

The Politics of Paraliterary Criticism

I

Bright, good-looking, well-read, and socially skilled, Jerry (that was not his name; but that's what we'll call him) was a senior at Columbia University when, in the early seventies, he entered my circle of friends and colleagues, where he was soon a well-liked young man.

In those years, as today, that circle was the science fiction writers, the comic book writers and artists, and the various journalists and editors who made up many of my day-to-day acquaintances.

While Jerry's interests were generally oriented toward what most speak of as literature, like many young people he'd gone through a period in early adolescence, only half a dozen years before, when he'd read comic books and science fiction avidly—so that, somewhat to his own surprise, already he knew the names and work of many of the men and women he was, at first through me, then on his own, meeting regularly: Denny O'Neil, Dick Giordano, Len Wein, Howie Chaykin, Mary Skrenes, Bernie Wrightson, Trina, Alan Weiss, Frank Brunner, Mike Kaluta, Tom Disch, Roger Zelazny, Terry Carr. . . .

Thus, while he did not particularly fetishize the paraliterary world of science fiction and comic books as having any special romance about it at present, it was a world connected to what had once been for him a rich and pleasurable interest.

Because he felt at ease with most people, Jerry was at ease with these people. Because he was bright, outgoing, and well-mannered, Jerry was popular with the people he met. Because his intelligence had once been turned on the products of this world—comics and science fiction—Jerry had enough knowledge, if not expertise, to hold his own, at least to ask informed questions, in conversations with those who made their living here.

One morning Jerry phoned to say that, talking to some comics artists and writers at a gathering the week before, he'd heard some comments

about things they'd like to see—or currently disapproved of—in the *Batman* comic as it was then being done. An idea had come to him for a story. To see if he could do it, over the weekend he'd written a *Batman* script. I told him it would be fun to read. Why didn't he bring it down the next time he came by? (I was then living at the Hotel Albert.) When, the following day, he arrived with it, he explained: "*Batman* was always one of my favorites when I was a kid—" (This was years before the Tim Burton movies.) "I realized," he went on, "that I knew the character awfully well. I was listening to what some of the writers and artists were saying, when we went to lunch last week. So, I thought, why don't I just try my hand at a script?"

I read it. It seemed *well* above average in excitement, action, and general plot interest.

"Why don't we show this to Denny O'Neil?" I said. "You've met him—and he likes you. He's editing now for D.C."

"Do you think he'd be interested? . . ."

"The way to find out," I said, "is to ask."

I called Denny. Would he mind looking at Jerry's script? . . .

A couple of days later, after a phone call from Denny, I went with Jerry to the D.C. offices. As we sat in aluminum tubular chairs on the blue carpet, Denny said: "Before I read it, Jerry, I was pretty dubious. We get kids who want to write comics in here all the time. But once I started it . . . well, it's a great story! Also, it's the most professional looking script I've seen go through this office in ten years. It's a fine story breakdown. You tell most of it in three- and four-panel pages. You don't overload your panels with words. Your captions use the nonvisual senses. You've got a real grasp of what comics are about. The only problem is, I don't edit *Batman*. But I'll pass this along to Julie Schwartz." Julie was a senior editor, well-respected at the company. "See what he thinks. He's someone you can learn a lot from. He knows comic book writing's craft inside-out. If he likes what you're doing, and you work with him, you can learn a lot."

That Denny had volunteered to pass the script on to Julie surprised and delighted Jerry. He was vociferous in his gratitude.

A few days later, Jerry phoned to say Julie had called him and asked to meet.

"Come on down here and tell me what happened," I told him, "when you're finished at the D.C. offices."

Eleven o'clock the following Wednesday, Jerry knocked on my hotel room door.

As he came in, I asked him, "How'd it go?"

"He had some interesting things to say." But Jerry seemed pensive. "He suggested some rewriting. He wants me to change the ending."

“So . . . what do you think?”

“Personally, I don’t think it’ll be as good a story. But he had some points. It won’t hurt it that much—though it changes what the whole story’s about!” He chuckled. “But I’d still like to see it published. I told him I’d have the rewrite in to him the day after tomorrow.”

A week later, Jerry was back from another editorial session. “Julie said he thought my rewrite was a very craftsmanlike job. But now he wants me to make more changes.”

“Do you follow his points? Like Denny said, there’s really a lot to learn about writing comics scripts. If you can master it—”

“Basically,” Jerry said, rather surprising me, “I think most of his points are silly. And, if I do what he wants, it won’t be my story anymore. Still, if he wants it, I’ll probably try it. . . .”

A week later, Jerry was back.

“I just got through talking to Julie. He doesn’t want to use the script at all, now. He says he doesn’t think I’m ready—that I’ve got a mastery of comics craft great enough—to do *Batman*, yet. The thing that makes it so funny, that’s exactly what Denny—and you, and everybody else who read it, even him—first said that they liked about it! All the things that made it a good comic book are what he’s asked me to take out! Now he wants me to do a whole different script, about . . .” He named another character. “He says if I can handle *that* one, *maybe* he’ll assign me some paying work. He says he can’t promise. But it’s up to me. . . .”

“What are you going to do?”

“I think I’m going to forget it,” Jerry said. “The thing is, I don’t want to *be* a comic book writer. I got what I thought was an idea for a good story—and I thought I could write a good script for it that would be better than most. That’s what I think I did. If it had come out, I’d have been able to say: ‘Hey, isn’t that neat? I wrote that!’ But now it’s turned into something completely different—there’re all these problems of comics craft that . . . well, I understand them, when he talks about them. But, honestly, they don’t interest me. At this point, I think I’m going to forget it.”

“Well, you know—” I had a sinking feeling—“you should pay some attention to these questions.” Really, I liked Jerry. But no adult enjoys seeing a youngster start something great guns, then not follow through because the going gets a little tough. And because I had introduced him to these people, his failing enthusiasm might even have prompted my own embarrassment. “If you could master it, it might be useful to you later—”

“Yeah, I know. That’s what Julie keeps saying. But the fact is, most of what he says, in story terms, seems silly. At least to me. The changes he suggests *don’t* make it any better. Now, because he’s got the dull script he asked me to write, he doesn’t want to use it at all! Really, at this point, I’m

not that interested. I've done three versions. He doesn't like them. So I think I'm going to let this one pass."

I remember I said: "But you've only done two—"

"That's what he said," Jerry told me. "But you're forgetting the first version, that you and Denny and everybody else—including Julie—said was so good and so professional."

"Yes, but . . ." Then I sighed, "Okay. But you're a real smart kid. You write well. I hope you're not letting a good opportunity to learn about the craft of comics slip by you."

"Maybe I am." He grinned. "But then, I just have to go by what I feel."

"I guess so."

Jerry called Julie and told him he wouldn't be handing in a fourth script. A year later, Jerry had more or less dropped out of the circle. Shortly, he had a job with a record company. From time to time I saw him. But though he was always friendly, his interests had taken him on, after his graduation from Columbia, in other directions and into other social and professional groups. From time to time, I saw an alternative newspaper article under his byline. Then he moved to the West Coast.

Some time later, in the bar of a science fiction convention, I ran into Julie Schwartz, retired now. When the circle of people around us had drifted away, I asked: "Do you remember, about nine or ten years ago, a young Columbia University student who came to you with a *Batman* script—through Denny O'Neil. I'd brought him to Denny's attention. His name was—"

"Oh, yes. Jerry. A really bright kid. I liked him very much. It's a shame he never followed through."

"What I don't understand," I said, "is that his first script seemed so polished and professional. As well, it had a great plot and was very inventively told."

"It was," he said.

"Why didn't you use it, then?"

"I did with Jerry what I do with every new comics writer who comes to me, Chip. I used to go through the same routine, oh, maybe six, seven—sometimes ten—times a year."

"I don't understand? . . ."

Julie smiled at me. "Look. The fact is, Chip, *anyone* can write a good comic book script. Now, when I say 'anyone,' I don't mean the janitor, or the plumber, or the dry cleaner. But I mean anyone who can write any sort of story at all can probably turn out a decent comic book script—"

"But this was more than decent. It was really talented—it was excellent. I mean, it was up there in Alan Moore territory—"

"Ah, yes." Julie shook his head. "But the craft—"

"I don't understand what you—"

“At this level of writing, talent isn’t the problem—which is to say, there’s enough of it out there that it will take care of itself. Every new writer who brings me a script (and, the fact is, many of them *are* talented), I tell him—or her—the same thing. I say: ‘All right. The first thing I want you to do is change the ending.’ We talk about comic book craft. Then, after they bring in a second version, I tell them to change the middle. Then I tell them to throw the whole thing out and write me a new script. Then, I tell them to do still *another* one. . . . And if they do everything I say, then I assign them a paying job on the least important character we have. You see, what we need in the comics industry is writers who will do what we *tell* them to. Doing what your editor says to do: *That’s* craft. It’s nice when I get a really talented writer, who gets through the whole set of tests. Sometimes they do. But, frankly, what we *need* are writers who have just turned in a wonderful, poetic, brilliant script with a downbeat ending, who, when an administrative decision comes from upstairs that all our stories have to have upbeat endings from now on, will throw that downbeat ending out and substitute a gloriously happy, feel-good ending, sacrificing everything of worth in the story—and who will do it without batting an eye. Like I say: craft. Jerry didn’t have what it takes to be a good craftsman. He’s probably better off out of the field. Likely he was interested in writing art stories—”

“What’s an art story?” I said. “A story that follows its own internal logic, where the motivations make sense, and, after lots of inventive twists, it ends where it’s supposed to?”

He laughed. “Okay—sure, that’s an art story: *if* you want to make me out to be more of a villain than I am. I could just as easily say: Inventive twists need thought to follow, and thought is not in overwhelming supply among *average* comics readers. But the point is: However you define them, no. We don’t have time for art stories. First and foremost, even before talent, we need craft here. And, yes, craft, in this business, means doing what you’re told, as best you can—no matter how dumb, stupid, or irrational it is in terms of the material.”

“You wouldn’t have taken the first script from any writer, then—no matter how brilliant, well written, or professional it was.”

“No. I wouldn’t.” He smiled again. “But that’s because I’m interested in the writer over the long haul. I’m there to teach young writers craft—it’s too bad Jerry didn’t want to learn. But when a young writer doesn’t, believe me, stopping then probably saved him—and me—a lot of time and unhappiness. Suppose he had to learn it after he’d already published half a dozen scripts, when he’d already been working as a professional for six months, a year, or more? So, in terms of professional comics writing, I make craft the first priority—before everything else.”

We see this concept of craft—where craft is opposed to art—constantly at work. (In a passing, even parenthetical, way, this entire essay is a personal message to “Jerry” so that he, or those in his situation in any of the paraliterary genres, might understand a little of what happened to them—in his case, years ago.) We see it marring the art works we are presented with whenever a science fiction writer or a mystery writer or a writer of pornography excuses his or her failure of taste, of invention, of skill, of insight, or simply of intelligence in thinking through the various ramifications of his or her story by reaching for the excuse that paraliterary criticism keeps ready: “I’m a craftsman—not an artist.” We see that concept at work in every incoherent movie in which motivations are absent or unbelievable and nothing makes sense or registers with any import, because, failing to understand the intricate ways in which coherence, believability, and interest must interweave to produce a satisfying story, one or another producer has told a writer, “Do it this way because it’ll be more exciting,” or, “Leave that out because it’ll be dull,” all of which basically translates: “Do it this way because I’m paying you.” Because the interweave of background and foreground is even more complex in a science fiction movie than it is in a film set in the contemporary world, this is a correspondingly greater problem in SF films than it is in movies with historical or contemporary settings. We see it in almost every attempt to write a story by committee.

Though I retain my personal fondness for Julie Schwartz and have great respect for what he’s done in comics, I abominate the esthetic of Craft *vs.* Art. I think anyone who loves the paraliterary genres should abominate it as well. We who criticize in the paraliterary genres should work to unmask it for what it is, discredit it, dismantle it, and permanently retire it. It is not that craft can’t mean other things, useful things, valuable and valid things for the construction of art works in narrative form. But wherever craft is presented as a concept *opposed* to art, it will be available as a cover-up for the sort of exploitation in the situation above. Because of the economic forces at work in the paraliterary fields, there’s no way to prevent such exploitation.

Two other concepts also hold back the development of paraliterary criticism and provide smoke screens for endless exploitation in much the way the concept of “craft” (and the attendant concept of “mastery”) does: First is the concept of “origins.” Second is a concept intimately linked with it, that of “definition of the genre.” But, as we shall see, all are connected. With strong historical filiation, they work to support and reinforce one another. By the end of this essay, I hope we’ll have a stronger sense of how that intersupport functions.

II

Possibly toward the end of the first century A.D., but more probably toward the end of the third, Cassius Longinus (or possibly Dionysius Longinus; *possibly* they were one and the same), wrote a letter-*cum*-monograph to his friend Postimius Terentianus, in which, inspired by a treatise by one Caecilius, περὶ ὑψους (*Peri Hupsous*—usually translated “On the Sublime,” but more accurately “On Greatness” or “On Greatness in Writing,” or “On Greatness in Art”), he put forward his own thoughts as to what made writing great. His essay was known throughout the Renaissance as Longinus’s “On the Sublime”—Longinus’s piece, originally unnamed, having taken *its* title from the now long-lost treatise by Caecilius that was its ostensible topic. The oldest version of Longinus’s text is a manuscript copy from the tenth century. Milton mentions it in his 1652 piece, “On Education.” But with Boileau’s 1674 French translation of the fifty-five page essay, “On the Sublime” became the most influential bit of classical literary criticism in the West for a hundred years or more, briefly surpassing in its influence Plato, Aristotle, and Horace. Indeed, as much as any single text, it is probably the reason why we venerate Sophocles and Sappho as we do today, if not *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, all of which it analyzes and praises in terms close to the ones commonly used about these works by contemporary critics.

Possibly in the year or so before 1992, in a phone call to his friend Matt Feazell, Scott McCloud talked about a project he had been considering: “an examination of the art-form of comics, what it’s capable of, how it works . . . I even put together a new comprehensive theory of the creative process and its implications for comics and for art in general!!” This is from the “Introduction” to McCloud’s extraordinary paraliterary critique, *Understanding Comics*. Reading on in McCloud, we find there is a kind of parent text that McCloud greatly respects, and that his own work is in creative dialogue with, Will Eisner’s *Comics and Sequential Art* (and, later, Wassily Kandinsky’s 1912 essay, “On the Problem of Form”), which, rather like Caecilius’s eponymous περὶ ὑψους in Longinus, is mentioned a handful of times toward the beginning, then drops away as McCloud pursues his own ideas about his topic.

