonplaces (e.g. - shivering to indicate it is cold), or conventions (e.g. - white hats to indicate the good guys, or crashing waves to intimate lovemaking). Commonplaces change as reality changes. Conventions come and go; as some become cliches, others are invented.

The commonplace index sign usually has for its signified some emotion or sensation. The signifier of this sign is usually some form of "body language." In his discussion of film technique Pudovkin contends that "there is a law in psychology that says if an emotion gives birth to a certain movement, by imitation of this movement the corresponding emotion can be called forth." Eisner also recognizes that "the human body, and the stylization of its shape, and the codifying of its emotionally produced gestures and expressive postures are accumulated and stored in the memory, forming a non-verbal vocabulary of gesture." Eisner depends heavily on the vocabulary of commonplace index signs. The rubber-faced protagonist of "Foul Play" [Appendix B] provides numerous examples of this type of sign employed in the comic-book panel.
In panel two of page one his whistling is an index of his carefree attitude. In panel eight of page four the sweating and nail-biting are indicative of anxiety. In panel four of page six the sweating, wide eyes and clutching at the throat have a familiar and inherent relationship with the emotion of fear. On page ten of *A_Life_Force* (Appendix D) Jacob’s heart attack is conveyed by the indexical signs of body movements. As is common with index signs, the reader can tell what is happening without any of the message being communicated by words.

Eisner uses relatively few index signs based on convention. Most of the conventions that he does use are exaggerated gestures or expressions that still bear some remote causal relationship to the emotions they convey. An example of this type of convention can be found in the bottom left panel on page three of "Mrs. Paraffin" (Appendix A). Pulling one’s hair as a sign of distress and guilt seldom occurs in reality, but it is a visual association that dates back to ancient drama. Another hoary convention that Eisner uses in his early work is the identification of moral quality by physical form. The morally pure and heroic Spirit is drawn as a perfect physical specimen. The weak and corrupt are drawn in a cartoon style that exaggerates
their deformity. Contrast for example, The Spirit and Mr. Freeze in "Black Alley" [Appendix C].

There are indexical conventions unique to comic strips and comic books that Eisner seldom employs. Examples of such signs are daggers coming from the eyes to indicate anger and a light bulb over someone’s head to indicate a bright idea. Because such signs are so far removed from reality, Eisner uses them almost exclusively in his most fanciful and light-hearted Spirit stories. One exception to this can be found in panel nine on page six of "Foul Play" [Appendix B]. The sweat popping from the brow is comic book convention that does not unduly disrupt the reality of the story, because it is merely an extension, for effect, of a commonplace sign.

Symbol signs are distinguished from icon and index signs in that they are more abstract. The symbol does not necessarily or usually look like what it conveys [i.e. - waves crashing on the beach do not resemble two people making love]. The symbol does not necessarily have an inherent relationship to the meaning it conveys [i.e. - there is no causal link between roses and love].

Jung gives this definition of the symbol:
What we call a symbol is a term, a name, or even a picture that may be familiar in daily life, yet that possesses specific connotations in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning. It implies something vague, unknown, or hidden from us.14

Arnheim gives a specific definition of the image symbol: "an image acts as a symbol to the extent to which it portrays things which are at a higher level of abstractness than is the symbol itself."15

Three types of visual symbol signs will be considered in this study: metonymy, synecdoche and metaphor. These are not the only forms of symbols that can be used in comic book communication, but, in the opinion of this critic, they are used most often.

In the metonymy sign a detail associated [either by causal connection or convention] with an object, activity, or idea is used to suggest the whole of that object, activity, or idea. In panel two on page one of "Foul Play" [Appendix B] the musical notes function as a metonymy; they suggest some form of music being produced. Combined with the puffed cheeks and the balloon shape, they indicate whistling. Another example of metonymy appears in panel nine on page two of the same story. The bubbles coming from the man’s mouth might be considered an index sign, save for the fact that gargling does not send bubbles floating from the
mouth. In this picture Eisner takes an associated detail [bubbles] that actually manifests itself deep in the throat, and exaggerates it so that, along with the man's posture and the glass in his hand, it suggests the activity of gargling.

The synecdoche sign, as employed in visual communication, uses a part of something to stand for the whole of that thing. In comic books the most common use of synecdoche is the visual shorthand by which artists suggest a complete setting or background by presenting only selected details of that setting or background. In the middle tier of page three of "The Strange Case of Mrs Paraffin" [Appendix A] a door frame is used to represent a room. Eisner uses this technique again [in concert with chiaroscuro] in panel six on page seven of A Life Force [Appendix D] to represent a building with the use of one structural detail. Likewise, in the first panel on page seven of "The Strange Case of Mrs. Paraffin" a patch of floor is the only structural element used to suggest a room. On the first page of the "Our Block" vignette in New York the Big City the frames of the car windows are the only details of location that the reader sees in panel four. Yet, the location is clear, and with minimal effort the rest of the car is imaginatively created.
in the reader's mind. Such synecdochical symbols allow a comic book artist to convey a sense of place without being a slave to realistic renderings that might serve to obscure or overpower the action.

In visual communication a metaphor or trope is an image that conveys more than its denotative [iconic] meaning. The signifier also has a non-equal, distinctly different signified. For example, a picture of the moon iconically represents the moon, but it could also symbolize danger and lurking terror if it appears in the comic book *Ike_Tomb_of_Dracula*, or romance if it appears in an issue of *True_Life_Romance*.

The metaphors most commonly used in comic books are of two basic types -- the common lore metaphor and the sequence metaphor. The sequence metaphor is the result of the juxtaposition of two or more panels. Thus, it occurs at the macro level of comic-book form, and will be covered in that section of the study.

The common lore metaphor is based on repeated associations of unrelated signifier and signified that have become conventionalized. The common lore metaphor depends for its communicative power upon the "pre-knowledge" of the reader. The more conventionalized the metaphor, the more likely that the conotative reading of the signifier will lead to the intended signified. In
the final panel on page seven of "Black Alley" Eisner uses an almost cliched happy ending convention of the dawning of a new day. Because this metaphor is so often used in popular narrative forms, it is probably easy for most members of Eisner's audience to read this sign correctly. Only slightly less obvious is the visual metaphor used in panel three on page two of "Our Block" [Appendix E]. Here the plaid pants and loud shirts of the suburbanites immediately call to mind the shallow, phony stereotype so often associated with this type of attire in popular culture. Because of the power of such visual metaphors, Eisner needs no words in this segment to explain why Angelo and Rosa do not like living in "the country."

Some common lore metaphors are more abstract, and thus, subject to different readings depending on the experiences the reader brings to the situation. In Life Force the cockroach is an important, perhaps central, symbol. For a reader to assign meaning to the image of the cockroach they must draw upon their knowledge of cockroaches. Some might draw upon the knowledge of how hard they are to get rid of, and reach the signified, survival, that Eisner seems to want for this story. However, other signifieds could conceivably be arrived at by drawing on knowledge of
the cockroach as bothersome, dirty and disease-ridden.

Even more abstract and prone to varied interpretation is the image of prison cell bars used in "The Strange Case of Mrs. Paraffin" [Appendix A]. The cell bars are overtly [although not concretely] used on page one, and implied in the pattern of floor tiles on the top of page two and in the shadow of a window pane on page three. There is obviously a wide range of meanings possible here since some readers might not even assign any meaning to these patterns. This critic interprets the images as meaning Mrs. Paraffin is the prisoner of her own guilt. However, meanings such as a foreshadowing of her incarceration, her being trapped by circumstances, or even her being a prisoner to her love for her husband also seem to be reasonable interpretations of the images. This type of common lore metaphor still has communicative power, but the control that the communicator exercises is far less precise.

**Syntax**

Comic books have no clearly defined grammar. The conventional linguistic concept of grammar can only be applied to comic books as an analogy. In applying this analogy, this study will draw upon the theory and terminology of film syntax.
However, "film syntax" is itself an analogy.

As Monaco bluntly states, "Film has no grammar."18 Yet he does recognize a syntax of film:

There are, however, some vaguely defined rules of usage in cinematic language, and the syntax of film -- its systematic arrangement -- orders these rules and indicates relationships between them. As with written and spoken languages, it is important to remember that the syntax of film is a result of its usage, not a determinant of it.19

Art theorist Donis A. Dondis gives a very similar explanation of syntax in graphic art. He states that "syntax in the context of visual literacy can only mean the orderly arrangement of parts."20

The arrangement of parts in film can be broken down into three simple considerations for the filmmaker: what will be shot, how will it be shot, and how will it be presented in relationship to other shots. The first two factors constitute the mise en scene. The latter is the province of montage. Monaco provides a slightly more complex consideration of arrangement from the critic's perspective:

So film syntax must include both development in time and development in space. In film criticism, generally, the modification of plastic space is referred to as mise en scene.
... The modification of plastic time is called montage.21

Comic book syntax is also the meaning assigned to the arrangement of constituent parts based upon repeated usage. Just as with film the arrangement of parts can be broken down into considerations of what to draw, how to draw it and how to present panels in relationship to one another. Notice how closely Eisner's description of comic book syntax echoes the earlier discussion of film syntax:

The rendering of the elements within the frame, the arrangement of the images therein and their relation to and association with the other images in the sequence are the basic 'grammar' from which the narrative is constructed.22

The first component of this grammar, what to draw, has been partially covered in the sections dealing with psychological and psychoanalytical analysis. Each of these approaches explain how meanings are assigned to the elements included in a panel. Obviously the decision of what to include must be based on the meaning of each of the elements.

However, comic book artists, far more than filmmakers, have to consider what moments of the action
to capture. Eisner refers to this capture of a segment of what would be in reality an uninterrupted flow of action as "encapsulation." Eisner provides an explanation of the concept:

In visual narration the task of the author/artist is to record a continued flow of experience and show it as it may be seen from the reader's eyes. This is done by arbitrarily breaking up the flow of uninterrupted experience into segments of 'frozen' scenes and enclosing them by a frame or panel.

In the creative process of encapsulation the comic book artist's first consideration is capturing the essential moments of the action. On page eleven of *A Life Force* [Appendix D] hours worth of work are depicted in just five images. Because he chooses the most distinctive or essential moments, Eisner needs only to portray a frozen instant from each of Rifka's tasks for the reader to understand the nature of each task and to a general sense of activity.

The artist's second consideration is whether or not the reader can imaginatively supply the intervening actions. In the example given above, although each of the moments shown would be fairly far apart in a continuous flow of action, each of Rifka's actions are commonplace enough that a reader could draw on
experience to fill in the gaps between the frozen moments. Page two of "Foul Play" [Appendix B] provides an example of how frozen moments from familiar activities, when there are only brief intervals between them, can be read almost as continuous action. The top two panels on page two of "The Strange Case of Mrs. Paraffin" [Appendix A] illustrate the jarring effect created when the encapsulated moments are ill-chosen. There are a number of problems with these two panels: too much time lapses between the dialogue, the intervening action is unclear (suddenly The Spirit is standing on the other side of Mrs. Paraffin), and the backgrounds are inconsistent (suddenly there is something for The Spirit to lean on).

The third consideration in the process of encapsulation is the amount of time to be captured in a given panel. According to comic book historian Michael Barrier, Eisner was one of the innovators in this aspect of encapsulation:

Eisner recognized that comic-book panels can represent varying amounts of time -- a single panel can contain only an instant or time, or it can contain several minutes, or even more. In Eisner's panels, time is compressed and expanded with great daring.25

For example, the first six panels on page nine of 8
Life_Force (Appendix D) encapsulates a very brief span of time [mere seconds], while each of the panels on page ten captures a greater span of time [at least minutes]. This "reading" of time is based on both panel content and panel structure. Looking at the content, a reader senses the amount of time elapsed based on his or her own experience of how long it takes to perform the action depicted. The role of panel structure or shape in creating perceptions of time will be discussed below as part of the "how to draw it" aspect of comic book syntax.

The "how to draw it" aspect of comic book syntax has two considerations similar to those that Monacco put forward for the framed image in film: "the limitations that the frame imposes, and the composition of the image within the frame." However, as Eisner points out, the comic book frame is not strictly analogous to the film frame because "they are part of the creative process, rather than a result of technology." The main difference between film and comic books at this level is that the comic book frame presents more possibilities than it does limitations.

Being a product of the creative process, and subject to artist control the frame can be an integral part of the message communicated in a given panel. The
role of the frame in comic book communication can be understood by examining the three functions the frame can perform. The comic book frame can operate as a narrative device, a structural device, or a timing device.

As a narrative device the frame's primary function is to separate the art into coherent segments. This has traditionally been done with a box framing each panel, and a white space or "gutter" between each box (e.g. - the panelization done in "Foul Play," Appendix B). However, clear demarcation between panels can still exist with frames that are non-rectangular, or non-existent in the sense that no lines are used to separate panels. On page nine of A_Life_Force [Appendix D] there are three panels; one set off by a box, and the two larger panels that seem to blend into one another. Yet, the reader can clearly distinguish between the two larger panels because of the repeated figure of Jacob, the shading on the brick wall and the skyline of the city that serves as the top of the lower panel.

