2006

Icon, representation and virtuality in reading the graphic narrative

David Steiling
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Icon, Representation and Virtuality

in Reading the Graphic Narrative

by

David Steiling

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of English
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

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Dedication

For my wife, Sarah Warren, who has made any success I have had possible. I am grateful for my life with her and our son. I owe everything to her tolerance and patience, her consideration and her love.
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Icon, Representation and Virtuality
in Reading the Graphic Narrative

David Steiling

Abstract

“Icon,” “representation,” and “virtuality,” are key elements to consider when reading multi-modal narratives, including graphic narratives. By considering in detail how these elements are realized in various examples, the author shows how the study of the comics can lay groundwork for critical reading across the technological continuum of storytelling.

The author looks at how icon, representation, and virtuality interact in a reading of William Hogarth’s A Harlot’s Progress. He then examines each term in more detail through readings of a variety of graphic narratives including Max Ernst’s, Une Semaine de Bonte, Winsor McCay’s Little Nemo in Slumberland, Kurt Vonnegut’s Breakfast of Champions, Craig Thompson’s Blankets, Phoebe Gloeckner’s Diary of a Teenage Girl, and Posy Simmonds’s Gemma Bovery.

The author distinguishes between two types of virtuality, internal and external, and ties the construction of virtuality to reader response theory. In exploring issues related to the icon, the author builds on Scott McCloud’s
conjecture that the iconic character is the means through which the reader inhabits the virtual space of the graphic story. The author advances the proposition that icons are metonymies and that graphic narratives are centered in metonymic, not metaphoric devices. He also undertakes a discussion of how icon operates within the expanding tradition of the “illustrated novel.” Throughout the dissertation an attempt is made to express observation and analysis through continuous instead of binary descriptors in order to emphasize the cooperative rather than oppositional arrangements of word and image within the graphic narrative.

The dissertation concludes with an extended examination of Will Eisner’s contention that the use of stereotype is a necessity in graphic storytelling. Examples from Frederik Strömberg’s Black Images in the Comics are used to test this theory and illustrate its consequences. The treatise finishes with an analysis of approaches to representation that avoid stereotypical treatment, are inclusive but sufficiently flexible to operate through caricature. These observations are applied to issues of characterization and representation in electronic gaming narrative. The author concludes that ethics, effectiveness, reputation and empathy are all compromised when artists resort to stereotypes.
Critical Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the importance of the graphic narrative as a genre through which we can connect traditional literary study with the study of complex multi-modal narratives. In this discussion I attempt to describe some specific ways the study of the graphic narrative can connect to the study of narrative in emerging technologies like electronic gaming and virtual reality. The controlling thesis of the exposition is that “icon,” “representation,” and “virtuality,” are key elements to consider when reading multi-modal narratives, including graphic narratives, and that these three elements form a continuous platform from which to observe and read narratives that are related in multisensory form. By considering in detail how these elements are realized in various types of graphic narratives, I intend to elucidate how discourse around these elements can highlight issues common to the act of reading across the technological continuum of storytelling.

I use the term Graphic Narrative in this dissertation to label a genre of works that combine word and image to tell stories. The edges of this genre, like the edges of all genre, are diffuse. The closer one examines the
perceptible boundaries, the more one seems lost in a blur of arbitrary distinctions.

I use the term Graphic Narrative so that I can include in my discussion works that are not usually considered comics, the dominant form of the graphic narrative in this country. Academics who study and teach the graphic narrative often call themselves “comics scholars,” which embodies some of the contrariness of those who professionally connect themselves with a medium that has a history of being characterized as literature fit only for children, drug addicts or mental defectives.

Until recently, questions about the legitimacy of the medium as a vehicle for “serious” storytelling (and consequently the legitimacy of the study of that medium) riddled critical discourse about the comics. As a result, a number of alternative descriptions of the genre evolved that deflected academic and popular prejudices. Today one will see the terms “graphic narrative," “comics," “commix," “comic art” and “sequential art" used more-or-less interchangeably in discussions about stories told in words and pictures, although each term has its shades of meaning and distinct frame of reference. Terms like “graphic novel" or “illustrated novel” have become publishing categories that have allowed the graphic narrative to enter the discourse of mainstream literary studies.

Most scholars of the graphic narrative in the United States make frequent use of the term “comics" to describe that large mass of material at the center of the genre which includes, among other things, comic strips,
comic books, graphic novels, manga, mini-comics, comics journalism, educational comics and graphic non-fiction. Just how to define what is a “comic strip” or what constitutes the “comics” comprises the bones of many contentions. In this dissertation, I generally adapt the attitude of Dierick and Lefèvre in their preface to *Forging a New Medium: The Comic Strip in the Nineteenth Century*, in which they abandon all attempts to “define comics by componential analysis” (12) and advance instead an approach to defining the genre through the description of prototypes in historical context.¹

The authors cite the explanation of Gert Meesters who suggests a definition for prototype in which “for each category of members that can be defined by a single term, you can define a hard core, the nucleus of the category. Other members may not match that definition entirely, but may still belong to the category” (12). These prototypes are considered within the context of their historical period because what might be near the nucleus of a category in one period or tradition might easily be near the edges of the category in another time or place. Genres, the territorial descriptions of cultural spaces occupied by the media extensions of human beings, adapt and evolve. During the course of the dissertation I try to talk not only about prototypical works but also prototypical narrators.

The term, “graphic narrative,” as used in this dissertation refers to works that generally tell stories with both words and pictures, but sometimes the number of either words or pictures might be very few indeed. The “stories” these works in word and image tell are subject to substantial
variation in terms of length, seriousness, or conventional structure and devices. Sometimes these works use the forms and elements that we associate with the “comics”—such as the use of panels, the composed juxtaposition of images, pictures that are not made to move but that suggest movement, or the use of dialogue balloons—and sometimes some (or many) of these elements may not be present.

Prototypes of various types of graphic narratives populate both the center and the borders of the genre and frequently interpenetrate other categories. The term “graphic narrative” is intended to allow for substantial inclusivity along these lines. In this essay I will consider a broad range of works in word and image in order to view certain common threads in the fabric of the genre that are not formal components of the works as much as elements of the act of reading the works.

Historically, and until quite recently, the graphic narrative has been largely a genre associated with the technology of printing. If one considers a large range of graphic narratives, such consideration might also include various types of proto-graphic narrative such as The Bayeaux Tapestry or Mayan temple murals which can be thought of, from some points of reference at least, as early examples of comics even though they are not printed. At the other end of the time continuum, the graphic narrative has clearly migrated into electronically mediated text and the larger pattern of the graphic narrative includes an expanding number of digital designs. It is part of the purpose of this discussion to delineate aspects of the reading of the
graphic narrative that transcend examples supported by print media. I hope to suggest continuities in the reading of graphic narratives that manifest across both time and media.

The art historian David Kunzle, in his groundbreaking scholarship tracing the origins of the comic strip in early woodcuts and broadsides, has established that most of the formal elements that we consider the essential ingredients to the making of a comic—narrative breakdown into panels, dialogue balloons, sequential drawings, caricatures—are all extant in very early examples of printed graphic storytelling and seem to be in somewhat regular use by illustrators since the middle ages. Although many pre-print examples of proto-comics are included in my definition of the graphic narrative, any reasonable history of what constitutes the genre of the comics or graphic narrative can probably best begin at the point where the genre of the graphic narrative intersects with the technology of print.

Kunzle’s work spurred interest among comics scholars to examine the early development of the graphic narrative. During the last 15 years, most of this research has focused on the work of 18th and 19th century illustrators and graphic storytellers, which has come to be considered by most scholars of the genre as the period in which modern comics begin to take shape.

I will begin my dissertation with a brief case study of aspects of virtuality in A Harlot’s Progress, a graphic narrative by William Hogarth. The critical framework of Ian Watt is an important background to the critical approach to this reading of Hogarth. My sources for my discussion of
Hogarth use him extensively, and it is Watt’s framework that is a powerful influence in the general project of reading the history of the graphic narrative itself. Charles Hatfield, on whom I draw for elements of my discussion in Chapter Five of this dissertation, uses Watt’s framework to discuss the emergence and development of recent expansions of the graphic narrative in his *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*. Hatfield’s work is part of a collective effort among comics scholars to retell the history of the comics within the contexts of printing, publication, and the historic sociology of both popular and literary cultures. Certainly part of the growing interest in the graphic narrative as part of Literary Studies has been the recent success of the graphic novel in attracting readers and critical attention. It is understandable that in looking at the rise of the graphic novel *The Rise of the Novel* would shape the general tenor of the critical discourse.

The work of Marshall McLuhan is also an important background to the ideas in this dissertation especially his observations in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. This essay is rooted in several contentions by McLuhan about the shift in paradigm’s between print and electronic culture. I also draw support in a general way from the essays of Neil Postman who carried on McLuhan’s tendency to provoke establishment thinking through his insights into media and culture. Behind my specific comments in this exposition are a few assumptions I have about what I believe will be the long arcs of literary studies and of the medium of the comics.
At least part of the increasing popularity of such forms as the graphic novel is a consequence of the way reading and writing are adapting as we shift paradigms from a print to an electronic culture. For the last seventeen years I have been teaching literature to art students, who are, to my reckoning, something like the canaries in the coal mine of literary studies. They provide an early indication of how the act of reading is changing and how the tastes of readers will change as the way we read and what we have available to read diversifies and becomes more image rich. This is part of the general increase of and interest in multi-modal discourse in which writers and communicators express themselves in forms and media that combine two or more traditional modes of expression (such as words and pictures) and advance their argument or narrative using both. Such multi-modal discourse is by definition multi-sensory and requires the reader to experience the work using two or more senses.

The technology of reading has many barriers and some people have difficulty obtaining the necessary skills to access the full range of the written word. Until recently the written word had the advantage of being the most portable technology for the delivery of information or story. That has changed.

It is now possible to compose informative or narrative works, even works that may be eventually received through the written word, without ever using the written word. This sort of change in the act of writing is bound to have a concomitant effect on the act of reading. One of these effects is a
return to oralism in literature and a greater emphasis on speaking and hearing than on writing and reading. Writing is often used as a means to organize such speech but is not the primary delivery vehicle for the story or information. Writing and reading are no longer characteristics of mass media but have returned to being the characteristics of elite media.

As mass media has been shifting in the direction of speech and oral communication accompanied by images, elite media has been shifting in the direction of enriching the content of writing with images. Works in word and image, like comics, that used to be considered elements of mass media, have taken a literary turn. This would be true of all works that depend on the support of paper. It is almost to the point that any creative work on paper assumes the cultural niche of fine art, and if not now, it soon will.

Looking out further into the future, one can foresee, assuming no apocalyptic intervention, a clear push toward the adaptation of virtual reality technology to the communication of information and story. This is already clear in the movement of narrative into genres like electronic gaming, and where story goes, literary discourse must follow.

The genre of the graphic narrative sits at the intersection of word and image. While parts of graphic narrative are viewed, the primary way one experiences a graphic narrative is to read it. The act of reading graphic narrative is both unique and an expanded version of reading a text of written words. The role of the reader in creating the experience of the story is still a very active one. Image rich texts may be one way that the written word is
rescued from the fate of overrefinement like the fate that has befallen the language of mathematics, which remains respected, is highly useful and applicable to many situations but is mastered beyond functional levels of numeracy by only a relative few.

The purpose of this dissertation is to take a few threads from the understanding of text, pull them out and examine them with an eye toward using them to connect the study of stories told in traditional media with stories told in new media. The graphic narrative provides the perfect genre for this effort because it is so image rich, has a history at least as long as the history of printing and tells the story through muti-sensory, multi-modal means. In studying the graphic narrative one can begin to create the groundwork for a literary discourse that can apply to the wide range of narrative expression from the technology of virtual reality to the technology of the written word.

The threads I have pulled out for my discussion are icon, virtuality and stereotype and I have devoted a chapter of my dissertation to each. I have tried in those discussions to look at each element in relation to some specific graphic narratives with an eye toward the implications of those applications on literary study beyond the genre of the graphic narrative.

In the course of my discussion I look to the relationship between word and image as expressed in the tradition of literature and literary discourse. I work extensively with J. Hillis Miller’s essay, *Illustration* as a source of ideas for that discussion which includes a consideration of how word and image
have been constructed as antagonists in the melodrama of contemporary letters.

The initial impulse for this dissertation came from reading Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. I found his ideas about icon and iconic style of image-making unshakably provocative. I have tried to extend those ideas in some directions that I hope will enhance the reading of graphic and non-graphic narratives and that consider the implications and applications of iconic discourse on the creation of virtuality.

In Chapter Four I look at how some novelists across the continuum of the novel that contains both word and images, have negotiated the relationships between word and illustration to create virtuality in their narratives. I look specifically at how the use of iconic style in these works together with different levels of illustrative discourse help create opportunities for expressively unique virtualities.

Chapter Five is an examination of what is one of the most important issues in iconic discourse, that is the relationship between icon and stereotype and the view that making successful graphic narrative, especially comics, requires the use of stereotype. I try to address the questions involved with the use of stereotypical forms of representation in a manner that emphasizes the application of practical solutions to the ethical issues.

In the course of my discussion I make occasional reference to the neurology of reading. We are on the verge of modeling the act of reading in bio-chemical-mechanical terms with a level of sophistication that is very
unexpected. We are currently beginning to understand how we read at the word level of acquisition. We also have a clearer understanding of how we process images. We have very little understanding of how we put those elements together, or how we blend the two to follow and understand a story. We are not very far from knowing considerably more about how the central nervous system operates during the act of reading. At this time we use this information mostly to try to better understand reader dysfunction, but soon we will be using this information to model how reading taps the mind’s ability to operate as a virtual reality engine. It seems inevitable that at least part of the future of narrative will be its entry into the technologies of virtual reality.

The current level of virtual reality technologies are already being used to tell stories. A number of scholars and critics, most of them young and assimilated into the new electronic paradigm are trying to integrate the study of those technologies into the study and explication of Literature. A more complete understanding of the neurological aspects of the act of reading will not only advance the quality of study in these inquiries, but these accumulated investigations will form the model on which the future technologies of virtual reality will be based. The new modes of the act of reading that will be brought about by advances in virtual reality technology will be modeled directly on the specific neurologies of the way we read the multi-sensory, multi-modal stories of today. The new reading will be founded on the old.
Chapter One

Prelude: Hogarth and Virtuality in the Early Graphic Narrative

In the tradition of English graphic letters, one of the first graphic narrators with wide-ranging and lasting significance may be William Hogarth (1697-1764). Hogarth himself described his major sequential works like The Rake’s Progress, Marriage à la Mode, or A Harlot’s Progress as “novels in paint” (Dierick & Lefèvre 81). Hogarth took the medium of the printed broadside (which had been used since the middle ages for political propaganda, moral instruction, home decoration, and covering the drafty holes in cracked plaster) and elevated it by applying higher standards of artisanship and creativity. Hogarth was a shopkeeper’s idea of an artist and something of an artist’s model of a shopkeeper. Hogarth developed a marketing strategy that targeted the interests and values of the rapidly expanding middle classes of 18th century England who had become a steady enough source of patronage to rival the aristocracy.

Hogarth chose subject matter that would excite interest (e.g. sex, social pretension, moral depravity) and that he could wrap in a narrative of moral application. There are both comic and tragic elements to his stories, and the audience can either marvel at the cutting and somewhat salacious observation of human folly, or rejoice in the inevitable triumph of virtue—
depending, of course, on one’s predisposition. Hogarth’s narratives are imbued with the zeitgeist of the Baroque in that they strive to display human emotions in a magnified fashion with which the audience would have an easy time relating and, presumably, experiencing vicariously. This impulse which, since 1600, had contributed to the development of Opera and the Theatre, now spurred the development of the graphic narrative. As Paul Gravett notes in his essay on the *Inventors of Comics in Great Britain*, “Hogarth wrote stories, or perhaps more accurately plays, with his pictures” (85). Gravett notes that “until relatively recently, his reputation had derived almost exclusively from his literary ambitions rather than his artistic accomplishments. Charles Lamb in his essay *On the Genius and Character of Hogarth* wrote, ‘His graphic representations are indeed books; they have the teeming fruitful suggestive meaning of words. Other pictures we look at, his prints we read’” (85).

By the time Lamb was writing, Hogarth’s “picture plays” or “painted novels” were subject to critical distinctions that strove to maintain a separation among the sister arts, assigning each its appropriate subject matter, themes and demeanor. The theory of art articulated by G. E. Lessing in 1766 rigidly defined “the boundaries between the visual arts and literature….Lessing claimed that painting depicted situations whereas poetry described actions” (20). With the ascendancy of this critical theory and variations of it articulated through the 19th century, works like Hogarth’s and
the various experiments in the graphic narrative that followed became subject to charges of artistic miscegenation.

Gravett quotes Hogarth as writing that he “wished to compose pictures on canvas, similar to representations on the stage; and farther hope, that they will be tried by the same test and criticized by the same criterion” (85). (Elzie Segar the creator of Popeye said similar things about his creation of his strip Thimble Theater, a strategic outlook that many other comic strip artists have adopted over the years.)

This statement significantly places the arts of painting and writing at the joint service of story-telling. Whatever facilitates the telling of the story, either word or image (or both), is what is valued in Hogarth’s approach to the graphic narrative. Hogarth’s narratives both depict situations and describe actions since both of these are components of storytelling.

The proclivity that Lamb observed for Hogarth to be a literary subject more than an art historical subject has continued to the present day. In his introduction to Engravings by Hogarth (easily the most widely circulated edition of Hogarth prints) Sean Shesgreen applies the methods of Ian Watt to the study of Hogarth. Shesgreen compactly reviews the milieu; aspects of plot, character, setting; the way Hogarth handles issues of time, and the way in which Hogarth’s work relates to various traditions—the artistic, the moral, the comic, the theatrical. In short, Shesgreen treats Hogarth as a novelist.

This approach is particularly interesting because, while it would be easy, I think, to argue Hogarth’s position as a graphic storyteller, his work
lies pretty much outside the realm of the book. Rather it is rooted in the mechanics of the broadside tradition, the distribution system of the print and the aesthetic tradition of narrative painting. Although we often encounter his work today within the technology of the book, it was not originally conceived to be distributed in that medium. Of course Hogarth’s engravings shared with the “book” or “journal” principle elements of printing technology, and Hogarth marketed his prints largely by folio subscription. Hogarth’s approach does at least demonstrate that the graphic narrative is independent of the container of the book or periodical, an issue recently underscored by the expansion of comics into electronic media. This easy flow between the container of the book and the container of the poster is seen again in the origins of the Underground Comix movement.

The more one examines the life, the work and working milieu of Hogarth, the more he seems to model one of the consistent prototypes of the graphic narrator. He was a product of the middle classes, born next to a printing shop in a middle class neighborhood. His father was a schoolmaster who was also a respected classical scholar. Hogarth received a good basic education in line with the period and, showing a facility for drawing, was apprenticed to a silver engraver at age 15. By the end of his 20s, Hogarth had developed ambitions beyond engraving and had become a painter of conversation pieces as well as an engraver of original narrative subjects or illustrations. In all of these works he strove to refine tastes, subjects, and expressions that would appeal to a middle class audience. He, himself,
embodied middle class values in his life and made them the center of his narrative outlook. (Shesgreen)

The Graphic Narrative as we have known it has largely been a bourgeois art form. There are certainly examples of the graphic narrative shaped to fit aristocratic pocketbooks and taste—Illuminated manuscripts, the Bayeaux tapestry, mural painting—all might sometimes fit this description. Nonetheless, graphic narrative emerges as a genre in conjunction with the development of printing and the spread of literacy which in turn is a result of the increased leisure of the middle classes. The theatre, the novel, and the graphic narrative are all art forms that developed their current state under mostly middle class patronage amid broadening mass appeal.

Like many graphic narrators who followed him, Hogarth focused on the representation of character and, like a novelist, was keen to show character by setting and detail as well as through facial expression and pose. Places, rooms, furniture, objects—all are part of the apparatus that Hogarth employs to root his narrative in exact time and place. Such concrete and specific details are naturally adapted to the possibilities of the graphic narrative. A graphic narrator can easily draw settings and objects instead of consuming paragraphs in description. This attention to the documentation of detail is a salient aspect of Hogarth’s style and one that distinguished him from painters like Reynolds who practiced a sublime style that avoided the contemporary and strived to represent the universal by techniques of
idealization and the suppression of the mundane. Hogarth approached the representation of the universal through the careful observation and presentation of specific elements that his attention and skills could render as forcefully iconic.

Like a good bourgeois, Hogarth liked to make sure he gave good value for the money, and his pictures are very full. Little, if anything, appears in them “by accident,” so that the viewer is conditioned to consider the significance of every detail represented. This concentration on the development of detail within the image is commonly an effect of the drawn picture in which everything in the image has been intentionally included. In a photograph everything that is available to the lens is automatically included and then some aspects of the image may be removed, either by erasure or by cropping and framing. Of course the photographer also has the choice to add elements to the image not originally available to the camera lens. Since the advent of photoshop and similar image manipulation software, some pictures now reflect the same atmosphere of intention that used to be the provenance of drawings alone.

The effect of Hogarth’s careful inclusions was that the audience was given a picture that was clearly meant to be read; all the elements in the panel to be fit into the perception of the story, each detail advancing the narrative in some way. As the reader went from picture to picture in the series, the story developed in the alterations and variations that occurred as one scene became juxtaposed with the next, the imagination of the reader
closing the gap by producing their own narrative thread derived from what they could see. There was a high level of involvement for the reader in the imaginative effort to fill in those gaps and it was one of the reasons that Hogarth’s work was almost immediately popular and has remained so. While his engravings may seem overcrowded for contemporary readers used to styles built for rapid apprehension, Hogarth’s level of detail has become one of the important sources of our ideas of what the ordinary life of the period was like. For example, the Harlot’s Progress, contains a meticulously observed and reproduced interior of Bridewell Prison, an 18th century sick room, a well known London square, and a wake.

One of Hogarth’s lasting contributions was to encourage and validate a certain naturalism that has become one of the main streams of representation in the graphic narrative. In this representational code there is an attempt to define character by suggesting the effects of the character’s presumed heredity and her surroundings through the rendering of selected and specific details. The intent is to represent reality but reality as the narrator observes it, not as a camera would record it.

Hogarth’s stories are primarily pageants designed to teach moral lessons, they are progresses after all. Hogarth’s lesson is not cast in terms of spiritual heaven or hell but in terms of suffering in this life. His is a very pragmatic morality. The consequences of Harlot Moll’s bad choices are death at an early age as a result of venereal disease; Tom Rakewell is driven mad by his excesses. But Hogarth is interested in staging the whole
pageant of moral implication in the melodramas he is relating. We see ill-intentioned predators on the young and helpless; we see the panderers to unhealthy desires. We see the consequences of the protagonist’s bad choices on her family and on the health of the community. We are presented with an outline of a culture that wants to ignore its social responsibilities and is inured to the exploitation and suffering that is before its eyes.

Instead of creating a pageant of allegorical types which would be using a metaphorical approach to representation, Hogarth makes substantial use of metonymous techniques instead. This metonymy is reflected in his characterization which is based in an observed verisimilitude of appearance but with a reduction of information so that the most expressive outlines of character become more readily visible. This reduction is not a full blown caricature as would be used by the generation that followed Hogarth, in fact Hogarth rejected the caricature technique. Instead he creates likenesses that lean toward types, the same sort of characterization practiced by the producers of reality television who take real footage but edit it in a way to create outlines based on predetermined types and stock characters. This process involves the initial selection, someone who seems a good example of the type to be represented and then the careful editing of content to create the impression of the type that fits the storyline. In both cases, Hogarth and reality television, the purpose is to not have to explain things to the reader but rather for the reader to have the pleasure of apparently observing things for themselves, although, of course,
the information the reader has received to make those impressions has been carefully selected and controlled.

Hogarth’s representative technique begins very metaphorically with plates like *Some of the Principal Inhabitants of Ye Moon: Royalty, Episcopacy, and Law*, 1724. In this work the characters are completely metaphorical, the icons used to represent them drawn associatively and allusively, not from life. By 1732, with *A Harlot’s Progress*, Hogarth was using more naturalistic techniques to represent his characters.

Fig. 1. Plate One of Hogarth’s *A Harlot’s Progress* etched and engraved from paintings, April 1732. Reproduced in Engravings by Hogarth (New York: Dover, 1973) Fig. 18.
In the first plate of the narrative, Hogarth shows the young and innocent Moll Hackabout just arrived in London via the York Wagon. Her character is developed, in part, symbolically through such devices as the rose of innocence protectively positioned at her bodice and the sewing kit and pincushion hanging from her belt that indicates her craft as a dressmaker. She has just caught the eye of a calculating procuress who is sizing her up under the cover of an ingratiating compliment. In the middle ground a nobleman is looking her over with fairly evident interest and a complete lack of good intentions. Such a likeness it is to an actual situation that it might as well be a picture of a teenage runaway getting off a motorcoach from Des Moines at the Port Authority Bus Terminal. And it is full of some of the same sort of social commentary as might such a photograph. The action is frozen in time, a snapshot taken a hundred years before there is such a thing as photography. But it is not a snapshot of actual events caught completely as they happened, it is a staged tableau in which all the elements of the scene are to be carefully observed and considered by the audience in a specific order so that they can slowly assemble the implications of what they are seeing.

Both the place and some of the personages in the scene would have been recognizable to Hogarth’s audience. The procuress is said to clearly resemble “Mother Needham, the keeper of a notorious brothel patronized by the aristocracy; she had recently been stoned to death by the London
“population” (Shesgreen Plate 18) and the nobleman sizing up his next victim was recognizable as Colonel Charteris an aristocrat described by Shesgreen as “the worst of the exploitative privileged class to which he belonged.” But we do not need to recognize the specific individuals to recognize their characters in these representations. Hogarth has sourced his character in someone actual not just for journalistic purposes but for naturalistic purposes as well. In taking their likeness he has a model of those character attributes he wants to present in his story, working from an assumption, as surely most his reader’s would have as well, that in the appearance of the individual there would be clues to the inner character of that individual as long as one had eyes to see them. It’s the sort of reader involvement that keeps the genre of the detective story so fresh and characters like Sherlock Holmes so eternal.

Hogarth has staged his picture in three tableaux poised before a backdrop. The scene is clearly set as being very specifically in front of the Bell Inn in Wood Street whose state of appearance speaks for its character. To the rear is the mundane landscape of city life with the image of the York Wagon disappearing off, stage right. Our eyes are drawn first to the center tableaux of the two women who are posed in the focal point of the pictures brightest light and outlined with an extra-thick line to bring them strikingly out front of the background. It is almost impossible not to see this group first. In this central tableau the figure of Mother Needham has a young girl in her sway. Her hand is in intimate contact with the young girl in a way that would
be far too familiar in anyone but a close relative. If this is the first time these
two are meeting, the gesture itself might signal alarm to an observant
onlooker. Mother Needham’s hand is cupped in a scoop as if to “scoop her
up.” (Shesgreen, Paulson)

The discourse between the picture and the audience is structured so
that the viewer can come into a sense of unease and alarm the more she or
he takes in the details of the image. At first there is just a slight unease in
regarding the central figures. The older woman might be an aunt come to
meet the girl or even to send her off. A little inspection of the foreground
items, Moll’s luggage, shows she has just arrived. The note on the goose
says that it is for her cousin on “Tems Street.” Since she wouldn’t be
departing with such a gift, she must be arriving. Teamed with the image of
the York stage departing the frame (exactly opposite to the placement of the
luggage) instead of entering it, it is not hard to read that Moll has just arrived
in town.

The sense of unease increases as one moves from the central
tableau to the two tableau in the middle ground. Posed in the doorway of the
seedy tavern, stage left, the figure of Colonel Charteris has his eyes clearly
on the sweet young thing. His face is unembarrassedly in a smug leer.
There is something very unsettling about the way he is posed with his hand
in his pocket. What is in there? Is it a weapon, a sack of money? Is he
agitating his privates at the sight of Moll? This is a representation of
someone whose character reveals itself as more questionable the more that one looks.

The figure of Mother Needham, the go-between, is placed literally between Moll and the Colonel. There is such similarity of pose in this pairing of figures, especially in the tilt of the head, that there is a sense of the nearer figure reflecting the motion of the further, like the pose of the puppet behind whom is a similarly posed puppeteer. The servant on the Colonel’s left is hunched in a sharply articulated pose of agitation and anticipation, so we quite naturally follow his gaze to see what he is looking at.

What he is looking at is the third tableau, the one at stage right in which a clergyman is riding a horse. The clergyman is absorbed in trying to make out the writing on a letter he holds, apparently a letter of introduction to help secure a preferred ecclesiastical appointment. He is holding it in such a way as to suggest nearsightedness which seems likely, at least in the moral/metaphorical sense since he is not watching what’s going on right in front of him. His horse ostensibly under his charge is wandering under its own guidance and is upsetting a stack of feed buckets and pails. It is the looming inevitability of the clamor and disruption of this impending event that has apparently attracted the attention of the Colonel’s servant. Hogarth’s snapshot preserves the moment just before the bucket falls just as his portrait of the maiden preserves the moment just before she falls.