I would not be surprised if McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* becomes as important and influential a work in the development of the whole range of criticism of the paraliterary as Longinus was in the last few centuries of classical criticism. Having said that, let me say also that that is something between an opinion and a hope. I make the comparison with the περὶ ὑψους in order to highlight a few, limited, particular points—and, more important, to make clear several points that I am *not* making.

In my description above, I've located two tropes—(1) the orientation of a critical study toward the enlightenment of a personal friend and (2) the celebration/critique of a “parent” text examining similar topics—shared by Longinus and McCloud. Because both are writing criticism, doubtless I could find more. But do I believe that Longinus's *περὶ ὑψους* is in any way a *privileged origin* of McCloud's *Understanding Comics*? Do I believe that the *περὶ ὑψους*, because of the similarities I've noted, in any way lends *authority* to the arguments or presentations in *Understanding Comics*? No, I don't—my answer to both questions.

Do I believe that, directly or indirectly, Longinus's *περὶ ὑψους* is in any way a *meaningful influence* on *Understanding Comics*? I would not be astonished to find that McCloud *had* read Longinus. It's available in translation in most large bookstores and is out in a Penguin anthology, an Oxford Classics anthology, and in a critical translation by G. M. A. Grube from the Hackett Publishing Company with an extensive introduction,¹ notes, and a bibliographical index. As well it's been reprinted in several other historical anthologies of European criticism. But though I would *not* be astonished, I *would* be surprised: Today readers of the *περὶ ὑψους* are limited largely to those graduate students interested in the history of criticism. For me to suspect *meaningful influence* from one text to the other, I would need internal (some sign in McCloud's text) or external (biographical or historical knowledge) evidence that McCloud *had* read Longinus, or similar evidence that McCloud had read a work by someone known (through similar historical evidence) to have been influenced by Longinus.

The simple use of the two tropes is, for me, just not strong enough evidence to allow me to make any such suggestion. Lacking a direct statement about such reading in McCloud's text, at the very least I would have to find a significant string of words common to the two texts, a string that might have been put there by McCloud to recall the parent text (as when in *Red Mars* [1993] Kim Stanley Robinson recalls Philip K. Dick's novel *The Martian Time-Slip* [1964] by naming the 39.5-odd-minute difference between an Earth day and a Mars day, compensated for by stopping the clocks for 39.5 minutes between twelve midnight and twelve-oh-one, “the Martian time slip” [internal evidence], the source of which is supported by the fact that Robinson wrote a book on Dick, *The Novels of Philip K. Dick* [1984—external evidence]), before I'd venture that such a suggestion carried any critically significant probability.²

1. The information about Longinus and the *περὶ ὑψους* comes from Grube's introduction. The *Oxford Classical Dictionary's* account of text and author differs notably.

2. In the past there have been many thematic critics who, considering the two cited figures not tropes but themes, might well have felt that, *as* themes, they were strong enough to suggest an influence. But, as someone who does not consider himself a thematic critic, I am not among their number.

Finally, and perhaps for this discussion most importantly, do I think that what stalls these passages of authority from Longinus to McCloud is that Longinus is writing about literature whereas McCloud is writing about comics? Do I believe something innate to the nature of the different genres—their assumed average quality, perhaps—makes the passage impossible?

Again, firmly I do not. Both McCloud and Longinus are writing criticism—and, in both cases, I believe, they are writing criticism of a high order. Longinus's essay dates from many centuries before the current valuation of genres was in place. McCloud's is from a time—and is at the forefront of the endeavor—when precisely such barriers are coming down. It is the system that tries to preserve such power relations *and* their attendant power exclusions that must be dismantled if McCloud's project (and I hope, with this essay, I make clear that I share it) is ever to see success.

What, then, is the status of the relationship between two texts that exhibit such similarity? I believe that for a certain kind of reader who recognizes such similarities, those similarities produce a resonance and richness in the *reading pleasure* to be taken from McCloud's text—and a highly pleasurable book *Understanding Comics* is. But the relation between them is specifically *not* a matter of consciousness or authority. Were McCloud later to inform me that the similarity was, indeed, conscious and in some way ironic (as is Robinson's recall of Dick), I would admit I was mistaken and say, "Fine." But I would also suggest that, were he interested in doing it again, he might leave a clearer trail of allusion (i.e., some internal evidence) in his actual text.

The two tropes shared by *Understanding Comics* and the $\pi\epsilon\rho\iota$ $\acute{\upsilon}\psi\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ are extremely powerful ones over the range of western criticism. They have introduced many strong critiques. Among them, now, is McCloud's. But does Longinus's use of them in any way lend *power* to McCloud?"

No, it does not.

Having noted the similarities, I note as well that there are myriad *differences* between the content, form, structure, and context of Longinus's letter to Postimius Terentianus and Scott McCloud's phone call to Matt Feazell. Similarly, the uses of their respective parent texts are notably different in many ways. Does *initiating* (in any sense) an essay with such tropes from an earlier classical example, either consciously or unconsciously, in any way *guarantee* the remainder of the text power, insight, or brilliance? As powerful, insightful, and brilliant as McCloud's book is (for it is all of these), the answer must still be: No. Many critiques have begun with the same tropes but have gone on to nothing, save the deadest of academicism. Myriad fine and brilliant critical essays have begun, using other tropes entirely—which is to say, the use of such tropes is neither

necessary nor sufficient to produce critical excellence. In no way do such tropes *define* excellence in a critical endeavor.

Because the two tropes have not been used so frequently that they have become deadly clichés, the relation between texts that employ them remains a matter of *resonance* and *pleasure*—in the way that a resonant note, calling up echoes and overtones, might sound richer than one that plunked out devoid of any enharmonics.

The tropes function exactly the way the Homeric parallels do in Joyce's *Ulysses*—adding pleasure and resonance to the reading of those who recognize them. But neither in the case of the likely conscious Joyce nor in the case of the probably unconscious McCloud do they lend, in themselves, *power*, *authority*, *persuasive force*, or *greatness*. *Ulysses* could just as easily have been a dull, boring, unimaginative novel based just as firmly on the *Odyssey*—in which case we would have an uninteresting, boring, dull piece of writing. But what Joyce gave us was a rich and resonant novel, one of whose pleasurable resonances occurs at the level of its Homeric parallels. Even using the two tropes from Longinus consciously, McCloud's book could have been a waste of paper. It is not. It's a wonderful and wonder-filled critical performance.

Tropes are basically formal, and as McCloud himself declares, for a sophisticated discussion of any art, we must separate form from content:

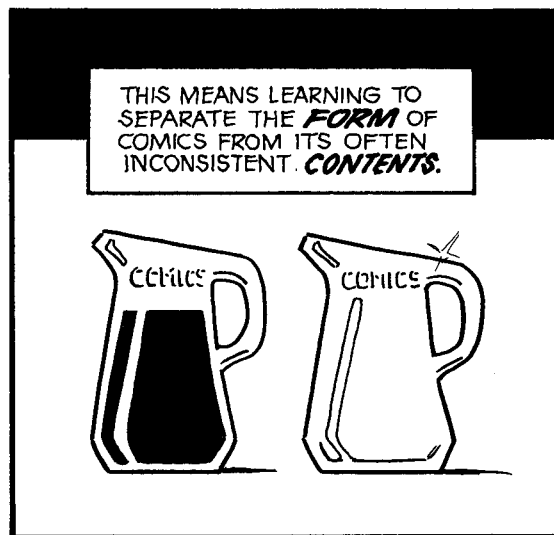


Illustration #1: McCloud, page 199.

Awareness that formal resonances are pleasurable but not authoritative is what, I suspect, led Jorge Luis Borges to write, "The repeated, but

insignificant, contacts of Joyce's *Ulysses* with the Homeric *Odyssey* continue to enjoy—I shall never know why—the harebrained admiration of the critics" (*Ficciones*, 42). This is not an attack on modernism, or on Joyce, or on *Ulysses*. It is an attack on critics who see, in a figure that should produce pleasure, rather a mark of power, authority, or greatness. *That* is what is harebrained.

The first of several places where McCloud's study soars to brilliance is in chapter 2, "The Vocabulary of Comics." The chapter's opening four-and-a-half pages are an awkward discussion of icons; to me they seem an attempt to reinvent, in four pages, the whole topic of semiotics—the study of signs—without realizing that this is what they are doing. But from these unpromising beginnings, McCloud's combination of words and pictures rises to a series of insights having to do with the different ways highly representational art can affect us contrasted to the way the highly reduced and schematic art associated with cartoons and comics can affect us. McCloud argues—and argues convincingly—that the representational portrait of a face is perceived as the face of another, whereas the highly schematic face is perceived as one's own.

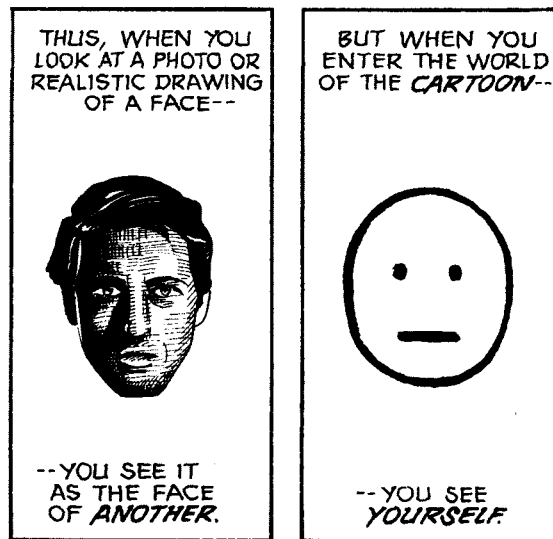


Illustration #2: McCloud, page 36

When abstracted from his presentation, the insight may not strike you. But when you follow, in words and pictures, the progression of his argument (from page 28 to page 47), it is highly convincing. It is also delightful. I exhort all my readers to take a look at it, for this is *Understanding Comics* at its best—where a summation, or even the citation of a few panels, is inadequate to convey the force and efficiency with which

McCloud makes his points, a force arising not out of the similarity with any other text—Longinus’s or anyone else’s—but out of McCloud’s own formal organization of his argument.

The next place McCloud shines is in chapter 3, “Blood in the Gutter.” Here he introduces an idea he names “closure”—i.e., what goes on between the panels; what joins panel to panel. (I have also seen this referred to as “gestalt perception.” But I’m content to use McCloud’s term.) As he points out, closure is often at work *within* a single panel as well. This notion of closure allows McCloud to begin an intense discussion of that aspect which is so important to any art: the relation between the shown and the not shown, the stated and the implied, the articulated and the suggested—for here is where all art begins to manifest the complexities that make some formal analysis a necessity for sophisticated appreciation.



Illustration #3: McCloud, page 66

As McCloud eventually says, when he is summing up his findings, “The dance of the visible and the invisible is at the very heart of comics through closure” (205). An earlier comment, however, is perhaps more to the point: “The comics creator asks us to join in a silent dance of the seen and the unseen. The visible and the invisible. This dance is unique to comics. No other artform gives so much to its audience while asking so much from them as well” (92). In an essay on La Fontaine’s *Adonis*, the French poet Paul Valéry noted a similar relation between the stated and unstated in poetry: “Follow the path of your aroused thought, and you will soon meet this infernal inscription: *There is nothing so beautiful as that which does not exist*,” italics Valéry’s. In a letter to a friend written after the publication of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, the philosopher Wittgenstein noted the same relation even in philosophy: “My work consists of two parts: the present one here plus all that I have not written. And *it is precisely this second part that is the important one*,” italics Wittgenstein’s. And, of course, so-famously Keats wrote: “Heard melodies are sweet. But those unheard are sweeter,” which suggested a similar point about music. This relation between the expressed and the withheld must exist in any art hinging on representation—because one cannot, in any given art work, represent everything.

Something has to be left implied.

If we take McCloud to be saying, by his dance metaphor, that the choreographic *form* of the dance is unique to each medium, comics among them, I have no problem with his assertion.

That the point has been made and made frequently before gives resonance and pleasure. But McCloud makes it well and specifically for comics—and thus makes it his own.

In the course of his discussion of closure, McCloud specifies six relationships that adjacent panels can have to one another: The panels can progress (1) moment-to-moment, (2) action-to-action, (3) subject-to-subject, (4) scene-to-scene, (5) aspect-to-aspect, or be (6) non-sequiturs. What follows this is an extraordinarily illuminating analysis of several comic books, American, European, experimental, and Japanese, as to the number of each type of transition.

American comics, whether they are commercial or underground, all produce the same graphic distribution, with action-to-action transition being far in the lead, with subject-to-subject transitions coming next, to be followed by scene-to-scene transitions. Only in highly experimental work do these proportions change. Japanese comics also produce a different graph: American comics almost never use aspect-to-aspect transitions. Japanese comics use aspect-to-aspect transitions notably more than they use scene-to-scene transitions. I share McCloud’s hope that

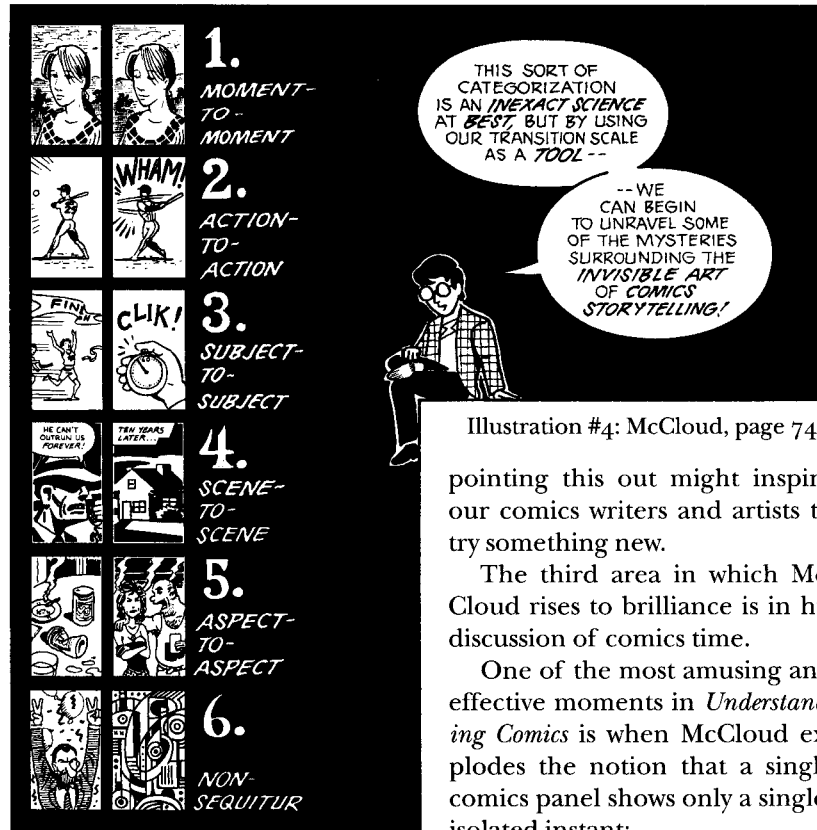


Illustration #4: McCloud, page 74

pointing this out might inspire our comics writers and artists to try something new.