The second function of the frame as a narrative device is to contribute to the meaning of the panel. In this sense the frame acts as part of the visual "language" of the comic book. As with so many aspects of visual language, there is no definite lexicon.
However, there are certain conventions that have been developed by repeated usage. One convention is that most realistic stories, such as "Foul Play" [Appendix B] and "Black Alley" [Appendix C], rely on traditional, rectangular frames to keep them grounded in reality, while more fanciful tales, such as "The Strange Case of Mrs. Paraffin" [Appendix A], have more varied and open frames. A second convention is the use of frame shape to distinguish between present and past events. Eisner describes common tense conventions:

For example, rectangular panels with straight edged borders, unless the verbal portion of the narrative contradicts this, usually are meant to imply that the actions contained therein are set in the present tense. The flashback [a change in tense or shift in time] is often indicated by altering the line which makes up the frame. The wavy edged or scalloped panel border is the most common past tense indicator.

Panel two on page three of "Black Alley" [Appendix C] provides an example of Eisner’s use of frame shape to signal a tense change. A third convention is the use of a jagged frame. The jagged outline is used for emotionally explosive panels, or to convey the crackle associated with radio or television transmission [remember, this technique was devised at a time when the sound quality of broadcasts was much poorer].
Aside from these conventions, frame shape can also serve an emblematic function. Because the frame is infinitely flexible, it can be made into visual signs that have directly translatable meanings. For example, a circular panel with cross hairs would immediately convey the information that we were looking through a sight of some sort, and whoever or whatever was depicted in that panel was probably in danger. Eisner cites "The Strange Case of Mrs. Paraffin" [Appendix A] as one of his first uses of this type of emblematic narrative frame. In this story Eisner uses numerous file card shaped panels to give readers the sense that they were privy to The Spirit's private files, and looking at the note to one of his past cases. Eisner explains how he wanted the file card shaped frames to serve a variety of functions in the narration of the story:

Throughout, the narrative cards are used to bridge wide gaps in the action [time], give background [the death of Waxel Paraffin] and set the scenes, especially when The Spirit enters the laboratory. The balloons convey only the immediate dialogue between the characters.29

A frame can also make a contribution to the narrative by being non-existent; that is, the open or non-frame
panel. The lack of a panel border can create a feeling of spaciousness. Eisner often uses this technique for outdoor scenes. In the bottom panel of the first page of "Our Block" [Appendix E], the lack of a frame around the panel not only emphasizes that they are outdoors, but that they are leaving the confines of the city. The lack of a panel border can also be a visual shorthand for the artist by letting the reader fill in the details of a scene. Conventional usage has created in the reader the expectation that when a space is defined by a border, that space will be filled in with some degree of detail. Conversely a space that is not demarcated by a frame signals the readers that they are to imaginatively supply background details shown in previous panels. For example, page five of "The Strange Case of Mrs. Paraffin" [Appendix A] provides enough scenic details of Dr. Paraffin's laboratory, that on page six two non-frame panels can show only a tabletop without confusing the reader or losing the sense of place.

The second function that a frame can serve is that of a structural device. This simply means that the panel outline is also some structure in the setting [e.g. - a door or a window]. On page one of "Our Block" [Appendix E] the car windows are a structural frame.
On page two, panel four of the same vignette, trees serve as a structural frame. Eisner, one of the first artists to make extensive use of the structural frame, explains the intent of the technique:

The use of the panel border as a structural element, when so employed, serves to involve the reader and encompasses far more than a simple container-panel. The sheer novelty of the interplay between the contained space and the "non-space" (the gutter) between the panels also conveys a sense of heightened significance within the narrative structure.

The third function that a panel frame can serve is that of a timing device. According to Eisner, "the act of paneling or boxing the action not only defines its perimeters but establishes the position of the reader in relation to the scene and indicates the duration of the event." The general rule of usage is that the less time the action takes the smaller the panel (especially the width). While no artist follows this practice slavishly, many artists, including Eisner, use panel size as a means of controlling the tempo of reading.

In "Foul Play" (Appendix B) Eisner believes "time is critical to the emotional elements in the plot." Thus, the story is a virtual catalog of how panel size can control tempo. On page two, the mundane, deliberate
actions of getting ready for bed are presented in panels all perfectly square, and all the same size. The routine of the milkman’s life does not break down until page three. By the middle of page three, long, narrow panels are crowded together to speed up the tempo and reflect his growing panic. At the top of page four the tempo gets even faster. Just when the protagonist begins to relax the startling contrast of the large panel in the middle of the page, emphasizing the loudness and the length of the telephone ring, creates a psychological jolt for both character and reader. After time slows down a bit for the telephone conversation, the panicked tempo of crowded, narrow panels returns and continues [with only one pause in the beat] until the milkman jumps out the window. After this release of the pent-up tension, panels widen and the pace slows, until the story ends with a wide, comfortable panel that lets the reader unwind.

The second consideration of the "how to draw it" aspect of comic book syntax is the composition of the image within the frame. This analysis will cover the seven elements of composition that comic books have in common with film [setting and decor, color, lighting, distance, angle, movement in the frame and movement of the frame], as well as three elements unique to
Setting and decor can be used in comic books to provide a context for the action or to enhance the mood. The context of most of Eisner’s stories is the big city. In The Spirit the setting is the fictional Central City. In his later graphic novel work the setting is New York City; specifically the tenements of his childhood. Most comic books are set in a big city because the hero needs adversaries, and a steady supply of criminals is most logically found in an urban locale. As “Black Alley” [Appendix C] illustrates, Central City serves this purpose for The Spirit. However, the urban setting often serves as a more integral part of Eisner’s work. Eisner is concerned with how the urban environment -- the dirt, the noise, the crowding and the fear -- shapes human lives.

While Eisner’s style is essentially cartoony, his cityscapes are gritty and realistic enough to help create the desired mood. In “Black Alley” [Appendix C] the city is an ominous, dangerous place. There is a forlorn quality to the setting in A Life Force. Virtually the same setting conveys a sense of comfort, even nobility in “Our Block.” However, much of the mood created comes not so much from the setting itself,
but from Eisner's use of lighting, shot angle, and color.

Color can help convey not only atmosphere, but character and symbolic meaning. How the psychological and associative values of color in comic books can be used to accomplish these functions has already been covered in the psychological section of micro analysis. No specific examples of color use from the appendices is possible since they are reproduced in black and white.

Black and white reproductions also obscure the lighting techniques used by a comic book artist. With proper coordination of the pencilling, inking and coloring stages of comic book production the artist or artistic team can control the intensity, concentration, and source of lighting just as effectively as a good film director. One of the most useful factors of control is the angle or direction from which the light source illuminates the shot or panel. Film scholar Bernard F. Dick explains the five basic lighting angles and the meanings associated with them:

Front lighting has a softening effect and thus makes the object we are viewing more attractive than it actually is.... Back lighting omits details but adds depth.... When a character is backlit, as Esther [Barbara Streisand] is when she sings
"Evergreen" at the end of Frank Pierson's _A Star Is Born_ (1976), a halo-like effect is produced that gives the character an ethereal quality. Similarly, top lighting is used to create an aura of youthfulness or spirituality .... Side lighting puts the object half in light, half in shadow; thus it can denote a split personality, a morally ambiguous character, or a femme fatale. Bottom lighting gives the object a sinister air.33

By controlling these variables the comic book artist can accent forms and textures, control viewer attention, create or enhance a mood, present a subjective experience or produce symbolic meaning.

Because the source of light is treated in a consistent manner on the last page of "Our Block" [Appendix E], the texture of the building is more realistic and the form appears almost three dimensional. Stairs, landings, windows, and even the building across the street all cast shadows in a realistic manner.

"Black Alley" [Appendix C] provides numerous examples of lighting used to direct viewer attention. The small figure on page one might well go unnoticed if the direction and intensity of the lighting did not create a long, dramatic shadow. During the fight in the dark on pages three and four the concentration of light [for which there seems to be no consistent source] keeps the reader's attention focused on key elements
of the scene (the antagonists, the radio and the window).

In "The Strange Case of Mrs. Paraffin" there are
dramatic, perhaps overdone lighting effects used to
create an eerie mood. During The Spirit's search of
the Paraffin house on pages four and five the lighting
is low intensity and concentrated primarily around
the figure of The Spirit (so that shadows dominate
each panel). In a number of the panels bottom lighting
is used so that even The Spirit's shadow looks
frightening. Bottom lighting is also used in "Black
Alley" (Appendix C) to make the assassin, Mr.
Freeze, appear sinister (note especially, panel four
of page three and panel five of page four).

None of the stories reproduced with this study
provide examples of totally subjective experiences.
However, this critic believes that the presentation
of "Foul Play" (Appendix B) is meant to reflect [at
least in part] the protagonist's perceptions. Perhaps
the best evidence of this is that the ringing of the
telephone on page four is done in ominous letters,
because that is the protagonist's reaction to the sound.
If this thesis is accepted, then the heavy shadows
and spotlight effects on page five can be interpreted
as more indicative of the milkman's fear than any attempt
at realistic lighting.
In the example cited above, the spotlight effect is symbolic of the milkman’s fear of being exposed, being caught. Another example of symbolic meaning created by lighting appears in panel five on page seven of *A_Life_Force* [Appendix D]. Jacob’s life seems very dark as Benjamin tells him he is no longer needed. The stark darkness of the room reflects those feelings. Yet, in contrast to the darkness of the interior, a bright light [here a symbol of hope and new beginnings] is shining through the open doors just ahead of Jacob.

The fourth element of comic book composition is distance; that is the reader’s perceived distance from the scene depicted. Just as with film there are five basic distances that the comic book artist can employ: extreme long shot, long shot, medium shot, close-up, and extreme close-up.

One of the primary functions of the extreme long shot is to establish a context or sense of place at the beginning of a story. The splash pages at the beginning of “Black Alley” [Appendix C] and *A_Life_Force* [Appendix D] are both extreme long shots that give the reader a feel for the setting of the story. Since Eisner’s stories tend to be personal and intimate, he seldom uses extreme long shots to convey a sense of grandeur and epic sweep.
As seen on the first page of "Foul Play" (Appendix B), long shots can also be used at the beginning of a story to establish the setting. Repeated use of long shots in a story (especially when they are not motivated by a change of setting) tend to stress setting over character. "Our Block" (Appendix E) is one of many vignettes intended to create a portraiture of urban life in Eisner's New York, The Big City. Since the environment, rather than the stereotyped characters, is the star here, "Our Block" is drawn mostly in long shots.

The medium shot creates a balance between character and setting. In A Life Force (Appendix D) Eisner is concerned with exploring the human condition and developing characters, but he does not want to lose the context, the tenement environment, that helps shape those characters. Thus, much of A Life Force is presented in medium shots. A specific form of medium shot is the two shot. The two shot frames two characters who are interacting so that their reactions to one another can be viewed simultaneously. The three panels on page five of A Life Force are all examples of two shots.

The close-up emphasizes character over setting. First, this is true because very little of the setting is visible in a close-up shot. Second, it is true
because a character's affect displays are more in evidence in the close-up. Panel five on page four of "Block Alley" [Appendix C] and panels two through five on page four of "Foul Play" are examples of how tight close-ups of a character's face can convey a great deal of nonverbal information. Because the emotional state of the milkman in "Foul Play" is central to the story, many of the panels are drawn in close-up.

"Foul Play" also provides examples of close-up panels used for emphasis. On the top of page two there are three close-ups that call attention for the first time to the dripping water that is used to build tension throughout the story. The close-up of the telephone on page four gives emphasis and impact to the jarring ringing.

The extreme close-up is also used for emphasis. In the extreme close-up an entire panel is devoted to some detail (e.g. - a ring, a scar, a signature, etc.) important to the plot. While there are no examples among the stories included with this study, Eisenr does occasionally make use of the extreme close-up. For example, The Spirit's recurring nemesis, The Octopus, wears a distinctive style of gloves, and in at least one instance an extreme close-up panel of a gloved hand is used to alert the reader that The Octopus is
on the scene.

Another aspect of comic book composition analogous to film camera work is angle. The five basic angles of film shots — extreme high angle, high angle, eye level, low angle, and extreme low angle — can be used to describe the perspective presented in any given comic book panel.

The extreme high angle can be used to present a subjective experience, suggest relationships, or make the reader an omniscient viewer. No examples of this angle used for subjective experience are presented with this study. However, one can imagine a panel that presents a character's view from an airplane or atop a building. The first page of "Black Alley" (Appendix C) establishes The Spirit's relationship to his environment — alone at night in a dismal and dangerous part of the city. The extreme high angle used for the splash page of "The Block" (Appendix E) gives the reader a detached, omniscient view of the microcosm of the block not available to the characters in the story.

The high angle shot can also be used to make the reader feel detached from the action, or to make something or someone seem small and weak. In "The Strange Case of Mrs. Paraffin" (Appendix A) the reader is already
one step removed from the action by the narrative device of the file cards. The repeated use of high angle shots increases the sense of detachment and the feeling of reading about the action rather than observing it. In "Foul Play" [Appendix B] high angle panels are repeatedly used to make the frightened milkman appear weak and vulnerable.