This little visual pun on “falling” is located at the very place in the picture where the reader should be led after having taken in the other
tableaux. Such careful composition of the scenes, like leading the progression of the eye from panel to panel in the comics, cannot be an absolute science but is a principle element of the graphic design of graphic narratives. The tableau of the falling buckets records an action that’s significance can’t really be understood without reading the other parts of the panel, and it is positioned so that it won’t be read until the end of the reader’s initial tour of the painting.

Besides the subtle timing of the reader’s progress to the pun on falling, Hogarth shows some more offhanded brilliance in the way he uses the background to complete the significance of the narrative. As the woman on the balcony in the rear of the picture goes on about her domestic tasks, she is completely oblivious to what is transpiring in the square. It is not that she doesn’t know what is going on, rather it is that the exploitation and misfortune on exhibit below happens every day. She has become inured and apathetic to the urban melodrama unfolding beneath her. The laundress on the balcony airing out the chamberpots may suggest an alternative life to the one on which Moll is about to embark (Paulson), but one has to ask just how attractive, if authentic, the alternative was to a young girl. Moll may have a choice whether to “fall” or not, but that choice in Hogarth’s illustration seems terribly constrained by her possibilities, her nature and the exploitive forces arrayed against her. It can’t be said that she has much of a chance.

Disclosing with brush and burin the reality of moral choice, Hogarth seems only on the surface to be a moralist. He might better be described as
a proto-naturalist narrator, looking to the essence of choice as, at least in part, predetermined by social and biological factors.

Hogarth certainly believes in the potential for art as instruction. His narrative works have at their core an instructive impulse. Hogarth’s characters may have enough free will to make them responsible for their choices, but, at the same time, the choices for some of characters may, in truth, be very limited. The point of the story is to serve as something of a narrative of hope against these limiting factors. Paulson’s analysis of Hogarth’s progresses is that the focus of the narrative becomes the subject of authenticity, or in this case the abandonment by individuals of their efforts to make inexact copies of models they would be better not to even try to replicate. For Paulson this concern with authenticity is a central theme through Hogarth’s life and work and includes his advocation for Hogarth’s Law, an act of parliament he initiated and for which he lobbied that gave copyright protection to artists and engravers of original material, and protection against unscrupulous pirates. Paulson is certainly right in his sense that much of what underlies Hogarth’s stories are the metaphors that proceed naturally from the medium of print such as the politics, ideologies, and aesthetic concerns that evolve from making copies.

The narrative technique of Hogarth seems to foreshadow many of the approaches and devices used by graphic narrators of today. First is the stylistic emphasis on “show” not “tell,” which requires the reader to engage in an imaginative recreation of the circumstances related in the narrative not a
mere decoding of a simple symbolic summary. This imaginative recreation is stimulated by a number of interesting narrative devices that make it clear the work is to be read not merely apprehended as if it were a landscape or a conversation piece.

There are linguistic elements in the largely visual text, but these elements are incorporated into the scene, not comments or explanations of it. They are texts that operate as narrative clues. These include such elements as Moll Hackworth’s initials on her trunk, the card attached to the neck of the goose, the advertising on the side of the York stage and the letter in the clergymen’s hand. This deployment of limited amounts of text as constituent elements of a scene reflects the default prejudices of the graphic narrative which privileges show over tell because pictures most commonly show, appealing to the way we ordinarily engage our powers of visual observation.

Most of the elements in the picture, including the textual ones, are involvers, deployed to bring us into the story as active readers looking for more information to tell us what is going on, the essence of which we have to find out for ourselves, to read it. The elements of information are deployed within the picture in a fashion to create interactivity. Much like a contemporary role-playing video game, people and objects are scattered through the space of the picture in discreet groups and as we progress from one to the other through a path that is indicated by compositional technique and reading habits, we collect the various bits of information through which
we will come to understand the story being shown to us. It is the emphasis on showing integrated elements necessary to the narrative that distinguishes the graphic narrative from the narrative with illustrations. The narrative with illustrations does not require the visual elements be present for the narrative to be imagined by the reader. The graphic narrative generally requires both the words and the pictures for imaginative recreation of the text.

While Hogarth does not generally embrace caricature, his central protagonists are, like Fielding’s, idealized types rather than highly articulated individual portraits. The concept is that by using such types, his character designs will have more universality, will be more easily recognized and easy to place into any reader’s particular experience of the world. The language of gesture and expression as well as the staging of action in the Harlot’s progress appears largely drawn from the practice of the theatre. But in the supporting cast surrounding the protagonists, Hogarth tends to draw his characters more closely from life, selecting models of actual persons to play the roles required for his version of 18th Century “reality-based” narrative. Sometimes these people are already social icons whose appearance in the role comes with preset associations that assist the reader in more clearly deciphering the intended meaning of the text.
In the second plate of the *Harlot’s Progress* there is an interesting combination of Hogarth’s character representations. The scene is highly theatrical in all senses of the word. Moll, now the kept mistress of a rich Jewish merchant, is caught at the height of her overweening self-confidence. Hogarth’s pre-photographic snapshot freezes a moment of action and reaction that reveals endless subtexts to the reader. Moll’s pique in overturning the tea table covers the discreet exit of a paramour rear stage.
right while simultaneously her servant enters carrying a teapot from front stage left. Moll’s expression suggests wealths of subterfuge that would have been unknown to the Moll of the opening panel. The juxtaposition of the first two panels of the progress underscores the falling of Moll who is clearly no longer an innocent but now is a moral actor fully participant in hastening her decline.

Hogarth has refined Moll’s expression into a much more worldly countenance. Moll’s dismissive fingersnap indicates the reader’s way to where the lover exits discreetly, his own gesture cautioning the maid to silence as he tiptoes from the room. The lover has been quite obviously caught off guard in that he secretes from the room carrying his belt and sword while the maid must hand him his shoes. Moll herself is quite fashionably but revealingly on display inferring the flirtation interrupted by the man who is paying her bills.

The rich merchant himself is represented by a caricature that reflects the face of the pet monkey in the picture’s lower left, suggesting perhaps that Moll has purchased the monkey as a satiric reminder of her protector. The idea that she regards both the monkey and the master as her “pets” may be reflected in the attitude of her gesture and her posture, but what makes the scene particularly dramatic is the reaction of the merchant as we see him (whether he notices the departing suitor or not) coming into consciousness that his mistress is becoming what we would call these days, “very high maintenance.”
The appearance of the Jewish merchant with its strong resonance of anti-Semitic stereotype, is interestingly contrasted with the portrait of the West Indian serving boy on the picture’s right, who is more closely drawn from life and is directly modeled on an actual person [add name] (Paulson). Both the maid and the serving boy balance either end of the mostly linear composition, each looking to the center of the panel and each highlighting the outrageous quality of the action in the center of the stage with their strong sense of reaction. It is they who represent the onlooker in the scene and who set the tone for what should be the reader’s reaction to events.

In the representation of the West Indian servant boy it is notable that the level of caricature is roughly the same level of exaggeration and detail as that of the other characters, with the exception of the Jewish merchant who is caricatured much more savagely and with more exaggeration of feature.

The method of pictorial narrative in Hogarth’s work is set against the narrative style in the paintings reproduced on the wall at the back of the scene. One is of “Jonah outside Nineveh seated next to an ivy plant” and the other is “David dancing before the ark while Uzzah, attempting to touch it, is knifed in the back” (Shesgreen). Here the message of Hogarth’s text might be supported by the allegorical components of the painted subjects, but the strategy of those paintings is allegorical and neither commonsensical nor easily assessable to the reader. Other allegorical apparatus are strewn through the picture but they only embellish the central argument, they are not the primary way the story is told.
The interpretation of the scene is one that can be constructed by an ordinary person capable, as are the servants, of common sense readings of events. Hogarth uses this device of placing onlookers or reactors within his panels and they almost always stand-in for a person of ordinary intelligence, experience and perspective who can witness and make a reasonable reading of the situation. Readability and accessibility are important aspects of the sensibility of bourgeois art. A work might contain levels of meaning or interpretation beyond the usual purview of the middle classes, but these must underlie the accessible qualities of the work as amplifiers or enrichers of the central experience of the reader or viewer. The way a work addresses “multiple levels of meaning” is a common defense put forward for “great works of art” from Shakespeare to Beethoven and which usually implies that even an uneducated or ordinary person can appreciate the work. This is a keystone of bourgeois sensibilities and middle-class critique.
Hogarth and the Prototype of the Graphic Narrator

The prototype of the graphic narrator exemplified by Hogarth is of an artist of literary sensibility who is generally self-taught, at least in the sense of not being university or academy trained, but who, instead, learned the trade of drawing comics in apprenticeship fashion, rising from the bottom rungs of the profession. Whatever aesthetic ideals these artists hold, they look at themselves as “working artists,” that is they aspire to do work they expect will make money either as work for hire or as artistic entrepreneurs. These artists tend to espouse the virtue of hard work and middle class values. They regard suspiciously the theorizing of the academy although they have a longing for the legitimation and respect that comes with academic recognition. They tend to feel their failure to achieve recognition lies in the class prejudices of the academy and the prejudice against popular art. They are often right.

Artists of this prototype tend to have a pragmatic outlook and may think of themselves primarily as entertainers in service to the gag or story. They adjust their stories and the telling of those stories to meet popular expectations and to appeal to popular tastes. Many adopt a naturalistic style that is based on the observation of actual persons but that metonymously reduces realistic detail to better outline a type or stereotype. Artists of this prototype can often be entrepreneurs if not always successful ones. Among the graphic narrators who might fall within this Hogarth prototype are artists
Will Eisner, Carl Barks, Winsor McCay, and many of the artists in the history of the main stream comic book and comic strip.

Hogarth also pioneered some very enterprising and important approaches to producing and distributing his work. Seeing where his best economic advantage lay, Hogarth became a self-publisher, building demand by showing original paintings in his studio, and then releasing reproductions at various levels of exclusivity, collectable quality and price point. He licensed his work for downmarket exploitation and even successfully lobbied for legislative protection of his designs in “Hogarth’s Act’ a copyright revision of 1735. All of these strategies worked to democratize patronage of the arts and were part of a larger movement of artists away from dependence on the patronage of a few rich people to the patronage of the larger class of newly literate, newly enfranchised, and status conscious bourgeoisie. This change could happen because the technology of mechanical reproduction had begun to make affordable copies possible.

Advances in the technology of mechanical reproduction produced a situation that required a new paradigm of narrative practice. The essential problem of that practice was how the storyteller could better overcome the barrier of not being in the presence of the audience when the story was told. The dramatist had solved this problem by creating a simulation of the action through the medium of playwriting and the acting out of the play. Eventually experienced playgoers could “imagine” the performance of a play while reading the text produced by the playwright without the necessary
intervention of actors. Reading a play out loud, amateur theatricals, attending actual performances of plays, all became ways of enhancing the experience of play texts by engaging in collaborative interpretive events. All of these methods of reading plays were very interactive with the text and made the reader feel more present within the virtual reality of the story.

Lyric narrative continued to harness musical effects to help create emphasis, mood, emotional context and memory. The limits of early mechanical reproduction meant that lyric narrative generally had to rely on well-known tunes, original music printed with the words or no specific tunes at all in which to set the stories. Narratives, especially large form narratives like the epic, began to migrate from poetry to prose fiction where there were a wider range of mechanically reproducible devices that a writer could use to simulate a sense of a reader’s presence within the story.

Novels of correspondence, novels that were framed as entries in logbooks, diaries, or confessions, were all popular devices of early prose fiction because they provided an easy placement of the reader in relation to the text. The reader’s voyeuristic impulses could be harnessed to plunge the reader into the virtual worlds set in motion by the simulated document. These approaches continue to be very usable and form the basis for many successful modern experiments in the novel such as *Lolita* or *The House on Mango Street*, for example; despite the later development of other techniques of verisimilitude such as the “stream of consciousness.”
Novelists experimenting with other devices beside document simulation focused on such techniques as the creation of believable narrators whose voices simulated the presence of a storyteller who could be sized up and read as a character in the story as well as the informant through which the details of the stories were delivered (for example, *Heart of Darkness*). Even the device of the implied author as narrator became easy for audiences to accept as the storyteller’s “voice” became replaced with the storyteller’s “point of view.”

Along the way novelists began to find other methods and devices by which the reader could feel present within a story. The techniques of creating virtual realities of experience within the consciousness of an audience—virtuality—from a distance became constituent to the shift of paradigms as the audience changed from an audience of listeners to an audience of readers. Authors discovered that increasing possibilities of interactivity, especially involvement in the story created by concentrating on styles and methods that increased simulated sensation, created more virtuality. Highly sensational or evocative genres like the mystery or the gothic tale began to flourish.

At the same time as the audience shifted from the paradigm of listening to the paradigm of reading, visual narrators, inspired in part by the experiments of novelists, began parallel explorations in how to create visual narratives that could be more easily read as an experience, instead of just viewed or understood through the interpretative frame of allegory. They
began to experiment with visual narrative techniques that would increase interactivity with the viewer encouraging the audience to enter the work not just look at it from a distance, harnessing the possibilities of icon, type, character, setting, action/reaction to create increased virtuality in the act of reading. The combination of narrative devices employed by Hogarth in his Progresses showed the possibilities of eventually uniting words and pictures in creating highly effective multisensory narratives for mechanical reproduction.
Not everyone who reads this analysis is going to share the assumption that works of graphic narrative, and especially comics, are literature. There is considerable prejudice against narratives that are comprised of both words and pictures. There is even considerable prejudice among certain readers against stories that are accompanied by illustrations. There has been a tendency for generations of literary critics to judge textual works as de facto literary failures if those texts are not verbally self-contained. “Can the text stand on its own,” we are asked to ascertain before the text can be considered as worth serious attention.

It is the same for works that combine text and music. “Can the text stand on its own, without the music,” the literary critic asks, going so far as to anthologize the words without the music so that it might be better examined as “lyric” poetry. The aesthetic ideal expressed in this position is of a work expected to excel in two media at once, each with its separate coherency. This is a bit like expecting a piece of furniture to function equally well as both a queen-sized bed and a living room sofa.

Much, if not most, of the best work in genres that combine word and image is bound to come about by techniques that effectively coordinate both
modes, not works that attempt separate edifices on the same real estate. It is likely that most graphic narratives will not necessarily be able to stand alone as either text or visual art because the work under consideration is bound to be dependent on the interactions of both. I am prepared to argue the literary value of many graphic narratives, but none of those arguments is based on the idea that the words in the narrative can “stand alone” without the pictures. Generally, the words in these narratives need the pictures, and the pictures need the words. That is the thrust of the genre.

Until recent years much academic writing on the comics has had to address itself in some way to the legitimation of the subject area itself. In many disciplines the climate may be somewhat more favorable to the “serious” consideration of the comics, but “reading comics in class” is the sort of learning activity still seized on by critics of liberal academia as proof of the deterioration of rigor and lowering of expectations.

It has been something of a commonplace among students of comics to bemoan the central problem of establishing the legitimacy of their discourse. Many critics and scholars of the comics continue to feel that they need to defend why they should be talking about what they are talking about. Of course any text is inherently a defense of the legitimacy of its subject, even a text that attacks the legitimacy of its subject—a central tenet of the deconstructive position.

In many of these defenses the historical resistance to the legitimacy of the comics is cast in terms of the high versus the low. These critical
narratives recount how the comics, because they were closely associated with the emerging mass marketing of culture through the popular press, have traditionally been considered “low” art. From such “low” origins the comics have, nonetheless, managed to produce some noble works (Little Nemo, Krazy Kat, Uncle Scrooge, Maus, etc. by some noble artists (Winsor McCay, George Herriman, Carl Barks, Robert Crumb, etc.) who sometimes labored in anonymity and rarely with the prestige accorded “serious” artists who practiced “high” art.

As the literary visibility of the graphic narrative has increased over the last twenty years, especially in respect to the appearance and development of the graphic novel, the medium of the comics can now be seen as containing an entire body of work that is literary in its strategies and not intended as strictly popular entertainment. So there are essentially two bodies of work in the medium that are currently being advanced for their artistic merit—The body of work seen as valuable that resides within the popular genres, both historic and current, and the body of work, generally of more recent vintage and often termed a graphic or illustrated novel, that assumes an audience with a literary sophistication prepared to readily accept narratives that are composed in word and image. Behind some of the growing academic interest in graphic and illustrated novels is the suspicion that there may be a growing segment of the audience that is so conditioned by image-rich media that they can only be bridged to literary values through works that combine word and image.
This construction of events aspires to the story arc of the romance and it suggests the strong possibility of a happy ending when the narrative of word and image assumes its rightful membership in the sorority house of the muses.

This is a good story. I like this story. I tell this story.

There are, however, some other aspects of the story that also need consideration.

Over the last three hundred years, as the reproduction of visual representations has caught up with the ease and efficiency of the reproduction of words, the cult of print seems to have become increasingly threatened, or at least suspicious, of the arts of the image. The prejudice I referenced in beginning this discussion seems founded in a fear of the force of the image, assumptions that can be summarized in the phrase: “a picture is worth a thousand words.” Literary critics often write or speak as if they were secretly afraid that this might be the case, that a word is only worth one-thousandth of a picture.

Pictures do, at first blush, seem less exclusive than words. It seems that although one has to be educated to read written language, pictures can apparently be understood without such education. While it may seem as if it is not always necessary that someone be educated to understand the message of a picture, pictures are still made up of more conventions and manipulations than is commonly realized. To understand conventions of perspective, conventions of representation and the symbolic meaning of
represented objects, viewers frequently need a great deal of experience with
the images of any particular culture to navigate even the most elementary
aspects of the meanings communicated by a picture. The incorporation of
images into electronic media means that much of our ordinary information in
life is now communicated by spoken language, not written, and increasingly,
when we hear mediated spoken language, the information being delivered is
accompanied by an image. The two often work together to create what we
know. Words in and of themselves are neither less nor more accessible than
pictures in creating meaning or understanding.

But traditional literary critics have only rarely acknowledged the
importance of texts that are spoken. As Derrida suggests through his
analysis of Plato’s Myth of Toth (from the Phaedrus) in Dissemination, when
the written word was relatively new it was placed in opposition to the spoken
word, accused of being inherently an imitation and hence, a deception. In
the resurgence of oral culture in film, radio, television, and sound recordings,
the role of writing as a preserver and transmitter of oral knowledge and
information has been challenged and even superseded, much to the chagrin
of those who see the written word as a fortress from which to battle for
traditional values. Warriors in this cause frequently see themselves
defending the castle of literature from both the slovenliness of speech and
the mediocratizing effect of electronic media.

One of the important changes in literary discourse of all sorts—stories,
 essays, journalism, entertainment, fiction, non-fiction—has been the
increasing ease with which pictures have come to accompany and be integrated with text. Works in the comics and graphic narrative provide a body of work in which words and images are specifically conceived to interplay. A better understanding of some of this unique interaction between word and image in establishing and representing the narrative has, I think, important implications for the entire future of literary studies.

The graphic narrative requires the audience to read, simultaneously, both words and images to imaginatively realize the work. Graphic narrative as a form of storytelling has developed over the last two hundred years as visual culture and the mechanics that have made its promulgation possible have become increasingly more accessible and more important in creating our ideas of ourselves.

If literary study is ultimately a meditation around the act of reading, than the reading of the graphic narrative is a very important subject for literary discourse. Definitions of what constitutes a text have certainly expanded in the last fifty years. Critical discourse about film, television, outsider art and popular culture now seem pretty much at home among disciplines previously devoted mostly to textual works. The inclusion of more disparate works and genres under the rubrics of literary criticism corresponds with the way in which works of film, television and other media have become more central to the articulation about, participation in and preservation of cultural values and mythic wisdom. Many of the most important texts that shape individual ideas and that define the common
cultural experience of the 21st century are texts that combine words and images. Many of these are movies, which we now commonly view in the intimate theaters of our homes so that the experience of “viewing” has come to resemble quite closely the experience of “reading.”

We quite often share the experience of these “texts” with the various communities that make up our social existence and most of us develop extensive “readings” of films or television programs that are based in critical approaches of various levels of sophistication and that quite frequently reference the opinions and tastes of others.

We access and incorporate these narratives much in the same way we have accessed and incorporated books into intellectual and cultural life during the last few centuries. Books and videos now share the same marketing, packaging, retail outlets, and vie for the same critical space in newspapers and periodicals. One of the most significant additions to the North American commercial landscape in the last 35 years has been the lending libraries for videos that became features of even the smallest communities or crossroads. Now they have become centralized megalibraries of multisensory stories easily assessable by internet and UPS.

Like the book lending libraries of the 19th century, these establishments and the new pipelines of information that intend to pour a Niagara of narratives into our homes on demand, have completely familiarized most of us with encyclopedias of narrative conventions, strategies, devices and schema. As I model the “typical contemporary
reader,” I see someone who is more at home navigating the narratives of television and movies than the stories or accounts expressed in more traditionally textual forms like novels, poems, or short stories. To be a reader in the contemporary sense is to be able to assemble narratives and construct meaning out of both words and pictures, often when they are juxtaposed or integrated. To be an educated and literate person in the 21st century is to have as substantial an acquaintance with the works of Hitchcock, Altman, Jarmusch and Wes Anderson as the works of Vonnegut, Morrison, Franzen and Zadie Smith.

In looking at the way text and image were beginning to interact in the publishing worlds of the 18th and 19th centuries, it is possible to see how the two were inevitably coming together. Readers had come to expect pictures with their stories and writers like Dickens would conceive and execute their work in close concert with the illustrators, often writing to images and visual ideas the way contemporary filmmakers often construct their stories to initial concept art. Text was often used to embellish the narrative of a picture, making the pictures more definite and not, as is generally assumed, the other way round. This tendency for words to explain and contextualize pictures often describes the relationship of text and image when the two are juxtaposed.

Those of us who teach in the genre tend to think of the graphic novel as an inevitable outcome of the efficiencies brought to storytelling by improvements in the technology of printing. Narratives in word and image
have been developing since the middle ages where most of the representational conventions of telling stories in sequential art have their roots. Certainly, at least from the 18th century forward, the mutual influences between narrative artists and narrative writers would seem to require any complete study of the development of literature needs to include a study of the development of the graphic narrative. For example, those who wish to adequately present the literature of such writers as Fielding or Dickens should certainly make more than passing reference to the works of such graphic narrators as Hogarth or Cruikshank.

Storytelling as a feature of human experience will, in all likelihood, continue to shape itself to the containers of newer and newer media. The central characteristic of that reshaping is that the story will depend less and less on conveyance through a single sense and that the mode of expression and reception will be increasingly multisensory. Along with narratives in multisensory modes, there will also be an increase in narrative techniques that emphasize interactivity. This does not mean that the act of reading will diminish, it means the act of reading will expand, as it already has, in response to the opportunities of expanded media.

After looking at narratives in emerging media and at many and diverse examples of the graphic narrative, I have attempted to settle on some common elements that may not have been as examined as extensively as have some other, more widely dispersed aspects of narrative such as character, plot, setting, etc. I have settled on three of these elements to
discuss in this paper, “icon,” “representation,” and “virtuality,” aspects of the graphic narrative that, when examined in specific works, have a great potential to reveal the techniques, implications and strategies of those narratives. I have selected those qualities because they have substantial application to the evolving discourse of narratives in word and image as they emerge in new and electronic media. It is my belief that these particular terms will be useful centers around which inquiries and critiques can be made of narratives that are diversely multi-modal and interactive, three dimensional as well as two dimensional. In the discussion that follows I will try to demonstrate some of the ways an examination of certain prominent features of the narrative of word and image can help us approach the study of narrative in general and the wider pursuit of the pleasures of the text.
Chapter Three.

“Icon” and “Virtuality”

Commentary on written text has usually acknowledged at least some visual elements of language and rhetoric. In some societies (for instance those that use character languages like Japanese or Chinese) drawing and writing remained sister arts. In our tradition of reading and writing, eyes (or fingers if we use Braille) translate certain images (letters and combinations of letters) into the sounds (or simulations of the sounds) of speech. Writing for us, after all, is for the most part simply the early technology we had for recording speech. Thus perception by written discourse or spoken speech remained rather similar until about the time St. Augustine marveled that Bishop Ambrose could read without moving his lips.

Once that written text could be detached from the breath; writing was no longer just the media extension of the voice but was an increasingly complicated integration of real and virtual senses [for example when one “hears” simulated voices when one reads, or even when one “smells” or “feels” in response to effective passages of description].

Once that written text could be read without being spoken, whole new sets of textual experiences were opened to the audience. These experiences
were often visual, and one of the perceptive channels that were broadened under the encouragement of these experiences was the channel of the icon.

According to the online edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, icon can be defined as

1. **a.** An image, figure, or representation; a portrait; a picture, ‘cut’, or illustration in a book; esp. applied to the ‘figures’ of animals, plants, etc. in books of Natural History. *Obs.*

   **b.** An image in the solid; a monumental figure; a statue.

   **c.** *Computing.* A small symbolic picture of a physical object on a VDU screen, esp. one that represents a particular option and can be selected to exercise that option.

2. **Eastern Ch.** A representation of some sacred personage, in painting, bas-relief, or mosaic, itself regarded as sacred, and honoured with a relative worship or adoration.


4. A realistic representation or description in writing. Now rare or *Obs.*

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**icon, n.** A person or thing regarded as a representative symbol, esp. of a culture or movement; a person, institution, etc., considered worthy of admiration or respect. Freq. with modifying word.
An icon then is a sign often in the form of a representation which shares, or appears to share, something in common with what it suggests or represents. The icon is an image that can be understood, when “read,” to imply certain larger contexts that are often collective, sacred, summarizing, or seemingly generalized. An icon might be a word, a proper name or, often, a picture. Sometimes word and picture are layered together to create a symbol that is rich with meaning or that is made more accessible or more clear.

The icon has an ancient history. The making of sacred icons may have been one of earliest forms of cultural utterance and often straddled the function of both word and image, comprising both name and visual representation. Something as simple as a signboard over a tavern is a good demonstration of how ancient is the lineage of the icon on our computer desktops. The same process by which an ancient Athenian located a taverna or with which a 21st century businessperson finds out if she has email, is what underlies the way we read and deploy all icons, from the evocation of the name of Ulysses or Superman, to the devotion we give to a chromo of a blonde Jesus, a publicity shot of Elvis, or a pin-up of Marilyn Monroe.

In many of these cases there is a tendency to want to boost the power of the symbol by deploying icons that are made of both word and image linked together. One reason for this may be that when the brain perceives a picture of an object, say a can of tomato soup, a different chain of neurons is activated than when the brain is just shown the words, “Tomato Soup.”
Neural responses to a picture of a can of tomato soup are also going to differ, necessarily, from the responses to the apprehension of an actual can of soup.

The icon is often thought of as metaphorical, but as the definitions above make clear it would be better to think of the icon as a metonymic trope because to become an effective icon the sign must contain representative elements of what is being referenced. In the study of the icon we must inevitably consider not only what is being referenced or invoked by the icon, but how that reference or invocation is constructed by the choices involved in shaping the representation itself.

| Fig. 3 | Limited edition cans issued by Campbell's Soup in a 2004 advertising promotion celebrating Andy Warhol's representation of Campbell's Soup Cans. From an ebay advertisement for Andy |
| Fig. 4 | A set of silk screen prints of Andy Warhol's representing Campbell's Soup Cans. From an ebay advertisement for Andy |
Functional neuroimaging by various techniques—m.r.i., p.e.t., o.t.—is providing new insights into the exact neurological means by which we perceive, consider, contemplate, process and imagine in relation to words and images. In developing theories of the icon and of virtual experiences, critics will have to account for the theories of thinking and perception that are emerging from these new sources of information. In my discussions here I have tried to incorporate some of that information when it seems to illuminate the way we read the comics.

Experiments in functional imaging have shown that when we read a picture, most of our perception is taken up in linear operation—that is, generally we are reading the picture one part at a time in some sequence. We rarely attempt to take on the whole picture at once. Rather, in the apprehension of image and text, the raw information is passed through several areas of the brain that sub-process and filter the information for rapid recognition. If the image can be refined into a simpler, coded, or familiar form, schema that are familiar to the sub-processing brain regions, than the perceptive experience can be modeled in one quick impression of the whole image or major potions of the image which tends to trigger set chains of associations. These refined, simplified or coded images are icons. Reading...
the image as icon can thus speed up apparent comprehension. These characteristics—refinement, simplification and encoding—are some of the characteristics that make up what I call here the “iconic.” There are other characteristics of the iconic, especially characteristics that are defined by illusions of distance from and within the narrative, that I will discuss below.
Virtuality and Illustration

Another term that is at the center of the explications in this paper is the term, “virtuality.” I hope to show that “virtual” and “virtuality,” which are emerging as important terms in discussing aspects of narrative as manifested in new media, can also be useful and productive terms when applied retrospectively to texts in traditional media as well.