The third area in which McCloud rises to brilliance is in his discussion of comics time.

One of the most amusing and effective moments in *Understanding Comics* is when McCloud explodes the notion that a single comics panel shows only a single, isolated instant:

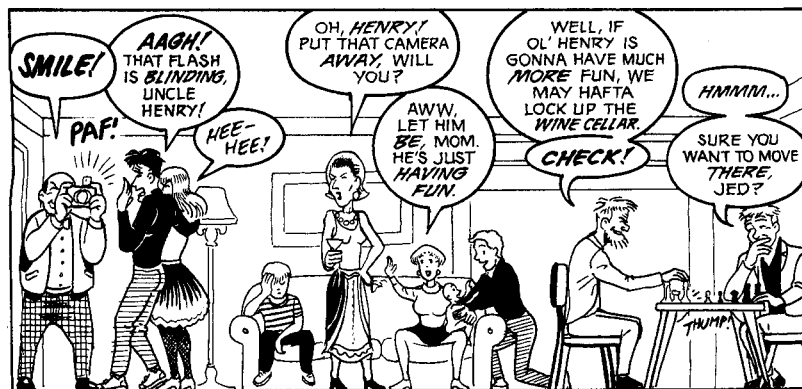


Illustration #5: McCloud, page 95

In McCloud's panel above, possibly for as much as thirty seconds, time runs left to right, intimately tied to the duration of language. His detailed discussion of this is intricate and illuminating. His account of the various lines that comics have used to portray movement (zip-ribbons, as they were once called) leads, through a discussion of "subjective motion," into another fine and revealing section on the nature of the expressive quality and variety of line itself in comics art.

In general, looking back through the several rich and suggestive arguments in *Understanding Comics*, I note that most of the ones I've already pointed out (the nature of faces and forms reduced to lines; the power of the lines separating panels; lines used to signal movement in time and—finally—lines' vast range of expressivity and emotion) tend, indeed, to focus on the line. The line and its function in the range and field of comics art are topics on which McCloud is unfailingly brilliant.

McCloud proposes several analytical tools which he uses to help make his points. For example, between pages 48 and 57, he poses a schematic triangle which plots artwork that is still referential along the bottom line, from highly representational on the left to highly schematic on the right. The altitude on McCloud's triangle represents the move from referential

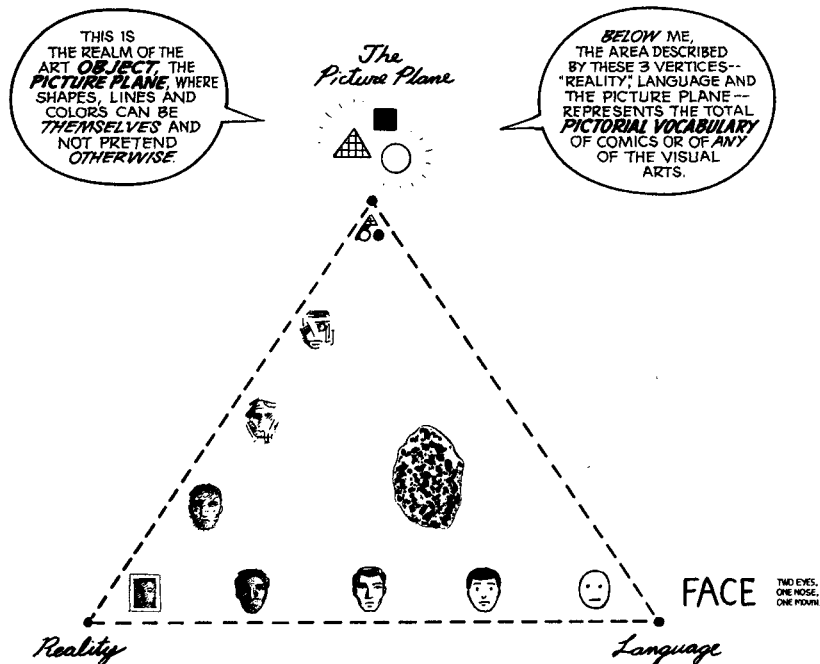


Illustration #6: McCloud, page 51

art, along the bottom, to nonreferential art at the apex—what McCloud calls “the picture plane,” and which might be described as that art which, without referring to recognizable objects, instead foregrounds shape, line, color, and even the materials—paint, ink, paper, and what-have-you—for their own sake. Such scales are always provisional. Indeed, had McCloud wanted to open up his triangle’s top vertex and expand triangle into rectangle, he could have plotted abstract art along the upper line from (say, on the right) those works that emphasize shape, line, and color to (on the left) those that emphasize the physicality of the materials—ink, paint, paper, nails, string, wood, canvas, masonite, chickenwire, mirrors, or what-have-you—in those abstract works (often called assemblages) that sometimes resemble sculpture more than painting. To date, of course, there’s not a great deal of this in comics—though one exception is the more recent work of Dave McKean, many of whose *Sandman* covers are as much assemblages as Rauschenberg’s briefly notorious Stuffed-Goat-with-Car-Tire (*Monogram*, 1963).

We’ve already spoken about McCloud’s six different kinds of panel transition—equally provisional.

The third schema that he comes up with is, for me, the most problematic. McCloud calls it “the six steps.” This follows upon a “definition of art” that is equally problematic (and which I shall return to). McCloud prefaces his “six steps” with the following statement: “‘Pure’ art is essentially tied to the question of purpose—of deciding what you want out of art. This is true in comics as it is in painting, writing, theater, film, sculpture, or any other form because the creation of any work in any medium will always follow a certain path.”

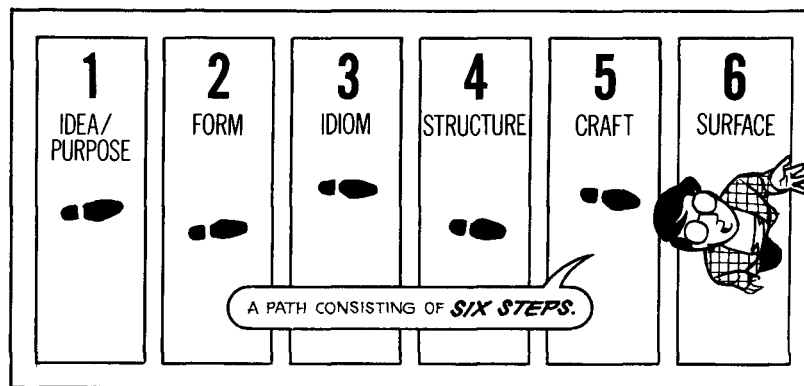


Illustration #7: McCloud, page 170

McCloud goes on to describe each of these six steps:

First [idea/purpose]: the impulses, the ideas, the emotions, the philosophies of the work . . . the work's "content." Second [form]: The form it will take . . . will it be a book? A chalk drawing? A chair? A song? A sculpture? A pot holder? A comic book? Third [idiom]: The "school" of art, the vocabulary of styles, gestures, or subject matter, the genre that the work belongs to . . . maybe a genre of its own. Fourth [structure]: putting it all together . . . what to include, what to leave out . . . how to arrange, how to compose the work. Fifth [craft]: constructing the work, applying skills, practical knowledge, invention, problem-solving, getting the "job" done. Sixth [surface]: production values, finishing . . . the aspect most apparent on first superficial exposure to the work.

The fundamental problem I see with this scheme is that too much is packed into each step, so that most of them have aspects both of form *and* content about them. That might even have been McCloud's purpose in formulating them. But, for that reason, it tends to undercut much of what he has proposed so far under that critically so necessary separation.

It is the quotation marks around "job" in "getting the 'job' done" and the idea of "practical knowledge" in the description of number five ("craft") that holds that description open for my unhappy account of the function of craft in comics art with which we began. The question McCloud sidesteps taking on directly is: Just whose job is it, anyway? (Not in the sense of who has to *do* it, but who *owns* it. It is no accident that this has been such a big part of the nuts-and-bolts history of recent comics.) The comics publisher? The comics buyer? Or the comics creator? The relationship of art and its audience in comics is one classical area of art criticism that seems slighted in McCloud's study—because, especially in comics, that relation, in terms of acceptance, appreciation, and finally money is, thanks to fandom, unique and has had and will have a great deal to do with the development and growth of comics, about which McCloud is so luminously passionate.

Finally, however, I think the most commendable aspect of McCloud's book is its particular combination—manifested in its layout, its draftsmanship, its breakdown of ideas—of intelligence and enthusiasm. Either one without the other would have produced a very different, and lesser, work.

III

McCloud has other things to say about the craft, the origins, and the definition of comics—and because he does not use the pages in which he

says them overtly to unmask and demystify the contradictions inherent in all three notions, his overall argument is marred—and marred seriously. But it’s a tribute to his critical intelligence that so much of—and certainly the most interesting part of—what he has to say lies outside these three essentialist bogs, and is anchored, rather, on the grounding of his considerable analytical intellect.

At one point McCloud writes (p. 163), “Even today, there are those who ask the question, ‘Can comics be art?’ It is—I’m sorry—a stupid question! But if we must answer it, the answer is yes. Especially if your definition of art is as broad as mine.”



Illustration #8: McCloud, page 164

What makes (or does not make) the question stupid may not, however, be as self-evident as McCloud suggests. As Raymond Williams explained in his book *Keywords* (Oxford, 1976) “art” is one of a number of terms (“civilization” is another, as are “modern,” “literature,” “poetry” and, most interestingly, “definition” itself) that always have *two* meanings that relate in a particular socially exploitable manner. One meaning is generous, inclusive, and largely value free: “Civilization” covers everything that occurs in the range of life in the developed countries. “Art” is anything that anyone, child or adult, skilled or unskilled, does that is focused on producing an esthetic response, rather than fulfilling a functional role. “Modern” is the adjective for whatever is occurring in the world today.

But each of the terms also has a limited, value-bound meaning that refers, not simply to different objects and materials (which would make it a different word, or a homonym) but rather to a limited (and, because of the fuzzy nature of those values, finally an impossible to define) subset of what the larger meaning refers to. Almost invariably, when the limited

meaning of the terms is invoked, it functions in the negative, as a means of exclusion. “That’s not art. That’s just a child’s scribbling,” although the scribbles of a child would be easily included in the notion of art under the larger meaning. “People living like that in New York City in this day and age is just uncivilized,” though what everyone does in New York, from the homeless to Donald Trump, is part of civilization in the larger meaning. “What do you mean, it’s a combination of art and literature? It’s a comic book!”

The fact is, until fairly recently for most people “Can comics be art?” was not a stupid question. It wasn’t a question at all. Rather it was what the split meanings of literature and art were there precisely to protect against: the serious consideration as art (in the limited, value-bound sense) of *any* texts from any of the paraliterary genres, SF, comics, pornography, mysteries, westerns . . . Indeed, the definition (and, though I use the term rarely, here I mean it in the limited, formal sense of presenting the necessary and sufficient conditions) of “paraliterature” and “paraliterary” is specifically those written genres traditionally excluded by the limited, value-bound meaning of “literature” and “literary.”

(One of the things McCloud’s analysis points to, though it does not say it outright, is that we need comparable terms, “art” and “para-art,” to discuss with any precision the visual genres that are traditionally excluded from the fine arts. As McCloud suggests, historically, in “para-art” and “paraliterature,” words and images combine easily [comics, advertising], whereas in the fine arts and literature, though from time to time they intersect [see Mark Varnadeau’s extraordinarily informative *High Art, Low Art*], that intersection is much more anxiety-filled for middle-class and upper-middle-class audiences.)

In short, the revolution in the *value system* of contemporary art that McCloud is so passionately pushing for is much more profound, complex, and far-reaching than McCloud’s protestation of the stupidity of its central question takes account of. Calling that central question “stupid” is not the way to win that revolution; if anything, it undercuts and even discredits the real advances McCloud has made in the sections of *Understanding Comics* I’ve pointed out already.

That’s a shame.

But let us return to McCloud’s “definition” (when people talk about multiple definitions of the same topic, distinguishing some as “broad” and some as “narrow,” and when these proposed “definitions” are qualified by phrases such as “to me” and “as I see it,” they are no longer talking about formal definitions. They are talking about the broader meaning of definition—some form or other of “functional description.” I hope, then, McCloud might accept the less confusing term “functional

description”) of art, expressed in the panel on the previous page: “Art, as I see it, is any human activity that doesn’t grow out of either of our species’ two basic instincts: survival and reproduction.” One can only assume, especially from the way the argument goes on, that he is using “reproduction” as a metonym for “sex.” Otherwise, we would have the immediate problem that *everything* homosexuals did that was oriented toward sex would be art, while *nothing* heterosexuals did that was oriented toward sex would be—even if it involved the same actions. Or: Any heterosexual behavior that led to oral or anal sex would be art, while, if the same behavior led to vaginal sex, it wouldn’t be. And so on and so forth. That, as I see it, just doesn’t *feel* right.

Readers familiar with a range of esthetic speculation in the West will probably recognize, however, the glimmer of a useful idea in McCloud’s formation. Often throughout the history of criticism, the esthetic (not art) has been described (not defined) as those aspects of an object that are in excess of the functional. (I’ve already used that description above.)

Even though it by no means exhausts the topic, repeatedly this has proven to be a powerful and useful description of the esthetic. Because it is so muddled, however, it isn’t, here.

If I may elaborate on that strong form of the description: Anything designed to fulfill a task will have aspects that do not directly contribute to the task’s performance. These aspects mark out the realm of the esthetic. Gross examples might include the designs or scrimshaw on the handle of a knife; the paint choice on a car; whether or not a machine, whose cleanliness does not effect its performance, is kept shiny and polished or allowed to get dusty and dull. Fundamentally, these are esthetic aspects. The esthetic is (a further description) the realm in which art (in its large, value-free inclusive meaning) takes place.

