

FRAMES OF REFERENCE: PROPERTIES OF COMICS

2

A single piece of paper tried to rewrite the history of comics, when it was signed on 30 October 1989 at the Lucca Comics Festival in Italy. A quorum of experts was convened at an official summit to determine once and for all exactly when comics had been born. To do this, they had to define the medium's essential properties and decide where they first came together. After days of deliberation, they emerged with an agreement. It read: 'The eleven international specialists, gathered in Lucca, establish by absolute majority that 1896 was the year of birth of the comics. This was the year in which, through the character of the Yellow Kid, the comics, assuming the expressive contributions provided previously by creators from various countries, launched those special linguistic characteristics which would transform it into a new medium of communication.'

In their judgement, the crucial turning point was a much-vaunted episode – recovered from fading, crumbling newsprint – of 'The Yellow Kid', the American newspaper character by Richard Fenton Outcault published on Sunday 25 October 1896 in the *New York Journal* (see p.25). Those 'special linguistic characteristics' to which they referred included the first use of speech balloons by this character since he debuted discreetly in the *New York World* on 5 May 1895. From this beginning, the Yellow Kid had only ever communicated his reactions in broad Irish brogue roughly scrawled by hand onto his long yellow nightshirt, like a street hawker wearing a sandwich board. He would often break the 'fourth

wall' and beam out at the readers, his shirt's bright, bold colouring catching their eye. As his remarks would be rewritten from one appearance to the next, his whole outfit operates as one peculiar balloon as if he is wearing, even embodying, his own words. The bald, flap-eared urchin proved so popular, he was used on big billboard posters for the *New York Journal's* 'Colored Comic Supplement' (p.24).

At first, the Yellow Kid had appeared only in single-panel captioned cartoons, expanding later to large scenes in colour teeming with the textual signage, advertising hoardings and raucous details of street life. Crucially, in a break from these single images, Outcault came up with the first in a series of half-page, five-picture sequences, additional to his main cartoons, proof of his child-star's growing appeal. It is striking that the cheeky tyke appears in the initial 1896 example entirely alone save for one prop, his new phonograph (p.25). He appears five times on a blank page without any of the usual urban background or chaotic crowds, to demonstrate the novel machine. Because Outcault has to portray sound, he initially shows the balloons floating out of the phonograph's horn extolling the newspaper's colour supplement and the Yellow Kid himself. Then, in the punchline scene, a balloon sprouts from a parrot, the hidden speaker, who waddles out of the phonograph box, and another sprouts from a surprised Yellow Kid, whose shirt is suddenly blank as he finally speaks for himself, complaining: 'De phonograph is a great invention – NIT! I don't think.'

'Seicherls schrecklichstes Badeabenteuer'
(Seicherl's Most Terrifying Aquatic Adventure)
in **DAS KLEINE BLATT**
Ladislau Knoch, 1934-5

Seicherls schrecklichstes Badeabenteuer.