Panels that present eye level perspectives tend to create identification with the characters and a sense of involvement in the action. Jacob Shtarkah in Eisner’s *A Life Force* [Appendix D] is an everyman; he expresses the frustrations, doubts, and dreams common to humankind. Eisner uses eye level panels to help the reader feel equality and identification with Jacob.

The low angle panel once again puts the reader in an unequal relationship with the objects or persons depicted. Low angle shots are often used to make someone or something seem powerful or menacing. In panel four on page six of "Black Alley" [Appendix C] the image of the on-coming train has more impact because it is seen from below eye level. The low angle shot in panel four on page five of "The Strange Case of Mrs. Paraffin" [Appendix A] makes everything in the room, including the black cat and The Spirit’s shadow, appear menacing.

The extreme low angle, or worm’s eye view is the
most infrequently used perspective in film or comic books. When it is used it can make whatever is shown seem very threatening, or it can make the reader feel omniscient by seeing the action from a vantage point usually unavailable to humans.

The sixth element of comic book composition is primary movement, or movement within the frame. Before considering the meanings communicated by this movement, it is necessary to explain what is meant by "movement" in comic books.

In live action film and animation a series of still pictures are shown in rapid succession in order to simulate movement. On the static comic book page there is no way to simulate movement. The most that can be done is to use techniques that convey a sense of movement, and rely upon the reader's imagination to perceive those techniques as actual movement. There are five basic techniques for communicating movement in a comic book.

The most common technique is simply the posture of the characters. In panel eight on page six of "Foul Play" (Appendix B) the milkman's posture makes it obvious that he is running. In "Our Block" (Appendix E) movement depicted by posture serves to contrast the staid suburbs with the energetic inner-city.
The next most common technique is the use of lines to indicate movement. Thin lines drawn behind an object or character indicate the direction and speed of movement. In panel seven on page six of "Foul Play" (Appendix B) the curved lines (along with the slipper still in midair) inform the reader that the someone has just dashed around the corner of the stairway. In panel eleven on the same page no character is even visible, but the lines make it clear that someone has just jumped out the window. In panel six on page six of "Black Alley" (Appendix C) the moving object (in this case a speeding train) is totally replaced by lines that indicate not only the direction of the movement (because they are thick on the right and taper to the left), but extreme speed of the movement. It is generally the case that the more blurred the image the faster the speed depicted.

The third method of communicating movement is drawing a partial outline of an object or figure in its previous position or positions. This is not a technique that Eisner uses often or fully. However, in panel four on page one of "Our Block" (Appendix E) Eisner uses faint lines at the previous position of Rosa's hand to indicate (with the help of an ethnically stereotyped posture) that she is gesturing with her
The fourth method is an extension of the outline. The artist makes multiple full drawings of the character in action with only slight differences in the character’s position each time so that [in the manner of animation] a virtually continuous action can be shown in a single panel. To this researcher’s knowledge Will Eisner has never used this method of communicating movement.

The final technique for conveying primary movement is a combination of multiple drawings and framing. At times movement within the frame may actually occur over a number of panels. A meta-panel composed of a number of smaller panels can establish a stationary setting, while in each of the smaller panels the same character or object can be shown at a different point in the setting, thus giving a sense of the figure moving within the frame of the meta-panel. The top three panels on page two of "Foul Play" [Appendix B] operate as a meta-panel in which the movement of the drop of water is depicted. Even without there being an established background a series of panels can operate as a meta-panel if they portray a continuous action and give a sense of the movement of that action. The bottom three panels on page two of "Foul Play" provide an example of this variation.
Primary movement in comic books has four potential variables that can contribute to syntactical meaning: direction, speed, kinetic quality and symbolism. While it is possible for all four variables to be present in a given movement, only direction is a constant in comic-book movement.

These variables carry no definite meaning. However, there have been some generalizations made about the meaning of primary movement as used in film. Stromgren and Norden provide an overview of some of the possible effects of primary movement:

The direction, speed, kinetic quality, and symbolism of film actors and objects in motion provide important dramatic variables, though perhaps film theorists have made too much of their apparent psychological qualities. Downward movement is usually associated with depression, deflation, weakness, or death, while upward movement suggests exhilaration, authority, and life-giving force. Likewise, movement toward the camera is usually associated with aggression and start of exploration, while movement away is associated with recession and completion of exploration. These psychological properties may be helpful guidelines to dance choreographers and film directors if they do not approach them as prescriptive and unalterable rules.

Horizontal movements also have psychological properties. Since viewers are conditioned by years of reading to find left-to-right movements "more natural and restful
than right-to-left," filmmakers will often have "objects and actors move from left to right during positive, harmonious scenes and from right to left to set up tension and disharmony."35

These same psychological properties can be employed by the comic-book artist. The middle three panels on page nine of *A-Life-Force* (Appendix D) form a meta-panel in which Jacob's downward movement is obviously meant to convey weakness and the threat of death. At the end of the first chapter of *A-Life-Force*, as Jacob recovers from his attack and is prompted by Rifka to get on with the business of living, most of the movement from page eighteen on is upward movement. On page nine of *A-Life-Force*, as Jacob begins his exploration of the meaning of life, he moves toward the reader. Having been roused from his introspection by Rifka, Jacob moves away from the reader on the bottom of page eighteen. Of course, the artist does not always intend, nor does the direction of movement always imply any particular meaning.

The variable of speed is not easily communicated in comic books. Only the extremes of fast and slow can be clearly depicted. Slow speed [usually conveyed by multiple drawings] can create a sense of anticipation. The slowly dripping water in "Foul Play" [Appendix
B] serves to heighten the suspense. Fast speed [best conveyed by speed lines] can heighten the energy in a story. On page six of "Black Alley" [Appendix C] the aggressive movement toward the reader of the train culminates in a panel of speed lines to indicate the train whizzing past the men who have just jumped out of its path. The speed of the train makes the escape more dramatic and the scene more energetic.

Kinetic quality is a vague term that is as hard to define for film as it is for comic books. In comic books kinetic quality is basically communicated by means of posture. The kinetic quality of a panel can range from tranquil to frenetic. The "Our Block" vignette [Appendix E] has already been mentioned as an example of how different kinetic qualities [suburban versus inner city life] can be conveyed by the postures of the characters.

The symbolic associations of movement are the most difficult variables to identify. To be considered a symbol movement must communicate something more than just the psychological qualities associated with direction, speed and kinetic quality; the movement must represent some object, action, quality or emotion. In discussions of his work Eisner never mentions any use of symbolic movement in the stories included with
this study. However, one movement that might be intended, and can be interpreted as symbolic is the falling of the figure in the milkman's path on page one of "Foul Play" [Appendix B]. This movement not only foreshadow's his own jump at the end of the story, but it is literally trouble dropping out of the blue.

The final element of film composition that can be applied to comic books is secondary movement, or movement of the frame. Secondary movement can be used to direct reader attention, control the mood and tempo, suggest relationships, and make the reader feel involved in the action. The six basic types of frame movement are panning, tilting, rolling, tracking, dollying and craning. An artist working in the static medium of comic books cannot copy these movements, but by varying the perspective in successive panels the artist can achieve some of the effects of secondary movement.

Panning is a horizontal movement on a fixed axis. The pan can give information (e.g. - moving along the words on a sign), imitate natural eye movement, suggest relationships and, when done slowly build tension. In general, there is very little secondary movement in the Eisner stories reprinted with this study. However, panels two through four on page four of "Black Alley" [Appendix C] provide an example of how panning can
Tilting is a vertical movement on a fixed axis. The tilt can serve all the functions of the pan, but is less frequently used. One use of the tilt that has become a cliche' in film, and has found its way into many comic books is to tilt upward just before some violent act occurs so that all the viewer/reader sees is shadows on the wall or splattering blood. As both films and comic books have become more explicitly violent, this cliche' has become less popular.

A roll is a horizontal movement that parallels the axis of the lens. Because it destroys the stability of the horizon, a roll disorients the viewer. In an expressionistic film the roll might be used for symbolic purposes if disorientation and confusion are themes of the film. In a neorealist film the roll might be used to present the subjective experience of a character in certain situations (e.g. - dizzy, drunk, or on drugs). The roll is also used to mimic the view from a boat or a plane. The roll is the least common "camera movement" in film and comic books.

The terms tracking and dollying are often used interchangeably. Film theorist Bernard Dick makes the following distinction: "if the camera moves on tracks, it is a tracking shot; if it is mounted on
a dolly [a small wheeled platform], it is a dolly shot."36 Yet, it is often impossible for the viewer to tell by what means the camera moved. In addition, the introduction of the steady-cam has made it possible to use a handheld camera on such shots. Stromgren and Norden provide another distinction between the two shots. They say that a dolly shot "involves movement of the entire camera toward or away from a stationary subject," while a tracking shot "concerns the horizontal movement of the camera parallel to a moving subject."37 A crane shot is easily discernible because it involves vertical movement.

These definitions are much more useful for distinguishing secondary movement in comic books. The last six panels on page two of "Foul Play" [Appendix B] are clearly a dolly shot. The camera slowly closes in on the stationary figure of the milkman as the realization of what he has seen slowly comes to him. Page one of "Foul Play" [Appendix B] provides an example of a tracking shot that follows the milkman as he walks down the street. The whole of page nine in "A Life Force" [Appendix D] is a crane shot that starts out high above Jacob and moves down to ground level as he slumps to the ground with a heart attack.

These mobile camera shots serve a number of

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functions. First, they serve the practical function of following along with the action of a film. Imagine how less dramatic the chase scenes from a film such as *Raiders of the Lost Ark* would be filmed with a stationary camera. Second, the viewer is carried along in the midst of the action and given the sense of being a participant in the action. Third, the mobile camera creates a greater sense of reality; not only in making the viewers feel as if they are moving around in the world of the film, but by increasing the perception of depth on the two dimensional screen. Fourth, this type of movement lets the camera take on a "personality," which in turn, helps to create the mood of the film. Bernard Dick comments on how director Max Ophuls achieves this effect:

In an Ophuls film the camera seems to waltz and glide; it sometimes rushes up the stairs with the breathless lovers or accompanies them demurely on a stroll, occasionally slipping behind a fountain so as not to be conspicuous. In Ophuls's *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948), the camera is listening to a provincial band ruin the "Song to the Evening Star" from Richard Wagner's *Tannhäuser*. Unable to bear the tinny orchestration, it rises up fastidiously and leaves the square to join Lisa and her boorish suitor."30

These seven elements of composition account for the bulk of the meaning conveyed by the mise en scene.
Art theorist Donis A. Dondis explains the importance of composition in any form of visual communication:

The results of the compositional decisions set the purpose and meaning of the visual statement and carry strong implications for what the viewer receives. It is at this vital stage in the creative process that the visual communicator has the strongest control of the work and the greatest opportunity to express the total mood the work is intended to convey.39

It should be remembered that for all the compositional variables covered in this section, the meanings discussed are not meant to be prescriptive or exhaustive. Just as words can constantly be used in new combinations and over time take on new meanings, so it is with the syntax of visual communication. The effects and meanings mentioned in this study are certainly not the only ones possible. They are merely those present in the most common usage of film and comic book syntax.

However, there are some aspects of mise en scene that cannot be strictly analogous between film and comic books. First, the frame of the comic book panel is much more flexible than the frame of a film shot, and therefore able to carry more of the meaning of the mise en scene. This aspect of comic book syntax
has already been covered in the discussion of the limitation of the frame. Second, there is the matter of sound. In film, speech, sound effects, and music are not, as a rule, seen. Yet, in comic books, any sound that is to be introduced into the story has to be visual, and is, therefore, a consideration of mise en scene. Third, comic books contain a unit of composition not present in film -- that of the page. Fourth, to be effective communication comic books must successfully blend prose and pictures.

Voice, sound effects, and music are uniquely represented in comic books. This representation, of course, lacks the realism and effectiveness found in an auditory medium. Yet, when the reader makes the requisite effort, these elements can be a great deal more expressive in comic books than they are when presented in non-illustrated prose.

Comic book dialogue and narration is generally presented in neat, clearly printed lettering. Such lettering achieves its purpose of being easy to read, but it does little to suggest the paralanguage elements of human speech. The less tidy, but more expressive lettering of Will Eisner comes closer to representing the true nature of the spoken word. Eisner visually suggests the aspects of paralanguage by varying the
size, thickness, and shape of both words and their containers. For example, on page six of "A Life Force" [Appendix D] Eisner's lettering lets the reader know Jacob is raising his voice [by the size of the letters] and emphasizing certain words [by the boldface letters]. Page six of "The Strange Case of Mrs. Paraffin" [Appendix A] provides a number of examples of how, in addition to size and thickness, Eisner uses the shape of words and the balloons that contain them to create their "sound." When Eisner's characters get excited, their words break from the horizontal orderliness of normal comic book speech [notice Dolan's dialogue in panel six] and stretch the "elastic" balloon around them [note the bubble created by The Spirit's exclamation of "hey" in panel one].