There have been powerful and incisive functional descriptions of art that do not so immediately stumble into the sort of problems McCloud’s does. One was given by the author of *Ada* and *Lolita*, Vladimir Nabokov: “Art is sensuous thought.” One of the pleasant things about Nabokov’s description, not accomplished by McCloud’s (for who’s to say that *Understanding Comics* was not a matter of McCloud’s own intellectual survival?), is that it allows us to see McCloud’s *own* rich, sensuously visual, and passionate exegesis as art. And, for all my carping, it is.

If, realizing the way in which the two meanings of definition (like the two meanings of art) create an unwinnable game of round-robin chasing-after-one’s-tail, critics of the paraliterary could retire the notion of definition once and for all, if they could restrict themselves to the far more modest-seeming task of describing our objects of concern (like comics, SF, pornography . . .), describing never-before-noticed aspects,

pointing out the most interesting examples, describing the myriad and fascinating ways in which those aspects react with one another and how they interact with readers and the world, we would produce a far less arrogant, far more interesting, far less self-crippling, and finally far more powerful criticism—as does McCloud at his strongest—than we usually do, a criticism that would go far further toward effecting the revolution *in esthetic values* that McCloud (and I) would like to see.

IV

The idea of “definition,” with its suggestion of the scientific, can be associated easily with the idea of “mastery”—which, in turn, can be easily associated with the idea of “origin” and “craft.” But the fact is, we do not master an art—and certainly we do not master it through knowing the “the proper definition” or “mastering” its “origins” or simply learning its “craft.” (Let me reiterate: It is only the idea of *craft in opposition to art* to which I object; in support of the concept of art, craft is a useful and fine, even necessary, concept: But it is not sufficient to produce art in the limited, value-bound sense—as McCloud himself explains on p. 171.) The more we study and dwell on (and in) an art, the more the art masters us. The clarity with which McCloud reports on the way the art of comics has mastered him is another facet that gives *Understanding Comics* its brilliance.

The people who want to master an art, be it comics, SF, pornography, or the various literary genres, are the gallery of administrators and producers, those who sink their money into its creation, its distribution, its sales; those who hope that, through such mastery, they can bend art to their own whims. The results are always broken-backed, limping, incoherent pieces that, to the audience, are laughable and instantly forgettable.

The reason for this is that, regardless of how we like to talk about it, there is nothing there to be mastered. There are only things to be submitted to.

There are at least three reasons to give up the notion of “definition” (and its attendant notions of mastery, craft, and origins). One is logical; the other two are strategic.

The logical reason, first: The one reason to *keep* using the word definition would be if one could form a definition in the limited, rigorous, formal sense of the word—otherwise, to repeat myself, we had better use the term “description” (or “functional description”) to avoid confusion. The question then becomes, *can* we create a limited, rigorous, formal definition of a form of art, a mode of writing and pictures, a genre?

Well, there is a certain order of objects—ones that the late sociologist Lucien Goldmann (in his brief book, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, Jonathan Cape, 1969) called “social objects”—that resist formal definition, i.e., we cannot locate the necessary and sufficient conditions that can describe them with definitional rigor. Social objects are those that, instead of existing as a relatively limited number of material objects, exist rather as an unspecified number of recognition codes (functional descriptions, if you will) shared by an unlimited population, in which new and different examples are regularly produced. Genres, discourses, and genre collections are all social objects. And when a discourse (or genre collection, such as art) encourages, values, and privileges originality, creativity, variation, and change in its new examples, it should be self-evident why “definition” is an impossible task (since the object itself, if it is healthy, is constantly developing and changing), even for someone who finds it difficult to follow the fine points.

The strategic reasons are more down to earth. Only since the late sixties, with the advent of the schools of criticism known as structuralism, poststructuralism, and semiotics, have some of these limitations of what is logically do-able and what is not become generally known to a fairly large number of (though by no means all) literary critics.

In the 1930s, many American critics wanted to make criticism more scientific. Critical literature of that time abounded in attempts to define rigorously notions such as the epic, the novel, tragedy, poetry, the literary, the lyric. . . . Many of these critics (they were often of a left political persuasion) began to look at the popular arts. Fields such as science fiction, the mystery, and film began to come under the critical spotlight. At the same time, more conservative critics were beginning to dismantle the various proposed definitional projects. These critics (more about them later) were often hostile to the popular cultural aspect of what their fellows were doing. But finally, in the forties and fifties, under the triumph of what was then called “the New Criticism,” all but the last of these definitional projects were generally given up.

Often they went out with an ironic flourish: Randall Jarrell, an exemplary New Critic, gave what may be the last “definition” of the novel in his 1965 preface to Christina Stead’s *The Man Who Loved Children* (“An Unread Book”), “a novel is a prose narrative of some length that has something wrong with it.” George Steiner, in his study *The Death of Tragedy*, ended the search for a definition there, by resurrecting an ancient writer who had noted, about the form, “The best of them are sad.” One would have hoped that, in the field of popular culture in those same years, Damon Knight’s famous “ostensive definition” from page 1 of *In Search of Wonder* (1956) might have sounded a similarly elegant death

knell to the impossible task of defining science fiction: “[T]he term ‘science fiction’ is a misnomer . . . trying to get two enthusiasts to agree on a definition of it only leads to bloody knuckles: . . . but that will do us no particular harm if we remember that, like *The Saturday Evening Post*, it means what we point to when we say it.” For those who need it spelled out, the humor lies in the fact that it’s undecidable whether that “when we say it” means “by saying it” or “at the same time as we say it.”

One would have liked to have heard a big laugh. Then we might have gone on to more useful critical tasks. Indeed, it could have brought to an end all the attempts to define the other paraliterary genres as well. What that would have accomplished is the first step in putting the *paraliterary* genres on the *same* level as the (now all-but-universally acknowledged to be) undefinable *literary* genres.

We had no tradition of academic rigor, however, to pressure us. Once the populist critics turned away from us, we were left with a general distrust of the academy (that came from our working-class roots), and because there was little pressure on us to *develop* our own criticism (though in the fanzines and through convention panels we have done a great deal of it—and much of it has been powerful and important), in terms of terminology, we’ve simply gone on using our borrowed vocabulary and talking about definitions for the last sixty years.

What McCloud and the other critics of the paraliterary (e.g., James Gunn, in science fiction) don’t seem to realize is that our very insistence that our genre *might be* susceptible to “rigorous definition” functions today as a ready-made admission that the genre *must be* substantially less complex and vital than any of the literary genres. Our adversaries reason: “Since *their* genre is created *only* with craft (and *not* art—note here the two function in distinct opposition), a paraliterary genre can be art only under the larger and inclusive meaning. It can’t be art in the limited, value-bound meaning: Science fiction, comics, pornography, mysteries can be considered art, at best, in the way Morris chairs or Wedgwood china (easily definable objects, by the bye) are art, but obviously not in the way that a poem (in the undefinable genre of poetry) is art. The fact that any given one among these genres *is* definable (or that its most interesting critical practitioners, such as McCloud, keep insisting that it is) is proof positive it *must be* simple and second rate!”

Before we leave those thirties/fifties critics, with their desire to make literary criticism compete with science by importing the notion of definition into it, and their openness to the paraliterary field of (especially) mysteries and science fiction (most of them drew the line at comics; but because the comics world had so much social interchange with these other genres, the critical vocabulary and concepts spread), we need to

make a final point, which will become important later on. As much as they favored popular art, these critics were also loudly opposed to the new work that is today called High Modernism—the work today represented by Eliot, Pound, and Crane in poetry in this country, and D. H. Lawrence, Wyndham Lewis, and Joyce in the British Isles.

Their reasons were clear and political. While acknowledging the range and vigor of the new collage techniques and anti-narrative structures with which these artists broadened the range of their monologues, they still realized that when, in part II of his first major poem, “For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen” (1923), Crane wrote

This crashing opéra bouffe,
Blest excursion! this ricochet
From roof to roof—
Know, Olympians, we are breathless
While nigger cupids scour the stars!

it was not some illiterate southern farmer who knew no other term for black people who was given voice in Crane’s lines. Rather it was a trendy upper-middle-class white voice, that had made a choice to ignore the political politeness of the day and whose jazz-age allegiances Crane’s poem was celebrating.

When, in a section Pound had excised from *The Waste Land* and that Eliot published two years before the longer poem, under the title *Geron-tion* (1920), Eliot wrote

My house is a decayed house,
And the jew squats on the window sill, the owner,
spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp,
Blistered in Brussels, patched and peeled in London.

(the lower-case “j” there is Eliot’s), or titled his poem “Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar” (“The rats are underneath the piles./ The Jew is underneath the lot./ Money in furs. The boatman smiles . . .”), he was evoking the most unthinking stereotype of the money-grubbing Jewish landlord, tourist, and businessman. Indeed, the latter poem operates within the most anti-Semitic of models for Jewish “decadence,” going at least as far back as Wagner’s notorious anti-Semitic article, “Jewry in Music” (1851): the Jew can only receive cultural input but cannot create valid work because of his commitment to trade, money, and (as it is symbolized in the *Ring*) gold.

Pound’s years of propaganda broadcasts for Mussolini earned him a

conviction of either treason or madness: Pound chose madness. But even the award of the 1947 Bollingen Prize could not erase the sour, treasonous taste of those radio programs.

The fascist ideas of Lawrence (with his love of the idea of racial memory and metaphors of blood and soil) and Lewis were even clearer.

That Joyce's *Ulysses* can be read as the celebration of the daily heroism of an ordinary, working-class Dublin Jew is probably a larger reason than many critics would like to admit as to why it has floated to the top of the High Modernist pool and stayed there. Similarly, Djuna Barnes's astute and finally compassionate analysis of the place of the Jew in European culture that forms the opening movement of *Nightwood* (1936) may well account for why, slowly but inexorably, that novel has risen to take its well-deserved place high in the modernist pantheon. What can't be denied, however, is that all these Protestant and Catholic writers were *fascinated* with the place of Jews and the "Jewish problem," all through the course of High Modernism. Whether well or badly, sympathetically or hostilely, they *all* wrote about it.

Though Eliot's brain-deadening work in an English bank and Crane, in his six-dollar-a-week room at 110 Columbia Heights in Brooklyn, lusting after the eight-dollar-a-week room with a view of the bridge, are both mythemes of High Modernism, both Eliot and Crane came from money. Both their decisions to be poets meant a goodly amount of family tension and, finally, financial abandonment. (A candy manufacturer in Cleveland, Crane's father has the dubious distinction of having invented the Life Saver.)

In 1934 Wallace Stevens became a vice president of the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company, where he'd worked since 1916. Almost Byronically popular in her time (and the only poet of her times, claimed critic Edmund Wilson, whose work felt like that of a major poet while she was alive), only Edna St. Vincent Millay came from more humble beginnings, despite her scholarship to Vassar. She was the most esthetically conservative, and today is the least read, moving toward an obscurity in which she has been preceded by the once extraordinarily popular black poet, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, and in which she is gradually being followed by Jeffers, Sandberg, Robinson—and even possibly Frost. Politically (with the exception of Millay), the American poets of the twenties were the most lackadaisical of liberals, easily swayed by reactionary ideas, and even violently conservative ones, as in the case of Pound.

Among the thirties American critics, sympathy with the popular and a corresponding distaste for High Modernism's politics eventually coalesced into what, sadly, was an all-too-easy argument. Since the working-class audience for popular culture so frequently found the esthetic

pyrotechnics in these new works alien and off-putting, *this* was put forward, by the critics, as the major sign of high art's *esthetic* (rather than *political*) failing. It was not a good argument. Too many things lay repressed beneath it.

But I said we'd come back to these critics' critics.

The Nazi persecutions in Germany produced a migration of extraordinary German intellectuals, many of them Jewish, into the United States—novelists like Thomas Mann and Herman Broch, musicians like Arnold Schoenberg, and university figures like Hannah Arendt, Herbert Marcuse, and Theodor Adorno. The situation of contemporary art in Germany and France was very different from that in America. In Germany and France the avant-garde was solidly on the left, and the left academics solidly supported them: A former music student of Alban Berg's, Adorno had already written his book, *The Philosophy of New Music*, in which he defended Schoenberg's atonal works (and castigated the far more popular Stravinsky). Walter Benjamin (though he set out for America, he committed suicide when the Nazis detained him and other refugees at the Spanish border, the vision of concentration camps too much for him to bear) had already written the essays that would make up his *Brecht* book. What those who arrived here found in the American academic left was the vulgarest of "vulgar" Marxism.

In particular Adorno held no brief for popular culture. In German popular culture, the film industry had been among the first institutions to be taken over by the Nazis. But maneuvering the prejudices of the working class and lower middle class to get them to do what he wanted was the name of Hitler's game. All Adorno could see in the American radio shows and films of the forties was patriotic pabulum for the masses, which, if it had any liberal leanings at all, was only because it was not under any particular pressure to be otherwise. (Nor would fifties McCarthyism and the Hollywood blacklists make him any more sanguine. Though he is not cited in their bibliography, Adorno's ideas on popular culture are very close to those found in my old elementary school friend Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart's *How to Read Donald Duck* [Valparaiso, 1971 / New York, 1975].) These thinkers and the scholars who were influenced by them began to mount their critique on the American academic populists. Why not try another careful reading of the High Modernists? Perhaps they could be redeemed—as they already were in Europe. But popular culture was lost—a mere puppet of the dominant ideology. At least in Europe it had been.

Under the critique of these newcomers, the American critics began to retreat from the popular. The bad faith at their argument's heart (the use of the *esthetic* as a smoke screen to mask *political* disapproval)

was uncovered—though in the realms of the paraliterary, writers, editors, and other folk, left to themselves, still held to the arguments and terminology abandoned, as it were, in their yard, without ever managing to think through (or mount for themselves) the critique that, in the university, had demolished many of the ideas involved.

Often when we look at what critics in the paraliterary fields are doing, even today, we see people going through the empty gestures from the thirties (e.g., immediately trying to define their genre as an opening move, before going on to a discussion of origins), gestures that were determined by a group of critics and ideas that, today, simply don't command much respect. By the repeated attempts to define this or that paraliterary genre, instead of just going about the task of describing what in the genre interests them, critically (I hope I've made it clear) McCloud and others shoot themselves in the foot. Another strategic reason to give up the notion of definitions is because, to the larger world of contemporary criticism, save among the *most* reactionary forces still fighting some last-ditch holding-battle against modernism itself, we look pretty silly, constantly running up and banging into a logical wall that everybody else learned long-ago is not going to go away, then, eyes still dazed and spinning, looking about for pats on the head for our stubbornness.