Among the definitions for “virtual” in the OED there are a few entries that help us understand the term in this context,

4. a. That is so in essence or effect, although not formally or actually; admitting of being called by the name so far as the effect or result is concerned.

g. Computers. Not physically existing as such but made by software to appear to do so from the point of view of the program or the user; spec. applied to memory that appears to be internal although most of it is external, transfer between the two being made automatically as required.

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virtual, a ....Also in more general use, esp. in virtual reality, a notional image or environment generated by computer software, with which a user can interact realistically, as by using a helmet containing a screen, gloves fitted with sensors, etc.
virtual pet, an electronically simulated animal with which human interaction is possible; spec. a hand-held toy with a small screen displaying the animated image of a pet which can be cared for and responded to (by pushing buttons) as if it were a real pet; cf.

I think the O.E.D. defines the term “Virtuality” in ways that have even more application to my context here,

1. a. The possession of force or power. Obs.

   b. Something endowed with virtue or power.

2. Essential nature or being, apart from external form or embodiment.

3. A virtual (as opposed to an actual) thing, capacity, etc.; a potentiality.

What is virtual has a history of resonating with truth or at least with virtue. It is often contrasted with what is “actual.” I think of the virtual as a state of imaginative perception—distinct from hallucination, dreaming, and ordinary reality—in which external stimuli, often encoded or representational or both—combine within the perceiver to produce a self-conscious delusion that any particular set of perceptions can be accepted as “real” although it is acknowledged at the outset that they are not “real.” This state usually begins
with at least a suspension of disbelief, if not outright willing and vigorous participation in the illusory process. This process of illusion may be encouraged and enlarged upon by mechanical means, such as the projection of images and sounds to simulate reality (as in film or television), or through the various rhetorical devices of any narrative. Many of these devices are deployed to create effects of verisimilitude. For example the tale of *Robinson Crusoe* is putatively an account in a log book, as is Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. The story of *Lolita* is introduced as a jailhouse memoir. Proust makes use of detail and the patterns of reminiscence to anchor his narrative’s discourse; Joyce simulates the associative organization of thinking/feeling/action within the interior thoughts of a human being as in Molly Bloom’s soliloquy. The mechanics and rhetorical devices of verisimilitude permeate our narrative experiences and seem specifically designed to help us virtualize the narrative, i.e. make the experience of reading the narrative seem somewhat like actually experiencing the events of the narrative.

Most devices used to help create narrative verisimilitude are shadows or impressions of the senses that are restimulated, not by a separate, original stimulation, but by an association that recalls the initial impression. These restimulations rarely call forth impressions with the same force as whatever stimulation that formed the original sense memory. When one reads a story in the traditional manner—eyes or fingers scanning and deciphering the written words on a screen or page—descriptive passages,
emotional accounts, situations described in the story call forth our
responses.

Some literary aesthetics have focused on the ways that writing
creates objects whose primary mode of representation reflects the unique
qualities of “being read,” i.e. the sense of having the gaps in the text
imaginatively filled-in by such simulated experiences. In several seminal
essays written in the mid-to-late 1970s Wolfgang Iser outlined a
phenomenological position that helped formulate one of the main streams of
Reader Response criticism. Iser introduces a vocabulary of virtuality to
describe some of what he constructed as the experience of reading, the act
of converting narrative to meaning. Iser poses his terms in a context in
which virtuality and reality were perceived as near opposites. The virtual was
conceived as contained by the real. These days, when mating the terms into
“virtual reality” it is now the real that can be seen as potentially contained
within the virtual. Along this axis, from virtuality to virtual reality we can
transect the subject of the graphic narrative, the object being to illustrate the
act of reading that is made up of the unfolding of narrative through both word
and picture.

Iser’s “virtuality” is conceived out of the same context that J. Hillis
Miller discusses in enlarging on the relation between words and pictures in
his essay, Illustration.

Image et texte—Mallarmé’s phrase identifies the place of a
warfare between the two media, in the full spectrum of its
possible skirmishes, from the true blue of pure text at one end
to the reddest red of pure representational image at the other, if
such purity exists. At one end text seems wholly dominant, the
literary text entirely without pictures other than those it
intrinsically ‘evokes’. But some poems are also, strangely,
pictures…such texts are calligrams. The words are arranged to
make a representation of what they talk about. …Concrete
poetry of our own day also belongs to this tradition. Calligrams
seem intended to show that the words on a page can do
anything pictures can. After all, both text and image are
something seen with the eyes and made sense of as a sign.
What, in fact is the difference between reading a word and
making sense of a picture? This is just the question. (Miller 73)

Miller notes that Mallarmé seems to think that a dynamic struggle
exists between words and pictures, a struggle in which they contest for the
attention of the reader.

‘I am for—no illustration’, says Mallarmé, ‘everything a book
evokes having to pass into the mind or spirit of the
reader’…The words on the page have a performative power of
evocation. They make present in the spirit something otherwise
absent. If that power is distracted, drawn off in a detour,
diverted into an illustration…it will then not operate when it
ought, on the spirit of the reader. It will pass into the picture
and be present there. The text will be impotent to work its magic effect of evocation on the mind of the reader, calling forth spirits within it. A book, it seems, has only so much magic energy. An illustration will drain this power off, leaving the book dead letter, short-circuited by the superior power of the illustration to make something present. The book has always been no more than dead letter, since its power is the power of evocation a raising of the dead. The word evokes. The illustration presents. (Miller 67)

Miller projects Mallarmé as upholding the traditional privilege of text over image for being, in a sense, more subtle in its stratagems because it “evokes” responses from within the reader. At this juncture Iser intersects with Mallarmé,

“…the strategy of the novelist must be such that the reader, in bringing about the virtual dimension, is actually entangled in what he has produced. Only in this way does the reading process become something alive and dramatic, and this is vital since its meaning is not to be illustrated by the characters, but is to take place within the reader...” (Iser 43)

The unifying ideal both share is that the experience of reading is interior and that it is at its most effective when the reader is allowed to imaginatively fill in the blanks, the spaces in the text:
“Thus the reader’s imagination is left free to paint in the scene. But instead of a concrete picture, the reader’s imagination is far more likely to create simply the impression of a living event, and indeed this animation can only come about because it is not restricted to a concrete picture. This is why the character suddenly comes to life in the reader—he is creating instead of merely observing. And so the deliberate gaps in the narrative are the means by which the reader is enabled to bring both scenes and characters to life.” (38-9)

Iser’s idea of virtuality is that the virtual experience is evoked from within using the reader’s pre-existing resources of imagination to flesh out the linguistic skeleton of the narrative text. In this approach to narrative, the creator of the text adopts stratagems that allow the reader to insert him or herself into the text.

The role of the reader as incorporated in the novel must be seen as something potential and not actual. His reactions are not set out for him, but he is simply offered a frame of possible decisions, and when he has made his choice, then he will fill in the picture accordingly. There is scope for a great number of individual pictures…whenever this ‘critical infidelity’ occurs in the reception of the novel, then the work is reduced to the level of its individual reader’s disposition; but the reader’s role…is meant to open him up to the workings of the text, so that he will
leave behind his individual disposition for the duration of his reading. In this way, and in this way only, he will gain a positive and active insight into human nature.” (55-6)

Iser summarizes this perspective, for which he acknowledges Roman Ingarden, in this way:

The text as such offers different “schematized views” through which the subject matter of the work can come to light, but the actual bringing to light is an action of Konkretisation. If this is so, then the literary work has two poles, which we might call the artistic and the esthetic: the artistic refers to the text created by the author, and the esthetic to the realization accomplished by the reader. From this polarity it follows that the literary work cannot be completely identical with the text, or with the realization of the text, but in fact must live half-way between the two. The work is more than the text, for the text only takes on life when it is realized, and furthermore the realization is by no means independent of the individual disposition of the reader—though this in turn is acted upon by the different patterns of the text. The convergence can never be precisely pinpointed, but must always remain virtual, as it is not to be identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader. (Iser 275)
The choice of the wording “bringing to light” by Iser in the above passage is particularly interesting in that the phrase is the literal translation of the term “to illustrate.” Iser seems to model the reader as engaged in a process of personally illustrating the text. It’s no wonder that the presence of actual illustrations complicates this view of the act of reading. This situation can only be further complicated when the text not only incorporates illustrations but is narrated through both words and pictures; however, this complication need not be distractive nor destructive of the virtuality. The graphic narrative as a genre demonstrates that the penetration of the reader into the spaces of the work, the wrapping around the armature of what schema the author(s) and the reader(s) supply, happens in both the linguistic and pictorial aspects of the work.

It is far from certain that Mallarmé’s assumption that the book has “only so much magic energy” is correct. Even if the potential “magic energy” in a work, the possibilities within a work to evoke feeling and response, is finite; the potential of words to evoke or pictures to represent is not likely to drain, one from the other, because they are being processed by separate areas of neural perception and the information from that processing is being cross-referenced and resonating through the networks of neural association. It seems more likely that works in word and image increase the potential for the magical energy of evocation rather than decrease it.

At the heart of the matter is an assumption that the illustration only serves to confine and define the imaginative evocations of words. But
usually it is the defining power of words that contextualizes images and not the other way around. The relationship between word and image is almost always made up in this fashion, when presented together, or even when related but presented separately, words define and express the contexts by which images can be received and their relation to other images and/or ideas. Images have great powers of evocation but little intrinsic power of definition. Exploring the potential evocative power of the narrative image, calling spirits from within the mind of the audience, was to become part of the surrealist project whether those images were composed of words or pictures. One of the most powerful examples of this is the “Novel in Collage,” Une Semaine de Bonte by Max Ernst, an example in which we can easily see a graphic narrative’s potential to evoke responses from a reader even though it is constructed primarily of pictures.
Ernst, Evocation and the Graphic Narrative

Max Ernst was a pioneer image maker in the Dada and Surrealist Movements and was also an experimenter with dadaist and surrealist texts. He mobilized his image/textmaking in the container of “the book” several times, most notably in two collage novels *The Hundred-headed Woman* (1929) and *Kindness Week* (1934). Both of these works embody “collage” as we have come to understand it today, an assemblage of elements from different sources united to form a new image designed to produce a new perception of experience and a meaning distinct from those of its sources.

Fig. 5 Collage from *The Hundred-headed Woman* by Max Ernst. 1929. Art of the 20th Century.

Fig. 6 Collage from *Une Semaine de Bonte*. Max Ernst. Paris: Editions Jeanne Bucher, 1934. Rpt. Dover, 1976. (200)
Une Semaine de Bonté or the Seven Deadly Elements was carefully poised by Ernst to reside within the dynamic between word and image, a dynamic that has been constructed to offer large gaps of specificity into which the reader can fit the story they imagine. It is about as open-ended a graphic narrative as one can imagine. As the art critic and curator Werner Spies explains at length, Ernst assembles his imagery in a way that is very local to himself. His obsessions, his biography, his outlook are very present in the choices of imagery he deploys, but while these choices localize the work, they do not seem to narrow the participatory channel for the reader. If anything, the channels seem expanded as the reader is invited to make a narrative of their own to accompany the juxtapositions that Ernst constructs.

Ernst clearly expects Une Semaine de Bonté to be read; he does not expect us to regard the work as a printed portfolio of separate works on the same theme. In this way it is not unlike Hogarth’s engraved sequential narratives The Harlot’s Progress and its mirror reflection, The Rakes Progress. Ernst’s work was composed in five sections and published over the course of 9 months. Later it was republished in its entirety. Each of the sections is focused around a title and some short epitaphs which are presented at the beginning of each section. These texts are open-ended point of reference around which we are invited by Ernst to form our reading. The subtitle of the work is “The Seven Deadly Elements” so each Day of the
week is provided with an “element” and an “example” as well an inspirational quotation or two.

Ernst launches his little narrative canoe on these limited contexts, but he floats the vessel of the work on the sea of our expectations and our resources. For a number of years now I have chosen this work as the introductory reading for students in my Literature of the Comics and Graphic Narrative course. I have asked the students to begin the course by translating any of the sections of the narrative into English words. These are some of the responses:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fig. 7a. Thursday-Blackness-Easter Island</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(168)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fig. 7b. (169)  
Fig. 7c. (170)  
Fig. 7d. (171)  
Fig. 7e. (172)
One student writes,

I chose to do the section of Ernst’s novel, Easter Island.

Though I went through the whole novel and was totally confused, I could piece together the story. It seems that in the
first sequence of the story, the Easter Island man is revered and looked up to, by the woman in the window, and being introduced to the party, though his egotism takes control and he becomes more controlling over the woman that he was admired by. She is then turned off and turns him down. Then he goes to a bar and becomes very drunk, returns to the party and becomes forceful with the woman and finally is shunned by the people he was so revered by. A story that could very well fit the issues of today’s date rapes and domestic violence. Maybe he meant it in another way, but that is how I perceived it.—Sean Murray
Another student “translates” an earlier section of the same work:

The water section is most puzzling because the water seems to be separating women from what they fear or the water acts as a purifier. I don't know. In some of the images,
men look as if they are being swept away from the women or the water has killed them maybe. Also, in some of the images the ladies are being observed by gentlemen. I thought maybe these men were Ernst himself trying to speculate on what a woman thinks about. From seeing that the water separates men and women, I guess that that is what Ernst probably thinks woman think about or, in this case, dream about.—Roger Hill

Students who respond to this exercise rarely have trouble coming up with some translation of what they are reading into words. Sometimes their stories have similar elements but mostly they do not. But the mere suggestion that there is a story here that can be translated into words seems enough to insure that they will find the story that they can read.

The importance of *Une Semaine de Bonté* is usually just touched upon in discussions of the graphic narrative. Arguments for the legitimization of the genre of works that combine word and image are usually founded on appreciations of artists working in popular forms whose work is generally seen as undervalued. The argument is generally that this or that work is underappreciated for its aesthetic value because it was composed in a genre generally seen as trivial, juvenile or low culture. But the project of advancing the work that integrates word and image is not exclusively a popular
tradition; for instance, it has always been a project of the 20th Century’s avant-garde.

Max Ernst’s experiments with the graphic narrative were not departures from his work or tangential investigations. His collage novels are recognized masterworks and reflect his central concerns as an artist; moreover, the collage novels pioneer aesthetic issues that are very much in the foreground of early 21st century culture. Despite the fact that Ernst’s works pointedly and most self-consciously explore the most essential issues in the construction of narratives that unite word and image, these works are rarely brought into context with more easily recognized examples of the graphic narrative such as the comic strip or the comic book.

The critic and curator Werner Spies, in his extensive discussion of Ernst’s practice, *Max Ernst Collages: The Invention of the Surrealist Universe*, credits Ernst with the invention of the collage. Spies is careful to distinguish what he calls the collage from the papiers collés utilized by other modern artists to diversify the materials of their paintings. For Spies the simple formal substitution of found objects for more traditional materials in the making or art works is not the same as Ernst’s intentional rearrangement of found materials for purposes of reconstructing meaning. This is an interesting distinction even as it rests on the perhaps unsupportable assumption that there is such an easy distinction between formal or structural elements and elements that are designed to create meaning.
It is certain that Ernst, about 1919 had an awakening to the aesthetic effect of the recomposition of accepted and conventional imagery, an awareness he describes himself in his essay Beyond Painting (Au-delà de la peinture),

One rainy day in 1919, finding myself in a village on the Rhine, I was struck by the obsession which held under my eyes the pages of an illustrated catalogue showing objects for anthropologic, microscopic, psychologic, mineralogic, and paleontologic demonstration. There I found elements of figuration so remote that the sheer absurdity of that collection provoked a sudden intensification of the visionary faculties in me and brought forth an illusive succession of contradictory images, double, triple, and multiple images, piling up on each other with the persistence and rapidity which are peculiar to love memories and visions of half-sleep. These visions called themselves new planes, because of their meeting in a new unknown (a plane of nonagreement). It was enough at that time to embellish these catalogue pages, in painting or drawing, and thereby in gently reproducing only that which saw itself in me, a color, a pencil mark, a landscape foreign to the represented objects, the desert, a tempest, a geological cross-section, a floor, a single straight line signifying the horizon...thus I obtained a faithful fixed image of my
hallucination and transformed into revealing dramas my most secret desire – from what had been before only some banal pages of advertising. (Spies, Collage 29)

At the very least Ernst’s statement shows that Ernst’s epiphany was not a formal inspiration, but a realization how simple juxtapositions could alter perception and involvement.

One could argue that this idea was, in essence, “in the air.” Certainly these same principles of juxtaposition are simultaneously being used by such artists as Sergei Eisenstein and D.W. Griffith to construct the grammar of the film. The technique of creating narrative links, dramatic emphasis, associative meanings, and other effects in the minds of the audience by merely juxtaposing images, even from completely different contexts, is becoming known and understood across many art forms by the 1920s. And the essential trick—the collaging of image and word—had been known since the very first efforts at mass producing illustrated works. For example, the early English broadsides that some critics mark as the beginnings of the graphic narrative in English (Sabin) made use of this device for economic reasons. In broadsides sold as souvenirs at public hangings, stock pictures would sometimes be used and reused to commemorate different executions. If the picture and the words could be united in the mind of the audience to produce the desired effect, it seemed unimportant that the images and the words that were combined with the images may have orginated from
different contexts. The freedoms and possible ambiguities were well appreciated by artists and writers alike.

J. Hillis Miller in *Illustration* makes note of this when he discusses a popular image that emerged from the U.S. Civil War. The image was originally a painting by Everett B.D. Julio that was a very popular engraving hung in Southern homes after the war. Miller quotes Twain's response from *Life on the Mississippi*. Having seen the original painting in New Orleans, Twain chanced to ruminate on the importance of the painting's title in creating its effect.

…we saw many interesting relics of the war. Also a fine oil painting representing Stonewall Jackson's last interview with General Lee. Both men are on horseback. Jackson has just ridden up and is accosting Lee. The picture is very valuable, on account of the portraits, which are authentic. But, like many another historical picture, it means nothing without its label. And one label will fit it as well as another:

First Interview Between Lee and Jackson.

Last Interview Between Lee and Jackson.

Jackson Introducing Himself to Lee.

Jackson Accepting Lee's Invitation to Dinner.

Jackson Declining Lee's Invitation to Dinner – With Thanks.

Jackson Apologizing for a Heavy Defeat.
Jackson Reporting a Great Victory.

Jackson Asking Lee for a Match.

It tells one story, and a sufficient one; for it says quite plainly and satisfactorily, ‘Here are Lee and Jackson together.’ The artist would have made it tell that this was Lee and Jackson’s last interview, if he could have done it. But he couldn’t, for there wasn’t any way to do it. A good legible label is usually worth, for information, a ton of significant attitude and expression in historical picture. (Miller 62)

Both Miller and Twain use the picture and the story to show how images can require labels to be “understood.” What is obviously implied is how relative the relationship of understanding is to the selection of elements that are combined. One of the most important strategies of the graphic narrative is this fundamental aspect of collage which allows for a re-imagining of meaning through recombination. Even apparently neutral labels like “Opus 41,” “Study,” “5,” or “Landscape” might seem initially sparse but are fertile with contextualization of whatever image they modify. Sometimes the context that is signaled is the working history of the artist, the formal intent, or even the pose of neutral context itself. All these modifications are powerful and significant in their effects. Since almost all images deployed in our culture are accompanied by labels, consequently the study of images is impossible without a study of the dynamics of the relationship between word and image and that the study of any particular image requires the recognition
and relating of the various labels (words) that have clustered around it. The study of images is by force, also the study of words.

The image artists of the 20th century certainly refined their practice so that now it seems that their images can be deployed for maximum effect with few labels or other modifiers. Sometimes the words that modify images can be mostly ghostly implications, but in many cases the apparent lack of words has been replaced by more complex language structures, structures related to forms, iconography, type, gesture and implied narrative elements.

In the case of Une Semaine de Bonté one of the most modifying contexts of the work is its container. The images that make up the work are packaged as a book; in Spies’s opinion it is specifically organized as a serial novel and was published in just that way, in several parts which were only published as a whole later on. The collage novels stand as a prominent progenitors of the contemporary “artist’s book” in which the perceiver is expected to deploy the expectations that would accompany the “reading” of a book in order to position oneself appropriately in relation to the work. Ernst’s novel is elemental in more ways than one. His subject is not only the elements that are archetypes of what we come to understand when we read, but the elements of how we come to read what we read.

Une Semaine de Bonté is an instructive work because it contains in figurative high relief the most basic elements of the graphic narrative. First is the container that signals that the contents are to be constructed sequentially, that what appears first is to be related to what appears second
and so on. The container signals the conventions that are to be used in assembling the sequence and these conventions are largely the result of cultural tradition and the opportunities embedded in individual technologies that comprise the medium of expression.

In the case of *Une Semaine de Bonté*, the container is called a book and moreover it is labeled a particular kind of book, a novel. This little bit of text invites us to approach the content within the book from the platform of our expectations as to what a novel might be. And so we begin to read the work because it seems to be a book and we begin to assemble a narrative because we are told it is a novel.

As both Eisner and McCloud point out in their respective works on the general theory of the comics, sequence is at the center of the operations that make graphic narrative distinct as a genre. Sequence of course is not distinct to the graphic narrative (e.g. McCloud shows that film might in some cases be considered sequential art), but sequence is what unlocks the real potential of pictures to show/tell stories.

The example of the Easter Island sequence for the Thursday section of *Une Semaine de Bonté* shows how sequence and label work to shape narrative. Sequential narrative is the product of what remains the same and what changes as the reader moves from image to image. In this case, because the size of the image remains the same from page to page, the reader can immediately focus on what is changing or not changing within the frame. Among the most prominent similarities in the sequence is the
appearance of a figure in each of the images with the features of an Easter Island monument. Because one of the expectations we have for novels is that they have characters, we quite naturally perceive this repeating figure, even with its variations, as a character. Because this character is the only figure that repeats in all the images in the sequence, and because it is frequently at the center of the action or composition we read this character as a major actor in the story.

One of the interesting aspects of this character’s design is that it has a face of stone. Although there are some variations from panel to panel in the carving representing the face, the general sense is of an expression on which we project our own emotions rather than of a character projecting his or her emotions through expression. As we shall see, some theories of graphic storytelling (especially Will Eisner’s) de-emphasize the role of facial expression in representing emotional states and emphasize instead the role of posture and body position. In this sequence by Ernst, his choice to use a stone face redirects the reader to a greater awareness of the pose and posture of the various figures within the panels.

Although the principle of “randomness creates its own context” may underlie the effectiveness of the reader’s perception of Ernst’s work—how it can be read at all—Ernst is not constructing his images in a random fashion. Ernst is much more of what we call today a mixer. Ernst has quite cleverly insured that at least aspects of his novel will be easily assimilated as narrative by using as a backboard for his recomposed images, image
components from highly dramatic novelistic sources. In the case of this sequence he relied on 19th century French sentimental melodramas. Much of any single image in this set of pages, one of the shortest but most clearly narrative sequences in the book, may be made up of a single illustration from one of these novels. He is said to have arrived in Italy where he spent three weeks in 1933 during which most of the novel was composed, with a suitcase of such pictures cut from books purchased in second-hand bookstalls.

While the images themselves are composed “automatically,” that is with an intent to work intuitionally and without interference from intellectual constraints and personal inhibition, Ernst has created certain compositional rules in advance by his selection of materials that assure certain component levels of readability in the images he produces as well as certain qualities of imagistic effect. In the illustrations used in the Easter Island sequence the base sources often contain figures in various melodramatic action poses, a language of action and tableaux shared with melodramatic theater. Almost all the panels in this sequence contain a figure with a body position formed to convey a theatrical and melodramatic emotion or reaction. Ernst may be remixing Doré instead of Hogarth but some of the salient narrative illustrative technique is based on the same principles.

The level of appropriation of image is extensive and demonstrates a history of such activities by artists long before software like Photoshop. In images like that on page 174 almost the entire original illustration is lifted
from a single source with the simple imposition of a new Easter Island head over the face of the original image of the male attacker. But just that amount of change of the original not only recontextualizes aspects of the original image but brings the image into line with the rest of the sequence. This work helps establish a long line of legitimacy for the appropriation and expropriation of imagery into new constructs that borrow extensively from their original sources. An example of this same type of remixing within the contemporary graphic narrative would be Patricia Seaman’s *New Motor Queen City*, which adopts narrative strategies very similar to *Une Semaine de Bonté*.

![Fig. 9a. New Motor Queen City Sec.1.2](image1)

![Fig. 9b. New Motor Queen City Sec.1.3](image2)

![Fig. 9c. New Motor Queen City Sec. 1.4](image3)

![Fig. 9d. New Motor Queen City Sec. 1.5](image4)
Virtuality and the Continuum from Absence to Presence

When we speak of virtuality today, we tend to mean an experience closer to simulation. The experience is often designed to feel/seem real; not necessarily to evoke from memory or imagination, but to construct a narrative experience through illusion. But the seeming “realness,” the virtual reality of the experience, is in fact the product of certain stratagems by the authors of these narratives that reference and use schematized views that are familiar to the perceiver of the work and that are deployed at every level of cognition of the work. On the face of it, the experience of reading text compared to the experience of virtual reality seems to be a comparison of the extremes of evocation with the extremes of presentation, of subjective with objective. But critical discourse clustering around both virtuality and virtual reality are in many ways similar. Both discourses attempt to describe and elucidate the absence/presence of the reader in the narrative, and both discourses emphasize the means by which the audience can customize the perception of the work.

If we apply Stephen Holtzman’s definition of a virtual world as an electronic environment, we might see how virtuality and virtual reality are similarly rooted in sensory experience.

A special quality of a virtual world is its lack of actual presence. The virtual realm is an electronic environment built entirely of electrical signals translated into sensory experience. Even
though the five senses may be immersed in a virtual world, the physical body always maintains its presence in the actual world. (Holtzman 47)

The universe of virtuality is the electro-chemical environment of the reader's neural system. For old school virtuality, the neural system is stimulated by the schematics of language and imagery, experienced by the reader in a state of consciousness not unlike that of the daydream. The neural system is stimulated to produce echoes and resonances of sensory experience. It can even be stimulated to simulate an experience the sensory system has never had or would want to have in actual life. It can imagine. The pulse might quicken as a result of the reader's immersion in the narrative. The palms might grow clammy with fear. Or the reader might simply experience a more subdued range of mental or emotional catharsis.

In new school virtual reality, the experience is projected at the perceiver with the idea of having the sensory system translate the projected illusion as if the experience were actual. The emphasis is on simulation, but on simulation external to the neural system of the perceiver, not within it. The narrative is presented to the reader with accompanying effects in a fashion that seems to yearn to the ideal of photorealism, that is, toward a perfection of realization that would be indistinguishable from actual life. A variation on this ideal as a theme can be found in the cyberpunk movie, *The Matrix*. A variation on this ideal as a narrative device would be the holodeck on the second generation of the *Star Trek* television series.
Key to the creation of the virtual reality simulation is the multi-sensory nature of the projected illusion. Future interfaces with virtual reality are expected to expand the sensory repertory of the illusion to include tactile, olfactory and vestibular types of stimulation. Ironically, the ultimate interface as represented by cyberpunk fiction is a return to old school virtuality in which the neural system itself is the interface and the sensory system is bypassed in favor of a direct channel to the neural consciousness. In the novels of William Gibson, this “jacking in” allows the fictional characters to “experience” life on the web, an ultimate media extension of the human being’s neural net that dissolves the boundary of the virtual and the actual.

The graphic narrative was one of the first genres to explore a multi-sensory approach to narrative. Although both written words and pictures are perceived through the sense of sight, the processing of the different forms of information seems essentially discrete, although with significant areas of overlap and coordination. Recent experiments with scanning magnetic resonance imagery confirm the assumptions of brain scientists that images and words excite responses from different areas of the brain (Yoon). Some of the pleasures of the text in the graphic narrative most likely come from the mind’s attempts to integrate and reconcile the information received from the linguistic and pictorial sources of the work. Certainly among the stratagems of the authors of graphic narratives are devices that take advantage of this internal neural interplay.
Winsor McCay might be seen as a pioneer in the narrative that imaginatively “simulates.” He had a profound insight into the possibilities of the page and the potential of the graphic narrative as an illusionist space. His use of illusionist and fantastic space is akin to the narrative technique of theme parks and dime museums both of which according to his biographer, John Canemaker, were significant influences on the content of his work. Among McCay’s first work as a professional artist was as a maker of posters and publicity material for circuses and dime museums. It was during this time that he began his exploration of unusual perspectives and elaborate decorative effects. Among the skills he mastered from this training was the ability to manipulate scale and perspective in such a manner that he could create a sense of realism in his drawings simultaneous with a sense of distortion and exaggeration that would make the implausible seem entirely possible (Canemaker).
Many of McCay’s most important works like *Little Nemo in Slumberland* or *Dreams of the Rarebit Fiend* were placed within the endless possibilities of the dreamscape. The most significant achievement of McCay’s best work in the comic strip was the creation of this imaginative space. In *Little Nemo*, for example, Nemo himself is an extraordinarily static character, wooden in his reactions and expressions and shows little development through the years of the strip’s weekly appearance. The plot lines are slow, repetitive and unoriginal; the dialogue is stilted and uninteresting. Every episode ends in exactly the same fashion, with Nemo waking up from his dream while falling out of bed.