Because of the "zap," "pow" and "zowie" of the Batman television series, onomatopoeic sound effects are probably one of the best known features of the comic book. While such sound effects add the element of "sound" to the action, they also clutter the artwork and often [probably due in good measure to the Batman television show] seem puerile. Like most comic book artists, Eisner has never been able to overcome the intrusive nature of sound, especially non-speech sounds, on the comic book page.40 For example, on page five
of "Foul Play" [Appendix B] the snoring sounds coming from behind the closed doors are important to the suspense, but when represented visually they are distracting and a bit ridiculous.

What Eisner has been able to accomplish is to suggest the nature of a sound by varying lettering and balloon shape. Panels five and six on page four of "The Strange Case of Mrs. Paraffin" [Appendix A] more effectively suggest cat sounds than would traditional comic-book lettering. Eisner's depiction of train sounds in "Black Alley" [Appendix C] illustrates how the sound produced by a moving object can be represented visually. In panel three on page two the "wooo" of the train horn moves downward and gets smaller to mimic the fading sound from the fast-moving train. In panel six on page six the roar of the passing train is effectively suggested by block letter "R's" that get smaller as they move to the right (the direction in which the train is travelling).

Of the three types of sound, music is the one least effectively represented in comic books. The words of a song, and even the musical score, can be placed in a comic book panel, but for those who are not familiar with the song or do not read music, it is merely text. For example, the music depicted on
page three of "A Life Force" (Appendix D) does not operate as music if the reader is totally unfamiliar with the Russ Columbo hit of the 1930's. The limitations of the form make it virtually impossible to score a comic book in the manner of a film.

However, through the visual shorthand of musical notes, a reader willing to make the effort and meet the artist halfway can be made to hear the sound of music in his or her head. The pictures gives clues as to the type of music and the readers fill in sounds from their own experience. In panel two on page one of "Foul Play" (Appendix B) puffed cheeks, a balloon suggesting a burst of air and a couple of musical notes all combine to make it clear that the milkman is whistling. The readers who want to make the effort can fill in any catchy tune that they themselves are prone to whistle.

In comic books there are two frames to consider -- the individual panel and the page. Eisner comments on the importance of considering the page as a unit:

"Pages are the constant in comic book narration. They have to be dealt with immediately after the story is solidified. Because the groupings of action and other events do not necessarily break up evenly, some pages must contain more individual scenes than others. Keep in mind that when the reader turns the page..."
a pause occurs. This permits a change of time, shift of scene, an opportunity to control the reader's focus. Here one deals with retention as well as attention. The page as well as the panel must therefore be addressed as a unit of containment although it too is merely a part of the whole comprised by the story itself.41

Unity and timing are the primary factors the critic should consider when evaluating the effectiveness of the page frame.

A page can be composed with unity of action [what is done] and/or theme [what it means]. Page nine of "A Life Force" [Appendix D] displays unity of action in that the seven panels on the page move from Jacob walking along venting his anger to Jacob slumped against the wall after suffering a mild heart attack. The actions portrayed in individual panels can occur over a greater period of time and still achieve unity. On page one of "Our Block" [Appendix E] the actions in panel one [packing the car] and panel two [driving out of the city] could well be separated by hours, but the page taken as a whole presents a unified act -- moving out of the city.

Both of the examples given above could be said to have unity of theme as well, since a single subject matter is dealt with on each page. In the stories reproduced with this study there are no pure examples
of unity of theme without unity of action. An example of such a unity would be if the last two pages of "A Life Force" (Appendix D) were combined into one page. Jacob plodding upstairs to eat his dinner and the cockroach struggling to turn himself over, then crawling off in search of food are not strictly related actions, but they do illustrate the common theme of perseverance and survival.

The page frame affects the timing of a comic book story because, as Eisner mentions above, "when the reader turns the page a pause occurs." The page unit contributes to effective timing when it does not create breaks in what should be a unified action and when it does create suspense.

Because Eisner is a master of the artform, his stories provide few examples of page breaks that are poorly timed. One break that is not ideal is between pages four and five of "Black Alley" (Appendix C). The first panel on page five would have worked much better at the end of page four. It is not part of the chase scene that is the predominant action on page five, but it would have completed the action of the gun battle on page four. However, since page four already contains eleven panels, it appears that Eisner simply could on the fit the panel on the page where
it would have worked best.

There are numerous examples of Eisner's use of the page break to create suspense. This is done not only by breaking the action in the proper place, but also by creating a "cliffhanger" in the last panel. Cartoonist John Richardson explains the function of this panel:

The last panel of the right-hand page should contain some sort of "teaser" to impel the reader onward. Most comic books have a miniature drama on every page, in the way each daily strip in a newspaper contains conflict, buildup, and climax.42

The use of page breaks for suspense is demonstrated on all but the last page of "Foul Play" [Appendix B]. In the last panel on page one the seemingly dead body of The Spirit falls to the ground. From there the suspense mounts with each page break until, in the last panel on page six the terrified milkman jumps out the window. Another effective use of the "cliffhanger" panel is on page four of "The Strange Case of Mrs. Paraffin" [Appendix A]. The Spirit has just been attacked, the lights will not come on and menacing eyes appear behind him in the darkness. It is not until the next page that the reader learns that the "attacker" is a cat.
The final aspect of comic book mise en scene is the unique blend of words and pictures that must occur for the medium to communicate successfully. Maurice Horn warns critics not to ignore this essential ingredient of the comic book form:

Even when honestly trying to judge the comics, the unwitting critic is likely to evaluate the text and the artwork independently, whereas the most original feature of the form is that it blends these two elements into one organic whole. Expression in the comics is the result of this interaction between word and picture, it is the product and not the sum of its component parts.43

Semiologist Roland Barthes is one critic who has not ignored the verbal-visual blend in his analysis. Barthes approaches the interaction between words and images by identifying two functions that the linguistic message serves in relation to the image: anchoring and relaying.44

According to Barthes, anchoring is "the most frequent function of the linguistic message."45 Anchoring explains the visual message. Barthes believes this anchoring function derives from the need to make visual signs more manageable:
Hence, in every society a certain number of techniques are developed in order to fix the floating chain of signifieds, to combat the terror of uncertain signs: the linguistic message is one of these techniques. On the level of the literal message, language answers, more or less directly, more or less partially, the question *What is it?*

Comic book art, especially when it is rendered in an exaggerated cartoon style and appears in small panels, is often ambiguous enough that the anchoring function of a verbal component is necessary to clearly communicate the intended message. For example, on page three of "A Life Force" [Appendix D] the small building in the lower left-hand corner might not be immediately recognizable as a synagogue (the star of David on the window might not be noticed, or might not be a meaningful symbol for all readers) if the narration did not specify the type of building the men were walking away from. In the first "panel" on page three of "The Strange Case of Mrs. Paraffin" [Appendix A] the tiny picture on the notecard is almost meaningless without the narration above that identifies it as "the Paraffin home on the edge of town."

The relaying function occurs less frequently than the anchoring function. According to Barthes "we find it mainly in cartoons and comic strips."47 Relaying supports the visual message. Barthes explains how
this support functions in comics:

Here language [generally a fragment of dialogue] and image are in complementary relation; the words are then fragments of a more general syntagm, as are the images, and the message's unity occurs on a higher level: that of the story, the anecdote, the diegesis.48

The relaying function operates in the majority of comic book panels. A good example of this function appears on page ten of "A Life Force" [Appendix D]. The narration reads "Rifka Shtarkah prepared for the sabbath." This identifies the woman and explains why she is doing something, but on its own the verbal message is vague about what the woman is doing to prepare. The pictures show a woman performing a number of household chores, but they do not inform the reader who the woman is, or why she is doing these chores. Only with the combination of words and images does the reader receive the full message of who, what and why.

Comics scholars Reinhold Reitberger and Wolfgang Fuchs offer a general rule for the combination of words and images in comic books: "The most important rule for any comic is that the text must be contained within the picture."49 This means not only that the verbal message must fit within the confines of a space defined
by the visual message (that is, either a hard or a soft panel), but that what is written must "fit" with what is shown. A proper fit depends upon the emphasis and support given to each component.

The blend of words and pictures in comic books should not be thought of as a balance between the two components. Based upon such factors as genre, message and target audience, one component is usually emphasized over the other. Traditionally, it has been the image that has received the greatest emphasis. Reitberger and Fuchs make the generalization that "it is bad -- that is it lacks effect -- if it is too wordy where a picture would be more striking." However, Eisner does not believe that dominance of the image is appropriate for all subject matter:

... in order to write seriously or deal with a subject like man’s relationship with God, you can’t have razzle-dazzle pages of two mutants trashing each other. You must be able to let your artwork be subordinated sometimes to the story, which is the way I work. I start with the idea and let the artwork deal with the idea, rather than the idea dealing with the artwork.

The second part of the "fit" between word and picture is the support each component gives to the other. As explained above in the example of Rifka
preparing for the sabbath, the relaying function can work both ways. In "Foul Play" (Appendix B) the milkman's growing panic is communicated by both the words he is saying or thinking and the visual element of facial expressions and posture. Without the two components working together to provide both substance and attitude the message is not effectively communicated. For example, the milkman's facial expressions in the last three panels on page two make it fairly clear that he has just thought of something, just come to some realization. Considering those images in the context of the story a reader might be able to guess the nature of the realization, but with the support of words in the final panel the guesswork is removed. Yet, words alone would not have served the purpose either. The sentence "Maybe he was dead" tells the reader what the milkman is thinking, but nothing about his attitude [happy, uncaring, terrified, etc.] toward that idea. The panicked expression, the beads of sweat on the forehead and the wavy lettering that indicates the word "dead" is said with a tremor in the voice all provide support for the verbal component, and limit its range of meaning.

It is the blend of pictures and printed words that make comic books a unique form of communication. It is the proper emphasis and support of these two
components that is the basis of effective comic book communication.

Summary

As a distinct medium of communication the comic book has its own language or rhetoric. Semiotics is a critical approach that uses modern linguistic theory as a basis for explicating such new languages. Two aspects of semiotics — semantics and syntactics — can be applied at the micro, or panel level of comic book communication.

The panel analysis critic can employ semantics to explain the meanings conveyed by individual visual signs in a panel. Peter Wollen’s system of sign classification — the icon, the index, the symbol — provides a useful vocabulary for explicating the semantic aspect of semiotics. Icon signs are used in comic books to present recognizable objects and beings that constitute the action and setting of the story. However, the style in which icon signs are rendered can vary from realistic to impressionistic (though still recognizable), and influence the interpretation of the story content. The index sign communicates a meaning based on an accepted association. The index signs most often used in comic books are commonplace associations gestures, postures, and facial expressions.
The indexical conventions developed in comic strips (e.g. - a light bulb over a character's head) are seldom used in mainstream comic books. Symbol signs in comic books create meaning by means of the abstract connotations applied to certain visual signs. The symbol signs most often used in comic books are metonymy, synecdoche, and metaphor.

Syntactics is used to examine the considerations of the mise en scene [what to draw and how to draw it] and montage [how to present it]. The panel analysis critic can examine the "what to draw" aspect of syntax by considering the psychological and psychoanalytical meanings discussed in earlier chapters. In addition, the critic must examine the artist's use of the creative process of encapsulation, or the capturing of the essential elements of the action. The "how to draw it" aspect, or the systematic arrangement of the elements in a comic book panel can be analyzed by applying the theory and terminology of film syntax. In addition to the elements of film composition -- setting and decor, color, lighting, distance, angle, primary movement, and secondary movement -- the panel analysis critic must consider the panel frame as compositional element.

The montage element of comic book syntax is concerned
with the meaning created by the combination of panels, and is therefore beyond the scope of micro analysis. This aspect of comic book language will be analyzed in the following chapter, macro analysis.
Chapter VI
Macro Analysis

The final component of panel analysis, macro analysis, concerns how the combination of panels creates meaning and manipulates time in the comic book medium. This chapter examines five methods of creating meaning by panel combination, and how controlling the presentation of panels can expand and compress time, and control tempo. Each of these aspects of macro analysis will be briefly applied to the work of Will Eisner.