The second strategic reason is, however, more important than what other critics will think of us. It can be found in McCloud's own passionate thoughts about comics. (I hope he will forgive me for extracting this bit of text from the several integral pictures which, in *Understanding Comics*, lend it an entirely different order of immediacy):

As comics grows into the next century, creators will aspire to many higher goals than appealing to the "lowest common denominators." Ignorance and short-sighted business practices will no doubt obscure the possibilities of comics from time to time as they always have. But the truth about comics can't stay hidden from view forever, and sooner or later the truth will shine through! Today the possibilities for comics are—as they always have been—endless. Comics offers tremendous resources to *all* writers and artists: faithfulness, control, a chance to be heard far and wide without the fear of compromise . . . It offers range and versatility with all the potential imagery of film and painting plus the intimacy of the written word. And all that's needed is the desire to be heard—the will to learn—and the ability to see. (Ellipsis McCloud's.)

This man passionately desires that comics change and grow. Why should someone with such desires attempt to strait his arguments and observations of his cherished object within the restrictive wall of definition?

Won't careful analytic *description* of what is vital, intriguing, newly noticed, and wondrous about comics (what they are; how they work) finally do the job much better? Why do we need the appeal to that extra, transcendental authority of science that "definition" falsely holds out, but which, as we reach for it, finally and only betrays (and, for certain critics, confirms the truth of) our own inferiority?

Like McCloud, I too want to see comics develop and grow. Like McCloud, I think the seeds of that growth have long since been planted, have sprouted, and, throughout the history of comics, have already yielded fine harvests. But I would also like to see the criticism of comics grow up. And it will not, until it can abandon that galaxy of notions, origins, mastery, craft—and definition. It must abandon them because they represent the several smoke screens behind which false authority has always tried to hold back the development of art. Traditionally "origins" and "definition" are the two that critics have used most widely to impede artistic change: "Because you have not studied the proper origins of the genres, you don't really know what the genre is (its definition) and so are not qualified to work in it."

Two comments.

First: In the paraliterary genres we do not have *enough* critics, or a strong enough critical establishment, for this stance yet to become a real problem. But it has often functioned as a powerful stifling force in the literary and fine arts genres. But, within the dead terminology and empty concepts we can already find, here and there, in McCloud's book, the basis for the problem is already apparent, and it could easily grow into something sizable if those concepts are not clearly and repeatedly analyzed and dismissed for what they are.

A personal example: In 1995, the Museum of Modern Art invited me to write an "Introduction" to the catalogue for an upcoming exhibit, *Video Spaces*, that ran through the summer and autumn of that year, and I discovered a policy of the MOMA's Publications Department: While you can state pretty much any opinion you like, you are not allowed to make a factual statement about art or its history in a Museum publication unless you are a bona fide art critic with an advanced degree in art history. Even statements such as "van Gogh worked on *Wheatfield with Crows* only days before his suicide at the end of July 1890," verifiable from any standard biography, or "The dominant colors in *Wheatfield with Crows* are yellow and blue," verifiable by eye to anyone, are strongly discouraged unless they come from accredited historians. The Museum's editors constantly rewrite such statements from their guest writers as, "To me the main color of this painting appears to be yellow and blue," or, "I

seem to remember reading somewhere that van Gogh painted this picture shortly before his death, but I can't be sure." When I asked about this, I was told: "Because this is a Museum publication, we simply can't make mistakes. So we just don't let the kind of sentences occur where factual mistakes might fall." As a nonexpert writing for MOMA, you can have an opinion about anything; but you are not qualified to state any facts—at least about art. The policy extends, incidentally, even to those MOMA curators who do not have advanced degrees and are not themselves accredited art historians. At the same time, when I was writing about science fiction, my own field of expertise, the same editors would blithely insert or subtract phrases that made the accounts of story plots or even genre history bogglingly inaccurate. Also the initial contract offered for the piece was a "work for hire" contract—which was only replaced by a better one when I pointed out the first one was illegal.

Sound familiar, guys? The point is not that MOMA is, somehow, an evil organization. Rather, the same forces are at work in both locations, producing the same results.

Second: There is an inverse of the statement from four paragraphs above: "If you *do* study the always many and complex origins of an art form, you *are* more likely to have a broader range of notions of what that art form might be (i.e., a richer set of descriptions), and thus are more likely to help it grow and change in interesting ways." This statement *is* true—while the earlier statement is false. But I would hope that we could recall our first-term logic classes: Reasoning from the inverse (or the converse) *is* false reasoning. Frankly, I think every day before breakfast every critic of the paraliterary should be obliged to copy out a dozen times:

"The 'origin' is *never* an objective reality; it is always a political construct."

"The 'origin' is *never* an objective reality; it is always a political construct."

"The 'origin' is *never* an objective reality; it is always a political construct . . ."

In the same way that origins and definitions form the usual smoke screen behind which critics hide their lack of esthetic authority, craft and mastery form the traditional smoke screen behind which producers, publishers, and, in general, people with money who have been trying to exploit art since the Renaissance up to the latest incoherently scripted 50-million-dollar blockbuster hide theirs: "He's talented, certainly. His work is very artistic. I just don't think he's mastered the craft well enough to . . ." (note: Again, here craft is being *opposed* to art) which simply means he won't do what you tell him to do because you ask him to, or because you're signing the checks.

V

As I've said, when McCloud's topics are line and its function in comics, or the galaxy of effects that line can produce (unto the colors lines can hold within the shapes they form), he is brilliant.

But because of his commitments to "origins" and "definitions," his arguments that lean on concepts of history are a maddening amalgam of truth and absurdity. The sensitive reader must go through them in full-tilt opposition to much that he says, ready to argue with him sentence by sentence.

Much of *Understanding Comics's* chapter 5, though called "Living in Line," turns out to be about history, with a discussion of prehistoric cave drawings on page 141, hieroglyphics and Chinese characters on page 142, the development of print on page 143, and a discussion of the relation between words and pictures from the fifteenth century to the nineteenth on pages 144 and 145. On page 150, we find a bit of historical sleight of hand. To untangle it, we have to analyze both words and pictures:

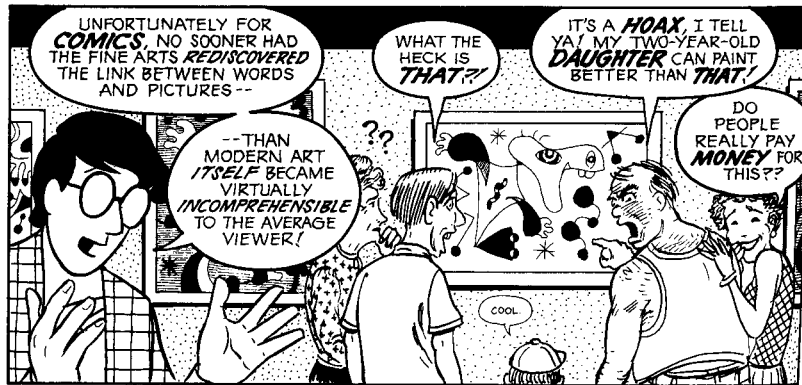


Illustration #9: McCloud, page 150

The picture that the five background characters are commenting on parodies the paintings of Barcelona-born Joan Miró (1893-1983). The grouping around the painting is definitely working class, and their Philistine responses are ironized by the (hemi)head of the child (the least noticeable of the five) in the middle, declaring in his/her small balloon: "Cool." Obviously the little one will grow up to become an alternative comics artist.

Over the next five panels, McCloud tells us: "In fact, the general public's perception of 'great' art and 'great' writing hasn't changed

much in 150 years,”³ whereupon he adds a footnote: “Not as much as we like to think it has, anyway.”

McCloud goes on: “Any artist wishing to do great work in a medium using words and pictures will have to contend with this attitude,” by which I assume he means the *incomprehensibility to the average viewer*, “in others *and* in themselves . . . because, deep down inside, many comics creators still measure art and writing by different standards and act on the faith that ‘great’ art and ‘great’ writing will combine harmoniously by virtue of quality alone. The art form of comics is many centuries old, but it’s perceived as a recent invention and suffers the curse of all new media, the curse of being judged by the standards of the old” (ellipsis McCloud’s). After some examples of a new medium judged by standards of an older one (writing judged as *aide de memoire*, movies judged as plays,

3. The single quotes around ‘great’ in McCloud above suggest that he knows, or at any rate is willing to suggest that he is aware of, how much of a revolution he is proposing. It is very likely that the idea of *great* art, as we have known it from the romantic period on, will have to be dismantled as well, if the notion of an art that allows the art work from any group, central or marginal, to be seriously considered is to prevail. In what is certainly a too-abbreviated account, the reason *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were assumed to be ‘great’ from the Renaissance on is because it was assumed, in the period c. 800 B.C. when they were written, that they were the first major pieces written for the ruling class, to celebrate the ruling class, and that the ruling class approved highly of the way they had been celebrated. The classic was, then, invented as a model to imitate. (It was assumed that the Romans had assumed the same thing, so that even the attempt to imitate the model, as the Romans had, in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, was, indeed, the imitation of an already extant model of imitation—as had Dante in his *Commedia*.) Art becomes great when it becomes endowed with the national spirit, and the national spirit is one with the dominant ideology of the society. This model fell to pieces as soon as the majority of intellectuals ceased to come from the ruling classes and could start to praise art that severely criticized, rather than celebrated, the dominant ideology. The next step—and the reason why it is a revolution—is the idea of analyzing, praising, and celebrating art that simply isn’t concerned with the dominant ideology, one way or the other. Through Adorno, it was assumed that all art *must* be focused there, and any art that appeared not to be was secretly, then, supporting it by covering it up. The notion that, within the realm of the esthetic, through a structure of references and ironies, art can simply be doing *something else* (Politically? Certainly. Ideologically? Inescapably. And esthetically interesting) is, I suspect, the gift—some will think it a catastrophe—the postmodern has to give.

Society itself has become too complex for the notion of a single national spirit, bodied forth in the nation’s great art, to endure. If any analysis is to take place at all, intellectuals from many classes and areas must begin to look at smaller, subnational units—and that is also, and relevantly, the model for art that McCloud (I suspect) and I (definitely) are putting forward, which allows comics, as well as many, many other kinds of art, till now dismissed as marginal, to be considered in their full esthetic richness. That leaves excellent art and good art and bad art. And interesting art and uninteresting art. And, yes, the level of critical subjectivity and political bias involved in the judgments will have to be, at last, acknowledged as far higher than they have been acknowledged up till now.

TV judged as radio with pictures), McCloud concludes: "Far too many comics creators have no higher goal than to match the achievements of other media and view any chance to work in other media as a step up. And, again, as long as we view comics as a genre of writing or style of graphic art this attitude may never disappear."

Now all of this is such an intricate interweave of insight and idiocy, played out against a set of wildly inaccurate historical assumptions, I don't know whether we *can* tease out *all* its strands here. Unraveling a few, however, might be instructive.

The critical position McCloud's panel dramatizes is one tile in the larger mosaic of the populist/anti-modernist critics' argument of the thirties. The hostility of the working class and middle class to modern art on esthetic grounds is used to support these critics' disapproval of what was often, indeed, these artists' politics.

The historical view that position is based on is right there in McCloud's words, with its 150-year period without basic or fundamental change in the esthetic situation. *Understanding Comics* was written in 1992, so that 150-year period extends back to 1842—the beginnings of what, today, we call modernism, with its three continental giants, Flaubert, Baudelaire, and Wagner. (At one point in *Understanding Comics*, McCloud cites them.)

The transition between the generally figurative impressionism and post-impressionism of the 1870s through the 1890s and up to the abstraction that has come to dominate serious western art in the vast majority of its galleries and museums today (and functions as a sign of the transition between early modernism in general and High Modernism in particular) is usually ascribed to a 1904 trip Picasso took with Derain (some say Matisse) to the Trocadero, a Spanish fort just outside Paris, used at the time as an exhibition hall. That spring there was a large and impressive exhibition of African masks.

The French painters were hugely impressed by the expressive power and the sense of presence gained through the figural distortion and exaggeration in these sculptural forms. They began sending all their friends to see the exhibition as well. From this encounter of French artists with the African esthetic of "significant form" (at least that's what western critics have since called it), in the hands of Picasso, Braque, and Gris resulted in cubism, which led shortly to expressionism and the general turn of serious art to the variety of abstractions McCloud places under the rubric of "the picture plane."

Joan Miró, the painter whose work is parodied in the picture, painted in this particular style in the 1930s and 1940s. The yahoos represented

in McCloud's panel evoke working-class characters from the post-World War II period in the forties and fifties—when the transition from representational to abstract had long since occurred. McCloud posits an unbroken 150-year period in which, say, the protests of the upper-middle-class Munich concertgoers in the early 1840s that Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* was “mere noise”⁴ is fundamentally the same phenomenon as the non-art-buying lower middle class's dismissal of the already 50-year-old movement toward abstraction that already dominated the world of art buyers and gallery owners in the period after World War II. But the notion that the bourgeois revolution of 1848 and the equivalent fracas over the rest of the continent in the years around it spurred no changes either in art or in the public's attitude to it would probably leave Flaubert, Baudelaire, Hugo, and Wagner, not to mention Courbet, Millais, and Daumier (all of whom lived through it, all of whose major work came after it and was often in response to it, and all of whose reputations were a direct or indirect result of it) at least a *bit* puzzled. World War I and World War II both had equally pronounced effects on art and the public.

The first thing I want to do is to abstract McCloud's specific statement about comics from all this. As far as I can tell, what he is saying is: The advent of new art (i.e., art forms that have emerged in the 150-year period when nothing changed in the audience response to new artwork) has always been decried at first by the Philistines. Because, however, comics are much older than this 150-year period and go back, rather, *thousands* of years, they should escape this Philistine response. Uninformed about their origins, however, people mistake comics for a *young* art form (i.e., *less* than 150 years old). They dismiss them in the same way as they do abstract art. Indeed, the contemporary academic's dismissal of comics is the same as the working class's mid-century dismissal of modern art—which is, in turn, the same as the haute-bourgeoisie's dismissal of Beethoven's

4. A situation which Richard Wagner, when he conducted the work in Munich in 1846 and again in 1848, overcame brilliantly by preceding the concert with extensive newspaper articles analyzing the piece and pointing out what the audience should be listening for and how the piece differed from music that had gone before, along with extensive program notes waiting for the audience at the Munich Opera House on the Easter eve performance night, and extra rehearsals to ensure that the difficult music was played particularly clearly, and even a new arrangement of the orchestra to foreground the strings and woodwinds and downplay the brasses, as well as a choir of three *hundred* (rather than the seventy-five the previous performance had used) in order to overwhelm the audience with the sheer richness of sound in the final choral movement. It worked wondrously well. For a while the *Ninth Symphony*—dismissed as “mere noise” three years before—became a concert favorite warhorse of the public that rivaled the already stunningly popular *Fifth Symphony*.

late works in the early 1840s. The way to overcome this for comics is to educate people to the age of the pedigree of comics, at which point they will start to respect them.