<p>Struppi, es gibt kan' größer'n Geruch, als im Meer bad'n! I bin ganz begeistert!</p> <p>1</p>	<p>Mi begeistert's aa! Hurrah, do schwimmt a Jaus'n!</p> <p>2</p>	<p>Jessas, a Haifisch hat uns beim Frack! Jetzt hamma die längste Zeit g'lebt! Mahlzeit!</p> <p>3</p>	
<p>Jessas, es kummt a Kuawachs! Ruck'n S'a bissert, zur Wand zuwe, damit i eini kann! I bin scho neugierig wa's drinn ausschaut!</p> <p>4</p>	<p>Mach'n S' ihna net so brab, Sie san net allar do! Geb'n S' die Pfeif'n aus'n Mäu oder steign S' um in an' Raucher! Nur kan' Streif meine Herr'n!</p> <p>5</p>	<p>Wann S' ihna spiel'n, reib' i ihna ane, das S' glei an der Mag'wand pick'n! Hall'n S' ihna z'ruck, mir san in kan' Matros'n beiss'!</p> <p>6</p>	
<p>I muab an Speisesoda nehma, i hab' so a stark's Aufstoß'n, auf die heutige Jaus'n!</p> <p>7</p>			<p>Wos hat er denn, der Pepi?! I glaub, er hat an' ganz'n Zirkus g'fress'n Tschinn Die Zwa san net zum Verdau'n Ja, ja, die Menschn san mit Vorsicht zu genieß'n! Aus'g'halt'n es steigt's ma auf's Gnack!</p> <p>8</p>
<p>Serwas, die rafrn, wie wann s' daham war'n. Und dabei spritz'n s' mit dem scharfn Mag'n'saft umanand, das a Graus, is!</p> <p>9</p>	<p>Hörts auf, es Narr'n! Er hat an' g'fangt! Sag'n s' net, er'! I hab' an' ehrlich'n Namen!</p> <p>10</p>	<p>Die G'schicht' wird no a Nach'spiel häm, beim Seegericht! I wer' ihna geb'n an' Vierz'ger mit ax' Buam ansag'n! Am End' könn' ma no als Zeugn' geh'n Fallt ma net in Schlaf ein! Wos geknag'n mi (du Mensch'n an'?)</p> <p>11</p>	<p>Jetzt rafr'n s' erscht richtig, weils mekr Platz häm! Seh'ls es Kinder?! Des kummt davon, wann ma alles obischlingt, oha z' beiss'n</p> <p>12</p>
<p>Jetzt spiel'n S' Kart'n, do wird's glei wieder a Leg'n S' ab, Raferei geb'n, i hab' an' Vierz'ger! Schwind'l'n S' net, i hab' ja die Dam'</p> <p>13</p>	<p>Des wer' i dir oh' g'wöna, du Gauner! Wia be-nehman Sie ihna in an' fremd'n Mag'n, Sie Fleg'l?! ?!</p> <p>14</p>		



There was a 'great invention' in this short strip, the sequential use of speech balloons to bring characters alive, although Outcault was slow to experiment with it further. He would come up with only nine more extra comics sequences of this type for Sundays, several featuring that chatty parrot, but the Kid lost his new-found voice, piping up only once more to escape the blame by claiming, 'It's all de goat's fault'. As for the rest of Outcault's seven other sporadic sequential episodes, some in no more than two panels, the Kid lets his shirt do all the talking again. Still, the potential of real-time sequential speech-balloon dialogue in comics had been demonstrated.

The experts' choice of 1896 was not accidental, because it conveniently allowed the centenary of comics to be celebrated in 1996, seven years after 1989 and in enough time to prepare commemorative stamps, exhibitions

and conferences in the USA and elsewhere. It also confirmed America as the birthplace of modern comics, affirming the contention that they were a uniquely American art form. It is no coincidence that of the eleven signatories, three came from the USA, and notably absent was anyone from Asia. There was one dissenter, the British comics historian Denis Gifford, who provocatively signed the agreement 'Ally Sloper 1876', to credit the popular British character who had existed twenty years before the Yellow Kid. Gifford could have written an even earlier year, 1867, when the character first appeared in *Judy* magazine. No doubt Gifford had tried arguing the case for Sloper as the progenitor of the form, certainly as a key recurring character (another widely held criterion). The debate would have been that Marie Duval's humorous multi-panelled strips about this loveable rogue from the East End of London made no use of speech balloons, only typeset narration beneath the panels.

New York City billboards
Uncredited, c.1896

graphically and temporally. It was an innovation which other American newspapermen would build on soon after, notably Frederick Burr Opper in 'Happy Hooligan' (1900) and the parodic patter of overblown French politesse in 'Alphone and Gaston' (1901), as well as Outcault's 'Buster Brown' (1902). The speech balloon, and its relative the thought balloon, often in the shape of a cloud, produce a transformative effect when integrated inside the panel. They seem to give a voice and consciousness to the simplest of cartoon figures. By emitting from their mouths and brains, dialogues and musings reinforce the effect of time passing inside a panel and between panels. In theory, reading texts and reading drawings within panels can combine as an experience much more smoothly than when having to navigate between separated and isolated pictures and words. As such, for many these balloons have become emblematic, if not defining, of comics. It is perfectly possible to create comics without them, of course, whether entirely textless and solely visual, or by placing narration only in captions.