In this study, how panels are presented in relationship to other panels is referred to as "montage." The term montage is borrowed from the vocabulary of film criticism. In its basic usage the term simply refers to the process of editing together the pieces of a film. The term also has more complex meanings, derived primarily from the work of Russian theorists and directors, Sergei Eisenstein and V. I. Pudovkin. James Monaco provides a simplified explanation of the various meanings of montage:

In general parlance, "montage" is used in three different ways. While maintaining
its basic meaning [editing], it also has
the more specific usages of: a.) a dialectical
process that creates a third meaning out
of the original two meanings of the adjacent
shots, and b.) a process in which a number
of short shots are woven together in order
to communicate a great deal of information
in a short period of time. This last is
simply a special case of general montage;
the dialectical process is inherent in any
montage conscious or not.2

Concepts of Montage

Russian filmmaker and theorist V. I. Pudovkin
was one of the first to examine montage as a dialectical
process that creates meaning. Writing in the late
twenties, before Eisenstein’s most influential theories
were published, Pudovkin does not use the term montage,
but rather refers to the process as relational editing.
This type of editing he defines as "not merely a method
of the junction of separate scenes or pieces, but is
a method that controls the 'psychological guidance'
of the spectator."3

Sergei Eisenstein’s theory of montage seems to
reject Pudovkin’s ideas on relational editing. Eisenstein
explains their differences in his own words:

In front of me lies a crumpled yellowed
sheet of paper. On it is a mysterious note:
"Linkage-P" and "Collision-E." This is a
substantial trace of a heated bout on the
subject of montage between P [Pudovkin] and E [myself]. This has become a habit. At regular intervals he visits me late at night and behind closed doors we wrangle over matters of principle. A graduate of the Kuleshov school, he loudly defends an understanding of montage as a linkage of pieces. Into a chain. Again, "bricks." Bricks, arranged in series to expound an idea. I confronted him with my viewpoint on montage as a collision. A view that from the collision of two given factors arises a concept.4

In his theoretical writings Eisenstein is at odds with Pudovkin over, not so much the use, but the basis of montage. Eisenstein does not contend that parallels, contrasts, symbols, and themes are not produced by montage, but that their origin is in the conflict, rather than the connection of juxtaposed elements.5 He views this conflict or collision as the source of meaning in the individual shot, the scene, the sequence, and the film as a whole.

However, as film scholars Stromgren and Norden point out, Eisenstein’s practical application of montage does, at times, reflect Pudovkin’s methods of relational editing:

Eisenstein’s films actually reveal a more eclectic approach to editing than his treatises on montage might suggest. In addition to the "collision of images," his films display an understanding and
effective use of parallelism, connotation through the use of close-ups of symbolic detail, the expansion as well as the contraction of time through editing, and the creation of rhythm and tempo by control of shot length.6

In actual practice there is a great deal of agreement between Eisenstein's and Pudovkin's concepts of montage. However, it is Pudovkin who provides the most precise critical vocabulary. Pudovkin identifies five methods of relational editing, or montage: simultaneity, contrast, parallelism, symbolism, and leitmotiv [or leit-motif].

Creation of Meaning

Simultaneity montage is simultaneous development of two actions that are thematically connected so that the outcome of one affects the other. Pudovkin cites this type of montage as the favorite device for bringing American films of the time to a climax. Simultaneity montage is still a staple of American movies, and a contemporary example appears in Who_Framed_Roger_Rabbit. Roger and Jessica Rabbit are bound and threatened by "the dip," a powerful stream of which slowly moves toward them. Meanwhile, their only hope of rescue, Eddie Valiant, is engaged in a seemingly losing battle with the film's villain, Judge Doom. The viewer is
presented alternating shots of these two actions as both move toward a resolution. This scene illustrates what Pudovkin thought to be the main purpose of this type of montage -- "The whole aim of this method is to create in the spectator a maximum tension of excitement by the constant forcing of a question, such as, in this case, Will they be in time? Will they be in time?"?

There are no particularly effective uses of simultaneity montage in the comic book stories included with this study. The best example they offer is contained on pages five, six and seven of "Black Alley" [Appendix C]. Beginning on the bottom of page five the fight between The Spirit and Mr. Freeze is interspersed with panels showing the Big Six making their way to the scene of the fight. On Page seven the two actions are brought together as the Big six confront The Spirit and his prisoner. Because the actions are developed over three pages, and because the Big Six are not presented as a serious threat to the hero, this instance of simultaneity montage does not effectively create tension.

Pudovkin explains contrast montage by giving a hypothetical example:
Suppose it be our task to tell of the miserable situation of a starving man; the story will impress more vividly if associated with mention of the senseless gluttony of a well-to-do man. On just such a simple contrast relation is based the corresponding editing method. On the screen the impression of this contrast is yet increased, for it is possible not only to relate the starving sequence to the gluttony sequence, but also to relate separate scenes and even separate shots of the scenes to one another, thus, as it were, forcing the spectator to compare the two actions all the time, one strengthening the other.8

A classic example of contrast montage can be found in Metropolis, where scenes of the elegant penthouses of the elite are shown next to scenes of the drudgery of the workers living beneath the city. The opening scenes of Trading Places, contrasting the lives of a street beggar and a Wall Street broker, offer a contemporary and blatant example of this sort of montage.

A degree of contrast montage is achieved on pages two and three of "Our Block" (Appendix E). Eisner cuts from panels of Rosa and Angelo in near catatonic boredom in the suburbs to panels of their lively return to the old block. Both the environments depicted and the attitudes of the characters stand in stark contrast.

Parallelism montage is similar to both simultaneity and contrast montage. Parallelism involves cross-cutting
between two actions that are not thematically affected by one another; that is, they are not direct contrasts or dependent on the outcome of the other. There may be some degree of similarity between the two actions, but that is not a necessary condition of the technique.

On the last two pages of "A Life Force" (Appendix D) Eisner presents two actions that are not linked, but parallel in development. On page eighteen Izzy the cockroach struggles to turn over on his feet, and then crawls into a tin can on the trash pile in search of food. On page nineteen Jacob struggles up the stairs, and then sits down to his evening meal.

Symbolic montage involves what has already been mentioned under semiotics as a sequence metaphor; the juxtaposition of two shots in order to create a meaning beyond that contained in either shot. On a general level this is the dialectical process inherent in any combination of visuals; any two adjacent shots can operate as a symbol depending on the connotations and associations the viewers bring to the process. A comic book artist can consciously strive for this type of symbolism by generalizing human experience, but there will always be personalized symbol montage that will be created unconsciously.

On a more specific and deliberate level, symbolic
montage operates as a metaphor; the literal meaning of one shot is applied by analogy to the adjacent shot. Pudovkin explains this type of symbolism by giving an example of how it is employed in one of Eisenstein's films:

In the final scenes of the film Strike, the shooting of workmen is punctuated by shots of the slaughter of a bull in a stockyard. The scenarist, as it were, desires to say: Just as a butcher falls a bull with the swing of a pole-axe, so, cruelly and in cold blood, were the workers shot down. This method is especially interesting because, by means of editing, it introduces an abstract concept into the consciousness of the spectator without use of a title.

This same type of symbolic montage occurs in the first portion of the parallelism montage example from A Life Force [Appendix D]. Page seventeen shows Jacob struggling to his feet. Just as the fate of the workers was equated with that of the bull in the Eisenstein film, Eisner equates man's struggle for survival with that of the lowliest of insects.

Leit-motif montage involves the reiteration of an image that emphasizes the basic theme of the film. In The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance John Ford uses images of guns and books to emphasize the conflict between civilization and rugged individualism that
is at the heart of the film. Obviously, the images used in this type of montage must have symbolic value, but their symbolism stems from inherent associations rather than juxtaposition (what is described above as symbolism montage).

In "Foul Play" (Appendix B) the dripping faucet appears in eight panels. While it is not as evocative a symbol as a gun, it has been used often enough in other media (especially film) to have a strong association with tension and suspense. Thus, with the reiteration of this image Eisner emphasizes the tension that builds as the milkman's paranoia turns to panic.

Manipulation of Time

Part of Monaco's definition of montage is -- "a process in which a number of short shots are woven together in order to communicate a great deal of information in a short period of time." However, this is too limited a view of how montage can affect filmic or comic book time. Montage can compress and expand time, and control tempo.

One method of compressing time is to use montage as a sort of visual shorthand or metonymy; the use of a few details to suggest an entire event or sequence of events. Orson Welles used this method to present the disintegration of Kane's first marriage in Citizen
Kane. A series of shots of breakfast in the Kane dining room show an increasingly aging couple sitting increasingly farther apart. By the end of the montage sequence they are sitting at opposite ends of a long table. In just a few moments of film time the viewer gets a sense of the emotional distancing that occurred over years of story time.

On page three of "Our Block" [Appendix E] Rosa and Angelo’s life in the suburbs is reduced to four panels. The details selected communicate in visual shorthand their weeks or months of boredom. Another example of montage metonymy appears on page ten of A_Life_Force [Appendix D]. Five images of Rifka performing various household chores provide the reader all the visual data needed to picture a full day of cooking and cleaning for the Sabbath.

A second method of compressing time with montage is the match cut. Probably the best known match cut in film occurs in Hitchcock’s North_by_Northwest. Eve Kendall is desperately clinging to the side of Mount Rushmore. Roger Thornhill reaches down, takes her hand, and pulls her up. Hitchcock cuts to the berth of a passenger train, where Roger’s motion is completed by pulling Eve up into the berth. The two actions are blended together as one motion, with all
the undramatic action in-between left out.

The match cut is rare even in film. Used sparingly it is striking. Used frequently, it can be a pretentious gimmick. There are no examples of match cuts among the stories included with this study. However, the match cut can be employed as effectively in comic books as it has in film.

Time can be expanded by using numerous frames or panels to present details of an action, so that it takes longer to view the representation of the action than it would for the action to occur in real time. Eisenstein created the classic example of expanded film time. In Eisenstein's *The Battleship Potemkin*, the famous Odessa Steps sequence, a flurry of violence that would take only seconds in real time, is drawn out by focusing on many specific details (e.g. - close-ups of the soldiers, close-ups of the victims, repeated shots of the baby carriage careening down the steps) of the action. The same technique is used (in obvious homage to Eisenstein) in Brian DePalma’s recent film, *The Untouchables*. The climax of the film is an agonizingly long gun battle on massive steps, complete with a baby carriage rolling down the steps.

There are no true examples of expansion of time to be found in the Eisner stories reprinted with this
study. In fact, this use of montage is rarely found anywhere in the medium. Many of the techniques of film and comics are analogous, but in their presentation of time there are significant differences. Filmmakers capture action in real time and later manipulate it in the editing stage. The comic book creator has to encapsulate significant moments from a flow of action. Because of the comic book format (even in the graphic novel), space is too valuable for much use of expansion of time. Rather, compression of time (usually through metonymy) is the standard in comic book montage.

Finally, montage can control tempo, and thus influence the psychological state of the viewer. The basic element of control is the shot length. D. W. Griffith was one of the first filmmakers to tap the potential of this type of montage:

In his famous early short film *Lonely Villa* (1909), Griffith presented two events occurring simultaneously: bandits menacing a woman and several of her children in their unguarded home, and the woman’s husband riding home to the rescue. In addition to cutting back and forth between these events, Griffith made sure to make each succeeding shot just a little bit shorter than the previous one until the events eventually converged (that is, until the husband finally arrived home to rescue his family). Through this editing technique, which has been popularly labeled the “last
minute rescue,” Griffith helped instill a breathless quality into this and countless other melodramatic situations.12

This technique need not always be melodramatic, or always used for a rescue. A more contemporary label for the technique is accelerated montage. The identifying characteristic here is not the content, but the progressively shorter alternating shots of two actions that ultimately converge in a climax. Accelerated montage should not be considered as a separate category unto itself, but rather as a special case of Pudovkin’s simultaneity or parallel montage.

Eisenstein conceptualizes two methods of montage that relate specifically to tempo: metric montage and rhythmic montage. In metric montage the length of pieces [shots] are manipulated, in accordance with a preplanned formula and without regard for specific content of the shot, to create a physiological and psychological effect. Eisenstein contends that simple formula-schemes corresponding to classic measures of music [3/4, 2/4, 1/4, etc.] are more effective than complicated irregularity. According to Eisenstein this type of montage creates a "sensual impression" that brings "into unison the ‘pulsing’ of the film

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and the 'pulsing' of the audience."13

Manipulating "the length of the pieces" in comic books means controlling panel size. It can be generalized that the larger the panel, the more time it takes the reader to scan it. According to comic book historian James Steranko, "Eisner was the first to realize that the size of a panel equals, in filmic terms, the length of a shot in time. With this knowledge he created stories with definite pacing"14 However, to this critic’s knowledge, neither Eisner, nor any other comic book artist has ever developed a "formula-schema" of panel sizes such as Eisenstein suggests for metric montage.

In rhythmic montage the content within the frame is a factor in determining the length of the shot. On the practical level a shot with a great deal of movement within the frame might need to be fairly long simply to allow the viewer to take in all the action, whereas a static shot can be fairly short. However, when considering affective rhythm, shots containing frantic action might be very short in order to heighten the emotional tension. When the rhythm of the editing matches the rhythm of the action in the shot, this reinforces the action itself.

The story "Foul Play" [Appendix B] is an experiment in timing and rhythm.15 Eisner explains how he attempts...
to create rhythm:

The number and size of panels also contribute to the story rhythm and passage of time. For example, when there is a need to compress time, a greater number of panels are used. The action then becomes more segmented, unlike the action that occurs in the larger, more conventional panels. By placing the panels closer together, we deal with the 'rate' of elapsed time in its narrowest sense.16

On page three of the story Eisner begins using long, narrow panels crowded together to match the increasing tempo of panic. This rhythm continues until the middle of page four, where it is jarringly broken by the wide panel that conveys the loud, long ring of the telephone. On the top of page five the rhythm quickens again, and the narrow, crowded panels match the emotional tension that culminates in the milkman jumping from the window.