When it is teased out and displayed in this form, I hope the argument's errors and inconsistencies begin to appear self-evident. The dismissal of comics today has nothing to do, for example, with the presumed length (or brevity) of its historical pedigree. Films are just as much a combination of words and pictures as comics, and, in their talking form, they only go back to 1929. Since the mid-sixties, film has been acknowledged as *the* art of the twentieth century. (*Every* major museum of modern art has a film curator. *None* of them has a comics curator.) The reason comics are dismissed is that, since their beginnings *as we know them today*, in the training strips for soldiers in World War I, they have been conceived of and produced to be the art form for the young children and adolescents *of* the working class. They are academically dismissed not for the same reason the *yahoos* dismiss modern art, but for the same reason as *we* dismiss McCloud's *yahoos'* *disparaging comments on* Joan Miró. It is not that the working class's positive esthetic judgments are being accepted and their negative judgments being ignored (as McCloud's argument would have it). Rather *all* working-class esthetic judgments, positive *and* negative, are dismissed—because the class is presumed to be uneducated *and* uneducable. No matter whether the art is representational *or* abstract, Titian *or* Picasso, working-class viewers (as a class—so runs the prevailing wisdom) are not going to purchase any significant amount of art anyway. Who cares, then, what they think—unless, now and then, we want to appropriate their uneducated hostility briefly to resurrect a rearguard action in an already long-lost battle against modernism, its political causes mystified behind a smoke screen of esthetic questions.

This is the ugly situation that keeps comics down on the scale of esthetic value—because comics are presumed to be a working-class art form—a situation which, at this point, McCloud does more tacitly to support than articulately to demystify. (Films made it up the scale because they involved more and more money; and the fantasies connected with them frequently appealed across class lines.)

The only way to change the situation is through the education of the esthetic sensibilities and, as far as criticism goes, a clear, constant, and demystifying critique of what the actual politics of the situation are.

One of my great recent pleasures has been to lurk among the galleries of the Whitney Museum on Wednesday mornings when nineteen-, twenty-three-, and twenty-five-year-old art students take student groups

from the New York City public elementary schools around to look at the paintings. The youngsters are overwhelmingly black and Hispanic—and, incidentally, working class. The art student conducting the group will often stop before one of de Kooning's swirling, abstract nudes.

"All right," the student leader will ask. "What's the first thing you notice about this picture?"

Invariably, without raising his or her hand, to be provocative some brave nine-year-old will blurt: "She's got real big *breasts* . . ." or "tits." Or "boobs." Or "titties." From boys and girls I've heard it come out all four ways, now. The rest of the class will snicker.

But the art student (who has been here many times before) will declare, loudly, "*Yes!*—that's right!" then launch into a clear and simple discussion of sexuality and sensuality in art, from its warm and nurturing aspects to the anxieties and discomforts it causes, and even the playfulness about it, demonstrating how all three of these are figured in de Kooning's vigorous brush work . . .

Silent now, the children listen, fascinated.

And they learn.

Usually when I leave the museum, I'm in tears. Somehow to watch what a moment ago was confused, alien, and off-putting to these kids, worthy only of sniggers and laughter, open up and clarify for them, revealing the sensuous thought it represents about the world, is . . . Well, I'm afraid, that's one of my buttons. So is watching kids learn that a response that begins in derision and hostility can pierce through to something fundamental and important that can be accepted and articulately discussed. (The critic's *own* response, Walter Pater noted, was where all criticism starts. Again, to cite it here is a matter of pleasure, not authority.) I can't help it. Nor do I want to. It's probably why I'm a critic as well as a creator. And whatever historic blunders it gets snared into, McCloud's book promotes both orders of experience: I find *Understanding Comics* deeply moving because again and again it accomplishes the same order of clarification.

VI

On the bottom of page 195 of *Understanding Comics*, McCloud gives us a diagram for the communication between comics artist and audience. Any contemporary critic will find it hard not to see McCloud's diagram as resembling both the nineteenth-century Swiss-born linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's famous speech circuit and twentieth-century linguist Roman Jakobson's equally famous refinement of it.

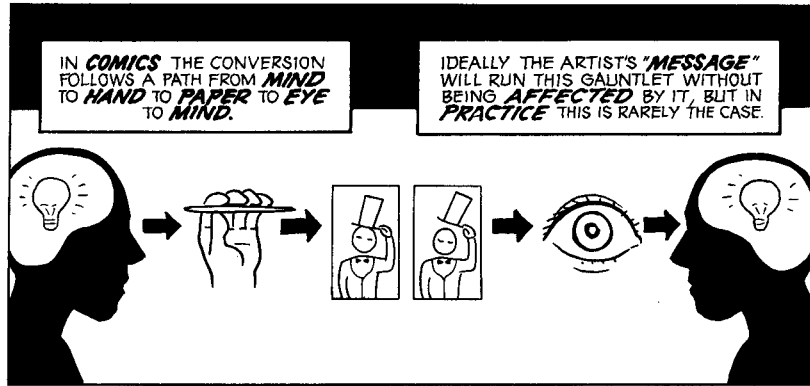


Illustration #10: Scott McCloud's communication circuit for comics (page 195)

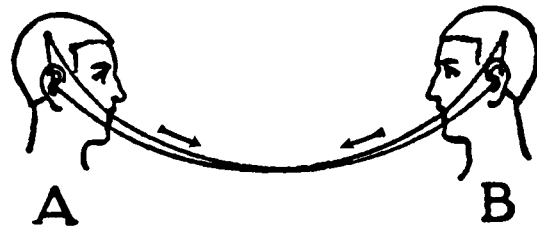


Illustration #11: Ferdinand de Saussure's "speech circuit" from the publication of his *Course in General Linguistics*, 1916 (page 11)

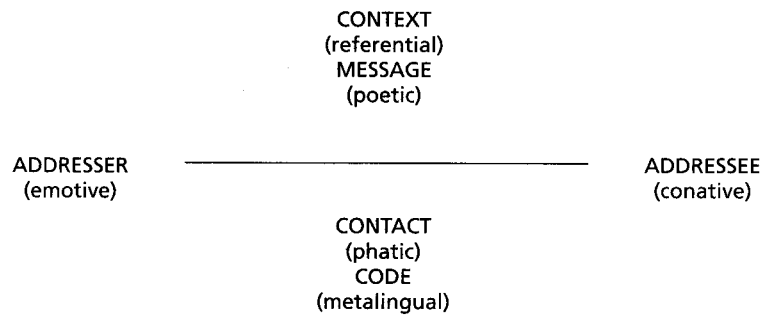


Illustration #12: Roman Jakobson's language model (from *The Framework of Language*, 1980) that first appeared in 1973

McCloud follows his illustration with a statement of his own perception of his creative process. On page 169, McCloud writes:

The comics I "see" in my mind will never be seen in their entirety by anyone else, no matter how hard I try. Ask any writer, or film maker, just how much a

given project truly represents what he/she envisions it to be. You'll hear twenty percent, 10 . . . 5 . . . few will claim more than 30. The mastery of one's medium is the degree to which that percentage can be increased, the degree to which the artist's idea survives the journey [over the communication circuit]—or, for some artists, the degree to which the inevitable detours are made useful by the artist.

If McCloud says that's how he perceives his own work (not to mention that most of the artists and writers around him also perceive it that way), I believe him.

But I mention in passing that, as a science fiction writer, I have never perceived my own writing in this manner. My own conceptions are comparatively dim, unfocused, and indistinct compared to the finished work. If the finished work doesn't strike me as a *lot* better than the conception, I'm likely to abandon it. Though I plan and outline my work as carefully as possible, in a real sense I write my novels to find out what they're actually about. The bulk of the text always strikes me as a gift from the language. As Lévi-Strauss once put it, I simply happen to be the intersection of a certain number of events which has allowed me to take a certain order of dictation.

My point is not, however, that McCloud and I perceive the creation of art in subjectively different ways. (Actually, I doubt we do.) But the creation of art has been repeatedly described in *both ways* at various times in history. For now, I'd like to look at the part these two descriptions play in the larger esthetic picture into which from time to time they're incorporated.

One might paraphrase McCloud's account: Any given art work is a fallen (or lapsed, or inadequate) version of a grander conception existing in its true form only in the artist's mind.

One might paraphrase my account: Any given art work is a creation of the language/the unconscious (which structuralist psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan said "is structured as a language")/society (among humans, societies are stabilized in their specific forms by language)/God—i.e., in all cases something other than the conscious mind. The artist is only a more or less hardworking amanuensis to this Other.

We find both descriptions from at least the Renaissance on. The poet Dante as well as many artists deeply involved with religious subject matter often described their work as dictation from an Other. (Among moderns, Yeats [and more recently Jack Spicer] is the poet most closely associated with "dictation.") Many great Renaissance painters—Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael—often proclaimed their work (rather, critics such as Vasari claimed it for them) inadequate representations of a greater conception.

What happens when these ideas are fitted into larger conceptual schemes? What do they imply about art and the artist? Leonardo (and other Renaissance artists) presented the world with a richly representational, highly finished, virtuoso painterly surface. Their pictures fall far to the left on the base of McCloud's triangle (see illustration #7). For many of us, such painterly techniques (until the advent of the photo-realist painters in the seventies, e.g. Audrey Flack, James Valerio, and Richard Estes) *were* the left extremity of that triangle. In their representational intensity, they created awe and admiration, even among the uneducated. Now if *these* paintings were fallen, lapsed, inadequate versions of greater conceptions, then the artists themselves must have been some sort of intellectual supermen, able to conceive of visions far more intense, vivid, rich, and important than the actual paintings—and thus far more intense, vivid, and rich than ordinary human beings are capable of. This indeed fits closely with the Renaissance notion of the great painter, who was at once a philosopher and often an influential courtier/intellectual as well.

If the pictures produced by an artist are located, however, to the far *right* of McCloud's triangle, such as a panel from Chester Brown's *Yummy Fur*, or toward the upper vertex of abstraction, such as a canvas by Hans Hoffmann (the same applies to poetry where verbal skill is not foregrounded by rhyme, meter, or formal stanzaic patterns), so that, in any case, the uneducated response is likely to be some version of, "My two-year-old daughter can paint/draw (or even write) better than that," if it's claimed that *these* works are fallen, lapsed, or inadequate versions of a grander conception, the same uneducated response is likely to be: "You're darned *right* they are! He/she just doesn't know how to *draw!*" (Or paint! Or write!) Regardless of what they actually experience, artists who work at the right and upper vertices of the triangle will likely fare better in the public mind if they espouse some form of the esthetics of dictation: "I did it that way because that's how I received it from the language/the unconscious/society/God. I find it just as surprising and unusual" (and, of course, rich, provocative, and fascinating) "as you do." (Easily this could be a paraphrase of Robert Rauschenberg.)

The esthetic of lapsed or fallen conception tends to separate the artist off from society and posits him or her as intellectual superman. At the same time, it urges the artist toward a glitzy, virtuoso, but (by contemporary esthetic standards) conservative esthetic surface, which must constantly awe the general public.

The esthetic of dictation from an Other tends to democratize the artist, making her or him just another human being, who happens to have a line to the unknown. At the same time, it encourages variation, experi-

mentation, a less virtuoso esthetic surface, a less conservative esthetic, and more acceptance of a greater range of concepts and techniques.

Till now I have purposely stayed away from engaging with McCloud's opening chapter, "Setting the Record Straight," where he presents his definition of comics and discusses what he takes to be their privileged origins among Mayan and Egyptian boustrophedon picture writing, Queen Margaret's Bayeux Tapestry, *The Torture of St. Erasmus* (c. 1460), Hogarth's engraving portfolios of the 1730s (*A Harlot's Progress*, *The Rake's Progress*), Rudolphe Töpffer's cartoons from the mid-nineteenth century, Frans Masereel's (*Passionate Journey*, 1919) and Lynd Ward's (*God's Man*, 1929) narrative books of woodcuts, and Max Ernst's surreal collage novel, *A Week of Kindness*. Nor will I engage it directly here. In a paraliterary context to say in any way that I believe his definition to be wrong is to suggest that—somewhere—I think there's a better one.

I don't.

My feeling about his discussion of origins is this: I see nothing wrong with comics artists or comics readers looking at or studying as many works of art or historical documents as they want. And if they choose to study them because they have found—or find in them, after they have chosen to study them—similarities to comics, well and good. They should talk about them—and publicize them.

But I believe that, lacking historical evidence of influence, critics must take the relationship between these historical texts and any given modern comics work as exactly the same as the one I set out between McCloud's own *Understanding Comics* and Longinus's περὶ ὑψους. To reiterate: It is a relation that, in the recognition of similarities, can generate great reading pleasure, richness, and resonance. But it is not a relation in which the earlier work lends force, quality, or some other transcendental authority to the latter.

McCloud's argument finally leads to a dismissal of the idea of genre. As I have already quoted: ". . . as long as we view comics as a genre of writing or a style of graphic art this attitude may never disappear," though I hope I have demonstrated that it is the clinging to notions such as "definition" that fosters the reduced and deadening notion of genre for the paraliterary that McCloud wants to escape.

It might be appropriate for me to describe, then (I hope I no longer have to insist, each time I use the word, that—again—I *don't* mean "define"), what I mean when I use the term genre: I mean a collection of texts that are generally thought similar enough so that, largely through an unspecified combination of social forces (they are sold from the same bookshelves in bookstores, they are published by the same publishers,

they are liked by the same readers, written by the same writers, share in a range of subject matters, etc.), most people will not require historical evidence to verify that a writer, producing one of those texts, has read others of the group written up to that date. Thus, when E. C. Bentley wrote *Trent's Last Case*, we can assume he had read other English mysteries, without turning to Dorothy Sayers's well-known introduction where she declares Bentley's intent and influences. ("He was sick to death of the 'infallible sleuth' and meant to show him up for what he was." In such a sentence, "infallible sleuth" is a metonym for the assumption of general reading among texts perceived at the time as mysteries.) When Shakespeare wrote his *Sonnets*, we can generally assume without specific historical evidence that he had read other texts of metered lines with (often) end rhymes at the breaks. If I say that the mystery or that poetry is a genre, *that's* what I mean. I use the term as a virtual synonym for a recognizable (not definable) practice of writing. As such, I find it useful and more or less innocuous. Indeed, the notion that writing exists without such perceivable categories strikes me as counterintuitive. Thus, for me, literature is as much a collection of genres as is paraliterature. Though I've encountered a number of arguments against other uses of the term genre (and even, from time to time, accepted them more or less temporarily), I have not yet found an argument that's convinced me my intuitions are, in this case, wrong.