There was considerable resistance to integrating balloons into modern comics. In Italy, comics would come to be known as 'fumetti' or 'little clouds of smoke', specifically after balloons, but initially their ubiquity caused concerns among educationalists and parents. When early twentieth-century American newspaper strips such as 'The Katzenjammer Kids', 'Felix the Cat' or later 'Mickey Mouse', arrived for example in Italy and Germany, their speech balloons were removed

from the panels and replaced by commentary below, sometimes in rhyme. Such was the influence of Germany's pioneer Wilhelm Busch, famed for his 1865 success *Max and Moritz (A Story of Seven Boyish Pranks)*, that his balloonless approach became the norm and would largely stall the medium and obstruct the acceptance by creators, publishers and readers of speech balloons in the German language until 1930, when the Austrian Ladislaus Kmoch helped to popularise them through his 'Tobias Seicherl' strips (p.23). In Britain as late as the 1950s, several children's weekly comics persisted in running largely redundant blocks of type under the panels, when the story could be clearly understood from the images and balloons above.

In parallel, vibrant and thoroughly modern comics sprang up which embraced the fresh audio-visual immediacy of the medium. Founding fathers of the form such as Milton Caniff in America (right), Hergé in Belgium and Osamu Tezuka in Japan took prime inspiration from theatre and the movies and sought to reproduce their illusion of reality. In fact, comics were already 'talkies' years before sound became standard in film, and they had helped prepare the public for the arrival of talking cinema. So it's no surprise that the influences between cinema and comics flowed in both directions. When the young Orson Welles released his first feature film, *Citizen Kane*, in 1941, its progressive camera angles and effects created a sensation among apprentice American cartoonists struggling to draw comic books often with little or

Terry and the Pirates

Milton Caniff, 24 September 1939
Original artwork

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Original artwork

TERRY

AND THE PIRATES

by MILTON CANIFF

Reg. U. S. Pat. Off. Copyright, 1959, by News Syndicate Co., Inc.

HO, KLANG'S LAST BOMBARDMENT AS REPRISAL FOR THE PRISONERS WE TOOK WAS THE WORST SO FAR!

ALAS, THERE ARE GREATER PROBLEMS! THE MASTER AND THE WHITE GIANT DISAGREE OVER THE TREATMENT OF THE PRISONERS!



LISTEN, BEAUTIFUL, YOU KNOW THE RULES OF WAR, AS THEY ARE LAUGHINGLY CALLED, AS WELL AS I! WE HAVE LITTLE ENOUGH TO EAT—BUT WE STILL DON'T HAVE TO LET THESE PRISONERS STARVE!

THE DRAGON LADY HAS SPOKEN! NOT ONE MORSEL OF OUR PITIFUL RATIONS DO THE DOGS GET!



WE ARE DOOMED! MASTER KLANG SHELLS THIS PLACE—CARING NOT IF WE, TOO, ARE SLAIN! NOW WE STARVE! IT WAS BETTER ON MY POOR, BARREN LAND IN THE NORTH!

WHINING WILL NOT HELP, FOOL! THE WHITE MAN PLEADS FOR US... PERHAPS EVEN YET HE WILL SAVE US—ALTHOUGH I KNOW NOT WHY! STRANGE, THESE WESTERN PEOPLES!



COME ON, HONEY CHILE, ACT YOUR AGE—THESE AREN'T CAVE-MAN TIMES! GIVE THOSE POOR DEVILS THE JUSTICE DUE ANY PRISONER OF WAR!

THE DRAGON LADY NEED NOT LISTEN TO THESE WORDS OF OCCIDENTAL SOFT HEARTEDNESS! INDEED, SHE WILL NOT!