![Fig. 11. Nemo Wakes. Winsor McCay. Concluding panel from Little Nemo in Slumberland. New York Herald, October 22, 1905. 18](image)
Yet *Little Nemo* is considered one of the best comic strips of all time, and it is, but not because of its inventive humor, pungent characterization, or madcap satire, which distinguish much of the best work in other early comic strips. *Nemo* is captivating because of McCay’s ability to create a virtual experience for us unrivaled by any of his contemporaries in its immersive effects. *Little Nemo* is about setting and McCay uses the possibilities of picture and word to create an externalization, a new school type virtuality, of the internal state of mind of the dream.

Ernst’s high art, elite market surrealism simulates the juxtaposition of symbol and memory and recreates the interior landscape of dreaming. McCay’s low art, mass-media surrealism recreates the exterior landscape of the dream and the unpredictable high adventure of dreaming. Ernst gives us the dream as a narrative of potential psychological insight, forged in the deep conflicts of the human personality. McCay gives us a Sunday morning escape into the magical space that we inhabit each night but that drifts away upon waking. Ernst tries to reawake the dream imagery from within using a tarot of images to evoke our own deep associations, like a Rorshach test. McCay tries to recreate for us the visual setting of the dream with its transformations and metamorphoses, its animation and its exaggerated perspectives.
Both these narratives can be said to deploy imagery that both evokes and simulates. Most imagery does both, at least at some level. In Ernst and McCay we have examples of the graphic narrative that each emphasize one of the two forms of virtuality. Ernst’s work emphasizes the virtuality of reading that comes from evocation of the resources within, a form of virtuality like that constructed by Iser. Ernst’s graphic novels stimulate both verbal and visual association, evoking with both word and picture the mechanisms of interior storytelling.

McCay’s *Little Nemo* emphasizes the possibilities of imagery to immerse the reader in another type of virtuality, one that sometimes may even be co-resident with the virtuality of the evocative type. This second type of virtuality uses the multi-modal nature of the graphic narrative to represent a world that can be observed and experienced as if it were exterior to the self. This is the type of virtuality that creates an illusion for the reader that they are “present” within the perceptible world of the narrative itself, usually by providing sensory data, such as pictures, that combine with the words of the text to create an immersive effect. Some ways in which a virtual presence is created for the reader within the worlds of iconic narratives are explored in the next chapter.
McCay’s approach to the graphic narrative was forged when artists, who had dominated the business of supplying imagery to newspapers and periodicals, were increasingly being supplanted by photographers. McCay’s work could take the reader where no photographer could go. The changing nature of the relationship between drawing and photography must clearly be on McCay’s mind in light of the fact that McCay would in later years be considered the most notable pioneer of the animated cartoon which drew from both traditions. In creating drawings that appeared to move, McCay extended his interest in the breakdown of movement and creative metamorphosis already evident in the narratives of Little Nemo. Moreover, the presentation of “Gertie the Dinosaur” (1914), reflects the performative nature of McCay’s aesthetic. Gertie was first projected as part of a live performance in which McCay presented the drawings as a lifesize illusion. Gertie appeared to perform to McCay’s onstage cue. McCay incorporates or originates an entire catalogue of ways to place the reader within the graphic narrative. He seems to be keenly interested in the arts of imaginative simulation, creating the means by which an audience can “see” something exteriorized that once could only be interiorized.

The history of many of the standard devices associated with the popular forms of the graphic narrative like the comics, comic books, manga and graphic novels parallel the history of popular fiction. The work of the art historian David Kunzle amply demonstrates how illustrated broadsheets since the middle ages were the vehicles through which early illustrators
developed the narrative conventions with which they could tell stories. This repertory of devices and effects were clearly in place when the newspaper comics blossomed in the late 19th century.

When McCay begins to experiment with these conventions in the early years of *Little Nemo*, he creates a work that is essentially experiential in its appeal. The recent republication of some of McCay’s best work by Peter Maresca in his edition, *Little Nemo in Slumberland: So Many Splendid Sundays*, reasserts the highly immersive qualities of these works. Each episode in this edition is reproduced at the original size and occupies the entire page of a 16x21-inch 1905 newspaper broadsheet. Each page was a very immersive illustrated environment that, like Hogarth’s, gave good value for the money. It is easy to understand why any early 20th century reader with very little in the way of media entertainment on a Sunday, would be entranced with these works and become involved with them in a very experiential way. *Little Nemo* is a progenitor of what will likely become an enlarging body of works that are far more about setting and the exploration of created environments than about plot or character. The proliferation of High Definition Television has already created an audience for recorded landscapes such as the Discovery Channel HD’s *Sunrise Earth*. Works in the medium of electronic gaming will often be rated by users on the quality of the game environment and the immersive experience which are considered as important or even more important than what aspects of character or storyline might be present in the game. 

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Contemporary comic books are frequently taken to task for emphasizing flashy splash pages and explosive stylistics over fully-fleshed rendering of character psychology or original plots. In part this proclivity is an aspect of the continuing tension between the different agencies of word and image whose combination is the nature of the form itself. In works that lessen the importance of certain attributes of the narrative traditionally emphasized in literary discourse like plot, theme, and character, it needs to be considered that the focus of the graphic narrative need not be either character nor action, but can be simply the milieu of the narrative as an imaginative space—a space through which the reader navigates, often through an iconic avatar, sometimes with little more object than having the adventure of exploring that space.

Experiencing this imaginative space is both an experience of absence, of non-involvement in the milieu, and presence, a sense of being immersed in the “reality” of the narrative no matter what fantastical environment the narrative might represent. This “reality” is a “virtual reality,” a theoretical region not unlike the region of the “picture plane” that one refers to in discourse around painting. Those who prefer to picture their narrative realities strictly within the confines of their own heads favor the literary narrative of silent text or radio with its requirement for evocative language and dependence on textual detail. The iconic narrative of the comics or television provides a wire-frame reality into which one can project oneself. This narrative is less “heady” in that it provides more denotative external
anchors to the imagination in the form of pictures that simulate an external “reality.”

The idea of reading a work of literature with an eye toward determining what it “means” has certainly been put to substantial interrogation and the significance of “meaning” as a theoretical thread that connects narratives across time, space, and medium. has been reduced by twenty-five years of post-structuralist thinking. “Virtuality” as a descriptor of experience has been accumulating significance, resonance and implication over that same amount of time. I believe that “Virtuality” may be a key term in shaping the critical landscape of the twenty-first century because it is an emerging thread of literary discourse that can be drawn through time, space, culture and medium, a thread that spins from the core of the reader’s response.

The representative ideal of virtual reality might be expressed as an effort to recreate the sensory effects of an imaginary event by constructing an artificial reality of exacting verisimilitude. New virtual reality technologies work toward the goal of creating an environment that allows a human being to experience a created work as if it were actually happening to them. An audience, however, is not likely to be that interested in the recreation of “realities” based in the ordinary conventions of perception and representation, “readers” are more likely to seek virtual reality experiences that are “realer than real.” These virtual reality experiences will be virtual reality narratives and the subject of literary discourse. Some of the
implications of a narrative medium that an audience would not be able to
distinguish remains unclear. Some of the implications of this are explored in
a number of science fiction stories, such as *Star Trek: The Next Generation*
or *The Matrix*.

Virtual Reality, a developing technology of sensory illusion, wants to
advance the illusionist possibilities of creating environments that look, sound,
taste and feel like ordinary reality. When we examine questions of virtuality
in the Graphic Narrative we can gain certain insights about how storytelling
works in multi-sensory genres. In the Graphic Narrative we can see how,
just because the method of the delivery of the story combines two major
flows of sensory information, this does not mean that the major thrust of
those two flows of sensory data is to create illusionist verisimilitude.

Narrative devices in the graphic narrative are just as likely to be deployed to
create more interactional relationships between audience and content.

These devices can help immerse the audience in the events of the story by
other means than replicating in finely rendered detail the sensory impression
of the environment or the appearance of the characters.
Chapter Four

Representation, Iconic style and the Illustrated Novel

Among the assumptions that are questioned by this investigation is the idea that a sense of presence within multi-mode narratives is necessarily created by illusionist technique. Just because a narrative is made up of both words and pictures does not mean that the pictures function as a way of increasing the “likeness” of the representations. As the graphic novels of Max Ernst show, pictures can be just as evocative as words, especially when deployed in metaphoric or metonymic fashion. Some multi-modal narrative devices can create impressions that are perceived, not as external, but internal to the self. One of these devices is the icon and the mode of narrative that I call iconic.

One of the most prominent aspects of the graphic novel that distinguishes it from the literary technique of other types of novels is the reliance of the graphic narrative on the devices of metonymy, that is (to adapt Holman) figures that substitute a part of an object or action for the representation of the thing or action itself. This can be a little disconcerting to those schooled in tradition literary critique where so much emphasis is placed on reading through metaphor, figures that imply analogies identifying
one object or action with another ascribing to the first one or more of the
qualities of the second. Metaphor uses a vehicle, an image for example, to
express a tenor, the idea or subject of a comparison between objects,
emotions, ideas or other phenomena. Holman’s observation is that, “The
whole nature of our language is highly metaphorical. Most of our modern
speech, which now seems prosaic enough, was once largely metaphorical”
(315). In the same manner, much of visual language is metonymic, parts
standing in for wholes in a form that compresses the association between
part and whole into a more visible and affective effect.

In *Understanding Comics*, the most important general orientation to
the reading of the graphic narrative currently available, Scott McCloud
outlines the construction of the icon and asserts its importance as a device
through which the graphic narrative closes the distance between the story
and the reader. The icon as a device and the iconic as a style fall within the
category of metonymous discourse. As McCloud demonstrates, the icon
comes about as a result of a reduction of information in an image until a
carefully selected set of simplified parts stands for the whole. Through chains
of association these parts can come to stand for a surprisingly complex set
of characteristics and resonances. For McCloud, the icon registers within our
internal virtualization of the narrative in a fashion that is closest to the way
we internally visualize ourselves.

The way we visualize ourselves in our states of ordinary perception
has more in common with the wire frame armatures that figure in the early
stages of computer animation than the fully realized and rendered, photorealistic images we carry around of others. It’s easy to hypothesize that this perceptive shortcut might easily be the result of the same sorts of economy of processor time and memory within our neural systems that make animating with wire frame figures more efficient than trying to put into motion completely rendered images in an animation station. The consequence of this mechanism of perception is that in the virtual experience of reading the graphic narrative, we naturally wrap around the iconic, the caricature, as if it were an image of ourselves. We become close to that character, so close that we fuse with it in the virtual sense, the cartoon caricature is read as a representation of the self.

Conversely, the representation of character that is photorealistic is read as the representation of the other. One of the interesting variations of this principle occurs when the graphic narrative utilizes a very iconic form of representation for the characters and very photorealistic representation for the settings and backgrounds, as is the case for works like *Tin Tin* or many examples of manga. The effect of this choice seems to be to immerse the reader more virtually into the setting and background.

The genre of the graphic narrative is primarily built on iconic technique. A notable passage of Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* explains how the iconic style of narrative is built into the comics and other forms of graphic narrative involving cartooning. In this important work on the criticism of the comics and its sequel, *Reinventing Comics*, McCloud
demonstrates how a critical discourse made up of words and pictures is necessary to fully explore many of the critical issues involved with the reading of the graphic narrative. In the following excerpts from his discussion in *Understanding Comics*, McCloud sets up a continuum along which he places styles of representation. The styles run from photorealistic to iconically abstract.

![Fig. 13.](image)

AS RESEMBLANCE VARIES, SO DOES THE LEVEL OF ICONIC CONTENT.

OR TO PUT IT SOMEWHAT CLUMSILY, SOME PICTURES ARE JUST MORE ICONIC THAN OTHERS.
Fig. 14.

In the non-pictorial icons, meaning is fixed and absolute. Their appearance doesn’t affect their meaning because they represent invisible ideas.

In pictures, however, meaning is fluid and variable according to appearance. They differ from “real-life” appearance to varying degrees.

Words are totally abstract icons. That is, they bear no resemblance at all to the real McCoy.

But in pictures, the level of abstraction varies. Some, like the face in the previous panel, so closely resemble their real-life counterparts as to almost trick the eye.

Others, like yours truly, are quite a bit more abstract and, in fact, are very much unlike any human face you’ve ever seen!
FIG. 15.

Film critics will sometimes describe a live-action film as a "cartoon" to acknowledge the stripped-down intensity of a simple story or visual style.

Though the term is often used disparagingly, it can be equally well applied to many time-tested classics. Simplifying characters and images toward a purpose can be an effective tool for storytelling in any medium.

Cartooning isn't just a way of drawing; it's a way of seeing.

The ability of cartoons to focus our attention on an idea is, I think, an important part of their special power, both in comics and in drawing generally.

But I believe there's something more at work in our minds when we view a cartoon—especially of a human face— which warrants further investigation.

Another is the universality of cartoon imagery. The more cartoon a face is, for instance, the more people it could be said to describe.

When two people interact, they usually look directly at one another, seeing their partner's features in vivid detail.
EACH ONE ALSO SUSTAINS A CONSTANT AWARENESS OF HIS OR HER OWN FACE. BUT THIS MIND–PICTURE IS NOT NEARLY SO VIVID; JUST A SKETCHY ARRANGEMENT... A SENSE OF SHAPE... A SENSE OF GENERAL PLACEMENT.

Fig. 16 a-b.

THUS, WHEN YOU LOOK AT A PHOTO OR REALISTIC DRAWING OF A FACE--

--YOU SEE IT AS THE FACE OF ANOTHER.

BUT WHEN YOU ENTER THE WORLD OF THE CARTOON--

--YOU SEE YOURSELF.

THE CARTOON IS A VACUUM INTO WHICH OUR IDENTITY AND AWARENESS ARE PULLED...

...AN EMPTY SHELL THAT WE INHABIT WHICH ENABLES US TO TRAVEL IN ANOTHER REALM.

WE DON'T JUST OBSERVE THE CARTOON, WE BECOME IT!

Fig. 17 a-b.
What McCloud implies in his essay is an iconic theory of fiction. In this theory, when representing character, the more iconically the character is drawn, the more the audience can be expected to inhabit the character, to be present in the narrative. On the other hand, if the author represents the character more “photo-realistically,” that is represents the character with a plethora of fine detail, the more the reader can be expected to remain outside the story, an observer of the narrative.

This construct is not the sort of theory common in fiction workshops in the early 1970s. The general theory of storytelling put forward then was that the more detailed the observations the writer could transmit, the more the reader was brought into the story, and the more the reader was present in the narrative. McCloud’s assertion is very stimulating for being largely contrarian to this assumption.

This theory of storytelling accounts, in a way, for the durability and success of stereotypically drawn or stock characters. In McCloud’s catalogue, characters that are finely detailed and richly embellished are the
objective characters, the characters the author wants the audience to experience as outside themselves. Characters that are represented much more schematically are the subjective characters, the ones we want to inhabit within the landscape of the story.

The iconic character is the nexus for the absence/presence of the reader in the narrative. This sense of closeness or distance to/from the other characters or settings places the reader in relation to the action of the story. These positions are determinative aspects of what becomes the simulation of the narrative whole…the realization of the words and pictures that make up the text. Of course this positioning is virtual. The sense of distance between a reader and a character is a virtual sensation, a way of relating that is generally reflexive or intuitive with the reader although the nature of this reflex or intuition may largely be made up of socially constructed responses.

Although icons sometimes can be very resonant and rich with archetypal suggestion, most of the meaning of an icon is socially constructed and usually a matter of associations layered on through repeated contextualization. Icons seem to be rhetorical figures that can be deployed as strong metonymies or they can be deployed as ironies, or both. The more iconically a character is represented the more rhetorically the character might be deployed and the more first-person virtuality it might stimulate in the reader.
One of the effects of encountering McCloud’s theory of iconic representation was the insight it gave me into one of my favorite novels, Kurt Vonnegut’s *Breakfast of Champions*. I became very interested in how the style, characters, and devices of the novel took a pervasive iconic turn. I’ve come to feel there is considerable value in contextualizing this work among graphic narratives and that reading it in this fashion makes visible some interesting elements of both the novel and the genre of the graphic narrative.
Reading *Breakfast of Champions* as a Graphic Narrative

Vonnegut's novel could be called a graphic narrative primarily because it incorporates over a hundred “drawings by the author” and these drawings are deployed as icons in the narrative discourse of the book. These drawings are like and not like the illustrations that became a standard feature of most popular 19th century novels. The audience for fiction at that time expected to receive pictures along with their texts, and the pictures were there to help the readers imaginatively realize the characters and settings. They were there to help the readers “picture” the work. As Bill Blackbeard points out in his Overview to his two volume collection of comics, *The Comic Book Century*, the readers of this period did not index their ideas of what they considered a “good likeness” to the style of representation represented by the photograph. Blackbeard describes the dominant style of illustration of that time as “cartoon art,” in that it frequently strives to represent characters that are iconic types and frequently stereotypes. These iconically drawn characters are not infrequently placed in more specifically represented settings, a strategy of the European comics tradition evidenced in Hergé’s *Tintin* and a prominent strategy in Manga, the term we tend to use for the variety of graphic narratives that come from Japan or that use the narrative and representational conventions associated with Japanese comics.
Blackbeard advances Charles Dickens as a paragon of the writer who embraced the atmosphere of collaboration and partnership between authors and illustrators. He reminds us that Dickens’s first popularity began as an opportunity to write to drawings. The young writer of Sketches by Boz, illustrated by Cruikshank, was offered the opportunity to write the narrative to accompany some drawings by Robert Seymour who, “noted for his skilled comic handling of Cockney sportsmen, proposed an idea for a serial novel dealing with a middle-class hunting club in London taking off on a picaresque tour of the provinces” (Blackbeard 12). Dickens promptly launched into the project with such effort that he overwhelmed Seymour who died “partly of his illness, partly of simple dismay,” as Blackbeard has it.

Seymour was succeeded by Phiz (Hablot Knight Browne) on the Pickwick Papers and they formed a close working partnership that was to last for 20 years and ten more novels. Blackbeard sees parallels in the working relationships of Dickens and his illustrators with those in the various teams of writers and artists who have shaped many comics and other graphic narratives. For example, Phiz and Dickens would meet at the inauguration of a new narrative, which were mostly designed to be published serially, and they would work together on character design.

Eventually the economics of the demand for illustrations as a part of the experience of the book led to increasing reliance by publishers on stock art. A good illustrator could certainly attract sales to a book, the illustrations might even be a prominent attraction, but costs dictated that most books
became illustrated by using stock images. These illustrations were usually engraved economically on cross-cut slabs of hard wood and were the 19th century equivalent of today's clip art. Many of these stock images came to be read and deployed in an iconic way. The language of these illustrations as it distilled the graphic conventions of illustrators before 1850, became the foundation for many of the conventions of the graphic narrative. Most respectable stories had illustrations that tried to provide a non-iconic experience for the audience. The illustrations were there to increase the virtuality of the experience.

It was these illustrations, stock and otherwise, that provided the original material for Ernst's collages. As a bank of images these illustrations reflected a distillation of 19th century representative ideas; they evinced a quality of generic summation like recurring images from a shared cultural dream. Ernst made substantial use of their evocative, iconic qualities which he manipulated in such a way as to produce a unique and personal virtuality, the bank of cultural dream images became organized into a narrative of a personal dream.

The drawings in Vonnegut’s novel are ostensibly included for the purpose of increasing the virtuality of the explanations his narrator offers about life on earth. The drawings appear in the text whenever the putative author, who is not only the narrator speaking directly to the audience but a character himself who participates in the action of the story, wants to make something clear to the audience to whom, in a generally inclusive way, his
discourse is often directed. This audience is constructed as being something like a troupe of visiting Tralfalmadorians, a species of space aliens who inhabit a number of Vonnegut’s novels.

In *Breakfast of Champions* or *Goodbye Blue Monday*, Vonnegut speaks to the reader directly and seemingly conversationally, and as if the listener knew almost nothing about earth and earthlings. This tactic allows the most common assumptions of earthling life to be exposed and apparently explained. The pictures are included in the text by the author ostensibly to help clarify the narrator’s explanations.

Placing the audience in the position of being addressed as if they were space aliens basically turns the conventional frame of the science fiction writer (it was as a science fiction writer that Vonnegut received his first critical recognition) inside out. The genre of Science Fiction is based in part on the conceit that by setting stories on other planets we can more easily see the reality of life on earth. As science-fictional earthlings visit other planets, they frequently have guides to these imagined places who explain things to them as the reader (along with the characters) encounters them for the first time. In his novels, Vonnegut often writes as this sort of guide. He pretends the audience are like space aliens encountering the earth for the first time. A great deal of the fun and stimulation in reading Vonnegut’s work comes from seeing the extraordinary implications behind our ordinary assumptions. The narrator is cast in the role of explainer, and occasionally
what he is asked to explain seems so ludicrous or indefensible that a tone of embarrassment or chagrin enters his explanations.

In making his explanations, the relationship between image and word seems very much on Vonnegut’s mind in the writing of this book. One of the main protagonists of the narrative is Kilgore Trout, a down-and-out science fiction writer whose work is published only in sexually explicit “split beaver” magazines where it is printed as token “social relevance” to protect the magazines from the censors. The novel’s narrator, nominally the author of the preface, Philboyd Studge, explains it this way:

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**Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.**

And so on.

The illustrations for this book were murky photographs of several white women giving blow jobs to the same black man, who, for some reason, wore a Mexican sombrero.

At the time he met Dwayne Hoover, Trout’s most widely-distributed book was *Plague on Wheels*. The publisher didn’t change the title, but he obliterated most of it and all of Trout’s name with a lurid banner which made this promise:

**WIDE-OPEN BEAVERS INSIDE!**

A wide-open beaver was a photograph of a woman not wearing underpants, and with her legs far apart, so that the mouth of her vagina could be seen. The expression was first used by news photographers, who often got to see up women’s skirts at accidents and sporting events and from underneath fire escapes and so on. They needed a code word to yell to other newsmen and friendly policemen and firemen and so on, to let them know what could

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**Breakfast of Champions**

be seen, in case they wanted to see it. The word was this: "Beaver!"

A beaver was actually a large rodent. It loved water, so it built dams. It looked like this:

The sort of beaver which excited news photographers so much looked like this:

This was where babies came from.

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Vonnegut uses a partnership of words and images to describe a shotgun marriage of the same elements, but it’s not certain that Vonnegut means to favor one type of partnership over the other. The arbitrary pairing of Trout's stories with over receptive female anatomy is a little joke about the exigencies of publishing, but Vonnegut's loose, felt-tip drawings exude the same casualness of incorporation. It is the cartoony doodleness of the images that makes them so effective because they reinforce and even shape the attitude with which we receive the text as a whole.

I have always thought that it was one of Vonnegut’s achievements as a writer that he was able to make an art of such informality of style. While the mood of the text is seemingly loose and informal, the presence of insight and implication, of consideration seems behind each mark and remark. This casualness of style tends to rule out overarticulated or overly complex lines. Everything must be put simply and directly, the writer/illustrator studiously avoiding the temptation of falling in love with his own style or his own voice.

The images in the example above are deployed ostensibly in an explanatory manner, which supports the conceit of the audience of innocents. The representation of the lurid banner is explanatory and even illustrative in a indexical sense, i.e. it looks like what it represents. It is also
an example of text that has become an image. The text of the simulated banner, rendered as are the other drawings in felt tip pen, turns the image into an icon, a knowing representation that understands that image is much more than an example, it is a metonymy of a large set of associations that are among the potential resonances of the image as rendered. Among these associations are the commercializations of text; the relative merits of the word and the image, especially the sexually explicit image; and the absurdity of our sexual embarrassment and its vocabulary. In other words these pictures are not explanations; they are icons.

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Fig. 19a. Light switch. 68.
Fig. 19b. Asterix. 71.
Almost all of the images in the book are carefully selected for their iconic qualities. Many fall into distinct categories such as the three images above. The first, a picture of a light switch becomes iconic because it is a representation of an object so common as to have become invisible to ordinary perception. This image, once simplified and contextualized can be seen to have enormous potential implication. The on/off duality can seem, well, positively cosmic. The awareness hinted at is a little trippy but the essence is that the door to the extraordinary is through the ordinary, and the ordinary in the context of sacred perception can become iconic in the sacred sense. It’s just a light switch/ it’s far more than a light switch.

The second image above, the enlarged asterisk, is a sort of ur-iconic landmark in the development of a schoolboy’s discovery of visual ambiguity. Here what can be taken as an innocent language character, the asterisk, can, Vonnegut shows us, also be a reasonable likeness of an asshole. Vonnegut frequently titillates by seeming to skate the very edge of
sophomoric scatology, as in this case, and the four-legged/female figurative imagery illustrated above.

The final example in this set is not iconic word play or visual pun but a picture of the paper loop that used to go around the toilet seat in most American motels with pretensions to high class. It is an icon to middlebrow ideals of hygiene. Its illustration here is to hold up in the mirror of the story the absurdity of how we represent health, purity and sanitation. The joke results from the representation of a common object with implications of social satire. This is like the artfully chosen pop art icon of an artist like Claes Oldenburg who inflates and deflates the object into an icon. The Pop Art sensibility was very much on the minds of at least the marketers of the book who chose a very Pop Art influenced design for the font, layout and cover.

This novel, published in the early 1970s is a masterpiece of literary pop art. This is demonstrated in the very self-conscious way the style of the words and the pictures imitate the iconic character of the comic book. At the very least the title of the novel had Pop art associations at least as far as the book designers were concerned. The cover of the trade paperback edition, which reflects the design of the hardcover, is presented with the Wham! Pow! of late 1960s pop type design and color choices drawn directly from comic books.
Vonnegut’s choices also seem similarly inspired. This novel evidences a significant stylistic transition for Vonnegut. In his personal circle of friends were a number of painters who had made their reputations as abstract expressionists of various types. Starting in the early 1960s a few figures among these abstract expressionists together with a new generation of painters introduced a new paradigm to the art establishment. This paradigm became known as Pop Art. Diane Waldman in her monograph on Roy Lichtenstein describes how, by 1963, Lichtenstein
...and other artists of his generation such as Jim Dine, Jasper Johns, Claes Oldenburg, Robert Rauschenberg, James Rosenquist, George Segal, and Andy Warhol, many of whom were working independently, had turned to the common object, popular culture, or the mass media as the underlying theme of their paintings and sculpture, and effectively brought to an end the long reign of abstract expressionism. (3)

In *Breakfast of Champions or Goodbye Blue Monday*, his seventh novel, Vonnegut seems to have joined this project. This is conveyed in the imagery of the novel and the tone with which the imagery is put forth. The images themselves include a number of Pop icons distilled from or injected into the narrative. Among these are flags, smiley faces, chickens, apples, and images like these

Fig. 22a. Cow. 124.  
Fig. 22b. Burger. 125.
which are classic pop iconography. They are classically Pop because in part they are so easily—almost universally recognizable. My seven-year-old autistic son wandered into the room while I was writing this and where these images were displayed on the screen. He took one glance and immediately said, “there’s a cow and there’s a burger.”

The novel quotes, represents and incorporates many examples of commercial signs and advertising into the text. In the 1950s Commercial Art had been poised as the opposite extreme to Fine Art which at that time meant abstract expressionism. Pop artists reversed the privilege of that binary. Commercial art was celebrated for its lack of pretense and the bold, vulgar frankness of its appeal. It was cold about involving you, it was calculated to push your buttons, it actively sought to persuade you with any device commercial artists and writers could devise to penetrate their audience’s defenses.

Commercial art and advertising were also widely disparaged by the tastemakers of the period and thus were ripe for the tactics of the avant garde which likes to make “high” out of “low.” This play along the silk purse/sow’s ear continuum almost always preserves “the shock of the new” for whatever art establishment is setting the conventions of taste that are being overturned, or at least this is what happens according to the theory of the avant garde.

In the case at hand, one of the important sources of the low which would become high was the comics, both comic book and comic strip. The
first Pop paintings of Warhol and Lichtenstein were based on cartoons and comic strips. Both artists arrived at this imagery independently and were apparently attracted to the way in which this material brought with it inherent elements of conflict, drama, expression and narrative context.


Warhol almost immediately abandoned the imagery of the cartoon and became more interested in the artistic possibilities in the common object. His next experiments were with the Brillo box and the Campbell’s Soup can. Lichtenstein continued to experiment with the comics and the technique of the comics for the rest of his career. Many of his most significant works incorporate interactions between words and images that are directly modeled
from specific panels of comic strips and comic books. These works rely for their effect on the viewer “reading” the painting, the textual components in these works are not just painterly effects, reading the words is a part of the way by which a meaning for the painting can be constructed. *Breakfast of Champions or Goodbye Blue Monday* is a graphic narrative that overlaps with the traditional form of the novel; such works as Lichtenstein’s *Masterpiece* and *Eddie Diptych* are graphic narratives that overlap with the traditional form of the easel painting.