VII

While the academics who had come to popular culture in the thirties were comparatively radical, the academics who first came to the paraliterary genres, specifically science fiction, in the late 1950s (the critical journal *Extrapolation* was founded in 1958) were, paradoxically, comparatively conservative—even though they held many of the same ideas. What made them conservative was the changes that had occurred in the greater field of literary studies around them, the ascendancy of New Criticism, and, a decade later, the influx of continental ideas. Much of what was new and forward-looking in the thirties had been, by the late fifties and sixties, played out.

The academics who entered the field of science fiction in the late fifties and the early sixties loved the genre. But they felt that their major task was to legitimate it in the face of a larger academic situation that still dismissed most working-class art—*not* like McCloud's working-class yahoos dismiss modern art, but the way academics who did not love them and didn't see anything of interest in them dismiss comics. Umberto

Eco, a first-rate scholar whose 1962 essay “*Il mito di Superman e la dissoluzione del tempo*” (“The Myth of Superman” in *The Role of the Reader*, by Umberto Eco, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1979) is a fine piece of work on a comic book (nowhere in it does it define *anything*), tells an anecdote, which I reconstruct from brief notes and memory, about presenting the piece in translation at a Modern Language Association meeting, a year or so before it was published in Italian. “I was a very proper young scholar in those days, whose field was medieval Latin. The way I prepared for ‘The Myth of Superman’ was the way I would prepare, however, for any other scholarly paper: In this case, I read all the *Superman* comics ever published—it took me a couple of years. When I showed up at the MLA to give my paper, I arrived with a stack of seventy-five or a hundred of what I thought were the most interesting issues. When I walked in carrying them, people really looked at me as though I were crazy! I couldn’t understand it. I kept on trying to figure out what it was I had done wrong . . .”

From time to time, forward-looking critics have involved themselves in the field. Usually, however, they don’t stay long. Possibly the reason they’ve left is because they did not find a *tabula rasa* waiting for the newest critical approaches, but rather an insular field in which all these mummified half-ideas, ill understood—about origins, definitions, mastery, and craft—were in circulation as though they had life and value.

On the one hand, the academics who have given a good deal of their intellectual life to science fiction must be commended for putting up with a lack of understanding from their fellows. On the other hand, there are still forces at work that make the field of science fiction scholarship a haven for—while I will not call it the second rate, nevertheless I will say—critical notions that would be laughed off the floor by a first-rate collection of literary scholars.

Whether it is “in-house” SF critic Darrell Schweitzer writing in a seventies fanzine article that Henry James “had an absolutely tin ear for language, and few people have been able to finish his novels” (in a paragraph that goes on to dismiss *Finnegans Wake* as “unreadable” and “dull”) or it is tenured English professor David Samuelson, a regular contributor to *Science Fiction Studies*, commenting in a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article on yours truly, that “James Joyce took an awful long time to become popular—if he even is now” (in a paragraph in which he goes on to suggest contemporary literary theory is unreadable), regardless of what the immediate motivations of either man were, you can still hear, behind both, the ghosts of the thirties populist argument against modernism—a battle that, as I’ve said, was lost forty years ago and which, frankly, it’s simply silly to go on grumbling about.

Yes, either by modern standards *or* the standards of their times, the politics of many of the modernist giants was appalling. But so were the politics of Jane Austen and Charles Dickens and Percy Bysshe Shelley and (for all her admirable feminism) Virginia Woolf. And in ten, or thirty-five, or eighty-five years, so will be the politics of Anne Beattie, Don DeLillo, Jayne Ann Phillips, Richard Powers, Jori Graham, and William T. Vollman. Doubtless so will be mine and McCloud's. The way critics have traditionally dealt with this problem since the academization of literature shortly after World War I (which, for many people, means the invention of literature as we know it today) is by a critical move that McCloud knows well. Indeed, it is necessary for anyone who loves the potential of a genre but wants to see it develop, change, and grow. I have quoted it once. I shall quote it again:

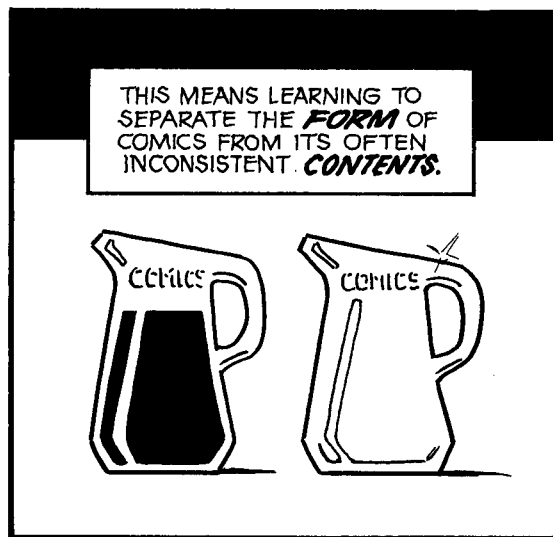


Illustration #13: McCloud, page 199

The division of content from form is a necessary (but only provisional) critical fiction. The reason it is only provisional is because, at a certain point in the discussion, form begins to function as content—and content often functions as a sign for the implied form with which that content is conventionally dealt. If the critic chooses to focus his or her observations in *this* delicate area for any length of time, the separation of form and content, so useful in other situations, ends up creating more problems than it solves. While an analysis of form apart from content may be *necessary* for criticism, certainly it is not *sufficient*—neither

sufficient to distinguish criticism from what is not criticism nor sufficient to distinguish good criticism from bad. Nevertheless, because of the way so much criticism has gone since the New Criticism, it has become, at least in certain circles, a truism for the last forty years: To be a critic one *must* be a formalist.

But return a moment to the critics who entered SF early in the burgeoning of academic interest in “popular culture” during the late fifties and sixties. In 1968 I was invited to give my first presentation at the MLA Christmas meeting in New York City to the Continuing Seminar on Science Fiction (the second oldest continuing seminar in the organization, at that time). When I found the hotel room in which the seminar was meeting, a modest thirty or thirty-five people filled it. The familiar faces were Joanna Russ, Frederik Pohl, Professor Thomas Clareson (who’d invited me to speak), and a couple of fans. Most of the rest—the academics—were strangers. In the milling period before my talk, Clareson pointed out another professor: “That’s Darko Suvin—from McGill. Really, he’s very sharp.” My presentation was an early version of a paper that would eventually be titled “About 5,750 Words.” After I’d read it, immediately the pleasantly portly, affable-looking Suvin (he was perhaps a decade older than I) threw up his hand for a question. I called on him. Rearing back in his chair, he said: “I very much enjoyed your presentation, but . . .” here he paused significantly, “I think I disagree with everything you said.” Laughter rolled through the room, then stilled. For a moment, I was disconcerted. (It was my *first* academic presentation. I was *only* twenty-six . . .) Suvin went on to make a tiny point, referring to the last sentence or two of my paper, that, really, contained no disagreement at all with anything. I could only assume that he’d seen my confusion and had decided to be kind, rather than present the full battery of his undoubtedly sharp disagreements.

Some years later, Suvin published a widely read volume, *The Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1977). In its opening pages, it states that no area of literature can be discussed unless it is first defined, then goes on to propose (as locating its “necessary and sufficient conditions”) a definition of science fiction: Science fiction is the literature of cognition and estrangement. Because of the appeal to necessary and sufficient conditions, we must read definition here in the strict, rigorous, and limited sense.

Now, when applied one way, cognition and estrangement produce surrealism about science; when applied another way, they produce fantasies about science; when applied still another, they produce historical fiction about science. A little thought will come up with several others—though any one explodes its aspirations to definitional rigor. Suvin’s book was widely discussed for a time and is still, now and again, referred to.

Today my reaction to this type of demand for definition is probably hyperbolic. Turning a book that begins like that loose in the paraliterary communities is the equivalent of telling children that the only way to discuss politics properly is first, before you make any statement whatsoever, to fling up your right hand and shout “Heil Hitler!” These young people may not even know who Hitler was. Some may even have fine and important things to say about a variety of political situations. But as they move out into and through our current world, they are not likely to get much of a hearing. At worst, they will be discussed as nut cases or neo-Nazis. At best, they are going to be thought . . . strange. And they will continue to be thought strange until they abandon what they have been told is “proper”—or until someone takes them aside and tells them to cut it out. When your behavior is strange enough, however, people do *not* take you aside and tell you. Rather, they leave you alone and go off to associate with more civilized people. Finally, all the “Heil Hitler!” people can do is talk to one another.

That strikes me as about how the paraliterary mania for always starting with a “definition” registers today in the larger field of literary theory.

The assertion that you cannot discuss any topic in literary studies until you have defined it is both practically and theoretically untrue—a lie, if you will, and a lie (I hope I’ve made it clear) associated with a particular critical agenda from the thirties (though Suvin’s book appeared in the seventies).

My anecdote, however, is not done.

Ten years later, in 1978, I was no longer a twenty-six-year-old first-time presenter at the MLA; I was a thirty-six-year-old Senior Fellow at a major research institution, the Center for 20th Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin. Annually, the Center hosts a large conference in which often upwards of a hundred scholars participate. That year’s conference topic was Technology and Imagination.

Darko Suvin attended.

He was giving two presentations, one on science fiction and one on his central field of scholarly concern, the German playwright Bertolt Brecht. The Brecht session came first.

After Suvin was introduced, I found myself listening to a jejune explanation of the fact that when Brecht, in his writings on theater, used the term “alienation,” he meant a positive audience reaction, in which the audience distances itself emotionally from what’s going on on stage so that it can better grasp the abstract *ideas* the play is putting forth, and that this alienation is encouraged by various “epic” staging techniques and stylization in the writing; and—this was a completely different meaning from Marx’s use of the term, “alienation,” which meant the situation in which

workers had little or nothing to do with what they were producing, or with fundamental human tasks such as growing food, building shelter, and the like. While I sat there, thinking I'd never discussed either topic with anyone over seventeen who'd ever *confused* the two before, a young German scholar at the Center sitting next to me, a Junior Fellow at the time, Andreas Huyssen, leaned toward me and whispered, somewhat, I think, in awe: "That man is a *fool* . . .!"

Later, in the science fiction session, when a young woman finished giving her presentation (whether it was good or bad, I don't recall) and she asked for questions, Darko's hand was the first to go up. She called on him. Darko reared back in his chair: "I rather enjoyed your presentation. But . . ." and here he paused meaningfully: "I think I disagree with everything you said." Laughter bloomed throughout the room. The young woman looked momentarily flustered—then smiled. Darko went on to make a minuscule point, which only pertained, if it pertained at all, to her paper's last sentence or two. And I understood, then, ten years later, that he was not being kind. Rather, he hadn't bothered to follow the presentation at all. His "question" was a purely comic gesture, designed to entertain the audience, without any intellectual weight whatsoever.

My overall point?

Despite Huyssen's wondering comment, Darko Suvin is *not* a fool.

But though, as he delivered it that day, his Brecht paper might have been informative to undergraduates or to people for whom Brecht was a brand new name, it *was* a foolish paper to deliver to a room full of literary scholars. If he thought that the majority of people in the room would not recognize it as foolish (or if he assumed that most would pay as little attention to his presentation as I now knew he had paid to two others on at least two occasions, so that it did not matter *what* he said), he was mistaken.

The opening assertion in *The Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* on the necessity of "definition" is also mistaken. (It helps to describe things so that people can recognize them; but that's a provisional task, and not definition.) Over the years, I have had many interesting discussions with Darko about science fiction and other topics. As intelligent as he is, however, I can say that he is not particularly attracted to what I feel are the most pressing questions in SF scholarship. Doubtless he would say the same about me.

Finally, however, each of us must decide whether these incidents represent a failure of sensibility or of intellect. The fact is, it's the rare academic who reaches the age of fifty who lacks for bizarre tales. The creators of paraliterature, for all our professed hostility to mainstream critics, are usually flattered by the advent of academic faces. But while it is by no means a general law, it's the case often enough to note: The academics

who enter the field of science fiction studies are not necessarily of the first order, even when, in our little pond, they occasionally make a sizable splash. It goes along with their tendency to be mired in outmoded critical concepts.

The most important triumph of the “origin” in SF studies of the last twenty-five years is the sedimentation of Brian Aldiss’s proposal that Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein, or, A Modern Prometheus* is the first science fiction novel.

Science fiction writers are as odd and eccentric a lot of readers as any other writers. They have been proposing origins for our genre since the late thirties, when the game of origin hunting became important to the early critics first interested in contemporary popular culture. The various proposals made over the years are legion: Wells, Verne, and Poe, in that order, have the most backers. There were more eccentric ones (my personal favorite is Edward Sylvester Ellis’s *The Steam Man of the Prairies*, a dime novel from 1865, whose fifteen-year-old inventor hero builds a ten-foot steam-powered robot, who can pull a horseless carriage along behind him at nearly sixty miles an hour. Out in the Wild West, with a gold miner and an old hunter as sidekicks, they kill *lots* of Indians), and more conservative ones (Francis Bacon’s *The New Atlantis*, 1629; Johannes Kepler’s *Somnium* [written 1609, published 1634]; Savinien Cyrano’s [de Bergerac] *Voyage to the Moon* and *The States and Empires of the Sun* [c. 1650]), and slightly loopy ones (Shakespeare’s *Tempest*; Dante’s *Commedia*), and some classical ones (Lucian of Samosata’s *True History*, from the second century A.D., which recounts a voyage to the moon). There were also backers for Wilkins’s *Discovery of a World in the Moon* (1683), as well as Gabriel Daniel’s *Voyage to the World of Cartesius* (1692, revised 1703), Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), Daniel Defoe’s *The Consolidator* (1750) and—again back on our side of Shelley—Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1888).

When Brian Aldiss’s history of science fiction, *Billion Year Spree: The True History of Science Fiction*, first appeared from Doubleday in 1973 (from page one of Chapter One: “As a preliminary, we need a definition of science fiction . . .”), one might have assumed that the argument filling its opening chapter, proposing *Frankenstein* as our new privileged origin, was another eccentric suggestion among many—and would be paid about as much attention to as any of these others. The irony of Aldiss’s subtitle has been noted by at least one critic.⁵

5. “[A] witty, ironic, iconoclastic knowledgeable history of the field that promulgates the theory that Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, rather than the works of Poe or Verne, is the first true work of SF, in part because it . . . leads up to him and his friends. The revised and expanded edition (*Trillion Year Spree*) is augmented by many plot summaries but drops the ironic subtitle . . .” (David G. Hartwell, *Age of Wonders*, Tor, 1996).