THE PROBLEM SHALL BE SOLVED COMPLETELY! LINE THOSE PRISONERS UP AND SHOOT THEM!



HEY!

NO FURTHER WORDS ARE NECESSARY! DO NOT FORCE ME TO INCLUDE YOU, HANDSOME ONE!



THREE AT A TIME WILL SUFFICE! READY! AIM! FIRE! ...I SAID, FIRE!!

MASTER, FORGIVE US...



FORGIVE YOU? GET INTO LINE AND DIRECT YOUR SQUAD TO FIRE BEFORE I RIDDLE YOUR BONES!

YOU MAY STRIKE ME DOWN, MASTER—BUT THE MEN FEEL AS I DO! YOU WILL FOLLOW YOU TO CERTAIN DEATH AGAINST THE ARMED ENEMIES OF CHINA...



...BUT WE WERE SIMPLE FARMERS BEFORE THIS WAR—AND WILL BE AGAIN, IF WE LIVE! THE PRISONERS BEFORE US ARE LIKE OURSELVES—MISGUIDED THOUGH THEY MAY HAVE BEEN UNDER KLANG! WHEN THEY BORE ARMS WE COULD FIGHT THEM... BUT AS HELPLESS HUMANS WE CANNOT SHOOT THEM DOWN!



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11- 10-19

D.K. - RWC

D.K. - RWC

no training. Some of these tyros went back again and again to learn from Welles's masterpiece. Films were great teachers, helping novices select each 'shot' and encouraging them to think visually and sequentially. For many, composing their pages was like making movies on paper. Jack Kirby, for one, recalled, 'I was a movie person. I think it was one of the reasons I drew comics.' Hergé heralded his scouting hero Totor in 1926, three years before Tintin, with the billing, 'United Rovers present an extrasuperfilm' by 'Hergé, director'.

Equally, Welles is known to have enjoyed American newspaper strips. Among Milton Caniff's papers at the Ohio State University Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum is a letter sent to him on Mercury Theatre stationery from Welles. It is a thank you note for Caniff's gift of an original drawing of his sultry oriental villainess from his daily serial 'Terry and the Pirates': 'The Dragon Lady is everything a mortal could ask for. She occupies an honored wall in a frame which is everything she could ask for. For a lovely and a glamorous portrait of the loveliest and most glamorous personage in present-day fiction, my undying thanks. I wonder, though, what you can have, one half so precious as the stuff you draw. Gratefully and with sincerest admiration.' That Welles's fan letter is dated 1939, two years before he filmed *Citizen Kane*, suggests that he was an avid student of the strip.

Welles would have observed Caniff develop his signature illustration approach, starting with 'Terry and the Pirates' in 1934, and encouraged and

assisted by his brilliant studio colleague, Noel Sickles. Drawing in black and white for crude newsprint reproduction, Caniff broke away from conventional outlined cartoons and gave form to faces, figures, objects and settings out of his vibrant swathes and delicate delineations of black ink onto blank board. Their play of highlights and shadows, or 'chiaroscuro', often evoked the artificial lighting and high contrast in black-and-white films, a further example of the cross-pollination of ideas between film and comics. Even more striking to Welles might have been the dynamics of Caniff's visual storytelling and composition which exploded through the 1930s. As Austin Stevens wrote in 1979, 'Caniff's panels were so subtly planned that they looked like a storyboard for a movie to be produced ten years in the future. His use of extreme "camera angles", dramatic contrasts, the push and pull of a pictorial sequence, was paralleled only once during that period, and then in the very advanced movie *Citizen Kane*.² Such 'subtle planning' was crucial to Welles too, who had his whole film drawn beforehand as a precise storyboard. It's no coincidence that storyboards superficially appear akin to comics. For their very first short silent film projected for an audience in Paris in 1895, the Lumière Brothers chose the simple visual skit of a gardener whose watering hose is blocked by a prankster stepping on it. Curious, the gardener looks closely at the nozzle and then, when the prankster releases his foot, he gets a drenching. The source of this gag was a one-page comic, of which there were several versions. Clear and concise, it made a perfect blueprint



from which to conceive and stage their film and was familiar enough with the public for them to understand the joke's actions and reactions.