In making these paintings Lichtenstein applied some of the same creative devices to both word and image. In his painting, *Takka, Takka*, for instance, when the final image is compared to the source it can be seen that Lichtenstein edited and manipulated the words as much as he did the image. Waldman describes some of these manipulations,

...in Lichtenstein’s version, the yellow band of text running across the top occupies a generous third of the
total space—a larger proportion than the original comic strip—and places maximum pressure on the image, condensing it considerably and heightening its intensity. In fact, he altered the composition quite a bit, keeping some of the images but changing others, and emphasizing the relationship between the way words sound and their visual equivalent. He enlarged “Takka, Takka”; made modifications to the narrative and to the border separating the text from the image; reconfigured the proportions of the surrounding frame, making the canvas ten percent wider in relation to its height, cropped the overall image at the bottom; and added his own color scheme and Benday-dot pattern. He also added a few forms that were not in the original comic strip, such as the explosion that dominates the middle tier of the composition. (Waldman 95)

What he changes in the text is interesting. He deletes the reference to Guadacanal as the context for the battle illustrated in the panel and he changes “marines” to soldiers. These changes have the effect of making the content of the panel less specific and more general. In a similar way the deletion of the soldier’s hand (presumably tossing the grenade), the deletion of the Japanese flag on the bunker wall and the transmutation of the helmet of the machine gunner into
something looking more like a hard hat or a part of the machine gun have the effect of making the context less specific and the image more iconic.

Waldman concludes that “Lichtenstein thus made a painting that, unlike the comic strip on which it is based, is a statement of powerful complexity.” This comment seems couched more in a need to defend such methods of painting than any fairness to the illustrator of the original image. At least to my eyes, the original image is pretty complex and dramatic. The original seems more narrative; Lichtenstein’s more iconic. Of course Lichtenstein has had much more time, attention, size and cultural leverage to bring to his work than the unknown illustrator of the original who is trying to get a serviceable image on paper as fast as she or he can. The comics’ illustrator of this period was looking for ways to simplify his or her task because the economics favored the artist who could refine a technique that could tell the maximum amount of story with the minimum amount of lines. Lichtenstein advances this aesthetic into the world of fine art along with some of the illustrative techniques with which the comics are associated.

Devices such as the Benday-dot, the speech balloon, and visual sounds effects had firmly established themselves as conventions of the comics and commercial graphic narrative by the 1950s. Lichtenstein used these conventions to attack both the establishment
of abstract art and the illusionist space of painting. The editing and recontextualization of the original panels in these paintings create new images that are more intensified, more generalized, more iconic and more ironic. This irony is an important component in the audience’s disillusionment.

A necessary part of the creation of this irony comes from the expropriation of the original image. The expropriations of Lichtenstein and Warhol need to be celebrated. Their approach is a very important root to the emerging dynamics of making 21st century art. When I look at what Lichtenstein does to the original image in the making of “Takka, Takka” what strikes me is how similarly expropriated images and text are routinely reconstituted by artists (both professional and amateur) using contemporary digital tools like Photoshop and other imaging programs. This is the exact sort of editing and retouching of images that has become very common and looks to become something of an assumption underlying contemporary visual culture.

In the 19th Century, engravers and other commercial image artisans were engaged in editing and retouching the work of fine artists for the purposes of publishing the image to a much wider and less elite audience. Lichtenstein and Warhol reversed this, editing and retouching works of commercial image makers for circulation among a much smaller audience of the elite who are in the “know” and capable of constructing the iconography of the images ironically.
Warhol, Lichtenstein and the generation that adopted “Pop” as a loose association of styles with which to play an ironic game helped close the gap in our perceptions between high and low. More recently comics, animation and other imagery from popular culture have been conflated in the art movement called Superflat, in which fine art and popular imagery are compressed in works that are superficial and often “cute” but often intensely ironic.

Fig. 26. *KaiKaiKiki News* by Takashi Murakami. Lithographed Poster. (2001) BBC Online

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/collective/A875171](http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/collective/A875171)

One of the hallmarks of both Pop and Superflat is a sense of humor and the humor is mostly ironic. The mannerist version of Pop,
such as the Batman TV series, implodes this irony into camp; however, I think that the prominent aspect of Pop that Vonnegut found so easy to associate with was the ironic quality of Pop, not its camp followers.
From the Novel with Illustrations to the Illustrated Novel

*Breakfast of Champions* is a prototype of the graphic novel that is primarily made up of words. It is closer to a graphic narrative than a typical book with illustrations. A book with illustrations would be like the various volumes in the *Harry Potter* series which boast evocative illustrations on the cover and occasionally within the body of the book.

In discussing the strategies behind the pictures deployed in the *Harry Potter* books with the illustrator of the American editions, Mary GrandPré, she relates that these illustrations were designed as concept art for future visualizations (like products or movies) but as expressionistic versions of descriptions of characters and places set out by the author. These strategies were set out first in conversations with the editors and, later, with Rowling herself, who draws and has her own illustrations of Harry Potter's world to draw upon.

In the context of the book itself, the illustrations are not used to advance the story but to incite the imagination in an impressionistic way, sometimes not so much illustrating the text as illuminating it. What the illustrations add to our perception of Rowling's fictional universe is most frequently an iconic addition, an opportunity to enter the virtual world through the vehicle of the pictures' iconic style.

GrandPré’s illustrations of the characters are close to caricatures in
their "soft geometry;" they invite the reader to merge personally with
an image of the character. This process is exemplified by the illustrator
herself as she uses her own face as a reference for the face of Harry
Potter in constructing his look. While certainly a matter of some
convenience for the illustrator, this choice puts its imprint on the virtual
possibilities of the images, advancing their iconic qualities.

In order to retain the way in which the illustrations summarize
and create an impression of the author's work, GrandPré, is one of
the few people who is allowed to read the books before they are
released.

Fig. 27a. Harry Potter  
Fig. 27b. Mary GrandPré
from Scholastic.com

Other iconic effects used by GrandPré include the design of the
now familiar typeface which is hand drawn in a way that evokes the
spirit and mood of the work. This typeface was used on the cover and
subsequently adapted as a logotype for the marketing of both toys and the movie.

Fig. 28  Harry Potter Title Logo. Designed by Mary GrandPré. (1998)
©Scholastic Inc.

The overwhelming popularity of these novels put pressure on the publishers to provide more and better illustration in these books than might be the ordinary case, although the initial two volumes were conceived within ordinary expectations before interest in the novels exploded into a global cultural phenomenon. At the same time, the page count of the novels themselves swelled significantly and there were more opportunities for illustrations. By the introduction of the fifth volume, illustrations within the novel contributed significantly to imagining the work.
Fig. 29. Chapter Illustrations from *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* show an iconic style of representation. By Mary GrandPré. (2003) Warner Brothers.
The Harry Potter volumes are good examples of the illustrated book, and sit on one side of a continuum opposite the purely graphic novel, such as Max Ernst’s *Une Semaine de Bonte* (*Kindness Week*) or Jim Woodring’s *Frank*. In the graphic novel of images, the syntax of the comics link juxtaposed pictures, usually expressed in panels, in a narrative that tries to tell a story with the least amount of words necessary. Comic strips like *The Little King* and *Henry* that tried to do this were called pantomime strips. The artists of both of these strips, while trying to maintain a self-imposed discipline of doing without words were, at times required to use supporting characters to say a few words or to use signage and other words to facilitate the reader’s understanding of the story. As Don Markstein notes in his online *Toonpedia* entry on Otto Soglow and his cartoon, *The Little King*,

…This sparseness of language isn’t the only element of the minimalist approach Soglow took toward his cartooning. There is also a sparseness of linework to rival that of Barnaby, another favorite among cartoon strip critics. Soglow believed in putting as little as possible between the reader and the humor.
In the illustrated book, the relationship between the words and the illustrations is that the pictures amplify the mood or style of the work, provide additional virtuality to the text, and/or add more concrete and specific detail to the descriptive materials of the book. The narrative is not advanced by the pictures and the images contain information that is largely duplicated by the text.

The exclusively graphic novel, the story that tries to do without words in telling its story, is the mirror image of the illustrated book. The words are used largely as image elements like signage or as virtual sensory input like sound effects. The words provide some additional concretization of the story being told in the pictures but are not used in a significant way to advance the narrative.
Fig. 31. Page 12 of Frank in “The River” a pantomime narrative in which textual elements are used as objects to show story rather than to tell it. By Jim Woodring. The Frank Book. (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2003)
Between the extremes of this continuum we can place other narratives that combine word and image with an eye toward how the words and pictures combine, or don’t combine, to tell the story. In all the examples selected for this discussion the characterization and style of the representations are iconic, only the functional relationship and the relative amounts of word to image changes. Looking at a few key examples across this continuum allows us to see iconic mode as it plays through a range of graphic narratives.

Vonnegut’s *Breakfast of Champions* resides somewhere near the extremes of the text dominated work, but in the direction of the pole of the more exclusively graphic narrative. As discussed above, the function of the cartoons that interpenetrate Vonnegut’s text is to place the work squarely within the dynamics of iconic discourse. It is certain that the illustrations do amplify the mood and style of the work and that, in fact, their influence is such that Vonnegut’s style takes a significant turn toward the iconic with this novel. It cannot be said that Vonnegut’s illustrations add more specific and concrete details to the narrative, but they do place visual icons into play next to literary versions of iconic characters and iconic settings. While the pictures do not advance the story as such, Vonnegut’s pictures supply the atmosphere as well as specific tropes that help the reader understand how to read and assimilate the substantial iconic turn in his prose style.
The genre of the graphic novel has come to suggest a long-form work of comics in which the words and the images both combine to tell the story. Most of the information conveyed by the images is not duplicated by the words, and most of the information conveyed by the words is not repeated or restaged by the images. In works of this type, word and image are part of the narrative flow of the work. The story is broken down into pages, panels and speeches or narrations which are sequenced and composed graphically for maximum narrative effect.

The creation of the graphic novel is often credited to Will Eisner, although there are several others who also claim credit for inventing the form. Various long forms of the comics have been experimented with since the picture stories of the Swiss schoolmaster Rodolphe Töpffer or works like Thomas Rowlandson’s *Dr. Syntax*. First Will Eisner in the 1970s and later Art Spiegelman in the lat 1980s and early 1990s published works that eventually helped establish the graphic novel as a market category with a defined presence in bookstores and libraries. The genre has continued to develop and now includes a range of longer works including translated Japanese Manga which are often made up of serial stories thousands of pages long issued in multi-volume reprints. Manga reprints account for at least half of what usually appears in the graphic novel sections of bookstores and much of that is made up of sho-jo manga, or stories designed to be read by girls or young women.
Among some of the most reviewed and most highly praised graphic novels of recent years have been Chris Ware’s *Jimmy Corrigan, Smartest Kid on Earth*, *Blankets: An Illustrated Novel* by Craig Thompson and *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi. These are exemplars of the contemporary graphic novel written in the traditional form of comics, using sequences of panels. Each of the novels spreads the story elements across both the images and the words of the work. It would be difficult to quantify the relative levels, but the reader does not get the impression in reading the work that either image or word predominates. Most often there is a balance of the two that integrates so successfully the reader is largely unaware that they are reading the narrative in a multi-modal fashion.

Craig Thompson’s *Blankets: An Illustrated Novel*, treats the themes of first love, loss of faith, reconciliation with family, and the search for meaning in just under 600 pages of virtuoso graphic storytelling. Any truly detailed discussion of the work is far beyond the scale of this essay and deserves several dissertations of its own (which it will probably have, I have heard of a couple that have already been started). This book is now my usual recommendation to anyone who has no experience of the graphic novel and wants a place to start reading into the genre. The story is so artfully told that its graphic effects, many of which are brilliant, go mostly unnoticed by readers because they are so involved in the main thread of the story. This is
the aesthetic of the graphic narrative that is present in classic storytellers in the form, like Carl Barks, where technique serves story, not the ego or self-promotion of the artist.

Thompson’s style of representation in this work is less abstract than the circuit-bent funny animal conventions he used in his previous long form work in the comics, *Goodbye, Chunky Rice*, but it is still very iconic. It is iconic, however, in a very lyrical idealizing way which is one of the endearing qualities of the novel.
Fig. 32. Page 182 of Craig Thompson’s *Blankets: An Illustrated Novel*. (Marietta, GA: Top Shelf, 2003)
As Chris Lanier says in his online review of the work,

*Blankets* is most persuasive in its nearly tactile evocation of first love. The revelations of sexual and romantic love are treated with the awestruck reverence they command in the adolescent heart. It’s only natural that, to someone trying to be a good Christian, these experiences would ring with the thunder of Biblical truth. Thompson has a beautiful facility of line, and the fluid drawings have a nearly devotional quality — he not only wants to materialize the past, he wants to make it sacred (the hands he draws seem particularly eloquent, like the poised and articulated hands of saints).

Thompson’s style in this work is very similar to Eisner’s in its approach to iconic representation of character emotion and reaction. Most of the emphasis in drawing a character’s responses is placed not on facial expression but on pose and body language. The expression on the faces of the characters often remain static or controlled while the more extreme the emotion or state of mind being represented, the more extreme is the body language of the representation of the character. These extremes are emphasized by distorting the figure geometrically when emotions are arch and dissonant, and in a rounded and curvilinear manner when emotions are warming, safe or loving. These distortions of the body tend to bleed into similar
distortions of the interiors or landscapes reflecting the way in which personal mood affects the way we render our surroundings. While there are occasionally panels that seem neutral in their observation and recording of place, most panels that feature the exterior world are represented with a more iconic slant that suggests the state of mind of the observing memorialist who is reliving the story.

The self-conscious literary effort of the work is the pursuit of memory. Thompson readily admits his reliance on Proust as a literary model, filling his sketchbooks with quotes from *Remembrance of Things Past* as he develops his own work. In a mutual interview with cartoonist and graphic novelist Allison Bechdel, he points to the following quotation from page 784 of his copy of *Remembrance of Things Past* as being an especially important quotation that influenced his thought and method in the making of *Blankets*.

For with the perturbations of memory are linked the intermittencies of the heart. It is, no doubt, the existence of our body, which we may compare to a vase enclosing our spiritual nature, that induces us to suppose that all our inner wealth, our past joys, all our sorrows, are perpetually in our possession. Perhaps it is equally inexact to suppose that they escape or return. In any case if they remain within us, for most of the time it is an unknown region where they are of no use to us, and where even the most ordinary are crowded out by memories of
a different kind, which preclude any simultaneous occurrence of them in our consciousness. But if the context of sensations in which they are preserved is recaptured, they acquire in turn the same power of expelling everything that is incompatible with them, of installing alone in us the self that originally lived them.... The self that I then was, that had disappeared for so long, was once again so close to me that I seemed still to hear the words that had just been spoken, although they were now no more than a phantasm, as a man who is half awake thinks he can still make out close by the sound of his receding dream." (Bechdel)

Like Proust, Thompson’s project is the representation of memory. His challenge is that he has to do this not only with text but with pictures as well. What is remembered must be holographically transferred; the sense impressions that interpenetrate and even index the past are analogized and coded into a graphic narrative. As audience we are transported into not only the matter of memory but the shape of recollection. What is subject is not only what is being remembered but how it is remembered and how the deepest felt matters of the heart are interwoven with whatever we imagine we remember.

The result is not a Proustian tale accompanied by illustrations, but an illustration of the Proustian mind. Thompson calls this effort an illustrated novel. This is to associate himself with the ambitions of the novel as a form
and the mode of illustration as a vehicle. *Blankets: An Illustrated Novel* affirms the literary standing of the graphic novel because it is rooted in literary strategies, literary interests and literary technique. It undertakes the same relation to the rendering of its subjects as does the novel.

Our virtual experience of *Blankets* is very filtered by the author’s point of view. The dominant sense in reading the work and perhaps its most attractive aspect as a narrative is the simulated participation in the strong perspective Thompson has on life and most especially on a particular girl. This is very much a novel about love and especially the highly charged and deep emotions of first love which are untempered by experience and banked by intense desire.

Thompson does not simulate what the experience is like while it is being undergone. He simulates it for us in the way it is remembered or dreamed. It is a retasting of the experience in the Proustian manner. Like any novel we read it not to experience love for the first time nor to even vicariously live first love again but to experience the memories of his first love and to place ourselves within the virtual spaces of his remembered realities. We read for voice, for the uniqueness of the other’s experience, for point of view. In the graphic narrative we hear it, we see it; in this combined way we read it.

Thompson talks about himself as a “calligrapher” in a way that he contrasts with Chris Ware’s perception of himself as a “typographer” (Hatfield
Both of these terms model a graphic relation to writing and reading that is fused, not an accompaniment.

*Blankets* with its literary provenance provides tangible evidence that there is a continuum present along which text and illustration can be described in a relationship that constructs a novel. To place them in opposition would be like pitting plot against character. One can be descriptive about the amount any work might favor words or pictures or the balance of the two in the constitution of the novel, or one can describe the interactions between word and image in the construction of any particular work. Until recent technology allowed for more efficient and economic reproduction of images, the amount of illustration within the container of any particular novel has been largely limited. There is a range of examples where the amount of illustration is more substantial or even dominates but there are not numerous examples. In forming any canon of works that help to collectively define the graphic novel, it is important to include works like Ernst’s, Hogarth and Vonnegut to help describe the boundaries that make up the continuum of these novels. The nature of the contemporary audience, continuing changes in visual information technologies and the development of the form of the graphic novel insures that, increasingly, more works of literature will be falling along this continuum.

*Une Semaine de Bonte* (*Kindness Week*) gives us the graphic narrative as a folio of illustrations sequenced as single panels in a longer work concerned with the novelistic interests of time, memory, dream,
relationship, psychology and the inherent character of human beings. It is made up primarily of images. Breakfast of Champions is a graphic narrative with the same novelistic concerns, made up largely of snippets of text interpenetrated with snippets of images, each unbordered panel of text or image constructed with equal weight and value in telling the story and advancing the rhetorical concerns of the narrative. It is made up primarily of text.

When Thompson calls his work “an Illustrated novel” he is intentionally trying to distinguish it from many works like manga reprints and other serially published works that tend to dominate contemporary perceptions of the graphic novel. He, in fact, resisted the importunities of his friends to publish it serially first, which he felt would undermine the perception of the work as a unified whole (Hatfield Interview). Because the term graphic novel has come to be associated with any long form of the graphic narrative, there is an understandable desire on the part of a writer like Thompson to distinguish his work with literary ambitions from those that are just collections of shorter efforts or episodic adventures. The issues of serialization in the construction of the graphic novel, the limitations and opportunities associated with that paradigm, and the issues within the current literary environment around the growth of the graphic novel are more than adequately explored in eminent comics scholar Charles Hatfield’s study of recent developments in the graphic narrative, Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature. Hatfield relates that he toyed with the idea of titling his
work, *The Rise of the Graphic Novel*, to make more explicit the connection between his work and the methods and observations of Ian Watt (153).

Like Watt, Hatfield’s study makes considerable connection between the economics and social history of the graphic narrative and its development as a form. Hatfield deploys a number of examples that reflect on the effect serialization has had on the construction of certain works and categories of work. He reminds us that the economics of serialization once played a significant role in the development of the non-graphic novel.

The difference in this developing literary dynamic between the serial novelists and those looking to create a more unified and self-contained form of the graphic novel may just boil down to a difference in approaches to writing between the “drafters” and the “planners”. “Drafters,” those who may plan as they go or not plan much at all in terms of the long story arcs of any ongoing work and who may thumbnail individual pages or sets of pages as they go along are fine within the context of serial publication. “Planners,” those who want to have the long story arcs completely framed and may even thumbnail the entire work before beginning on actual production of pages, are not necessarily adaptable to serial publication. They generally want to wait to allow the audience to experience the complete and full impact of the work. Even roughing out an entire graphic novel is a time consuming task that in itself can take years before actual page production begins.

Despite the fact that it is affixed to the title of a significant work in the genre, I am unconvinced that the term “illustrated novel” will be a useful term
in distinguishing novels and other long narratives not conceived for serial publication but more interested in works with defined beginnings, middles, and ends from those that are conceived or constructed in serial form. I am more inclined to think the term “illustrated novel” will come to indicate works that feature lengthy passages of graphic narrative or that are even dominated by graphic storytelling, but that also incorporate large sections of traditional text. A prototype of this kind of illustrated novel is The Diary of a Teenage Girl by Phoebe Gloeckner.

Gloeckner’s novel is the purportive diary of teenage girl, Minnie Goetz, growing up in San Francisco in the mid-1970s. It is a novel based not so much on memory as documented experience. Using her own diaries as a source, incorporating them, sometimes verbatim, into the narrative (and the endpapers), Gloeckner roots her story in the experience of her younger self, which she approaches re-creatively, using a persona through which to dramatize her past.

By the time I began the book, nearly 25 years had passed since I had lived in the time I wanted to write about. The physical diary was like an artifact from another realm of existence. In the meantime, I had somehow become an adult, and I found myself regarding the author of the diary as any and all 15-year-old girls — and this girl was in a state of emotional bouleversement. I cared for her, like a mother in a way, and wanted to see her prevail over her troubles.
At first the diaries seemed precious: I was afraid to change them in any way. But I wanted to write a novel, not to compile a collection of my juvenilia. I knew that my challenge would be to preserve the girl-ness of the teenager, whether I was using her actual words or not, and whether she was indulging in precocious or regressive behavior. I essentially spent two years locked in my garage, hidden from the world, and living the interior life of a teenage girl. (Bengal)
Fig. 33. “Victorian Book” Illustration for *Diary of a Teenage Girl*. By Phoebe Gloeckner. (Berkeley: Frog Ltd., 2002) 159.
What Glöckner uses as a device for distancing her authorship from her teenage avatar is the interweaving of illustrations and graphic narratives into the warp and woof of the text. Although some of these images are from her actual teenage notebooks, most are drawn in the present, in her contemporary style.

Initially I was drawing single images to illustrate the book, sort of like an illustrated Victorian novel. This became frustrating, as the pictures were not serving to propel the narrative — they were redundant interpretations of it. They offered no real relief from the self-centered voice of the teenage person who is writing for no one but herself. I began doing certain scenes as "comics" because that way, I had the opportunity to offer a window looking out at Minnie’s life from a perspective that was not her own. (Bengal)

While a device to facilitate both authorship and readership, the existence of comics within the work appears, at the end of the day, a phenomenon of the voice of the writer which quite naturally breaks into comics the way other voices might break into verse or song. Even when the novel is maneuvering forward as a novel with illustrations, the appearance of the illustrations within the narrative conveys the author’s unique qualities of voice. Both pictures and words establish the novelist’s undeniable presence in the narrative which is especially desirable as an additional layer of textual investigation and revelation because of the work’s autobiographical
inference. The events that unfold for the fifteen-year old protagonist, including an extended sexual relationship with her mother’s boyfriend and being prostituted by a girlfriend for drugs, are incidents in the author’s life that were preserved in her diaries.

Fig. 34. At Monroe’s Apartment. 89.
In the text, Minnie, Gloeckner’s fifteen-year old persona, comes to discover and be encouraged to pursue comics as a form of self-expression. Minnie is especially encouraged by encounters with comics artists Robert Crumb, Aline Kominsky and Diane Noomin all of whom were early encourager’s of Gloeckner’s pursuit of the comics as expressive art. The narrative is interwoven with such self-reflexive moments. Self-reflexivity, however, does tend more to self-examination through the distancing device of the novel’s passages in comics.

The reason this happens is that in the passages written in comics Gloeckner asserts herself as the narrator letting her adult self relate the story through her comics voice instead of editing or reshaping the voice of the Minnie persona. It is through the cumulative illustrative passages that we get to see Minnie from without. We see her contexts, and the larger patterns in the world around her are revealed by the change in distance and perspective. We see what Minnie can’t see herself.

There is substantial reassurance for the reader in this narratorial presence. The accumulated moments of self-reflexivity have created a close identity between the events in the narration and the presumed life of the author. We know that Minnie, the ostensible author, will survive because we know the representative language of the comics and the illustrations are not that of the fifteen-year old girl but the mature version of Minnie, now equipped to look at the past with an unblinking gaze. This reinforces the
impression in the epilogue that Minnie’s really is a survivor despite or because of the way her life has been in crisis.

Fig. 35. Minnie in Crisis. 262
Gloeckner organizes her illustrated novel to develop virtuality at three levels of the narrative—the words, the illustrations, and the comics. First there is the virtuality of the words in the story which simulate and may often adapt the actual words of the 15-year old version of the author. The conceit that it is a diary would provide a certain sense of verisimilitude in any event, but this particular novel goes farther in that it is, at least in some part, the actual diary of a teenage girl. The sense that the diary accounts are the actual entries by the author’s younger self is supported by the inclusion of actual illustrations and comics done by the 15-year old Phoebe. The inclusion of these drawings virtually insists that we regard the novel as very thinly disguised autobiography.

Second, the use of the traditional illustrations within the text is the mode that provides the most distant perspective on the events of the narrative. This perspective virtualizes the interior and exterior worlds of the presumed author. The full page captioned illustrations and the spot illustrations interleaved within the diary entries are the most composed and balanced accounts in the narrative. These drawings represent the view of the observing mature version of Minnie/Phoebe capable of putting a frame and a structure around the experience of her adolescence.

Third, the portion of the narrative that is told in the mode of traditional comics is placed virtually within the present time of the story. The point of view of this virtuality is that we watch Minnie as she goes through the actions of her life. The diary entries are monologues that give us a view of events
that is completely Minnie’s. We get some dialogue recorded in these entries, but just what Minnie wants us to hear; we have to infer the contexts through which the other characters are speaking.

Comics allows us to experience dialogue in a very direct way, even more directly than dialogue that is fashioned in typical novelistic prose. The dialogue in comics is immediately contextualized by the settings, the represented character of the speaker, and the dynamic interaction possible through the simulated presence of other characters. This contextualization occurs because the dialogue, usually in the form of a speech balloon, emerges visually within the context of the pictorially expressed descriptions of the setting and the characters; the reader experiences this rich visual context simultaneous with the moment that the dialogue is read. In comics, when dialogue is received, character and setting do not have to be remembered, they are present, as they are in actual events, at the same time the verbal information is received.

Gloeckner uses the portion of her story written in comics as a means of dropping into the third person; the voice of the narrator is a voice speaking in comics. The use of comics gives us the sense of watching the story move forward while having more perspective on events than is available within the confines of Minnie’s account of things.

A quality of Gloeckner’s specific voice in these comics is the way she has modeled her character designs in the comics portions of the narrative to reflect the proportions of more typical character design for comics. In the
full-page illustrations the characters are drawn between four and four-and-a-half heads high. These are the proportions often used by boardwalk caricaturists or illustrators of children’s books. This choice imparts to the characters a sort of forced cuteness that is very appropriate for Minnie’s world view and which feels very ironic in the hands of the mature Phoebe executing the illustrations. The result is that the illustrations drip with irony of which the cast of characters is so woefully ignorant that the illustrations can be wrenchingly painful to read.

The proportions of the characters in the comics portion of the narrative are rendered closer to the seven heads size of typical character representations in comics that are more on the photo-realistic side of the representational continuum. Gloeckner’s characters in this novel’s comics are about five to five-and-a-half heads high. A typical superhero these days might be rendered at nine, nine-and-a-half, or even ten heads high. This difference in character design changes not only the point of view when we shift from the illustrations to the comics, but the mood, the style, and the literal sense of proportion within the narrative itself, giving it the sense of being more normal or typical, closer to the reader’s point of view.

Moving so readily among these three major modes of narrative discourse Gloeckner is able to produce a reading experience that gives great verisimilitude to the reader’s presence within Minnie’s world. Alternating among all three modes she is able to incorporate sophisticated levels of absence and presence and the presumed author’s position in relation to the
events recounted in the story. She uses the ability of the comics to provide a better sense of “in the moment” virtuality. She uses words to represent, in first person, the state of mind of her protagonist so that we find it easy to reside within the protagonist’s virtual headspace. She uses the traditional techniques of the book illustrator to affix a comment to the story, a window into its visualization but also a distinct point of view on the character and the action which we can, in this case, ascribe to the author. *Diary of a Teenage Girl* is a prototype of the varied virtualities that can be unleashed within the illustrated novel.