(If *Frankenstein* were the first SF novel, isn't it interesting nobody noticed it until 1973, while so many people were digging around for so many years among all those other obscure titles . . . ?)

The problem with all these "origins" of science fiction, even the ones from early scientists such as Kepler, is that, when you read them, they don't *feel* like science fiction. They feel like moral or political parables in which the writer doesn't expect you to take the science even as seriously as you have to take Buck Rogers' force fields and ray guns.

Aldiss argues that there *are* serious scientific ideas in eighteen-year-old Mary's novel, but they're not easily detectable by the modern reader. Claims Aldiss, they come from, among others, Erasmus Darwin (1731–1802), grandfather of Charles. A doctor and eccentric inventor, Erasmus designed a rocket to be powered by hydrogen and oxygen and wrote a long poetic tract, *Zoonomia*, published in two volumes in 1794 (the year Mary's father published his influential novel *Caleb Williams* and Anne Radcliffe published *The Mysteries of Udolfo*; *Zoonomia* also fascinated the young German writer Novalis) and (posthumously in 1803) a volume called *The Temple of Nature*, in both of which he presented some ideas not wholly unrelated to his grandson's, which may even have got his grandson thinking in the direction that led to the theory of natural selection. According to Aldiss, Mary took them in, along with the ideas from Humphrey Davy, Joseph Priestley, John Locke, and Condillac to give them back to us in *Frankenstein*.

To give Aldiss his due, other than in the title of his chapter ("The Origin of Species"), he does not use the word "origin" in connection with *Frankenstein* in the body of his actual argument. But in the Introduction to the 1986 revision and enlargement of his book *Trillion Year Spree*, he writes:

[O]ne must stand by one's beliefs.

Foremost among these beliefs is a certainty about the origins of SF. Of course it is a Stone Age truth to say that SF began with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). [One assumes that by "Stone Age," he means 1973 when he'd first proposed the idea, thirteen years before.] The more we know, the less certain we can be about origins. [That incongruous admission is the *starting* point of the poststructuralist argument against privileged origins.] The date of the Renaissance becomes less clear decade by decade as research goes on.

Nevertheless, bearing in mind that no genre is pure [another truism of literary theory that had entered Aldiss's argument over the intervening thirteen years], *Frankenstein* is more than a merely convenient place at which to begin the story. Behind it lie other traditions, like broken skeletons, classical myth, a continent full of *Märchen* tales. But Mary's novel betokens an inescapable new perception of mankind's capabilities, as is argued in Chapter One. (18)

There you have his commitment to origins.

I'm sorry. *Anywhere* we begin such a critical story is *always* only more or less convenient. That convenience is determined by what we wish to highlight—or, indeed, wish to cover up.

A careful reading of Aldiss's argument suggests that the "inescapable new perception of mankind" was actually all over the place at the end of the eighteenth century, among people like Erasmus Darwin and others. Mary only reflects it in her novel—which seems to defeat his own claim for her originary newness.

But the main problem with *Frankenstein* as an SF origin is simply that, when you read it, it doesn't *feel* like science fiction any more than the others cited above. In this case, it feels like an early nineteenth century take on the gothic novel, much closer to Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) and the novels of Mrs. Radcliffe—which were, incidentally, among the novels that Mary read before she wrote her own most widely known work.

My favorite discussion of *Frankenstein* is in Chris Baldick's *In the Shadow of Frankenstein's Monster* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), which examines the general use of the metaphor of monsters and the monstrous to characterize the working classes between the French Revolution and the 1830s. He relates his examination closely to the scientific *and* political ideas current at the time. As he spells it out, that relation is just not the same as we are used to in what most people today recognize as science fiction. The more one reads about *Frankenstein*, the *less* it feels like a science fiction novel. In his Introduction, Baldick remarks, "I have read that *Frankenstein* is supposed to be the first science fiction novel." In that "supposed," it's not hard to hear a politely disingenuous bemusement.

The academics (and/or science fiction writers) who have accepted the notion of *Frankenstein* as our most recent origin story are not the ones who have gone back and specifically reread Shelley's novel (or E. Darwin's poem) in order to assess Aldiss's argument. Those who do, such as David Ketterer, tend to come down on the other side of the fence.

What contributed more than anything to the acceptance of Aldiss's proposition, however, was a general situation among university critics in the early seventies. Fresh after the triumph of the Johns Hopkins Seminars of 1966–68 on the human sciences, during those years structuralism (aka literary theory) was starting its embattled journey along American university hallways. If literary theory *had* a battle cry at that time, it was: "The origin is *always* a political construct . . ." Many academics felt radically threatened by the Gallic incursion. Still smarting from the New Criticism, too often many thematic critics saw their fundamental job as the tracing of themes "back to their origins." The assumption had been

that those origins were not political constructs, changing when one's politics changed, but objective value-free facts. Now this entire plank in literary criticism's platform was being splintered.

In the midst of this ferment, Aldiss proposed his new origin for science fiction. Aldiss was English. Aldiss's argument was reasonably put. At the same time, if you didn't read it closely, it even seemed to exhibit some feminist sympathy—Mary was a woman, after all.

There isn't much, however, if you read the argument carefully. All the elements that figure in the originary importance of *Frankenstein* for science fiction pass from (Erasmus) Darwin and others, through a more or less transparent Mary, to her text; though today most of the people who cite *Frankenstein* as an origin of science fiction have forgotten the pivotal part played by the Darwin connection and her other male progenitors—if they ever knew they existed.

Frankenstein's originary place in the history of SF may be a cherished belief for Aldiss. But to most academics who saw their own fields of literary study rocked by the advent of theory, it was a weighty sandbag on a breakwater against the rising theoretical tide. For the rest, they tended to accept the argument simply because it received a certain amount of attention from these others. Among writers and those not directly concerned with the theoretical debates, there was still a vague presentiment that such singular origins somehow authorized and legitimated a contemporary practice of writing, or that its feminist implications made it attractive.

The way that, since 1973, the anti-theory forces in science fiction scholarship have taken up Aldiss's proposal, along with the "feminist" aspect of the choice (if anything, Aldiss's actual argument does not allow Mary to be the agent of anything significant to SF in her own book, other than that she had the vaguely a-specific genius to put them in a novel), only seems to have proved the truth of the insight that so upset them: "The origin is *always* a political construct." Certainly this one is—as much as the campaign platform of any current political candidate.

What it masks is the situation I've tried to uncover here.

As I do from McCloud's, I welcome the discussion of any aspects of science fiction Aldiss's "definition" highlights, though I insist on calling it a description. ("Science fiction is the search for a definition of man and his status in the universe which will stand in our advanced but confused state of knowledge [science], and is characteristically cast in the Gothic or post-Gothic mode" [Aldiss, 25]; "**com-ics** (kom'iks) **n.** plural in form, used with a singular verb. **1.** Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" [McCloud, 9].) With both McCloud

and Aldiss I object only to their attempt to appropriate a position of mastery for those more or less interesting descriptions by claiming for them the authority of definitions. It would be unfair not to point out, however, that even Aldiss's commitment to the idea of origins is loosening ("The more we know, the less certain we can be about origins. The date of the Renaissance becomes less clear decade by decade as research goes on . . ." [Aldiss, 18]). There is a playfully self-subversive circularity in that Aldiss's "definition" is a search for a "definition"; and McCloud, before the problem of whether or not cartoons can be called comics art, is willing to allow his own definition to begin deconstructing itself:

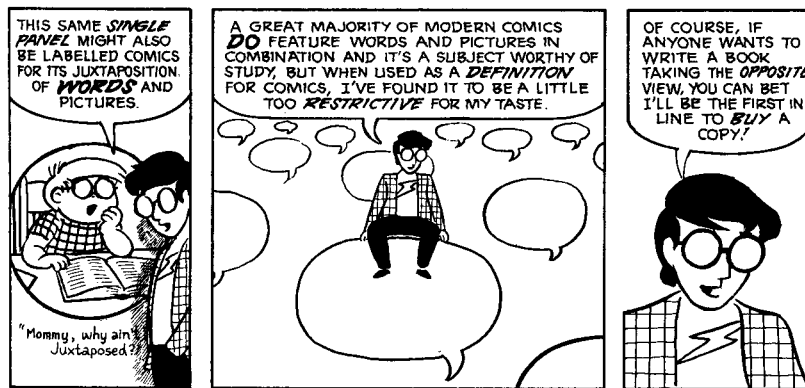


Illustration #14: McCloud, page 21

This essay is definitely not intended to fulfill the place of the book McCloud proposes. Rather than validating the *system* of definition by posing one the "opposite" of McCloud's, I would like to step into a different system entirely of intellectual reading pleasure (and power—though we have not yet discussed that directly); and I would like to shrug off the system of authority (the acknowledged claim to power, whether or not power is actually there), purely through generational ties, marked and straited by definition, mastery, and origins.

The pleasure and insight to be gained from formally comparing *Frankenstein* (or Mayan picture writing), either text or context, to any number of modern science fiction (or current comic book) texts or contexts is a pleasure I begrudge no one. (If Aldiss could see his way to comparing *Frankenstein* to a *specific* novel, I think his argument would have been far richer, if not more pleasurable.) I object only to the assumption of the transfer of some transcendental generational force between the two if they can be linked in a familial and genetic (cognate, after all, with genre) relationship.

It is not the concept of category, as carried by the metaphors of family and of genre, that I object to. It is rather the imposition of family values, if you will, that bear the brunt of my critique: the assumption that family or genre members must submit to these generational relations, in a field of fixed authoritative forces. The fixing of relations of reading pleasure and descriptive delirium within a critical oedipal esthetic, conscious or unconscious, too frequently leads to violent exclusions and stasis, when, for the health of the paraliterary genres, those relations should be placed in positions of confidence to welcome and celebrate.

If we read Aldiss's definition of science fiction in the context of the ironies he imbeds it in, if we read McCloud's definition of comics in the context of the restrictions he places around it, we see each writer indicating where his own definition breaks down. From the texts alone it is undecidable whether these self-subversions are more profitably read as reservations only for the specific definition, or whether they sign a more meaningful reservation with the overall system of definition that straits so much of the paraliterary critical enterprise. But if we then turn from these particular self-crippled definitional projects to the discussion each writer mounts under the concept of origins, it's hard not to hear as an originary impulse behind both: "These things are like comics—these like SF. Because their similarities produce a surge of pleasure, I want to write of them."

Above and beyond the insights the comparisons generate, the considerations of these similarities may even provoke belief—a belief the writer comes to cherish—in some vision of the way the world is, was, or should be. If we can find internal and external evidence connecting one of these early texts and one of the later, we can even posit influences.

We *still* don't need a shared identity.

(There is both internal and external evidence for the influence of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist* [1914] and *Ulysses* [1922] on Bester's *The Stars My Destination* [1956], and of Huysmans's *À Rebours* [1884] on [again Bester's] "Hell is Forever" [1942]: but are these influences—or the evidence for them—less meaningful because neither Huysmans nor Joyce wrote science fiction?)

Often, however, certain of our discussions are straited by a fear that without the authoritative appeal to origins and definitions as emblems of some fancied critical mastery, our observations and insights will not be welcomed, will not be taken for the celebrational pleasure that they are. What can I say, other than that we need more confidence in the validity of our own enterprise?

I am not suggesting that by changing a few rhetorical figures old-style criticism will be automatically rendered new and modern. The rhetorical

traces I cite are, in themselves, traces of a discourse—a discourse whose hold on the range of paraliterary criticism, I hope I have shown, is neither inconsequential, nor innocent, nor simple. The argument between McCloud and me over his view of the history of the genre represents a conflict of *two* discourses, one of which (mine) is posited on respect for, and celebration of, difference, and one of which (McCloud's) turns on the dignity of, and, on some essential level, the identity of, the same.

To give an admittedly unsympathetic portrayal, however, of what I take to be the discourse McCloud inhabits, it might be exemplified thus:

The Greeks of the fifth century B.C. represented a peak of civilization. We represent a peak of civilization. Thus, because there is an essential identity between the two cultures, the Greek myths can be made to stand in for the Christian karygma. Presented as such, this would probably strike most of us as hugely arrogant. But at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, out of this discourse grew some extraordinary works, e.g., Hölderlin's poem *Brot und Wein* (1803). The way in which this and similar works organize the perceived correspondences between karygma and myth was intended to produce mystical awe. It was assumed in the time when this discourse was a living and vital one that these correspondences functioned as conduits of power, authority, greatness, and that it was the recognition of these power correspondences that produced the pleasure. Our generation has to be satisfied with the pleasure for its own sake.

McCloud's 150 years when nothing changed or the identity he finds between Egyptian picture writing and comics is precisely the sort of conceptual offspring the traces of such a discourse still produce today. They attempt to operate in much the same way as Hölderlin's continuity between fifth century Greece and turn-of-the-(eighteenth-)century Germany. It is a venerable tradition and it has organized much beauty. But with *Ulysses*, as well as the French explosion of comic plays and novels on Greek themes—Cocteau's *La Machine infernal* (1934) and *Orphée* (1925), Sartre's *Les Mouche* (1943), Giradeaux's *Elpénor* (1919), *Amphytrion-38* (1929), and *Le Guerre le Trois n'aura pas lieu* (1935), and Gide's *Œdipe* (1931)—from the twenties through the forties, such correspondences became a site of bathos, opening up the possibility for difference (similarities were sought out precisely to mark a field in which difference could be subsequently inscribed), and the relation was ironized precisely to highlight these differences, so that the Greek parallels critique the modern (as well as the discourse that preceded it) in a way they could never do in Hölderlin.

At the level of the signifier, the way to effect the transition between discourses is, yes, a matter of rhetoric. At the level of the signified, however,

the only way to effect it is to do some serious thinking about the respective priorities of pleasure and authority in our current critical undertakings. We must be willing to understand how cleaving to a certain dead rhetoric forces us to go on repeating empty critical rituals associated with past authority and perpetuating the anxiety that what we take pleasure in will not be sufficiently welcomed, the two interacting in a way that does not overcome the problem but only produces a self-fulfilling prophecy.

To all our critics, I offer the assurance: Vision, history, belief, as well as the operationalism of the sciences are all welcome in contemporary criticism. All they require is that, with enthusiasm and intelligence, you have something to say and can put it with grace and insight. And in Aldiss and McCloud, enthusiasm, intelligence, grace, and insight abound. But the thirties' pseudoscientific argumentative form (start with a definition, then go on to origins) is unnecessary and insufficient for criticism today, literary or paraliterary.

Let's lose it.

— *New York City & Wellfleet*
August 1996