As well as storyboards, comics can be said to resemble the sprocketed frames on a roll of film. Both are analogous with a fundamental element of comics, much more than the speech balloon, namely the strip. A row or tier of one or more panels, usually horizontal, sometimes vertical, the pictures forming a sequence, is the building block of the majority of comics. At their simplest, they are recognisable as the daily strips in newspapers, but they are also present in almost all comics pages, where they can be arranged together in larger configurations. Most readers know instinctively the order of strips, and therefore panels, and in what direction to read them across and down the page, one strip at a time, although

some early American Sunday newspaper pages, for example, would number the panels to avoid any confusion. In many Japanese comics, this legibility is reinforced by packing panels in strips more closely together horizontally and enlarging the blank spaces or gutters separating each strip, making each one almost like a frieze or printed screen. Widening the horizontal gap more between rows of panels in manga can be used to convey a change of scene. Out of these conglomerations of the basic strip have developed a wide range of layouts. Renaud Chavanne is one of several French-speaking theorists who have closely analysed the role of the strip as the primary structural unit in the layout of almost all comics, the underlying organising principle even where it is not so immediately obvious to the eye. Studying copious samples in *Composition de la bande dessinée* (2011), Chavanne distills five main types



ABOVE:
His Dream of Skyland, Vol. 1
 Anna Opatowsky (writer)
 and Aya Morton (artist), 2011

RIGHT:
A Bride's Story
 Kaori Moru, 2009

OVERLEAF:
George Sprott
 Seth, 2009

of layout. In a regular layout, the panels are of an unchanging, identical size, such as the three-by-three or nine-panel 'waffle' grid, used by Alan Moore and his collaborators in *Watchmen* and *From Hell*, or by Ray Fawkes in *One Soul* to chronicle eighteen lives in different eras, each occupying the same panel position across successive spreads (p.29). In a semi-regular layout, some regular panels may be split into two smaller panels, and others may be joined up to create larger ones. In a rhetorical layout, such as in *His Dream of Skyland*, (left), Anna Opatowsky and Aya Morton adapt and adjust the sizes and formats of panels to the demands of what is

being represented. In a fragmented layout, the height of the strip can be divided to form two or more shorter panels of variable heights or widths, multiplying further layout possibilities. Finally, Chavanne groups together other 'layouts in action', more or less complex, that move outside these first four categories.³ Chavanne's system of analyses and filters permits us to see afresh the scaffolding and guidance system underpinning nearly all comics.

The American comics artist and theorist Scott McCloud, in *Understanding Comics*, placed emphasis on another property of the medium: 'closure', a hot-wired impulse in humans to forge some sort of meaning between one image and the next. Two panels juxtaposed seem to invite us to spot the difference and construct meaning, a before and after, a cause and effect. This leap of faith into the 'gutter' between panels, what the French more elegantly term the 'intericonic space', drives the reader onward through comics. Equally significant, however, is the reader's engagement with the whole page, its totality, and how it is organised and presented. Leafing through a comic or graphic novel, we have to understand the reading protocols, as Chavanne calls them, which guide how we will navigate the pages and their layouts. And before that, our first impression as we turn the pages is usually the double-page spread. Many comics creators are acutely aware of the impact they can achieve with the turning of the page. It is the only way to generate surprise or shock, because once the page is turned, our eyes inevitably glimpse

ahead. A peculiar discipline is needed as we read to narrow our focus onto just the first panel and then the next, and so on, restraining ourselves from discovering the punchline or twist lying ahead.