Posy Simmonds similarly stitches traditional textual narration together with book illustration and comics in her illustrated novel, *Gemma Bovery*. This work does not hinge on self-reflexivity nor on autobiographical sub-text. Instead it loosely adapts a classic novel and retells the story through a distinct narrative character. The novel, as the title suggests, is a retelling of *Madame Bovary* within a contemporary frame. The story is narrated by a local baker with literary pretentions who gets caught up voyeuristically in the life and affairs of a recent addition to the population of the little village in Normandy where they all reside. The typical textual portions of the novel are in his voice. But Joubert the baker’s narration is interpenetrated on every page with the illustrative elements of the work which expand the narration in a contrapuntal manner by providing the author’s wry observation and point of view.
As in *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*, the illustrative materials often are there to add verisimilitude or additional detail to the narration. The illustrations include letters, drawn versions of photographs, maps, architectural drawings as well as landscapes and interiors. As various points are made in the narration, the pictures expand on those points, vertical elaborations to the horizontal flow of the story.
Fig. 36. Charlie’s Workshop. Vertical elaborations of the horizontal flow of the story. By Posy Simmonds from *Gemma Bovery* (Boston: Pantehon, 1999) 22.
In Simmonds’s work as in Glockner’s, the illustrative features break out into comics, advancing the narration instead of just glossing it. In the comics passages in Gemma, the voices of the other characters come into the story in a more objective way than if they were narrated by Joubert. This is also the way aspects of the story can be told that would be impossible for the narrative character to know or see. Comics becomes the vehicle through which the writer can easily counterpoint the accounts of the narrator with the perspectives of the other characters who in comics, can speak for themselves.

Unlike in *Blankets* or in *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*, the voice of the maker of the comics in *Gemma Bovery* is not directly a character in the story as either the first person narrator or her later life avatar. In *Blankets*, the maker of the comics is the possessor of the memories which are the real subjects of investigation. Everything we know and feel in the work comes to us filtered through our conscious construction of what we imagine as the artist’s perception. In *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*, the maker of the comics is the possessor of the memories and the maker/possessor of the documents on which the story is founded. She asserts her presence into the narrative to ameliorate some of the rough and troubling aspects of the work. In *Gemma Bovery* the maker of the comics is the stylist of the story adjusting the illustrative elements in a fashion that often indicates her judgements, her attitudes and her points of view. The author’s presence is strong in this work through the diverse inventions of her drawing and her devices of visual
communication which never lets us get away from the fact that we are reading a graphic narrative.

Fig. 37. Charlie’s Panic. 30.
Fig. 38. Three Seasons. 35
The general ratio of words to image on the pages of this novel is about fifty-fifty. There are times when the images dominate, sometimes almost completely, but rarely if ever do pages seem less than half made up of pictures. So the pictures must carry at least half the weight of advancing the narrative. In Figure 37, above, Simmonds creates a metaphor in her unbordered panel in which Gemma is shown filling in her life like a paint-by-number painting. The written narrative that contains the details of the page’s back story occupies the top center of the page surrounded by spot illustrations that each contribute a specific detail that elaborates on the story—a small shot of Gemma’s grief over the loss of her father, country lifestyle magazines that have helped shape the numbered pattern on the canvas that Gemma is trying to fill-in. An illustration of a real estate photo with accompanying description is put side-by-side with the same photograph turned into a paint-by-number image gilded with a few roses and amplified with the inclusion of a over idealized portrait of Charlie and Gemma happy in front of their new home in the French countryside. The narrative put forward by the top half of the page forms the background of the episode that unfolds in the comics that occupy the bottom half of the page. Over each panel of the active storyline there is an bulleted entry from the orderly list of Charlie’s objections. All of these aspects of her page design are laid out in such a way as to leave the impression that Charlie is being successfully maneuvered through Gemma’s scheme. The tone of the pictures—the jibe of the paint-by-number canvas, the smallness of Gemma’s grief, the way
Gemma pushes aside Charlie’s objections with rationalizations that nonetheless seem devoid of any real concern for Charlie’s happiness.
Later in the novel (Fig. 39) Gemma is pictured once again making plans for a new life with a new and different lover. These plans unfold with the elaborate character of a footnoted Baroque cartoon which suggests just how grandiose Gemma has gotten in her total self-involvement.

In Fig. 37 we see nine months compressed into three illustrations of the same scene pictured at three different seasons during which Emma becomes disillusioned with country life. This episode is another example of how illustrative strategies are central to the appeal of the work. These concentrated effects are likely the product of its serialization, the fact that it would have originally been seen by readers of the Manchester Guardian, one page at a time. *Gemma Boverys* is a prototype of the illustrated novel because it uses so many illustrative strategies and devices to show and tell its story. The novel contains both traditional types of illustrations as well as passages in comics and these, together with the written word, are braided quite tightly together on most pages of the narrative to form a very dense music with many overtones that decorate its captivating storyline.

The term “illustrated novel” has the effect of reassuring potential readers that they will understand how to approach the work they are being asked to read. Readers are quite familiar with the concept of illustration and they are likely to be reasonably comfortable with the combination of “novel” and “illustration” put together because the two terms have a long history of easy association. The illustrated novel may be a publishing category that will
make further inroads with the readership of traditional novels. Despite longstanding prejudices against works that combine word and image to tell stories, Illustration still connotes cooperation with the written text and even subservience to it. This is a relationship that readers of typical novels find less threatening then what is implied by terms like "comics" or even "graphic novel."

The novels of Gloeckner, Vonnegut and Simmonds all show ways in which illustration can be artfully integrated with texts in novelistic fashion. The work of Gloeckner and Simmonds also gives testimony to the manner in which full integration of words and image in the novel is best accomplished by using comics. When the story is to be advanced by both the words and images, some close approximation to what we call comics, the juxtaposition of sequential images to tell story with or without narrative boxes, speech balloons or panels (open or closed), is the form such narrative passages most efficiently take.

At the center of the continuum between the novel of words and the novel of images is the novel in the form of the comics. Although called an illustrated novel, Craig Thompson’s Blankets is completely a work of comics. It’s illustrative qualities spring primarily from its use of a contemporized post-impressionist illustrative style. What is comics is not dependent on style of representation or figuration. There are definite styles we associate with the comics, manga style, superhero style, bigfoot style, etc. But comics as a mode of discourse has found itself highly adaptable to the form of the novel
in various ways. Sometimes comics will be used to relate the entire novel, at
other times, only passages. There are also forms of graphic novelistic
discourse, like those used by Vonnegut, that suggest the comics without
becoming them.

The act of reading within the paradigm of a more visual culture will
mean an inevitable growth of works all along the continuum examined here.
Most of these works will make use of icon and iconic styles of representation
to articulate character and to create a means by which readers can become
more “present” within the work. The iconic is a means through which both
observation can be manifested and through which presence can be invoked.
Both of these are the primary means by which virtuality is created and
maintained in the graphic narrative.

Yet there is a dark side to the icon and the iconic and that is the
stereotype. In the next chapter I will examine the way stereotype has been
wound up in the issues of representation in the comics, the problems, both
ethical and practical with the use of stereotypes in the comics and some of
the prominent strategies in character design founded in more diverse
approaches to graphic storytelling, in the novel and beyond the novel.
Chapter Five

Icon, Stereotype and the Ethics of Representation in the Graphic Narrative

Traditional commentary on the cave art of Europe has generally assumed that the pictures and symbols painted on the cave walls by early cultures have a dimension of functional magic. It is hypothesized that humans made those images because they expected, in some way, that the representations they made had some influence or even control over what was being represented. Thousands of years later we are still tracing the manner in which representations can effect individuals, shape culture and form attitudes of self and other. The power to make and shape representations of others is not a power that should be wielded without consideration or thought about the consequences and implications of the images one makes or promulgates. This chapter is an inquiry into some of the ethical issues that accompany the power to represent. It is an inquiry that specifically addresses the ethical problems accompanying one particular schema of iconic representation in particular, the use of stereotypes.

In his book on the narrative aspects of sequential art, Graphic Storytelling, Will Eisner articulates one of the central tenets of representation
in the comics, that effective graphic storytelling is dependent on the use of stereotype. The purpose of this discussion is to examine that tenet and its context.

The terms stereotype and cliché are very close in origin. The terms originate near the beginning of the 19th century and refer to the process in printing in which a metal printing plate, cast of molten metal, is struck from a mold. The type is assembled, a mold made of the type using papier maché or other material, and the molten metal, commonly lead, is introduced into the mold. The resulting plate is used in the printing process while the original assemblage of type can be disassembled and reused. The term cliché is echoic, apparently, of the sound used when a stereotype was cast by letting the matrix fall down upon a surface of molten metal at the point of cooling. The sound made was a sort of “click,” or “cliché.” (O.E.D.)

By the turn of the 20th century both of these terms were no longer limited to describing the specific mechanics of printing, but had been turned to use in describing a number of conditions ascribed to language, appearance or even character. It became possible to use cliché phrases, to dress like a cliché, or even to be a “walking cliché.” The initial image of a cast being made from a mold and then that copy being the enunciator of many other copies—the stereotype—became applied to anything “continued or constantly repeated without change; a stereotyped phrase, formula, etc.; stereotyped diction or usage” (O.E.D.). The meaning of the word “cliché”
had enlarged to include “A stereotyped expression, a commonplace phrase; also, a stereotyped character, style, etc.” (O.E.D.).

By the 1920s the word “stereotype” was most commonly used to describe the “preconceived and oversimplified idea of the characteristics which typify a person, situation, etc.; an attitude based on such a preconception. Also, a person who appears to conform closely to the idea of a type.” (O.E.D.)

It is out of the last sense of the term that Eisner seems to be constructing his central thesis. Eisner begins his own discussion of stereotype (Graphic Storytelling, “Chapter 4: Images as Narrative Tools”) by referencing its origin in printing. This seems his way of contextualizing his discussion around the position that stereotype is just another artist’s tool and one whose use is virtually inevitable in the construction of graphic narratives.

Stereotype has a bad reputation not only because it implies banality but because of its use as a weapon of propaganda or racism. Where it simplifies and categorizes an inaccurate generalization, it may be harmful, or at the least offensive. The actual word comes from the method used to mold duplicate plates in letterpress printing. These definitions notwithstanding, the stereotype is a fact of life in the comics medium. It is an accursed necessity—a tool of communication that is an inescapable ingredient in most cartoons. Given the narrative
function of the medium, this should not be surprising. (Eisner, *Graphic* 17)

Eisner continues,

Comics book art deals with recognizable reproductions of human conduct. Its drawings are a mirror reflection, and depend on the reader’s stored memory of experience to visualize an idea or process quickly. This makes necessary the simplification of images into repeatable symbols. Ergo, stereotypes. (17)

Eisner explicates his method of stereotyping thusly,

In comics, stereotypes are drawn from commonly accepted physical characteristics associated with an occupation. These become icons and are used as part of the language in graphic storytelling. (18)

Eisner’s idea of what is a usable stereotype is amply illustrated in a panorama backstage at an Eisner casting call. Under each of the character representations Eisner has labeled the stereotype he intends to represent. As an revealing experiment I have reproduced the illustration here without the labels. Below the drawing is a list, not in order, of the stereotypes represented in the drawing. Can you match the labels to the stereotypes? The original drawing, including the labels, is reproduced in Appendix A.
Fig. 40. Label the Stereotype. Match the list of stereotypes below with their conventional image. Do you want to reinforce the stereotypes with your selection or call them into question? To see the image with Eisner’s labels go to Appendix A. Image by Will Eisner altered in photoshop by the author. From Graphic Storytelling (Tamarac, FL: Poorhouse Press) 18

List of Stereotypes

Thief       Vamp
Wimp        Boss
Con Man     Scientist
Police      Banker
Mother      Worker
Athlete

170
Among the observations one might make if one tries this experiment is that at least, at some level, the stereotypes are all rather interchangeable. Labels like Banker, Athlete, Scientist, or Worker could be applied to any of the images. Of course when gender is indicated by the label the choices among representations is somewhat more limited, in large part because the set of representations includes only two images conventionalized in a way as to represent women. Of course the number of images that might be labeled Con Man, Mother or Vamp would vary as to whatever preconceptions about gender, androgyny or cross-dressing the observer might have.

When looking at the images after Eisner's labels are reattached I am fond of asking my students how many of their mothers resemble Eisner's conventionalized representation of a mother. It is rare for a student to acknowledge a resemblance. At the same time, almost all the students have no trouble recognizing the image as a conventionalized representation of a Mother stereotype.

Eisner explains,

For example, in creating a doctor prototype, it is useful to adopt a compound of characteristics that the reader will accept. Usually this image is drawn from both social experience and what the reader thinks a doctor ought to look like. (18)
Fig. 41. The basis of stereotypical imagery is the idea of embodying what someone in a particular category should look like. 18

Along the way, Eisner’s explanation for the mechanism behind the functioning of stereotype has morphed from “the reader’s stored memory of experience” to the reader’s “social experience.” The emphasis suddenly shifts from the observer’s natural powers of observation to the nature of his or hers cultural programming. This is a very significant switch.

Eisner wants to hold to some essentialist underpinnings for his theory of visual narrative.

The art of creating a stereotypical image for the purpose of storytelling requires a familiarity with the audience and a recognition that each society has its own ingrown set of accepted stereotypes. But there are those that transcend cultural boundaries. (19)
In Eisner’s worldview there seem to be some universal values. hence there must be some universal icons that can represent those values.

The comics’ creator can now count on a global distribution of his work. To communicate well, the storyteller must be conversant with what is universally valid. (19)

Eisner tends to view all stories as being variations on the theme of human survival. Eisner seems to believe that living things share in common the struggle to survive, and that human beings share a consciousness of that struggle. The near universal awareness of that struggle among humans implies to Eisner that there must be a universal set of images or icons that can symbolically represent that shared awareness.

Whatever the virtues of this hypothesis, it is dubious that Eisner does much to demonstrate it in the context of Graphic Storytelling. He evokes the contention of physiognomists of all periods when he says, “Certain human characteristics are recognizable by physical appearance” (19). But he doesn’t illustrate this in any absolute fashion. His examples seem to be built on associations between characteristics and appearance that are largely, if not wholly, culturally determined.

McCloud makes a good case for how human perception is subject to filtration by gestalt so that some very recognizable schema, such as the human face, arise unbidden from our flow of visual information. These perceptive operations seem nearly universal because scanning for the pattern is automatic and the data is filtered for these schema close to the
entry ports for the dataflow. The act of recognizing faces seems to have been very important early in the development of the human species, as it seems to be very important in the early development of human individuals.

Eisner seems to want to evoke a presumed process nearly as deep in human neurology when he discusses the sourcing of stereotypes in archetypal personification of animal attributes.

In devising actors, it is important to understand why the use of commonly accepted types can evoke a viewer’s reflexive response. I believe that modern humans still retain instincts developed as primordials. Possibly the recognition of a dangerous person or responses to threatening postures are residuals of a primitive existence. Perhaps in the early experience with animal life, people learned which facial configurations and postures were either threatening or friendly. It was important for survival to recognize instantly which animal was dangerous. (20)

And then Eisner provides an example of how archetypal, or perhaps neurologic, readings of animal-based images can evoke character recognition.
Fig. 42. Employing Characters that Resemble Animals. Eisner suggests some representations of types have their basis in primordial human perception of animals. 20

In considering the reading of these images one must consider that while the human types portrayed physically resemble the appearance of the animals with which they are paired, the characteristics associated with those features are purely a matter of cultural conditioning.

I think what Eisner gives us is a very nice description of how to develop archetypal stock characters by using animals and especially animal-based allegory to provide visual models. In the particular examples Eisner
illustrates in Fig. 42, the representations seem to me to be drawn not so much from character abstractions of the animal but from individuals in Eisner’s acquaintance who seemed to him to resemble a particular animal and so he uses that animal as a reference point for designing his caricature of them. I think this can be seen in Eisner's caricature of owlishness which seems substantially like a caricature of Eisner himself.

The representations end up displaying not universally recognized qualities but simply preconceptions—preconceptions about animals derived from traditional anthropomorphic readings of their presumed characters, preconceptions about the people whom he may be caricaturing—preconceptions in a sense, masquerading as observations.

These preconceptions are on display in the three panels that illustrate Standards of Reference.

![Standards of Reference](image)

Fig. 43. Standards of Reference. Eisner illustrates the relationship between stereotype and standards of reference. 19
The images labeled Heroism and Evil are examples of pure stereotype. They clearly resonate with associations to our preconceptions about the physical appearance of heroes and evil-doers. But there is no necessary connection between the images and the attributes they supposedly project. For example one could complicate the reading of the images by replacing the label for “Heroism” with the label “Hitler Youth,” or the label for “Evil” with the label “Advanced Scoliosis.”

Eisner moves on to explore how stereotypes can be used to create humorous effects by unexpected interpolation of type and situation.

Fig. 44. Stereotypical humor. Substitute an unconventional stereotype for the conventional one in a situation and the result can be humor. 19

Eisner is not blind to the implications of his joke or his defense of stereotype. Many Eisner stories touch on the effects of preconception, prejudice and the rhetoric of stereotypes on individuals. Anti-Semitism and its roots were
active areas of inquiry for Eisner and comprised the central subject of two of his late works, *Fagin the Jew* and *The Plot*.

Eisner’s rationale for the use of stereotypes is largely a pragmatic one.

In film, there is plenty of time to develop a character within an occupation. In comics there is little time or space the image or caricature must settle the matter instantly. (18)

In graphic storytelling, there is little time or space for character development. The use of these animal-based stereotypes speeds the reader into the plot and gives the teller reader-acceptance for the action of his characters. (20)

The general rationale is the need for speed and certainty of recognition which, to a large degree, means giving people what they already expect.

The task of the graphic narrator when it comes to the visual creation of characters is to select and exaggerate those details which summarize or embody expectations. These representations, perforce end up drawn not so much from life as from the storehouse of previous representations. For Eisner, there is no question of using stereotypes, it’s a matter of preferring positive stereotypes to negative ones.

Eisner seems to believe that the graphic narrator must learn to employ a large vocabulary of images that are employed with specific associations and resonance within the visual language of the comics. I call this vocabulary of images the “apparatus.” Eisner offers a few catalogs of
such apparatus which includes objects, apparel, pose, props, all of which are cast in the story like actors to facilitate the speed and certainty with which the reader can comprehend the story.

Fig. 45. Eisner’s Apparatus. 21

As Eisner remarks about the employment of this apparatus,

There are some objects which have instant significance in graphic storytelling. When they are employed as modifying adjectives or adverbs, they provide the storyteller with an economical narrative device.
adjectives or adverbs, they provide the storyteller with an economical narrative device. (21)

Poets and writers have always regarded images as being economical in the way they can modify or represent ideas, emotions, states of mind, problems or anticipations within a text. In this case the images are literally drawn—represented visually, rather than with words.

Eisner’s pragmatism should not surprise us. Eisner lies well within the boundaries of the Hogarth prototype. Eisner, like Hogarth, had a career shaped by his energetic entrepreneurship and he excelled at making accessible work that showcased the bourgeois values of middle class life. In the late 1930s Eisner was the artistic center of the Eisner-Iger Studio where his storytelling techniques were a major influence on the development of the commercial comic book. Eisner pioneered the factory style of comic book production, breaking down the various stages of story development into stages, each completed by someone who became a specialist at that area of production. Eisner’s primary role in the factory was to oversee the entire process of production. Usually he would “pencil” the story, that is, block out the visual story-telling elements, make the panel-by-panel breakdown of the script and rough in the drawing for each panel. He was responsible for much of the character design and general concepts for the stories and on-going series, so he was the central figure at the origin of most work produced by the studio. At the end of the process he would review and sign off on the final product.
Payment in this system was by the page, so the more efficiently the studio could operate; the more money came into the operation and enriched the partnership. Eisner became almost legendary for all the ways that he devised to make operations more efficient and to save money. At the same time Eisner remained dedicated to the idea that the comics were a storytelling medium capable of delivering literary art.

It was in this atmosphere that Will Eisner began developing his ideas about the theory and practice of sequential art. Any insights into how to make his storytelling clearer, more emotive, faster-paced, more exciting and just more communicative in general were derived directly from the practice of making visual narrative and were immediately put back into making more work. It was an environment in which all incentives were directed towards getting more effect for less time and effort.

Others in the field were similarly motivated, but what made Eisner special in this regard was that he remained committed to improving the quality of the storytelling as well as the speed at which new stories could be conceived, produced and delivered. Eisner became known for two qualities of his work, the ability to deliver on time and his ability to produce work that excited a higher level of reader interest.

It was his reputation for delivering work on time that recommended him to a large newspaper syndicate that wanted to try integrating a comic book-like product with its newspapers. This recommendation resulted in
Eisner’s creation and work on *The Spirit*, regarded by most critics as one of the highest achievements of the so-called “golden age” of American comics.

*The Spirit* was a comic book that was distributed as an insert in the Sunday paper in a number of markets across the country. Ostensibly the adventures of a masked hero in the mold of a pulp-fiction detective, the feature quickly became a wider ranging anthology with the title character serving to introduce a variety of tales, often involving a cast of stock characters and frequently reflecting the tastes and qualities of noir film. *The Spirit* allowed Eisner to ratchet up his experiments with page design, typography, splash panels, among other formal elements of the comics as he explored subject matter that blended pulp fiction with elements of social realism. It was the formal experiments of *The Spirit* as well as the range of subjects and themes advanced in its stories that made Eisner’s reputation as a master of the medium.

Clearly Eisner’s early period laid the groundwork for his subsequent practice and approach to his graphic novels. But it may be the next period of his career that secured much of his ideas and practices involving characterization and representation.

When Eisner left *The Spirit* for the army in 1942 it was the first step on a journey that would make him a pioneer in the field of graphic communications. His primary work in this area was the production of PS Magazine, a publication of the Department of the Army that was designed to promote preventive maintenance among the troops. For over 20 years this
publication was the core project for Eisner’s successful business enterprise, a time during which he cultivated a reputation as a businessman more than that of an artist or cartoonist.

In creating the successful formula for this project, which was a successor to Army Motors, the magazine that Eisner illustrated during his time on active duty, Eisner based the concept of the publication on what he thought would appeal to the average soldier. As a result it had obvious humor, “cheesecake” representations of women, and occasional use of visual double entendre.
Previous Page: Fig. 46. Double Entendre. Eisner uses a visual double entendre to catch the attention of the average soldier in order to encourage better practices of preventative maintenance. The caption on the cover reads: “You really have to keep in shape to cover that kind of territory.” From Bob Andelman, *Will Eisner: A Spirited Life* (Milwaukee, OR: M Press, 2005) 153.

In designing for PS, Eisner kept his representations limited to types with which he thought his audience would find it easiest to connect. He has something he wants to communicate, and his tools as a cartoonist are there to be bent to the purpose of what he wants to communicate. But by the 1970s Eisner’s approach had run afoul of demands for more inclusive formulae. PS Magazine was by now being produced by others who had to find new devices and approaches to create soldier interest in the publication. As Murphy Anderson relates in Bob Andelman’s biography of Eisner,

It became very much an issue when I was in my ten years on the contract, and we couldn’t do the risqué stuff any more. The ladies sometimes complained that they felt there were a lot of male chauvinists in the military. Of course, it had been strictly a male organization. And then, of course, color became an issue, too. We had to make sure that the black troops were portrayed correctly. The staff introduced a new character called Bonnie, but they didn’t think she was pretty enough. They kept after me
giving me photos of beautiful black ladies, trying to get me to incorporate that stuff. At the time, during the Vietnam War, her trademark was an Afro and I kept drawing this. They said, ‘Oh, no, no! That’s not it!’ Finally it dawned on me, I just started drawing Connie’s face with an Afro and giving her brown eyes. You know, that stopped it. That’s basically what I did.”

(Andelman, 165)

Throughout this period when Eisner is developing as a businessman, he is trying to create a more systematic understanding of the relations between image and reader. His attention to the task of organizing and making more efficient the production of the comics inevitably turns more to the issues of visual narrative and to the technical breakdown of the whole process of making comics from inspiration through execution that is outlined in Graphic Storytelling and its predecessor, Sequential Art. These efforts are typical Eisner entrepreneurial projects and demonstrate a number of Eisner’s trademark elements.

These works attempt to educate in the way that PS magazine and any number of other Eisner projects (like his Gleeful Guides series for example) do. Eisner attempts to make explanations as short and efficient as possible, he makes his choices based on appealing to the largest audience appropriate to the project, and his explanations are accompanied by humorous illustration wherever possible because learning is more effective when its fun.
These approaches are all hallmarks of the commercial artist. Eisner’s values and assumptions are bourgeois and revolve around a strong work ethic. He displays a craftsman’s pride at having risen through the ranks of his profession and at having always been able to make a living by working at what he liked to do. This is the professed ideal of most of the young people with whom I work, all whom aspire to be professional artists.

It is through someone like Eisner that we can understand an artist like Hogarth. This is someone who considers how to broadly appeal to the tastes of the public rather than to the tastes of a specific patron. This is someone who wants to clarify and make more systematic the study of the graphic narrative and its legitimacy as an art form. This is an artist who approaches his work with the pragmatic ethics of the bourgeoisie, ethics that charge artists with a responsibility to educate and promote positive values through their work while they entertain. This is a dedication to learning as an ideal which is personal, based on the artist’s own need to self-educate, and which is both principled and entrepreneurial. It is why we can think of Hogarth and Eisner as not just prototypical figures in the history of multi-modal narrative but paradigmatic ones as well.

The efforts of graphic narrators between Hogarth and Eisner were attuned to the efforts of distillation, of finding reproducible images that could embody, at a glance, a set of characteristics that would be instantly recognizable and easily placed within the virtual narrative of the reader. The paradigm of print emphasizes the reduction of complexity and
individualization in favor of simpler schemata that are easier to reproduce. The economics and dynamics of the technology of printing emphasize processes of reduction. Artists within the paradigm of print quite naturally flow with the grain of the medium toward the most essential aspects of representation, the most telling of details. Inevitably the techniques of print favor the speed of impression, both the impression made by the plate to the paper and the impression assembled by the reader from the words and images on the page.

Against this background, the use of stereotypical representation can seem reasonable and even necessary. Much of the project of mass media seems to be to simplify all issues, points of view, representations, and ideas into low common denominators entertainingly expressed. Commercial graphic narrators since the time of Hogarth have largely worked from within that project.

In a commercial framework, stereotypes can seem well-vetted mechanisms for storytelling, images developed over time sure to be quickly recognized and easily understood by a mass audience. The adoption of stereotypical representation as the primary form of character design in episodic television points to its success as a crucial element in contemporary narrative formula.

There have been many analyses put in motion about the social effects of stereotypes and the psychological effects on individuals as they measure themselves against these stereotypical standards of beauty. There are
fewer efforts to confront stereotype directly within the theory of graphic narrative as opposed to efforts to select the “good” stereotypes from the “bad.” We can understand that stereotyping people—overgeneralizing them, often in an unfair or unbalanced fashion—is probably not a good thing, but we can find it hard to imagine that the comics can work without resorting to stereotype in some way. And most of us can be a victim to the often expressed opinion that there must be some truth to a stereotype, or otherwise why would it be a stereotype.

To test this assumption we can look at a case study of a particular stereotype within the context of the comics. Such a study should have substantial implication for the study of stereotypes in general because of the acceptance, by some, that the deployment of stereotype is a necessary component to the genre’s narrative technique. What is wanted for this is a body of images in which the stereotyping is clear, apparent and undeniable.

Fredrik Strömberg’s *Black Images in the Comics: A Visual History* provides a perfect set of images from which to make observations because it ranges widely in its sources and includes a diverse set of representations. Strömberg’s collection of imagery is emotionally resonant and is rendered from a number of cultural positions including representations of Africans and African-Americans by Africans and African-Americans. The images include representations that are both stereotypical and non-stereotypical; but his selection is particularly sensitive to and communicative of the ways in which stereotypes have conditioned and shaped representations of black people.
This is evident in the image ornamenting the frontispiece of the collection which shows the night and day of a stereotyped image and a non-stereotyped representation.

Fig. 47 Night and Day. Graphic Design by Fredrick Strömberg from *Black Images in the Comics: A Visual History* by Fredrick Strömberg (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2003) 3

Central to the difference between the two halves of the image is that one side is an observed impression and the other is a received impression. There are a few common elements between the two representations, the curl to the hair for example, but mostly it is hard to understand how the stereotyped image on the right side is in any way a generalization or metonymy of the image on the left. There is such an obvious disconnect between the actual appearance of Black people and the minstrel/cannibal stereotype, it’s difficult to understand how this set of conventions became the
default iconic form for representing black people in the comics of Europe and North America.

Strömberg summarizes seven different basic Black stereotypes that he sees reflected in the images from his collection.