Conclusion

Since all comic books are composed of distinct units or panels that are arranged in sequence, montage is an inherent element of the comic book form. The macro analysis component of panel analysis examines how montage creates meaning and manipulates time. Since the concept of montage originated in film, and
most of the scholarly work on montage has been done in relation to that medium, a fairly strict analogy between filmic and comic book montage has been used in this study.

This critic would like to note two weaknesses of the macro analysis component as it has been applied in this study. First, filmic and comic book montage are not strictly analogous (especially as concerns the expansion of time). As more scholarship on comic books is produced a self-sustaining body of comic book montage theory should be built up, and future critics will be less dependent on the film analogy. Second, comic book creators have been slower to make deliberate use of montage than they have of other cinematic techniques. Panel analysis critics are likely to be frustrated in their attempts to find examples of all of the specific montage uses mentioned in this chapter.

However, all of the montage techniques discussed in this study are possible in the comic book medium. Artists such as Dave Sim, Frank Miller and Howard Chaykin have built upon the groundwork Eisner laid in his early work, and have found innovative ways to create meaning and control timing with panel combinations. Their work should prove fertile ground for the panel analysis critic.
Chapter VII
Application of Panel Analysis

In order to provide an example of how the methodology constructed in this study can be used to examine the substance in a comic book this chapter applies panel analysis criticism to a full length comic book. The comic book chosen for this application is in accordance with a principle that Kenneth Burke distills from Lessing's *Laocoon*: "expert practitioners of a given medium may resort to the kinds of contents that the given medium is best equipped to exploit." Frank Miller is widely recognized as one of the expert practitioners of the comic book medium. During the period he wrote and drew *Daredevil* the book was one of the most popular mainstream comic books. More importantly, *Daredevil* is a super-hero comic book.

Frank Miller's stint as writer and artist of the *Daredevil* comic book is an example of the medium being used to exploit and explore a type of content that no other medium can deal with as effectively. That content is the super-hero myth. Comic books can, of course, present other content successfully. However, the super-hero, while originated in other popular literature, was refined and defined in comic books,
and, in turn, defined the medium in the public perception.

Daredevil, by genre classification, is always a super-hero comic book. Yet, as done by Frank Miller, Daredevil is also often a super-hero comic book in terms of substance. Not only is Miller using the form of the costumed adventurer comic book tale, but the subject matter is the nature and role of that very hero. This application of panel analysis criticism will examine the substance of one Miller Daredevil story, "Roulette" [Appendix F], that explores both hero-worship in general, and the super-hero myth in particular.

Selected elements of the historical and micro components of panel analysis will be applied to demonstrate how Miller uses the techniques of comic book communication to develop his theme. Miller demythologizes the super-hero myth, while at the same time humanizing and glorifying the heroic spirit. In the end, Miller redefines the super-hero myth in terms applicable to the human condition.

**Historical Context**

Frank Miller was in his mid-twenties when he produced the "Roulette" story. He began his comic book career when he was in his early twenties. Interviews with Miller reveal virtually nothing about events in his
life that might have influenced the form of his work. In fact, the very lack of significant life experiences seems to have been a force in shaping his early work. The major factors that affected Miller's early work were his youth, his saturation in popular media culture, and the fact that he learned his craft by reading superhero comic books.

Many comic book writers and artists enter the industry at a young age. Siegel and Schuster, for example, created Superman when they were still in high school. In an essay on the state of the industry, Miller comments on how this practice shapes the medium:

In a lot of ways, Siegel and Schuster represent how most of us enter the comics business. We come in young, enthusiastic, drenched in fantasy, bursting with adolescent needs and angers, looking for an outlet.

The super-hero genre provides the perfect outlet for playing out adolescent power fantasies. The content of this genre has traditionally remained on a basic physical level that has a powerful attraction to adolescent readers. Most comic book creator's begin their careers producing work in this simplistic vein. Many never progress beyond this level of expression.

Part of the reason for this lack of sophistication

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might well be that comic books are being produced by and for generations that have accepted the products of mass media entertainment as the standards by which to judge comic book work. Critic Gary Groth believes that Miller's early work is unable to rise above the television and movie cliches of which it is composed:

Part of Miller's problem is probably cultural. Everyone under the age of 35 has grown up staring at television, and the secret to a popular series is action and movement. Keep the images moving, keep the viewer dazzled, and you'll keep the ratings up. Forget subtlety; subtlety does not sell deodorant or dog food. And what is good enough for television is good enough for comics, so the emphasis in comics is on visual storytelling.

Even when the action in a Daredevil comic book slows down enough for a conversation to occur, the emphasis is on the visual element. As Groth points out, "such conversations are invariably shrouded in shadow and gloom, just like an old Warner Brothers movie."

Yet, the strongest popular culture influence on Miller's work is the super-hero comic book genre itself. Miller is an example of a crippling feature of the comic book industry that is pointed out by critic Randy Reynaldo:
Quite simply, comics today also reflect the narrow tastes of the professionals who produce them. One of the most incestuous aspects of the business is that those now entering the industry have learned their craft and gained their interests almost exclusively from reading super-hero comics.

Miller is one of the many fans turned professionals in the industry. Before breaking into the ranks of professional comic book artists Miller "apprenticed" in an amateur press association, or apa. In the dozen or so apas devoted to comic books aspiring writers and artists contribute material that is often imitative of their favorite professionals, and perpetuates the cliches of the super-hero genre. Those that become most accomplished at recycling the old concepts and techniques (such as Miller did) occasionally make a career as a professional comic book creator.

Miller's style has evolved during the course of his career, but the influences of certain other comic book artists at the various stages have been rather blatant. The angular, leaping figures of Miller's early Daredevil work are clearly reminiscent of Gil Kane. Miller admits that "when I first started drawing super-hero comics, I looked around for the
best super-heroes I could find, and they were by Gil Kane, and they had a terrific effect on me." Other early influences that Miller mentions are Robert Crumb, Garry Trudeau, and Will Eisner. In 1983, when Miller ended his run on Daredevil with the "Roulette" story to work on more personal projects, such as Ronin, he abandoned the simple, sterile style of the American super-hero genre, and adapted a more textured style. This style was the direct result of the strong influence of two artists whose work Miller admits discovering at the time he was beginning the Ronin project: Jean Giraud [perhaps better known in America by his pseudonym, Moebius] of France and Goseki Kojima of Japan. "Roulette, "being the last Miller Daredevil story [at least for a couple of years], and being produced at a time that Miller was beginning on Ronin, is a transitional work with a blend of the two styles mentioned.

The influence of one comic book writer/artist warrants special consideration. No one working in the super-hero genre has been, or is likely to be unaffected by the work of Jack Kirby. Gary Groth explains how Jack Kirby set the course from which very few comic book professionals have deviated:
Jack Kirby practically created the super-hero idiom, which is to say that Kirby almost single-handedly created the comics idiom as it's known and understood in America. But, Kirby was an anti-intellectual artist; that is, he had the unique and by no means unimportant talent of translating human experience into something monumental, compelling, grandiose — and utterly moronic. It is a paradox that Kirby, one of America's most original and vital comic book talents, is the progenitor of this ongoing moronism that has adulterated American comics from the beginning.11

Miller also acknowledges the stifling effect of Kirby's accomplishments:

It's strange that Jack Kirby, an absolute powerhouse of an artist who shaped so much of what's going on and developed an entirely new way of telling stories, who worked out his solutions to the whole problem of drawing super-heroes and made everything up until that point outdated, that his vital force became a pair of handcuffs around comic book artists in present times.12

Miller's Daredevil work in general, and "Roulette" in particular, is an attempt to break free of those handcuffs. Even Gary Groth, while very critical of the results, recognizes that Miller is "attempting valiantly to transcend the conventional formulas of super-hero comics."13 In many ways Miller's approach is the opposite of Kirby's approach. While Kirby takes
human experience and makes it into something grandiose and fantastic, Miller takes the fantastic, the super-hero, and translates it into terms relevant to the human condition.

This approach to super-hero material is evident in "Roulette." The substance of this particular comic book is an examination of the super-hero myth, and the application of that myth, redefined by Miller, to the struggles of the human spirit. The construction of this substance can be examined at both the micro and macro levels of the comic book form.

Two of the components of micro analysis are particularly relevant to Miller's work on "Roulette." Psychoanalytical and semiological approaches reveal how Miller uses the unique form and content of the super-hero comic book genre to convey meaning or substance at the level of the individual panel.

**Psychoanalytical Approach**

An important object of analysis for the psychoanalytical approach is the myth. In the case of comic books, the dominant myth is the hero (or super-hero) myth. As Miller uses this myth in "Roulette" it makes the work more compelling and provides psychological reinforcement for the theme of the work.

However, Miller also makes the super-hero myth
part of his subject matter. He dissects the myth to reveal what he sees as the failure of the myth in the traditional approach to super-hero material, and also to emphasize what he perceives as the potentially powerful and psychologically significant aspects of the super-hero myth. In one interview Miller complains that "the main image people have of super-heroes is Adam West playing Batman," but insists that "the idea itself is valuable."14

Miller's treatment of Daredevil in "Roulette" reveals three failings that he perceives in most comic book presentations of the super-hero myth. The first shortcoming is a reliance on simplistic, direct solutions. In most comic books the solution involves the violent punching or blasting of the "evil forces." The attempts at simple, violent solution in "Roulette" have disastrous, or ineffectual results. It is Daredevil's act of punching Hank Jurgens that traumatizes Chuckie; driving him into violence, and, finally, withdrawal. When Matt's father deals with Matt's disobedience by striking him, he drives the two of them apart. At the end of the story, when Daredevil seeks a simple, direct solution to the battle between good and evil by shooting Bullseye, he is unable to carry out the act. Most telling of all is that Daredevil, as a costumed
A hero possessed of super powers, can perform no heroic actions or fantastic exploits that will solve Chuckie's problems.

A second weakness of the myth is that it teaches might makes right. Part of the appeal of super-heroes has always been that they symbolically fulfill the adolescent longing for power. In serving this function the heroes are admired, not for their intellect, integrity, or even for their courage, but simply for their physical power. Miller uses Chuckie's statement of admiration for Daredevil to illustrate this unheroic aspect of the myth: "Yeah, you're excellent! When somebody gets in your way, you give it to them ... pow!"

Miller further emphasizes the point with Daredevil's reaction: "So thrilled I didn't look too closely at what I was being admired for."

A third defect of the myth is that the hero's victories are only temporary. Because comic books are a product, and meant to run for as many years as possible, villains that are recognizable and have market appeal will be recycled endlessly. The heroes of ancient myths often achieved decisive and final victories over their foes. However, in the fictional realm of comic book super-heroes no matter how many times it seems that The Joker, Lex Luthor, Bullseye, or any of the
other popular villains are absolutely, positively dead, if the comic book runs long enough, they will eventually be brought back to do battle with the hero. The final panel of "Roulette" ("Guess we're stuck with each other Bullseye.") is a blatant statement of this aspect of the super-hero myth.

In many ways "Roulette" is a critical analysis of the super-hero comic book. Yet, it should be remembered that Miller finds the super-hero myth itself to be a valuable concept, and a potential vehicle for meaningful examinations of the human condition. "Roulette" also reveals three powerful and positive psychological aspects of the super-hero myth as defined by Miller.

The first compelling aspect of the myth is that the costumed hero is treated as the true identity. This feature of the myth was established by the progenitor of the super-hero breed, Superman. From the moment Kal-el comes to Earth he is, by his very nature, a super man. Clark Kent is a total fiction. The Matt Murdock/Daredevil relationship is not exactly analogous (Matt Murdock did exist before assuming the Daredevil identity), but Miller clearly focuses on the hero. Murdock is often treated simply as a disguise that Daredevil wears. Not only is this story narrated by
Daredevil, but at one point the hero implies that Daredevil is his true identity by referring to Matt Murdock as his "secret identity."

The psychological significance of this approach is that the powerful hero, sometimes hidden within the everyday garb of a secret identity, represents the moral or spiritual strength within each human. Psychologist Joseph L. Henderson maintains that "the essential function of the heroic myth is the development of the individual's ego-consciousness — his awareness of his own strengths and weaknesses." With most portrayals of super-heroes the representation is very positive and optimistic. In "Roulette" the optimism is tempered by Chuckie's failure of strength and Daredevil's helplessness. The adventures of Miller's hero translate into human terms because Daredevil is an imperfect man struggling to do the right thing.

The second element of the myth that Miller employs to powerful effect is the use of the super-hero's battles as a metaphor for the struggles of the human spirit. Miller views this metaphor as the most valuable aspect of the super-hero myth:

That's a great thing about super-heroes, the substance of what makes them "larger than life." Not that they can fly or
Yet, the metaphor, as presented in traditional super-hero comic books, is usually too blatant and simplistic to be compelling. A costumed hero, representing all that is pure and just in the human spirit, uses superhuman abilities to fight a costumed villain, representing all that is evil and corrupt in the human spirit. Miller's approach in "Roulette" is more subtle and effective. While the story is framed by a "confrontation" between Daredevil and Bullseye (a recurring adversary), the true conflict is within Daredevil himself. Daredevil's struggle to choose between what he wants (to be admired by Chuckie, and to seek revenge on Bullseye) and what he feels to be right provides a heroic battle much more relevant to the human context than the fantastic, yet shallow, fight scenes that fill most super-hero comic books.