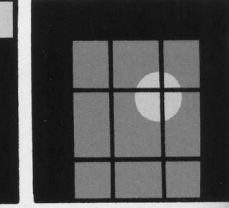
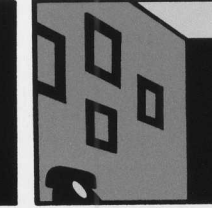
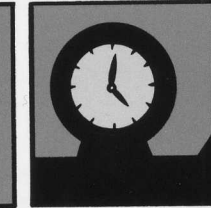
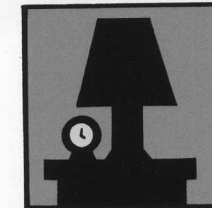
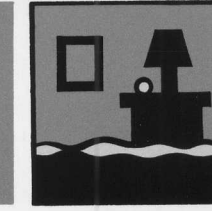
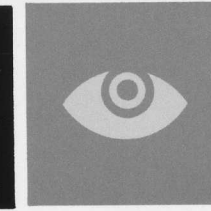
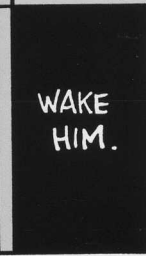
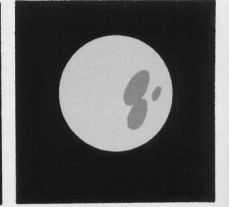
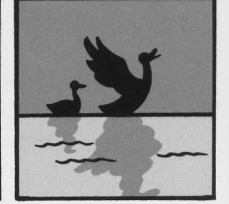
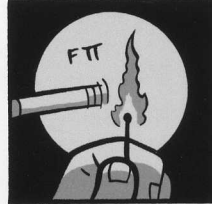
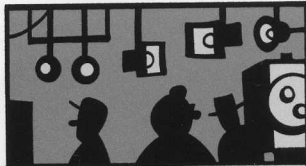
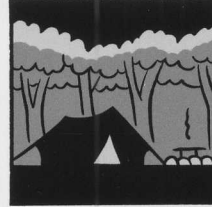
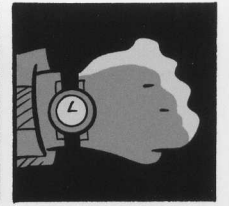
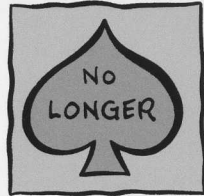
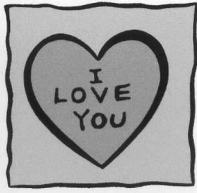
Another crucial system operating in comics is the persistence of images. Unlike the fleeting, flickering visuals of film or television, comics provide static, fixed images, which the reader can refer to again and again. Thierry Groensteen has proposed the principle of 'braiding' to describe how comics creators plant cues and clues, recurring motifs, symbols, colours, intended to spark recognition, memory, and other echoes through the story. Tapping into our urge to create patterns and observe links and relationships, braiding makes the medium highly interactive. Comics encourage, even demand, exploration and reflection, and scanning panels and pages permits readers to move easily back and forth through time.

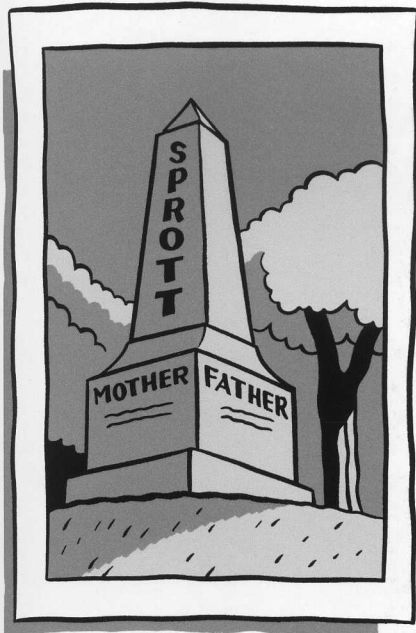


In the remarkable climax of *George Sprott* by Seth (pp.32–3), the eponymous elderly Canadian broadcaster literally sees his life flash before his eyes as he dies from a heart attack. Seth has designed six pages to fold out from the graphic novel, compiling a mosaic of single photographs, short comics and a variety of graphic elements reminding us of what we have read so far and filling in the gaps and connections that make up this flawed, all-too-human protagonist. We are caught up in the intense synaptic undertow of his final moments, interrupted by insistent but unheard pleas from the real world to 'wake up'. It is the kind of audacious,