I might call the first stereotype simply—for want of a better word—the native, namely the unflattering portrayal of native aborigines as childish savages both silly and dangerous. Next comes the tom, an eternally servile, humble, and forgiving soul who never questions the superiority of the white ruling class; his name derives from the traditional, if somewhat inaccurate, popular reading of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s title character in Uncle Tom’s Cabin. The third stereotype is the coon—a roguish, comedic figure known for his mischievous pranks and idiosyncratic approach to the English language; the fourth stereotype is the piccaninny—a younger version of the coon, prone to leaps of the imagination and “funny” bursts of overenthusiasm. The fifth type is the tragic mulatto, particularly common as a topic in films—a person (most often female) sexually torn between Black and white worlds, her sensual nature making her an “acceptable” object for white desire even as her Black legacy dooms her to tragedy. The sixth common stereotype is the mammy, a sort of feminine tom—complete with large, ungainly, asexual physique and an
unwavering loyalty to the white household for which she works. The seventh and final stereotype, the **buck**, is a strong, violent and rebellious “bad Negro”—most often functioning as a cautionary example. (Strömberg 29-30)

In laying out these stereotypes Strömberg reminds us that Racism in comics is not only a matter of the drawings, however. It can—as I see it—be distinguished on at least three levels: the first is the purely pictorial (in which a certain minority is depicted with various stereotypical attributes); the second is the purely textual (in which captions and not least the use of language present persons in a negative way); the third, and probably the most subversive, is on a content level (in which for example people from a certain minority are constantly portrayed as evil, stupid, foolish, subservient…or quite simply nonexistent). (24)

Strömberg shows how early images of Africans in popular print were not based on actual observation of Black people but instead, on “ideas” of the savage or primitive that conformed to accepted ideas of the “other.” His first historical image is a “documentary” panel from a anti-slavery broadside of the early 1800s entitled *Remarks on the Methods of procuring slaves, with a short Account of their Treatment in the West Indies*. 

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In this image we are looking at representations that are stereotypical in the original sense of the term, the sense that the figures are very generalized in style and the image could have been used or reused any number of times to illustrate similar tracts about the abuses of slavery. Stereotypical then, in the manner that they are designed to make a quick and immediate impression, onto the paper and into the reader.
Although the images of Black people here are more vaguely impressionistic than closely observed and show little evidence of the artist necessarily having seen many Black people, they are still rendered with the same level of caricature as the figure of the slave owner. Compositionally it takes three slaves to balance the slaveholder and he is obviously clothed to their nakedness, which serves to emphasize visually the inequality of power that shapes their situation. At the same time, though they are portrayed as humbled, the slaves share the same depth in the picture plane as the slave owner. This, and sharing the same level of caricature means there are definite ways that the image and representations are equalized in their visual essentials.

The vagueness of the caricature has an iconic quality to it, and if McCloud’s supposition is correct we are inclined more to wrap around these iconic representations empathically and to internalize the experiences of the character being iconically represented as experiences like our own. This is not a demeaning portrayal and the Black figures are posed with considerable nobility, especially the manner in which the lead figure stands to the branding iron. It might be said that the representation slants in the direction of imaging the stereotype of the “noble savage,” but the gross caricature of Black people that infects subsequent centuries of illustration is not in play here.

Negative stereotype is well in play, however, in this image from an 1872 episode of the Ally Sloper feature in Judy, or the London Serio-Comic
Journal. Ally Sloper is generally considered the first recurring character in European comics.

Fig. Ally Sloper in Africa from *Ally Sloper* by Charles Henry Ross and Marie Duval, 1873. By the 1870s the stereotype of the savage is well ensconced in the visual catalogue of popular culture. 40

From the episode, *Sloper in Savage Africa*, the story itself is a satire of British colonial behavior, but the representations of Black people are very stereotypical and do as much to reassure colonial attitudes as bring them into question. As Strömberg notes about representations from this period,

> It is hard to tell exactly when individualized Black characters began to appear in comics. ...it is clear that Black characters—
when they first showed up—overwhelmingly did so in the guise of the native stereotype. Sometimes the characters were “tame” savages, kidnapped and educated Africans housed in European royal courts. More often, though, native characters simply reflected crude European visualizations of Africans at home. (39)

For Europeans, demeaning stereotypes were used to preserve and defend assumptions about culture that enabled colonialism. The foreign, exotic other was represented in such a way as to justify exploitation. Nothing enables exploitation more efficiently than the delusion that you are exploiting others for their own good. Key to creating such illusions are representations of the other as juvenile, animalistic, without reason or judgment, non-rational and overly superstitious, stupid and slow-witted, without ties of community or family—all antithetical to the virtues of “civilized” societies. The force behind the cultivation of stereotypes is our self-serving attitudes about others that de-humanize them and create a network of rationalizations that can excuse and mask our exploitation of them. The social behavioral mechanisms which enforce certain limits on how badly one can treat “kin,” “clan members” or “people,” easily fall away when the subject can be seen as not “one of us” but a member of the other.

The stereotype of the “savage” has been particularly used to rationalize violence and exploitation of indigenous cultures pretty much anywhere there is a collision between large scale and small scale societies.

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In the Levi-Straussian dialogic between the “raw” and the “cooked,” the representation of Black people is very “raw” indeed. They are put not only in cultural opposition to the “cooked food” eaters of civilized society but are represented as a threat to them as well because they are portrayed as seeing civilized people as less fellow beings than as just something to cook.

Fig. 50. Mickey on a Desert Island. By Win Smith, 1930. Most major artists in the comics and animation before the 1950s evidence the use of stereotypical Black images. 68

In the United States there was a greater need during the 19th Century, when the visual conventions of Black stereotypes were being refined and disseminated through the new illustrated humor magazines and publications of popular fiction, to rationalize slavery. The result was that by 1900 the commonly accepted caricature of a Black person was conventionalized.
around the minstrel stereotype, a sort of tamed version of the African “savage” contextualized by the rural humor and pastoral comedy of the minstrel show.

Fig. 51. *Musical Mose*. By George Herriman, 1902. The central character in this series of strips seeks to hide his ethnicity in order to pursue his career interests. This may have been the case with the strip’s creator as well. 48

In the panel from the strip *Musical Mose*, by George Herriman, the minstrel stereotype is used to represent the Black characters. As Strömberg relates in his notes accompanying this image, there is likely poignant irony and psychological subtext in the theme of this strip in that Herriman is considered by many contemporary comics historians as having significant
African-American ethnicity. His birth records list him as “Creole” although some suggest it’s possible that it only meant he was part Greek, which was something he readily acknowledged. In this strip the central character is always trying to pass as another ethnicity in order to get work as a musician. Whatever his ethnicity may have been, Herriman lived as a White person, not as a Black person. In contrast, Jelly Roll Morton, a near contemporary and who, like Herriman, was originally from New Orleans, always considered himself to be White but he did live as a Black person and largely amidst the African-American culture of his time.

Some critical readers of Herriman’s Krazy Kat feel that work in particular, considered by many comics scholars (including myself) as the epitome of the comic strip, is very representative of an outsider, African-American perspective and is very influenced by Herriman’s hidden ethnicity. It should be said that the work reproduced here is a fairly early work. One of Herriman’s achievements as an artist is that he took his comic narrative interests and developed a visual language that did not rely on ethnic humor and stereotype but on archetypes and the specific archetypal triangle composed of a dog, a cat, and a mouse. Part of Herriman’s genius was seeing and using the new archetypal visual vocabulary that was emerging out of popular culture. Interestingly enough he was able to develop the possibilities in this language in large part because he was freed from the need to use stereotype to reach the masses. Herriman was unique among commercial comics artists in that the large body of his work did not have to
compete for mass appeal because he had a patron in his publisher, William Randolph Hearst, who gave him a lifetime no-cut contract. It is highly unlikely that any of that would have happened if Herriman had been living as a Black person.

The stereotype that Herriman has used in this panel is one that the novelist/cartoonist Charles Johnson describes in his introduction to Strömberg's book,

As a black American reader, my visceral reaction to this barrage of racist drawings from the 1840s through the 1940s was revulsion and a profound sadness.

How else could a black person respond to a parade of generic, dancing silhouettes; savage, cannibalistic Africans; language-mangling Boskos; and bubble-lipped, buffoonish sidekicks like The Spirit's "Ebony"? As the great, late black cartoonist Ollie Harrington once put it, white illustrators invariably drew Negroes as "a circle, black with two hotdogs in the middle for a mouth." More importantly, the creators of this inhuman iconography...did not envision, as they sat penciling and inking into the wee hours of the morning at their drawing tables, black Americans as their audience. We were not part of the artist/audience equation. (8)

Strömberg's selection devastatingly chooses examples from virtually every major figure in the history of the comics through 1960, from McCay to
Eisner, all of their work, tainted in some part for us as readers, by their use of these racist stereotypes. I bring this information to my students as an important observation about the consequences of the use of stereotype on the subsequent reputation of the artist, asking them to consider if they want their own work being perceived in the way we read these obviously compromised images today. For me, the importance of Strömberg’s book is to make the case that it is not just a matter for the artist to choose from between negative and positive stereotypes. The graphic narrator is far better off, I think, to completely eschew stereotype as a device, a device toxic to both reputation and work.

The main problem with stereotypes is that they are untruthful in their essence because they are representations that have been devised without observation of those who are being represented.

This problem is clearly visible in the case study of Black images that Strömberg assembles. It is obvious upon reviewing these images that the history of stereotypical representations of Black people in the comics tells us nothing about Black people. The history of stereotypical representations of Black people does tell us some things about White people.

I’ve chosen to make that emphatic so as to be clear that Black stereotypes are without any elements of truth, accuracy or reportage. Stereotypical representations of Black people are not the embodiment of any pattern recognition; they are artifacts of psychosexual desire and the will to
power. They are like embodiments of evil platonic ideals shaped in some completely self-serving region of the imagination and disseminated to mold and to shape the way we think we recognize the patterns in others. Stereotypes embody the way we think others should be if the world were organized to satisfy our desires, designs and assumptions. Stereotypes are exaggerated and, often, demeaning models of humans with which we try to insist that reality comply. It is not unusual for people to see validation for the stereotypes they harbor in their observations of others because, in large part, what to observe and how to interpret what they observe has been coded in advance by the stereotype.

People often confuse caricature with stereotype. Caricature, which is a mode of representation that makes use of exaggeration and diminution together with other techniques of distortion, emphasis and isolation, is based on observation. Caricature may be very cruel and unkind, it may be unfair and it may even be hateful but at least it is rooted in observable phenomena. Caricature may be deployed in a very demeaning fashion, and although it is often used to deflate the pompous and the mighty, it can also be used to make sport of those who are simply strong-featured, powerless or disabled.

When we look at the O.E.D. on “caricature” we see definitions that presuppose the observation of an original,

1. In Art. Grotesque or ludicrous representation of persons or things by exaggeration of their most characteristic and striking features. 2. A portrait or other artistic representation, in which
the characteristic features of the original are exaggerated with
ludicrous effect.

3. An exaggerated or debased likeness, imitation, or copy,
naturally or unintentionally ludicrous.

A stereotype does not presuppose any observation of an original, a
caricature does.

That a stereotype does not presuppose any observation of an original
is demonstrated by Strömberg’s anthology of images. Alongside observed
representations of people of color, like Hogarth’s, we have the early
appearance and promulgation through print media of representations of
Black people that are visualizations, not observations. A representation of
someone that substitutes supposition for observation has the inherent
problem of being untruthful. “Untruthful” not in any essentialist sense, but in
the relational sense in that we expect the image and imagemaker to give us
a “true” picture of the subject whatever that might be. The case history of
Black Images in the Comics shows how the use of stereotypes has
compromised the work of the most important and valued artists in the form.
What has been betrayed is the compact between artist and audience that
any reality the artist presents has been observed, observed no matter how
interior, absurd, spontaneous or personally skewed. The artist can tell us the
“truth” as they see it, but we ask them to “see” it in some genuine act of
perception, external or internal.
Nothing in this essay should be constructed as any criticism of Will Eisner or any other artist of the past for making the choices they made with the information they had. In the case of Mr. Eisner I was personally the recipient of many generous favors on his part and I admired him greatly for the high standards he applied to his work and his relentless pursuit of “truth” in storytelling and representation. Artists are responsible to history as much as politicians and there’s always an open season for second-guessing their choices and judgment. My concern in this discussion is not their use of stereotype; my concern is our use of stereotype.

Stereotypical representations are not really present in a narrative to enhance the readability of the narrative or to develop the characters; they are usually present to reassure the reader of the safety of their opinions and prejudices, whether this is known by the author or not.

It is true that our consciousness of stereotype has evolved in such a way as to now allow for stereotypes to be deployed ironically if not always sensitively. Such a case may be the way very racist and sexist imagery that shows up in the work of Robert Crumb.
Fig. 52. Intentional Offense. Robert Crumb deploys his stereotypical imagery in full awareness of their offensive character. He invites the offense as a way of revealing the pervasive racist character of White imaginings. 132

Crumb’s savage/minstrel stereotypes are delivered with both a knowingness and a sense of compulsion. They often have an exaggerated cuteness that helps underscore the irony with which they are intended. Crumb is obviously aware of their maliciousness and demeaning qualities; he even exaggerates those qualities for more effect. The images taste of projectile vomiting, bites of things brought from deep within, indigestible bits of mass culture vomited out of personal history and put on display for public consideration from a cool distance.
What started very spontaneously in Crumb’s LSD-enabled big bang of archetypal characters is enlarged upon as Crumb’s confessional qualities are encouraged by his association with his second wife, Aline Kominsky, whose intensely confessional, *Love that Bunch*, is a masterpiece of personal comics. Crumb begins to emerge more and more from behind his characters as his work solidifies and he concentrates on improving his observation and his draughtsmanship while, at the same time, trying to hold on to his spontaneity.

In his sequential stories Crumb seems to develop a semi-confessional method that accepts that many aspects of the self do emerge in the work and that the artist can choose not to put the lid on, not censor what arises, and let it all hang out as a sort of exercise in telling it like it is [to use two phrases that might have quotation marks but for the sake of trying to rehabilitate them as actual statements of serious bohemian lifestyle advice and not just catch phrases of hippie cliché]. Kominsky’s and Crumb’s compact with the reader is to deliver themselves up in rawest fashion possible. Although expressed within the exaggerated frame of the comics, Crumb and Kominsky share a commitment to representing their truth and that is evident in the work with its willingness to share deep detail about their own lives as they attempt to come to an awareness of their own hidden motivations. As always with confessional work, the danger is in becoming too self-indulgent and it may be that Crumb’s imagery crosses that line of self-indulgence, in the sense, anyway, that it is offensive.
In the Terry Zwigoff documentary, *Crumb*, the artist notably declares the only people who complain about his use of stereotypical imagery are White liberals, thus implying that Black people “got’ what he was trying to do with stereotype. I cannot report that is the reaction of my African-American students. They see what Crumb is doing, but they are still very offended by the imagery he uses to do it. Ironic purpose or effect may not be able to compensate for the failure to include these readers in the expected audience, as Charles Johnson notes above.

For me these images resonate. As a contemporary of Crumb’s, I relate viscerally to the way his images distill the simultaneous affection and loathing one can have for the mythic framework of characters and icons that populate the common cultural reference for the first television generation. This was a generation whose childhood spanned the 1950s when stereotypical portrayals of African-Americans were ubiquitous and still largely an unchallenged component to America’s shared iconography. It was a time in which the common icon for a roadside vegetable stand was a stereotype consuming a watermelon.

Part of coming of age in the 1950s and 1960s was coming into an awareness of how the icons that made up the background imagery of our lives were loaded with ideology and programming. A fair amount of the exposure to popular culture we did receive was not just to the popular culture of the 1950s (Elvis, Eisenhower and Ed Sullivan) but to the popular culture of the 1930s and 1940s largely as an effect of the repackaging of film (and
especially animation from those decades) for daytime television. Crumb’s caricatures and most of his sequential work inhabit a world that is deeply influenced by the false memories of the 1930s and 1940s induced by deep exposure to this popular culture. It is from these influences that Crumb draws his style and his archetypes and some of these archetypes are stereotypes.

This same interest in the way that these stereotypes are denied and written out of our cultural history appears in Terry Zwigoff’s film of *Ghost World*, in which a stereotyped advertisement for the fried chicken chain for whom Seymour works, becomes Enid’s (Thora Birch) controversial, and ultimately banned, art project. Seymour, a character added to the screenplay by Zwigoff and author Daniel Clowes, and not developed in the graphic novel, is much like Crumb and Zwigoff themselves, preferring the authenticity of primitive blues and insouciance of Sweet Band music of the 1930s to their commercially overhyped and overprocessed pop culture descendants. A strong preference for what is acoustic and analog over that which is electric or digital.

What is privileged in the Crumb universe is being “unwired” a state of rooted looseness, a relaxation that is the antidote for the constipated White American culture that creates individuals who can smile on the outside, while all the time being consumed with desperation from within. Whiteness in Crumb is constructed as rigid, unforgiving and stultifying, denying the body, prizing repression and appearance above naturalness and sincerity. The
construction of Blackness in Crumb tends to be built as an antithesis to his construction of Whiteness rather than occupying any inclusively independent platform of representational ideals. Other than his narratives about musicians, African-Americans are not at the center of Crumb’s story. They populate the backgrounds and add to the atmosphere of Crumb’s sets. When they aren’t represented as a physical threat to Crumb’s weakling protagonists, representations of Black people in Crumb tend to signify potential sexual energy, resignation and malaise, willingness to surrender to impulse and sex without guilt or regret. When placed at the center or near the center of a story, Black people in Crumb tend to be celebrated like noble savage heroes of culture (like Blues musicians) or to be ruthlessly exploited by White men. When Crumb uses an iconic stereotype he does so without apologies, but also without softening the representation, without softening the history or the implications. Crumb exaggerates even more, if possible, the brutality of his stereotypical icons and characters. Crumb wants to reveal the cruelty in these images and rub our noses in what they mean about our collective culture.
One prominent example of this occurs in the infamous Devil Girl sequence in which Crumb’s character, Mr. Natural, finds a way to get rid of his girlfriend’s head and keep just the body for sex and for cleaning the apartment.

As an experiment, Mr. Natural loans the body of Cheryl to his disciple, Flakey Foont. Foont can’t resist the temptation to degrade the headless and compliant Cheryl, and as he has sex with her body, his orgasm is triggered and facilitated by violent and misogynist sexual fantasies of her severed head.

In a state of guilt and regret that follows his complete capitulation to his misogynist impulses, Foont confesses all to a restored Cheryl; “old African witch doctor stuff…nothing special….” supplies Mr. Natural (Crumb
The story ends with Cheryl raging over Mr. Natural having treated her like “a piece of meat” “Where’s the Butcher Knife!?” she screams, “I am going to cut both your heads off” (126). The men dive out the door and the window to get away.

Crumb introduces this story with this tagline:

Fig. A Bitchin' Bod First Panel Detail. By Robert Crumb (1991). 114

This particular story is part of a series that starts about five years earlier with the reintroduction of Mr. Natural into the life of Flakey Foont who had last been featured committing Mr. Natural to an asylum. The series of stories establishes a romantic triangle of sorts among Foont, Mr. Natural, and Cheryl Borck who is Devil Girl. Both Foont and Mr. Natural are members of Crumb’s late 1960s cast of characters. The representation of Mr. Natural is very iconic and simplified, as if he were built like a Kilroy with a beard; he is dressed in a simple nightshirt style robe that gathers past his ankles. He’s bald, he’s short and he often carries a homemade sign with a “spiritual” message. He is a very clear rendition of what Eisner would call a
stereotype, and what might be also called a “stock character.” I want to reemphasize that when Eisner is talking about stereotypes, he is not really talking about the sorts of stereotypes on display in Strömberg’s book. He is talking largely about stereotypes of occupations and roles; it just happens that the category of imagery he is talking about also contains the sorts of representations collected by Strömberg.

Crumb’s Mr. Natural is a stereotype of a street mystic, spiritual proselytizer, end-of-the-worlder drawn from the catalog of gag cartoon characters. His backstory is that he is a streetsmart charlatan who has been a vaudeville magician and a dance orchestra leader. Since the 1950s he has reinvented himself as a guru and spiritually evolved person with a small cult of followers who began organizing Mr. Natural Fan Clubs in the early 1960s (42-44). The fact that he has a backstory indicates the amount to which the character has evolved from stereotype and stock characteristics into a specific persona. One of Crumb’s distinct achievements as a visual narrator is how he takes the stock characters and stereotypes of the comics and turns them into archetypes of contemporary experience.

Both Mr. Natural and Foont, are rendered in the “bigfoot” style of comics conventions, which suppresses distinguishing details in making a representation in favor of imagery made up of bold lines that emphasize active body pose, facial expression and the humorous exaggeration of such body parts as hands, noses, and feet.
Despite this highly exaggerated style, it seems to me that when including African-American characters in sequences with Mr. Natural or other member of his repertory company Crumb retains something like the same level of caricature but not the same level of stereotyping as, for example, his representations in Fig. 53.

There is a difference in the representations in this example; sourcing the caricatures in the conventions of vintage cartooning has meant that when it comes to the representation of Black people, the stereotype being used is not a stereotype of a vocation or a role, a stock character, but the stereotype of an ethnicity. While stereotypes of bakers and judges might not always be well-received by those who work in those vocations, there is some
reasonable inclusiveness to the representation and frequently, as with most stock characters, there is a framework that can be built out, particularized and made individual while remaining iconic in form, the kind of character the reader can wrap around and inhabit the narrative.

One can think here of a sitcom actor cast in the role of the “wacky neighbor.” As the actor articulates the character over time, the role must develop without losing at least the lingering impression of the basic, iconic, stock character outlines on which the structure of the comedy is framed.

Ethnic stereotypes are much more limiting than stock character stereotypes. Instead of having a framework through which to develop and articulate the character more individually, an actor or creator must work to subvert the stereotype in order to create a character. One can appreciate what’s required when observing how extremely adept comic actors like Mantan Moreland and Eddie Anderson manage this in their film and radio roles in the 1930s and 1940s. Mantan Moreland, who appears as the chauffeur, Birmingham Brown, in many Charlie Chan Movies, uses set pieces from Black vaudeville, exaggerations of stereotypical expectations, and even direct addresses to the audience to intentionally include the African-American audience.

Eddie “Rochester” Anderson, in the role as Jack Benny’s valet on radio and later television, created a relational character out of the stereotypical role that was originally written for him. Although the relationship on air between Anderson’s character of Rochester van Jones and his “boss,” Jack Benny, was conditioned by an employer-employee situation, Anderson’s portrayal of Rochester used irony, snappy comebacks, and mumbled asides to make it clear Rochester was his own man. This aspect of Rochester’s character became more prominent after WWII when
Benny’s own awareness of the holocaust caused he and his writers to reassess the way the role was written. Eisner went through a similar revision of Ebony, based apparently on Eisner’s more enlarged acquaintanceship with African-Americans during the war and a greater sensitivity to the effects of negative stereotypes on African-Americans.

Both of these actors, who struggled so effectively to subvert the stereotypes and humanize the characters they were given to play, suffered substantial damage to their reputations when culture moved on, and their efforts at humanizing their characters, for a time, were overshadowed by the stereotypicality of the roles they played. It illustrates how the use of stereotype, particularly demeaning stereotypes, has a corrosive effect on the lasting perception of a performance, no matter how nuanced or artfully expressed.

The essence of the problem of stereotype in graphic narrative involves the way in which the virtuality of the experience is interrupted by the stereotype instead of encouraged. The idea of the iconic, in McCloud’s terms, is to create a framework in which the reader can become immersed in the narrative. Crumb is considered a master narrator of the form because his world is so inhabitable. The funky vintage cartoon/comics influenced characterization and background, the interesting conjunction of iconic characters, iconic sets, and iconic apparatus posed in front of backdrops of mundane and colloquial American landscapes create an inhabitable reality to
one side of ordinary life and on the seamy side of Toontown. But it’s very hard to get in there if you’re African-American.

We ride the iconic characters of the graphic narrative like voodoo gods, the steed must be compatible, the shape of the character we are to inhabit must fit comfortably so that the illusion is that it is us, a media extension of the body that allows us to feel present. Black stereotypes do not allow for that because the manner of representation is completely exterior, the image exists to control, to contain, to reduce, to limit, repress and restrain.

Crumb certainly has no conscious agenda to do any of these things to people of color. He merely wants to make fun of them the way he makes fun of everyone else. His unconscious agenda he lets unfold right in front of you. He is the one who reveals and makes a subject of his prejudices and predilections. But his choices as a graphic narrator have also posted the equivalent of Do Not Enter signs to some classes of readers that he might otherwise wish to have. That the narrative excludes in this way—not because it offends peoples’ ideas, morals or values—but because it doesn’t include them in the audience, is what compromises the values in the work.

Although Crumb’s use of stereotypically racist caricatures has been long recognized as problematic in his work, it is often his representations of women that have ignited the most controversy among readers of his comics.

“A Bitchin Bod’!”, the Devil Girl episode detailed above, is one of the most distilled presentations of Crumb’s model of the elemental forces that
govern relations between men and women. Like for the American satirist James Thurber, the War between Men and Women occupies a considerable amount of Crumb’s creative output.

Both artists project meek personas overwhelmed by their own response to feminine power and female sexuality. Their male characters frequently chafe under what they see is the domination of female anima and they escape by imagining themselves in daydreams or fantasies of power. Thurber’s representation of this world is rendered in simplified strokes and fluid thin lines, decorous and well-mannered. These representations get progressively more zen-like in both their simplicity and their evocative power as he loses his sight. But Thurber’s world is one in which emotion and conflict lie beneath the surface while above, floats the veneer of upper middle class imperturbability.

Thurber’s idea is that underneath this placid, normalized surface is a vicious near-animal like conflict for power and position that determines the real relations between men and women. The struggle is at the primal level and erupts humorously in Thurber’s portrayal of the games of seduction and the realities of marriage.

By contrast, Crumb’s project is to make this conflict public and strip away its layers of overcivilized denial. Crumb, like Thurber, sees the conflict as ancient, primal and determining the relations between men and women, but he seems to believe in the efficacy of a certain “naturalness,” an
acceptance of the nature of the conflict and the nature of the combatants as a necessary step to functional détente in mixed gender relationships.

Crumb presents relations between the genders as rooted in a violent conflict in which both male and female parties are impulsively driven to participate. The Crumb male may pretend to various civilized behaviors, particularly if they are the received ideas of social conduct—what he thinks he ought to be doing—but underneath, the Crumb male is a potential rapist, seething with resentment toward women basically because he wants to jump on
every attractive one within reach and have uninhibited sex with them—and most of them won’t let him. 4

Crumb’s view of the primal violence that conditions most male-female relationships is very much in line with the sort of analysis of gender relations represented in works of what I call, “New School Feminism.” Writers like Mary Gaitskill, Molly Kiely and Virginie Despentes represent an “up from the streets” feminism rejecting the “nice” attitudes of middle class feminist ideals in favor of a more pragmatic and less idealized appraisal of sexual politics. These writers often share a background that includes experience as sex workers and/or as victims of sexual assault. New School Feminist writers practice a feminism that is careful not to alienate women who position themselves within the discourse of sexual objectification as a putative object; women, for example, who are prostitutes, strippers, hostesses, or Pam Anderson. One of the hallmarks of New School Feminism as it has emerged in the past 15 to 20 years is how it seems to accept sexual objectification as a part of the “natural” interaction between men and women. The tendency of New School Feminists is to suspend judgment of “men,” replacing it with a more useful environment of acceptance of their testosteronal urges that might be expressed as “like it or not, they are what they are.”

A New School Feminist might go beyond mere acceptance and also express sincere empathy for male sexual feelings and behavior as Mary Gaitskill’s characters often do. There’s an interesting insight into this in a 1994 interview of Gaitskill by Alexander Laurence,
Q Have you used your experiences as a stripper for a story?

There was one story in Bad Behavior about a prostitute. I was wondering have you ever turned a trick?

MG Yes. Have you?

Q No. Not really. Maybe I should. I've paid a prostitute for sex before.

MG I definitely would if I was a guy.

Whether Gaitskill would empathize with Crumb’s male, even think the sorts of thoughts he portrays in his work if she were a guy, is a matter of purest speculation, but what is no speculation is that there are reasonable possibilities of this work being read with sympathy, empathy or perhaps just bemused acceptance from a feminist position.

In the Devil Girl series of stories, Crumb represents men as basically and irresistibly driven by their receptive sexual reflexes. The code of male sexual behavior is that a man sees his opportunities, and gets as much as he can get to gratify his sexual desires. Sexual attraction in Crumb is not general but specific, and Crumb enthusiastically celebrates the figuration of his specific desires.

Once stimulated by some combination of aspects that set off a man’s specific compulsions, the Crumb man is driven by the demands of the sexual Id. His impulse is toward conquest, possession, use, discharge, and relief.
The nature of the Crumb man is that he is selfish and he’s a pig. All this would come as no revelation to a feminist of any school.

But Crumb provides something else a New School Feminist might greet with specific approval and that’s a female character who is drawn with her own complex sexuality and lustful intensity. Devil Girl is not that dissimilar from a Virginie Despentes heroine. She is anything but defenseless, although she can be brutally used by men. She is capable of rage and animal desire. In fact, in this archetype of heroine both rage and desire are close to the surface. She is physically represented as a figure very transgressive of standards of beauty and social norms. Cheryl Borck, “Devil Girl,” is constructed with a very active self-defense system. She is usually bigger, stronger and more aggressive than anyone else in the room. Nor is Cheryl required to suppress her rage when she is victimized. When she feels she has been wronged she reacts belligerently, with aggression and even violence. When examining how much Cheryl Bork is or is not a stereotype we might begin by considering the Crumb’s construction of her nature. Devil Girl is Robert Crumb’s version of the White Goddess. Her representation is refined through the full length of Crumb’s career and is the archetype of his muse with whom he wishes to embrace in the most carnal of fashions. The elements that make up her character design are careful refinements of the specific shape of Crumb’s desire. Devil Girl is Crumb’s ultimate Pin-up.