When the hero myth is presented in such a way that the reader can make a connection between the battles of the super-hero and their own personal struggles, catharsis is possible. The fictional hero acts out the readers' frustrations and anxieties. As a cathartic
hero, Frank Miller's Daredevil can provide a symbolic release of anger by violently dealing with the forces that corrupt the world. Certainly most readers' emotions toward Hank Jurgens would be mirrored in Daredevil's angry and violent means of dealing with Jurgens. Yet, in the context of the story, Daredevil's action has negative results. Daredevil provides more effective catharsis when he grapples with common human concerns of purpose and justice. To make the myth serve this function Miller has Daredevil question the very nature of the super-hero: "...am I showing them that any idiot with fists for brains can get his way if he's fast enough and strong enough and mean enough?"

Miller uses Daredevil's intimate relationship with the concept of justice to develop a third powerful aspect of the super-hero myth -- the hero adheres to rules. Because of the super-hero's vigilante nature, the rules followed are not always the letter of the law set down by society. Here too, Daredevil struggles with opposing forces in his own nature. Matt Murdock chooses a career in law because his father's failings force him into "thinking about right and wrong ... and how even my father could do bad things ... how even dad needed rules to obey, rules ... laws." Matt Murdock becomes Daredevil and deals with criminals by taking
the law into his own hands because he is inspired by his father's courage in standing up to gangsters.

In "Roulette," Miller examines the sense of justice that emerges from these two influences. The examination is carried out by putting that sense of justice to the test. In his dealings with the Jurgens family Daredevil learns that might cannot make everything right. Daredevil's confrontation with Bullseye is a test of where he will draw the line in his vigilante crusade. In the end, he cannot kill Bullseye; he has found a boundary of law, or perhaps justice, that he must obey if he is to be true to his nature as a hero. Super-hero adventures operate as "morality plays" in which the rules the hero chooses to adhere to demarcate right and wrong.

**Semiological Approach**

Miller articulates the substance of his redefined super-hero myth by means of the unique "language" of the comic book form. The semiological component of panel analysis examines both the semantic and syntactic aspects of this language.

Semantics concerns the nature and meaning of individual signs. Images or forms can operate at three distinct levels of signification: icon sign, index sign, or symbol sign. Two of the most important recurring
images in "Roulette" [guns and human eyes] operate at all three levels.

An icon sign merely reproduces the likeness of what it is meant to represent. The icon sign that dominates the first page of the story is the gun. The image of the gun appears on a total of fifteen pages throughout the story. At this level the gun is simply a motif; any meanings attached to the image occur at the level of index or symbol. The same is true of the recurring close-up images of eyes.

An index sign presents a form or image that has an inherent relationship to the significance or meaning represented. For instance, the various ways in which eyes are drawn is directly related to the emotions that are being experienced by the character. Bullseye’s one visible eye is wide to indicate fear the first time the gun is placed to his head and the trigger pulled. Chuckle’s eyes are wide to indicate shock and horror when he sees Daredevil hit his father. During the fight with Daredevil, Jurgen’s eyes are squinted closed in pain. In all of these examples Miller is able to convey the emotions solely by means of an index sign. No dialogue or narration is needed to support the meaning.

A more blatant, and perhaps less skillful use
of the index sign is the image of a gun being fired. Twice in the story guns are fired. Both times the action is made explicit by a puff of white smoke. While there may be some indexical relationship between gun powder and smoke, the index sign in these instances is exaggerated [probably for the practical consideration that the guns are in the background of the panels, and it needs to be made clear that they are firing]. The effect detracts from the realism and drama of the moments.

The symbol sign presents a more abstract and arbitrary relationship between image and meaning. It is at this level that the images of guns and eyes are brought more into the service of the themes Miller is developing in "Roulette." Both images operate as common lore metaphors; that is, they carry meanings that are based on conventional associations.

The two common associations with the gun that Miller plays upon in this story are violence and the violation of rules. When Jurgens is caught breaking the law, he tries to shoot Daredevil with a gun. When Chuckie thinks he must be bad like his father he shoots another child with a gun. The gangster that kills Matt's father uses a gun.

Yet, along with guns being used in these violent
violations of the law, the hero also holds a gun through­out the story, and repeatedly uses it to threaten his enemy. This operates as a metaphor for the super-hero's reliance on violent solutions, and vigilante disregard of the law. At one point, as he holds a gun to his enemy's head, Daredevil asks "Am I fighting violence, or teaching it?" However, in the end, he rejects the use of the gun as a solution, and thus stays within the boundaries of his own rules of justice.

Miller uses close-ups of characters' eyes as a common lore metaphor to emphasize the human over the heroic. The poetic notion that the eyes are the "window of the soul" is so conventionalized in cinematic technique that most comic book readers are surely conditioned to consider a character's thoughts and reactions when they see a close-up of the eyes. The frequent use of this image gives the hero's emotions as much importance as his actions. In a medium usually dominated by fight scenes and other physical action, Miller uses the meanings of individual signs to help construct a story that emphasizes human emotions rather than super-human battles.

Syntactics concerns the systematic arrangement of the component parts of the comic book "language." One of the considerations of this arrangement is the
composition of individual panels. Examples could be found in "Roulette" for how each of the seven elements of composition are used to develop Miller's themes. However, the elements of color, lighting, distance, and primary movement are particularly significant in Miller's redefinition of the super-hero.

The color scheme used in "Roulette" serves the somber mood of the story, but, more important to the substance that Miller tries to convey, it serves to define the characters. In accordance with the black and white associations of good and evil, Bullseye, the villain, wears dark blue. Yet, Daredevil, the hero, wears scarlet. On a pragmatic level, the psychological properties of the color red are vibrant and dynamic; consistent with a heroic image. Red also has associations of evil and impurity. It seems that in this story the color serves to reinforce Daredevil's own human weaknesses and his ambiguity about his role as a hero.

Like color, lighting can be used to enhance a mood (for example, the low key lighting on pages five and six makes what might appear a mundane family dinner seem ominous) or create symbolic meaning. In at least two instances symbolic lighting is used to make direct comment upon the super-hero myth.
On page fourteen Chuckie is entranced by the videotape images of Daredevil and Bullseye fighting. The only light in the room comes from the television screen. The dominance of the light source signals that Chuckie's only reality has become the unreal, idealized media presentation of the colorful battle between good and evil. Here, as in many mass media portrayals, the hero's actions have no application to the human condition, and thus, no real significance.

On the last page of the story, the lighting in the hospital room is suddenly altered to produce blatant symbolism. On the one hand, the patch of gray surrounded by blackness presents a pessimistic ending. The hero small and seemingly helpless [the high angle view helps create this effect] is almost overshadowed by the darkness, the evil that he can never eliminate. Yet, there is also a message of hope in that the hero functions as a patch of light [albeit a ambiguous gray light] in the midst of the darkness. This final panel implies that the struggle of the human spirit that has been dramatized in the story will continue.

Another element of composition that Miller uses with purpose is distance. The reader's perceived distance from the images depicted can suggest relationships among the images themselves, and between the images
and their environment. In most of the panels in "Roulette" a close-up or medium view is presented. The close-up panels emphasize the nonverbal reactions of characters (every page but the last has a tight close-up of a character’s face), and focus the reader’s attention on details (for example, there are numerous extreme close-ups of the trigger and the hammer of Daredevil’s handgun; thus, heightening the suspense with each round of roulette). Many of the medium distance panels present the basic two shot that focuses on two characters interacting. The medium distance panels of Daredevil and Bullseye suggest that they are linked; that the villain is an essential and inseparable part of the hero’s existence. Overall, Miller’s use of distance emphasizes character and human emotion over setting and action.

With the composition element of primary movement Miller uses the variables of direction and kinetic quality to undercut the grand, mythic image of the super-hero in the Jack Kirby mold. Miller presents Daredevil as a man much less powerful and perfect than the hero that exists in Chuckie’s imagination.

Direction of movement is used to contrast the simple, idealized aspects of the super-hero myth with the violent, often negative aspects inherent in the
super-hero concept. Left-to-right movements have the psychological properties of being more natural and positive, while right-to-left movements create a sense of disharmony and tension. The only significant left-to-right movement is when Daredevil is feeling powerful and admired as he leaps from building to building with Chuckie on his back. The majority of movement depicted in the story is in the opposite direction and negative in nature. For example, right-to-left movement is used when Daredevil hits Jurgens in front of his son, when young Matt gets into a fight, when Matt is slapped by his father, and when Daredevil puts the gun to Bullseye’s head for the final pull of the trigger.

Kinetic quality is used to contrast the excitement of the idealized hero, that is a creation of the mass media and Chuckie’s imagination, with the “reality” of a hero who struggles more with his own doubts and desires than he does with a super-villain. The movement in the videotape images of Daredevil’s battle with Bullseye is dramatic and frenetic. The brief fight with Jurgens is less dramatic and much less heroic. In the real-time action of the story, Daredevil simply sits or stands next to Bullseye’s bed. It is here that the true conflict of the story takes place. It is here that Daredevil struggles to define for himself,
and thus, for the readers, what it means to be a hero.

Conclusion

"Roulette" is a significant comic book work for two reasons. First, it is an example of a talented practitioner of the medium skillfully using the form of the medium. R. C. Harvey is perhaps a bit too lavish in his praise when he claims that "If Miller is not a master of his medium in every respect, he is but a knife-edge away." However, Harvey emphasizes Miller's importance to the medium when he says that his comic books "consistently explore, exploit, and expand the potential of the art of storytelling in comics."18

Second, "Roulette" is significant because the content is an examination of the super-hero myth that has defined comic books in the popular perception. Rather than abandon the super-hero concept Miller attempts to evolve the concept beyond its purely adolescent appeal and apply it to adult themes. In this story Miller redefines the super-hero myth as a metaphor for the struggles of the human spirit. What makes Daredevil a hero in this story is not that he wears a costume or has special powers, but that he struggles to discover and do what is right.

The combination of skillful use of form and meaningful content produces a substance that is worth
critical attention. Panel analysis provides an array of approaches from which the critic can select those most appropriate to the work being studied, and to the aspects of the work that are to be emphasized.
Chapter VIII
Conclusion

This study is an attempt to establish a method of rhetorical criticism for the formerly neglected medium of comic books. The critical approach of panel analysis that is developed in this study focuses on how the unique form of the comic book medium communicates content. Panel analysis consists of three components: historical context, micro analysis, and macro analysis.

Method

The historical component makes use of a humanist historical approach to place a comic book or a body of comic book work in the contexts of the creator's personal history and the evolution of the medium. Placing the work[s] to be studied in such contexts helps the critic to understand the origins of the various formal aspects of the work[s] and to compare the form of the work[s] to the creator's corpus or to the general development of the medium.

The micro component uses psychoanalytical, psychological, and semiological approaches to examine how meaning is produced in the individual panels of a comic book. The psychoanalytical approach analyses
how recurring symbols and myths incorporated in the images and text of comic book panels might communicate meaning to the subconscious of the reader. The psychological approach analyzes the psychological forces (intellectual meanings and emotional reactions) created by shape, pattern, color, and the operation of gestalt principles. The semiological approach uses the linguistic concepts of semantics and syntactics to explain the "language" of comic books. Semantics analyses the individual visual signs in a panel. Syntactics analyses the encapsulation, framing, and composition of panels.

The macro component examines how montage, the combination of comic book panels, creates meaning, and manipulates time. While there is dispute over whether the meaning produced by montage comes from the linkage or the collision of units (in this case, panels), the major theorists agree that meaning can be produced by the methods of simultaneity, contrast, parallelism, symbolism, and liet-motif montage. Montage can also compress time, expand time, and control tempo.

Strengths_and_Weaknesses

As a critical methodology panel analysis has several weakness that must be acknowledged. First, for most comic book creators there is limited biographical data to support the historical component. Second, the
psychoanalytical and psychological approaches in particular require generalization and extrapolation. Third, many aspects of the methodology require second-guessing the intent of the creator(s). Fourth, particularly in the application of semiological and montage analysis there is an over-reliance on the analogy between film and comic books.

However, there are also reasons to recommend the critical method of panel analysis. First, it builds on established and credible scholarship in history, psychology, semiotics, and film criticism. Second, panel analysis is both broad and flexible. Any aspect of comic book communication can be analyzed utilizing one or more of the components of panel analysis. Components, or approaches within components can be emphasized or deemphasized to fit the particular characteristics of the work studied, or the goals of the critic. Third, panel analysis focuses on the most significant aspects of the comic book medium -- the panel and the blend of words and pictures.

Form_and_Content

Panel analysis is a method of examining how the unique form of the comic book medium can communicate meaning to a reader. Save for the brief applications of the method to the works of Will Eisner, this critical
approach has been formulated without reference to any specific content. Thus, the question arises whether it is a valid critical approach to consider form in isolation from content.