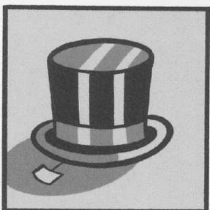
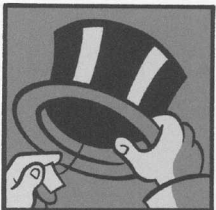
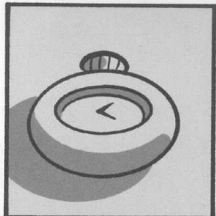
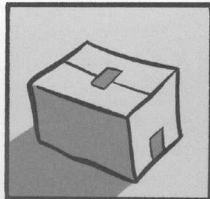
intense multiple moment, perceived all at once but readable slowly as we decode it, that is impossible in cinema or prose. Of course, readers of novels will retain memories of what they have read and can physically refer back to them, but with much less convenience than in a comic.

Debates over what essentially defines comics have gone beyond speech balloons or recurring characters and are being thrown wide open by such boundary-blurring variants as Posy Simmonds's textually enhanced *Gemma Boverly*, Brian Selznick's pure storytelling in pictures and in words in *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, or Al Columbia's disturbing associative collage *Pim & Francie*. One property which comics share with some children's picture books or artist's books is the persistence of images, sometimes with text, on the page and how both creator and reader build these into a network of 'frames of reference', combining the persistence of vision with the persistence of memory. Reading a comic actively encourages re-reading, re-viewing, building up 'document literacy' of the whole narrative tapestry. This explains why Chris Ware has likened a comic to sheet music. A comic only truly comes alive when it is directed and animated in the reader's head. Because of this, each performance, each interpretation, each definition, will be unique.

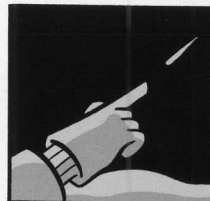
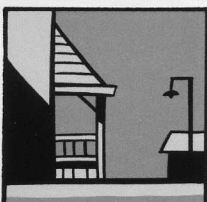
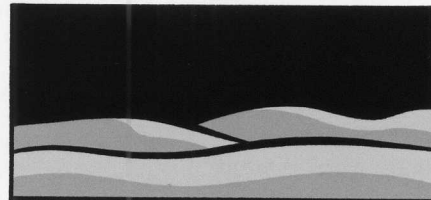




THAT
BOX



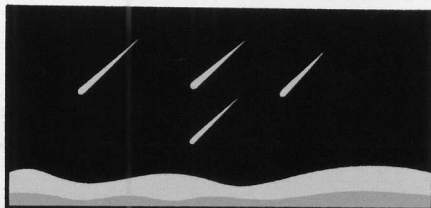
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GLADSTONE
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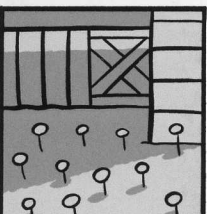
LOOK



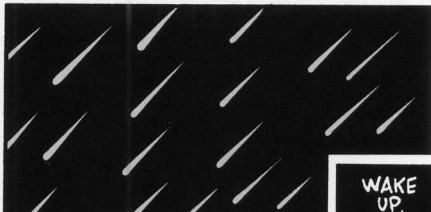
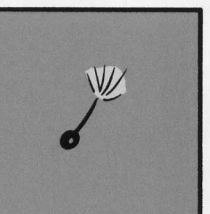
THE
SMELL
OF
BURNING
WOOD



THE
SOUND
OF



A
CLOTHES-
LINE
PULLEY



WAKE
UP,
GEORGE