In his survey of contemporary rhetoric, James L. Kinneavy claims that "with the advent of contemporary mass media, the channel of communication has become virtually as central as the message." Marshall McLuhan's dictum, "the medium is the message," relegates content to a distant second consideration. The New Criticism focuses upon what a work of art is [form], without consideration of what it says [content] or how it acts upon us [function].

However, the artificial separation of form and content that occurs in such formalist approaches ignores the organic relationship of form and content; neither can be analyzed in toto without reference to the other. Art theorist Ben Shahn says that "To me, they are inseparable." Shahn goes on to explain that "form is not just the intention of content; it is the embodiment of content." Art critic Jerome Stolnitz contends that "the form is what it is because of its interaction with everything else in the work." It seems then, that the proper focus of panel analysis should be what critic A. C. Bradley refers to as substance [form and
subject combined in a specific work). It has been questioned whether comic books have any substance (both in the sense that Bradley uses the term, and in the sense of significance), or whether they are merely a form signifying nothing. Critic Gary Groth accuses the medium of "an obsession with form, a contempt for content." Critic and sometimes comic book writer Jan Strnad characterizes comic books as "a medium where form often is the content, where graphics and continuity are appreciated in their own right as abstractions removed from plot, character, theme meaning ... importance." Critic R. C. Harvey points out that "Newsstand comics are mass entertainment produced on a deadline schedule for regular publication, and the objective is clearly to fill the pages -- to fill the form -- with something, anything."

While these criticisms may be valid for the majority of comic books, one must not jump to the conclusion that the form of communication itself is inherently flawed or inferior. The significance of form is always dependent upon content. Shahn explains the relationship:

I think that it can be said with certainty that the form which does emerge cannot be greater than the content which went into it. For form is only the manifestation, the shape of content.
Critic Heidi MacDonald provides a terse definition of comic book content: "The American comic book is defined as a costumed hero having a fist fight with a costumed villain." MacDonald goes on to claim that "it's clear that the fight scene is the story in the vast majority of comic books." However, as MacDonald's quotation allows, there are exceptions. When a comic book creator such as Will Eisner or Frank Miller take the content beyond the physical level, and into ethical, spiritual, and intellectual conflicts, then comic books with substance are a possibility.

**Future Applications**

Critics considering further application of the panel analysis methodology should consider first, what works to study, and second, what variations might be made in the methodology. The suggestions for future applications made by this critic are not meant to be exhaustive or prescriptive.

It has already been suggested that priority be given to applying panel analysis to the work of auteurs. Auteurs are creators who not only have a significant degree of creative control (of both script and art), but who also deal with recurring themes and symbols. The following are offered as examples of auteurs, and suitable subjects for future applications of panel
analysis. Jack Kirby (Fantastic_Four, New_Gods) reinterprets the themes of classical mythology with mythic super-hero comic books. Frank Miller (Daredevil, Ronin, Dark_Knight) explores the role of mass media in society, and the concept of justice. Jim Starlin (Warlock, Captain_Marvel, Dreadstor) uses star-spanning epics as a backdrop for his examinations of the cult of personality, and the power of religious leaders. Dave Sim (Cerebus) has devoted his life to producing 300 issues of a comic book that is filled with very personal icons, and very biting ridicule of institutions and authority. Art Spiegelmann (Raw, Maus) produces personal and therapeutic memoirs that help him come to terms with family relations and his Jewish heritage. Howard Chaykin (American_Flagg) details a future world of commercialism, sex, and mass media bombardment.

The basic tools of panel analysis can be adapted to a number of critical approaches. A critic wishing to apply a situational context to a particular comic book need only expand the historical component to create the historical situation at the time the comic book was produced, and then evaluate the form of the comic book as a fitting response to the situation. Because the field has been traditionally male-dominated there are few comic books to be studied by the critic whose
scholarship falls under the umbrella of women's studies. However, in recent years creators such as Wendy Pini, Ann Nocenti, Joyce Brabner, Trina Robbins, and Louise Simonson have produced work of sufficient quantity and quality to make such studies feasible. Propaganda studies would be particularly apt for the comic books produced during World War II or some of the more politically oriented comic books from contemporary independent publishers. Finally, genre criticism can be adapted to the various genres of the comic book. Each genre might have its own conventions of symbolism, color, framing, composition, and montage.

At the beginning of this study three questions were posed. First, what constitutes the communicative power of the form? This study delineates the unique ways in which comic books employ symbols, both singularly and in combination, to convey meaning. Central to the communicative power of the form is the blend of narrative content and image content. Second, given an understanding of the limits and possibilities of the medium, can a coherent and useful theory of comic book criticism be developed? This study is a first step in that direction. Future application of panel analysis will serve to broaden and refine comic book critical theory. Panel analysis as set forth in this
study is useful because the emphasis placed on various components can be tailored to the needs of the critic or the nature of the work. Third, might such a theory help explain aesthetic achievement and economic success of particular specimens of the art form? Since the focus of panel analysis is on comic books as communication, any aesthetic or economic achievement is explained only by implication. While future application of panel analysis might reveal a strong correlation between communicative power and aesthetic or economic achievement, there have not yet been enough critical studies to support such a relationship. However, the application of panel analysis in Chapter Seven examines an economically successful and aesthetically praised comic book. By examining the constituent elements of the comic book an explanation is provided for how substance [content within a particular form] is effectively communicated to the reader. This piece of criticism is meant to clarify panel analysis theory and serve as a model for future applications.
Notes

Chapter One

Major studies of prose and poetry form include:
Cowie, Alexander. The_Rise_of_the_American
Booth, Wayne C. The_Rhetoric_of_Fiction.
Nye, Russel. The_Unembarrassed_Aristocrat.
The_Popular_Arts_in_America. New York: The Dial Press,
1970
Cawelti, John G. _Adventure__Mystery__and_Romance:
Formula_Stories_as_Art_and_Popular_Culture. Chicago:
Eco, Umberto. The_Role_of_the_Reader. London:
Hutchinson, 1979.

Major studies of film form include:
Pudovkin, V. I. Film_Technique_and_Film_Acting.
Eisenstein, Sergei. Film_Form. trans. Jay
Kracauer, Siegfried. Theory_of_Film. New
Bozin, Andre. What_is_Cinema?. Berkeley:
Balazs, Bela. Theory_of_the_Film. New York:
Metz, Christian. Film_Language. New York:
Monaco, James. How_to_Read_a_Film. New York:

Major studies of television form include:
McLuhan, Marshall. Understanding_Media:_The
Newcomb, Horace, ed. Television:_The_Critical
Fiske, John and John Hartley. Reading_Television.

2 Arthur Asa Berger, "Secret Agent," Journal

3 Mike Barrier, "Comic Book Books," The_Comics
4 Maurice Horn, *75 Years of The Comics* (Boston: Boston Book and Art, 1971) 7.


11 Berger, *Signs* 54.


17 Burke, *Literary Form*, 1.

18 Burke, *Literary Form*, 304.

Chapter Two


2 Nord and Nelson, 281.

3 Nord and Nelson, 281.

4 Nord and Nelson, 282.

5 Consult Louis Gottschalk, Generalizations_in_the_Writing_of_History (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963)


10 Nord and Nelson, 289.


12 Yronwode, 8.


15 Yronwode, 129.


18 Yronwode, 132.


20 Yronwode, 15.


30 Yronwode, 20.

31 Most comic book scripts are written using film terms such as "establishing shot," "close-up," "reaction shot," etc.


33 The influence of comic books on filmmakers is mentioned in the following sources:


39 Sternako, History, 2: 115.


41 The "Clipping Service" feature in the Comics Buyer's Guide summarizes coverage of comics by other media. Since the mid-80's favorable coverage by the mainstream press has increased.


49 In film terminology, "auteur" refers to a director who has a recognizable style and is usually the prime creative force behind his films.

50 Even though Eisner always had assistants, and even turned The_Spirit over to Lou Fine during the war, he established and maintained a shop style.
Chapter Three


7 Jaffe’, 232.


9 Jaffe’, 237.

10 Wolverine’s popularity is evidenced not only by the sales figures on *The X-Men* (the series in which he regularly appears) and his own limited series, but also by the number of cross-overs and guest appearances he has made in other Marvel comic books.

11 The *Dark Knight* limited series returned the Batman character to his original interpretation as a "creature of the night" who means for criminals to be as frightened of him as ordinary citizens have been of criminals.

12 Jacob’s last name, Shtarkah, means "strength” in Yiddish.
13 Jaffe', 249.
14 Jaffe', 240.
15 Jaffe', 249.
16 Jaffe', 249.
18 Reitberger and Fuchs, 124.
22 Henderson, 123.
24 Rietberger and Fuchs, 124.
25 Reitberger and Fuchs, 124.
28 Erickson, n.p.
29 Henderson, 112.
30 The heroes of myth typically had some character flaw; usually pride [e.g. - Hercules, Achilles].
31 Reitberger and Fuchs, 100.


34 Jung, 79


Chapter Four


4 Pickford, 11.

5 Hoffeld, 83.


7 Pickford, 13.

8 Pickford, 16.

9 Pickford, 24.

10 Pickford, 24.
11 Dondis, 46.


13 Pickford, 24.

14 Pickford, 31.

15 Pickford, 32.

16 Pickford, 31.

17 Pickford, 30.

18 Pickford, 30.

19 Dondis, 22.

20 Dondis, 23.

21 Dondis, 27.

22 Dondis, 27.

23 Dondis, 30.

24 Dondis, 46.


26 Dondis, 50.


28 Pickford, 87.

29 Pickford, 90.

30 Pickford, 92.

31 Pickford, 24.

32 Dondis, 51.
33 Dondis, 55.
34 Pickford, 77.
35 Dondis, 51.
36 Pickford, 190.
37 Moholy-Nagy, 155.
38 Pickford, 191.

Chapter Five


4 Monaco, 428.


7 Peter Wollen, Signs_and_Meanings_in_the_Cinema [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972]


10 Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, 148.

11 Clothes are perhaps the best example of this. Thirty years ago a leather jacket was associated with a hood or a rebel. Now it is the mark of a Yuppie. At one time a male college student not wearing a suit would have been considered a bum. Now a male student wearing a suit would be considered a nerd.


13 Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, 100.


16 These terms were coined specifically in reference to visual communication. "Common lore metaphor" is from E. H. Gombrich. "Sequence metaphor" is from Sol Worth.


18 Monaco, 142.

19 Monaco, 142.


21 Monaco, 145.

22 Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, 39.

23 Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, 39.


26 Monaco, 151.

27 Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, 38.

28 Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, 44.


30 Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, 49.


32 Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, 30.


35 Stromgren and Norden, 49.

36 Dick, 20.

37 Stromgren and Norden, 52.

38 Dick, 21.

39 Dondis, 20.

40 Howard Chaykin (especially in *American Flagg!*) is an example of a comic book artist who has been able to employ sound effects as an organic part of the panel.

41 Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, 63.


43 Maurice Horn, *75 Years of the Comics* (Boston: Boston Book and Art, 1971) 10.


50 A "hard panel" is a panel that is enclosed by lines (usually in the form of a rectangle), or the drawing of some structure (e.g. a window). Traditionally, hard panels have been separated by a white space, or a "gutter." A "soft panel" is a panel that does not have its borders outlined by lines or structures. The range of a soft panel is defined by the artwork itself. Page sixteen of Appendix D, "A Life Force," mixes hard and soft panels. Panels two and five are hard; the rest are soft.

51 Reitberger and Fuchs, 230.


Chapter Six

1 The major theoretical works by Eisenstein are Film Sense and Film Form. The major work by Pudovkin is Film Technique and Film Acting.

2 James Monaco, How to Read a Film (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) 184.


5 Eisenstein, *Film Form*.


7 Pudovkin, "Film Technique," 195.

8 Pudovkin, "Film Technique," 194.

9 Pudovkin, "Film Technique," 195.

10 Monaco, 184.

11 It is not always true that action is filmed in real time. Sometimes, in order to create special effects, slower or faster than normal film speeds are used.

12 Stromgren and Norden, 66.

13 Eisenstein, *Film Form*, 73.


Chapter Seven


5 Groth, 42.


9 Miller, 79.


11 Groth, 42.


13 Groth, 42.

14 Miller, *The_Master_of_Comic_Book_Art*.


18 Harvey, 61.

Chapter_Eight


4 Shahn, 70.


10 Shahn, 72.


12 MacDonald, 66.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Appendix A

"Mrs. Paraffin"
PLEASE NOTE

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225-231
233-239
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University Microfilms International
Appendix C

"Black Alley"
Appendix D

"A Life Force"
Appendix E

Miscellaneous
Appendix F

Roulette
Vita

Ralph Randolph Duncan II was born April 13, 1958 in New Orleans, Louisiana. He received a B.A. in Liberal Arts from Southeastern Louisiana University in 1980. He did two years of graduate work in English at the same university. In 1985 Randy received a M.A. in Speech Communication from Louisiana State University. Randy is currently an underemployed comic book writer, and chair of the Communication Arts and Sciences Department at Henderson State University.
Candidate: Ralph Randolph Duncan II

Major Field: Speech


Approved:

[Signatures]

Major Professor and Chairman

Dean of the Graduate School

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

[Signatures]

Date of Examination: April 18, 1990