It is likely that Devil Girl incorporates specific observations of various women in Crumb’s life or from images on which Crumb is fixated. In some
ways she is an assemblage of parts, but she is drawn at times with voyeuristic specificity because she must function as a fetish, an object that summarizes and potently concentrates sexual desire. Devil Girl is the representation of Crumb’s idea of beauty. Will Eisner reports that when he met Crumb for the first time, Crumb’s first and virtually only question was, “Do you know any girls with big legs?”

Devil Girl is drawn from a very specific representation of observations within Crumb’s life and his fantasies; she may be iconic, but she is based on deep observation and study; she has had many models and many versions in the work of Crumb. Devil Girl is not a stereotype. Her character is not elaborated out of a stereotype; it is built out of an archetype, and thus a fairly plausible device with which to invite (or bait) a female reader to enter an involved relationship to the work.

If the reader chooses or is drawn to participate in the narrative through the character of Cheryl, she or he will be drawn into the sex play within. Most complaints about this story do not fault Devil Girl as a character, but object to what is done to her by Crumb in the course of the sex play (or violent sexual assault if you prefer another construction). This opposition to the story does underscore the importance of the issues of virtuality in considering the narrative and the manner of representation.

As I have discussed in a previous chapter on “Virtuality in the Graphic Narrative,” the sexually explicit narrative is probably the most successful genre in comics publishing today. Publications in this genre keep publishers
like Fantagraphics in business, such as it is. It is my argument that the reason for this is that the multimodal form of the graphic narrative, both words and pictures, provides a more involving virtual sexual experience. It is the fact that the sexual experience being portrayed can be shared by the reader in such an involving way, that one might sexually get off on it, is what arouses such a strong reaction among critics of Crumb and of the sexually explicit graphic narrative.

It should be added that some who would find most sexually explicit narrative socially acceptable still find stories like *Bitchin Bod* unredeemably offensive and possibly dangerous. The high level of virtuality, of possible virtual participation, and concomitantly the prospect that you may, through this means, be encouraging such practices as sexual violence and incest disturbs many people. This is, of course, an old argument and affects each new medium that moves in the direction of more virtuality. It surfaced most visibly in connection with the comics in the creation of the Comics Code. In recent years more concerns are being voiced about content and issues of representation in relation to video-games as the technology has allowed for increasingly more “photo-realistic” styles of representation.

It is true that a substantial amount of Robert Crumb’s work appeals to our basest instincts; it’s supposed to. This is low humor. Robert Crumb is a comedian of the lower chakras and proud of it. *Bitchin Bod* is based on the structure of a vaudeville sketch; it is made up of the interaction of clown show archetypes—in this case, the top banana, the second banana and a
girl with hyper-feminine qualities. The sketch ends with the clowns jumping off opposite sides of the stage pursued by the enraged butt of the joke.

The point of such low humor is to appeal to our most common elements. Such an appeal generally leads back to the body as the universal portal to our shared human experience. In the clown show, the clowns image the essence of the human situation through narratives expressed predominately through body language and body action/reaction. Any message we receive, any teaching or observation comes to us without our thinking of it, which is part of the zen or sacred character of clowning. Clowning emphasizes communication forms that address the earliest filters on our perceptive streams of exterior information and that are designed to most fully engage the mirror neuronic virtual machine.

Crumb’s low comedy clown show is not designed as an intellectual experience; it is designed as a gut level simulation of real human interaction around sex and desire. It dramatizes the absurdist comedy with which we pursue the uninhibited release and satisfaction of our deepest sexual impulses, while we fear, regret, feel ashamed, guilty and embarrassed by those same impulses. Like some clowning, there is in Crumb’s exaggerated absurdities a dark, and in this case, instead of the more typical misanthropic, a clearly misogynist edge.

One of the functions of the clown is to define and illustrate boundaries by going beyond them. They are not only transgressive in terms of boundaries, but also in terms of behavior. Clowns do not act in an ordinary
fashion. Clowns are not models for ordinary behavior; they offer contrast to ordinary behavior in order to reveal its patterns and rituals. Clowns are contrarians, they often deploy tactics of inversion to make the nature of privilege more visible. All of these strategies apply to Crumb's Devil Girl narratives; the actions here are not offered to be emulated but to show extreme example; the actions are a mime of the rituals of power and help form a caricature of human behavior.

The narratives of Mr. Natural try to represent what is most "natural," the design of the deepest patterns of our interactions. The Mr. Natural stories dramatize the patterns of these rituals and it is the keen observation and representation of those patterns that are the substance of Crumb's archetypal comedy.

Crumb's myths of Mr. Natural are attempts at explanations of what is organic, what is based in the organism of the human. His myths celebrate as well as dispar over the way human consciousness is trapped in a body and that the body rules. It's natural. It's the way it is.

This extended discussion of Crumb is meant as an example of how a discourse about icon, representation and virtuality in relation to a particular graphic narrative helps reveal and contextualize a reading. Here that discussion has been used to explore some of the issues and contexts that become visible when we look at issues of stereotype and representation within specific narratives.
While we have been looking at a number of examples that draw on Black images in the comics in relation to the question of stereotype, this chapter is more generally centered on a discussion of stereotype and its place in the visual narrative; nevertheless, it is necessary to reassert a point that Strömberg makes evident, namely that it is not that difficult to make a caricature of a Black person without resorting to ethnic stereotypes.

There are any number of non-stereotypical caricatures of Black people including the numerous examples that have appeared in the African-American press which, up through the 1950s, provided the primary vehicle for images of African-Americans in the comics. The many images of African-Americans in contemporary mainstream comics with mostly African-American casts or central characters who are African-American, like Wee Pals, Quincy, Curtis, Boondocks or Watch Your Head, show that relevant comic caricatures of African-Americans that are funny, inclusive, and readily recognized by the reader are not that hard to make without referencing the visual shorthand of traditional Black stereotypes. In the 1960s and 1970s several popular mainstream comics integrated their casts as some newspaper cartoonists and editors became more sensitive to issues of African-American representation on the comics page. Cartoonists with well-developed styles working on strips with types of character design that had been long established, were required to figure out ways to adapt their styles and character designs to representation of African-Americans. This new inclusiveness had to be accomplished with studious attention to avoiding
sensitive visual stereotyping. These mainstream cartoonists managed to make these representations in a quite reasonable fashion that balanced difference and similarity within their own character language. The example of Charles Schultz in his strip *Peanuts* shows how thoughtful characterization can create the impression of ethnicity and still stay in the same representational scheme.

Previous Page: Fig. 58. Franklin. Charles Schultz introduced Franklin, an African-American character who is little distinguished in appearance from the rest of the cast, in 1968. from *Black Images in the Comics: A Visual History* by Fredrick Strömberg (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2003) 130
One of the guidelines that these cartoonists seem to follow in their efforts at more inclusion was to keep the level of caricature the same for all the characters so that no one character is especially demeaned by being more exaggerated in action or figure than roughly every other character. In this approach to representation, whatever standards of caricature an artist uses must be fairly applied and that fair application needs to be reasonably apparent.

Fig. 59. Lieutenant Flap. The introduction of Lt. Flap into the cast of Mort Walker’s Beetle Bailey. October 5, 1970. 146

In this approach, a character can still be strongly represented or caricatured in a pronounced way without, theoretically, giving offense. This is the approach used by South Park, for example, which, although it seeks to offend in a reasonably fair and universal fashion, still incites significant controversy. This controversy, however; does usually relate to questions of
language or subject matter rather than to the approach to character representation taken by its creators.

Fig. 60 Puffy and Entourage. From a picture gallery of South Park by Trey Parker and Matt Stone. http://animatedtv.about.com July 22, 2006.

Any representation best avoids being perceived as too stereotypical by using as much actual observation of action, demeanor and figure as it can in the construction of its character design. In making such observations, the artist must be aware of the ways in which previous exposure to stereotypical ideas and stereotypical images can shape the perception of information. My brother-in-law is convinced that African-Americans are just like their traditional stereotypes because that is how he sees them, looking for them to fulfill his ideas of how they should look and act. Stereotypical representations are not really present in a narrative to enhance the
readability of the narrative or to develop the characters; they are usually present to reassure the reader of the safety of their opinions and prejudices, whether this is known by the author or not. In making representations of others, especially where previous representations have been circumscribed by stereotypes, the artist must be careful to see what is actually there and not what they have been conditioned to think will be there.

Observation is at the foundation of the development of iconic imagery and can be especially important when those whom the artist is representing have been subject to very stereotypical treatment in the past. An exemplar of visual narrative strategies under these conditions is Howard Cruse’s 1995 graphic novel, *Stuck Rubber Baby*.

![Image](image_url)

Fig. 61. *Stuck Rubber Baby*. Howard Cruse represents all types of folks through specifically observed iconic character design. (New York: Paradox,
A coming-of-age story situated in the heart of the South during the civil rights battles of the mid-1960s, in this historical context Cruse’s protagonist awakens to the fact that he is gay. The novel recounts his explorations of his situation and recounts the various social barriers and prejudices he encounters, including those self-limiting ideas of race, gender and sexual preference he discovers within himself. Cruse has occasion to represent all kinds of folks in the course of his narrative and does so by constructing each character with conic particularity. In Cruse’s novel, all the characters share the same order of specificity and that specificity has the look of being anchored in observed differences between individuals, not generalized differences between different groups of people (African-Americans, homosexuals, etc.).

Cruse’s characters are not strictly autobiographical any more than the events related in the story are necessarily autobiographical. They might easily be patchworks of observation or casual borrowings recorded in a sketchbook and later imagined into a character. There are many ways to proceed in building characters either metonymously or by accretion or even both together.

Some types of character design start with very photorealistic reference but are made more iconic using the repertory of techniques and effects of the fine artist. In Ho Che Anderson’s King, the author often breaks
out into various experiments with abstraction and expressive distortion of characters. The characters are rooted in photographic and journalistic/historical reference, but Anderson has personalized their representation in such a way that they have become equally representations by himself. This personalization may be a subtext in all images—that they reflect the characteristics of the imagemaker, but in Anderson’s icons the personal subtext has become text and shares the attentions of the reader with the historical, biographical themes of the work. Anderson’s personalization of King makes King a story in a mythic flow, an account of a hero and an ancestor whose spirit and blood vibrate through the being of the storyteller. Anderson’s personal connection to Martin Luther King and the story of King is on display in the high level of personal style with which he represents King. Anderson wants both to represent King and also represent his ideas of King. Such a high level of abstraction or visual play with the character design may distance the characters from the reader, but they do close the distance between the characters and the author. Thus the reader is drawn closer to the author and participates more in the narrative through the author’s point of view.

The position of the creator in relation to the representation they are making is a very important consideration in the way we receive that representation, especially representations where ethnicity or other histories of stereotypical imaging are involved. If we feel the representation has been made by someone who is a member of whatever group might be
represented, then we are more likely to credit its authenticity or acceptability. Certainly in questions of ethnicity, gender, or sexual preference we are inclined to feel that a person who shares the ethnicity, gender or sexual preference that is a focus or important element in the work, should be more sensitive to and have more direct experience of the issues involved.

Of course any individual creator may or may not be more sensitive or informed, but once we connect the artist with the work in this way, our knowledge of the specifics of the relation between the artist and representation can substantially shape our reading of the work. Such knowledge can certainly shape the authenticity which we are willing to grant a narrative and our willingness to accept representations when they are challenging or unconventional.

In the case of Anderson and *King*, our knowledge that the author is African-Canadian of Caribbean heritage affirms the authority with which the creator can manipulate Black images in his comics. It also helps us create a version of King in which we read the author’s search for a relationship with the subject which is not necessarily conditioned by the political conditions of the United States but views his hero as an historical figure from a cultural context that is geographically next door. Anderson’s comics biography of Martin Luther King is expressively felt and reimagined while being able to portray King less attached to specific ideological constructs and more iconically, as a figure of more cross-cultural relevance, a relevance that aids, perhaps the crossover to White readership.
The way we read any representation is conditioned by our ideas of who is doing the representing. This has always been somewhat problematic, but it is clear that readers still expect there to be some reasonable relationship between the way a creator represents themselves and the general and sometimes specific facts of their situation. The nature of those expectations on the part of an audience can be rigid and inflexible so sometimes, to advance their own interests, authors disguise the general facts about themselves: female science fiction writers disguising themselves as male, or male romance writers disguising themselves as female so as to preserve the illusions and expectations of the audience. If an author is too fast and loose with the veracity of information they impart about themselves the reader can become disillusioned, their work called into question and the author can end up being publicly humiliated on Oprah.

The increasing prominence of narratives and representations from virtual discourse communities means that the act of reading must inevitably depend less on looking to the relationship between the creator and the representation as a trustworthy opening into the text. Readers are having to make more and more judgements and choices around text without having any clear notion of a text’s authenticity in relation to its representations. This is just one way in which the act of representation itself is being subverted by the dynamics of cyberculture.

My colleague, Dr. Carolyn Bloomer, in her paper *Skin Color, Ethnicity, and the Graphic Infrastructure of Mass-Media Imagery* points out how,
although our awareness has grown of the effects of bias and racism in the overt choices that make-up the visual language of representation, we have been less ready to examine the effects of choices in the framing and composition of images among other aspects of graphic infrastructure, and how these might reflect similar bias. Bloomer, who is a visual anthropologist, is interested in the nature of representation that is being processed and understood non-consciously. Citing Tor Norretenders 1991 work, *The User Illusion* (Bloomer 1), that 11 million bits of information are being processed by the brain every second but that only 15-40 bits can be held in consciousness at any one time, Bloomer wants to focus on the information in an image, some of the 10,999,960 bits of information each second, that is being processed at non-conscious levels. Bloomer’s work focuses on the effects that certain choices that image creators make have on shaping the non-conscious impressions that audience members decode. One method Bloomer uses to reveal this non-conscious information in an image is to reduce the information in a photograph or an advertisement by tracing over the image to make an outline of the figures that emphasizes the pose and gestures of the figures and the framing and composition of the image. In essence, to better understand the non-conscious aspects of the image she turns the photo into a comic.

Her analysis looks at a number of aspects of the graphic infrastructure of photographs and advertisements including such issues as: the simulated distance between viewer and subject and the interpersonal relationship that
is suggested by that distance; the point of view the reader has on the subject in the image, are we looking down on them, up to them? Etc.; the positioning of figures “inside” vs. “outside” the scene; the integrity of body boundaries and body wholeness (contour interruptions, whole vs. part; significance of unseen or “missing” parts); connectedness (contiquity vs. isolation, center vs. periphery); graphic hierarchies (higher or lower positions in the frame, “in front” vs. “behind,” equivalence or inequalities in color, value, shape, focus, detail, etc.); “…are all ways in which the image communicates independently of its overt content. This is the most ‘subliminal’ level” (Bloomer 2-3).

Bloomer’s analysis also looks at the individual figures and their interrelationships in the depicted situation.

These levels bring into play culturally learned social codes regarding gaze, facial expressions, body language, self-presentation (clothing, make-up, hairstyle, etc), interpersonal power and hierarchy (‘up’/’down’ roles, insider/outsider, serving/receiving, giving/taking, together/apart) and the ways in which these visual cues work as shorthand to represent social class, hierarchical roles, and social relationships. (3)
Fig. 62a.

Fig. 62b. Photos are Turned into Comics. As a means of revealing the graphic infrastructure Dr. Carolyn Bloomer outlines the figures in the photo in
order to reveal their hidden codes of association. Images from lecture Handouts.

Another level of Bloomer's analysis considers overall patterns of representation as regards specific categories within various contexts. Among the values she examines is how often a category (skin color, gender ethnicity, etc) is represented (frequency) and how much variety is represented (range). In Bloomer's judgement,

To a surprising and disturbing extent, these 'subliminal' dimensions of mass media imagery commonly support ethnic stereotypes, colonialist attitudes, and white (male) dominance—even when the overt content pretends to multicultural inclusion. Average audiences—and not only 'white' ones—need help in recognizing the clear duplicity of these 'double messages.' (3)

Bloomer's observations are based on a model that expresses the relationship between maker, image, and audience in the following fashion:

ENCODER → IMAGE ← DECODER

Designer, Artist, Photographer Audience, Reader

Bloomer focuses on the receptive side of the equation, looking at the effects of choices made by the image makers. She explicitly challenges image makers and image mediators to consider what they are encoding into images
at the non-conscious level and to envision how they might encode more equality into their representations.

In the construction of character through representation, image makers must raise to a higher level of observational consciousness the way in which their representations must avoid not only the stereotypical forms and attributes of the representation and stereotypical behaviors, but they must also consider the effect of staging that reasserts and reconfirms at the non-conscious level, social and cultural biases.

I have drawn on Bloomer’s analytical scheme in the course of my examinations of individual narratives within this dissertation. Interesting to me is how Will Eisner, when he demonstrated the basics of visual narration in person, concentrated on the depiction of character through the very elements of non-conscious information at the expressive end of the transaction that Bloomer concentrates on in her study of the receptive effects of these expressive choices.

I think Eisner’s theory of stereotypes is very much in contradiction to some of his best and most prominent practices as a graphic narrator. The essence of Eisner’s narrative technique is to distill his observation into what a particular emotion, feeling, action, reaction should look like in iconic terms. The essence of these image elements are observed, but in Eisner’s work their expression is refined and idealized. He tries to create images that allow us to place ourselves, through our reading of other (mostly non-conscious) information, within the virtual reality of the narrative as an observer. He
gives us very iconic emotion in his characters that can create the conditions for easy reading of the supporting cast as well as the possibility to wrap around the iconic armature of a lead character and experience their narrative of feelings and their response to events more internally.

The great strength of Eisner’s style is the clarity of the emotional narrative and this is achieved through Eisner’s great skill of transferring body language and expression into the shorthand of caricature. Eisner obviously seems to have felt that he needed the additional assistance of recognizable stereotypes to help make things even easier and clearer for the reader. This orientation to reader convenience was quite helpful to Eisner when creating his large body of information-purposed work like his illustrations and graphic narratives promoting preventive maintenance for P.S. magazine. When it came to adapting his style to the more social-realist narratives that comprise his work in the graphic novel, this aspect of his narrative technique seems far less useful.

The tools that Eisner, as a businessman, used to satisfy clients and the readers of Eisner’s client-driven narratives seem not just clarifying but sometimes overobvious when applied to Eisner’s attempts, as an artist, to expand on the potential of the graphic narrative for extended storytelling. The more stereotypical the characters, the less they succeed in longer narratives where we need more character definition and more specific qualities of a character with which to relate. In his most successful books, this strategy in Eisner has been tempered by other factors. In the case of
Dropsie Avenue, the historical pageant in which characters move into and out of the story space of the Avenue allows for a reasonable use of more stereotypical design. This is a narrative of place and the characters are not there to sustain the story but are there as apparatus, providing detail to people the creation of a virtual reality experience: the reader's exploration of a particular space over a significant span of time. The achievement of Dropsie Avenue is the recreation of an historical point of view in words and pictures. Part of that historical view is the delight in pattern recognition and the use of stereotypes or stereotype-based characters can reinforce the idea that certain social patterns exist when in fact the social patterns are embedded in the stereotype in advance of their deployment.

In books like The Name of the Game, Eisner's stereotypical models for characters are replaced by his use of character designs that seem more observed at close hand and built on actual people rather than on stock characters. Because the story is based on his wife's family this is possibly the case. In this story Eisner's narrative technique is continuing its transit from the types of characterization used in pulp fiction to the types of characterization used by more mainstream novelists of Eisner's youth, like Booth Tarkington or John Galsworthy. Like Tarkington and Galsworthy, in this graphic novel Eisner is interested in creating a sense of intergenerational family traits that help determine the interaction among characters and that shape the conflicts and resolutions of the novel. Among these traits are class and ethnicity, which are among Eisner's thematic concerns in most of
his work in the graphic novel, especially his interest in representing the Jewish experience in American culture.

When one chooses to represent issues in class, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation, finding a specific language that will not be perceived as stereotypical can be a very difficult task. Sometimes a creator will try to avoid some of the issues by choosing a scheme of representational narrative conventions such as funny animal conventions, manga style, or conventional superhero narrative. This strategy of using conventionalized representation schemes does not; however, necessarily make the problems disappear.

An example of how these problematics can remain is Art Spiegelman’s choice of the funny animal convention in which to write *Maus*. Written initially for a comic book entitled, *Funny Animals (1972)*, in *Maus*, Spiegelman chooses the funny animal convention to emphasize the issues of stereotypicality and constructed categories among humans, not to deemphasize it. In successfully applying the iconography of Mighty Mouse cartoons to a retelling of the Holocaust, Spiegelman demonstrates that the conventions of cartooning can be put to telling any sort of narrative, a major moment in the expansion of the graphic novel in the United States.

Spiegelman’s choice of representational schema makes virtual the racist environment of the holocaust by, in a sense, accepting the world view of the Nazis. The categories in Maus are by species, with the Jews being represented by mice and other ethnicities or nationalities placed in a hierarchy of animal-based typology. The Germans are cats, the French are
frogs, a child who is half-German and half-Jew is represented as a mouse with stripes. This is a means of showing the Nazi racist hierarchy for the absurdity it is. It also allows for an efficiency of reading in that we have no trouble telling the Jews from the Germans from the Poles, etc. My Polish students usually do not like to see Poles being represented as pigs, although this does embody the bias in Vladek’s (Art’s father) world view which is the world Spiegelman is trying to tell us about. Art knows he giving offense, its an inevitable consequence of the system of representation through which the story is being told.

Spiegelman’s narrative has many metafictional passages and in one of them, Art discusses with his wife, Francoise Mouly, how he will represent her, whether she will be a Frog, because she’s French or whether she will be a mouse, because she’s a Jew.
Fig. 63. I Just Married a Frog. From *The Complete Maus* by Art Spiegelman (New York: Pantheon, 1966) Vol. II, 12.
The problem Spiegelman is struggling with is how to apply his representational schema to constructed categories of race and ethnicity. How will he represent Francois as French and/or a Jew is the real issue, there is no functional metonymy for such generalized categories, only stereotypes. How does a Jew look? How does a French woman look? This are aspects that cannot be specifically represented in an image without resorting to stereotypical reference points. It’s the sort of difficulty with graphic storytelling that leads Eisner to conclude that stereotypes are necessary because they can be so difficult to escape or find an equivalent for in terms of narrative convenience.

I advise my students that in making representations of themselves or others that they should consider the following questions regarding the foundations of their character design:

- What is the artist’s position in relation to the characters he or she is representing? If you are representing types or groups do you know these types or groups from the inside or do you only have a distant or outsiders take on the group or type? How close is your observation; how close can you be to the characters?

- Is everyone in your world rendered at the same level of caricature? Is the level of caricature itself demeaning of any of the characters? Why and to what purpose or effect?
Is your world of characters inclusive? Do the members of your cast who represent or express minority positions only occupy the fringe of the narrative? Are these minority characters involved in the action or do they take a passive role? Who is at the center of the narrative and who, generally, do they represent? Are you providing ways into the virtuality of the narrative for a wide range of audience?

As you execute the work are you careful that your staging and graphic infrastructure don’t reflect hidden bias?

Even if you have used particular conventions like anime, funny animal, or superhero conventions through which to tell your story, are you satisfied that your representations are fair and inclusive?

The object of this questionnaire is to promote alternative approaches to the use of stereotypical representation. The main thrust of this effort is not towards altering representations as they appear in comics today; there is substantial sensitivity to the nature of stereotype among the creators of comics of all types. I have laid out my observation about stereotype within the context of the comics because it is easy to see the issues through the examples offered. There is some distance historically and the fact that the issues of representation are flattened into two dimensional representations makes the issues somewhat more visible and easier to acknowledge. These remarks are intended to lay groundwork for what will be a different but
related discussion about the issues of representation, stereotype and simulation as they evolve in the next level of virtual reality narrative, narratives in video-games and other immersive technologies.

In concluding the discussion in this chapter, I want to look briefly at some issues in these emerging media that intersect with the issues of icon, virtuality, and representation in the comics. When I take up these questions with my students I like to begin with several images that are much more familiar to them than the images from the comics we have been considering here. These are images from the prominent mass media of the current generation.\(^5\)

The first of these, an image of the video/pc game character, Lara Croft always provokes a range of interesting reactions from the class and especially the women in the class.
Fig. 64. Lara Croft in Rare Repose. Fan art by Udi Anoulin. The Croft Times. www.ctimes.net

Most of the young women in my classes do not find the design of Lara Croft particularly objectionable. They understand that she is objectified and framed to optimize the pleasures of the male gaze. They like the way she’s not a weakling or a wimp and that she’s at the center of the action. In her more recent renderings her proportions and figure are somewhat within the realm of the feasible and she has been de-bustified in her seventh incarnation to make her more atheletic. The debusitification is also expected to attract more female gamers, an important growing segment of gamers whose allegiances are not already committed to established game
franchises. The new game developers have also reframed her image in the typical arcade view of the game, backing the camera up so that it lets more of the landscape into the frame which used to be closely fixated on her considerable charms in collective motion. (Totillo)

What the young women in my class find most problematic about the representation of Lara Croft is that she is a standard of reference for “Beauty,” something we saw at the beginning of this chapter in Eisner’s explanation for the necessity of stereotype. They are very concerned about what they feel is the pressure on them to meet standards of reference for beauty and ideals of body perfection. They are especially aware of how these standards, these ideals of perfect appearance, are encoded in heroic representations like Lara Croft.

In the paradigm of print the dynamics at play around the technology of that medium work toward an efficiency and simplification of design to ease the mechanics and improve the accuracy of reproduction. As I said earlier in this essay, the emphasis for narrative artists in print is on creating characters that will make a quick and clear impression. In the act of reading the graphic narrative, the reader will experience increased virtuality if the creator has adequately handled the creation of characters with iconic qualities, balancing them with more photorealistic characters and apparatus so that they are perceived as part of the environment that can be seen when one is “inside” the story.
In the paradigm of information interactivity the act of reading can involve the sorts of character relationships we see in comics and other graphic narrative forms. But the technology is not a force pushing toward simplification and ease of impression but rather in the opposite direction, towards elaboration and toward photorealistic detail in the characters and throughout the environment. Instead of pushing toward the icon, the technology pushes toward an illusion of simulated reality, a simulation. Immersion in the story is created, not by iconic transfer but through interaction in the fictive space.

In many comics the reader is invited to wrap around an iconic representation that they can ride through the virtual reality of the narrative. In electronic gaming, the reader is invited to immerse themselves in a character—to wrap the character around themselves and investigate a simulated reality through the shell of the character.
The limitations of processing speed, memory and the manner in which computer drawn polygons can be rendered to simulate the smooth continuums of analog reality currently limit simulated worlds to environments and characters that have character designs that look very similar to the comics. This similarity is a byproduct of designing characters to maximize the creative potential within the rendering power of first, second and third generation gaming engines. Some game designers and artists are beginning to discover that iconic character design provides some welcome narrative advantages besides better facility at graphics rendering. For example, the simplified and iconic design of Pac Man characters is really quite appropriate for the game play of Pac Man and there is no good reason to significantly
alter the characters, in fact significantly altering them would not be well-received by the players. Three-dimensional versions of Pac Man are now commonly played, but in creating the worlds of 3-D Pac Man, designers have not tried to replace the iconic world of Pac Man with a photo-realistic world.

Some game designers are learning that using iconic characters in photorealistic worlds has something of the same effect as reading manga. Readers enter the narrative through the iconic character and explore the virtual world of the story as they explore normal space because there are such interesting places to visit. Entering 3-D space through the icon can make the gamer feel even more present in the action and the narrative. Increasingly gamemakers understand that Cartesian coordinate space is just a set of visual and narrative conventions, appropriate for some types of storytelling but not the only convention that can contain interactive electronic storytelling and sometimes not the best choice. Not all narratives, worlds or characters should aspire to the condition of photorealism and over time we may discover that not many truly satisfying gaming or virtual reality experiences will aspire to that condition. In the world of gaming like the worlds of comics, will we want to see ourselves as we see ourselves, in various iconic guises, or will we want to see ourselves as others see us?

The other question is how we will want to see “the other?” As narrative evolves into various modes of interactivity and virtual reality, will our fantasies be better realized by interaction with individuals or stereotypes? Games have an unfortunate proclivity towards stereotypical
representation because the violence that is so ubiquitous in electronic gaming seems more acceptable when the virtual victims of simulated violent acts are represented as a stereotypes. The more stereotypically represented are the subjects of our fantasies, either in consciously constructed narratives or the narratives that we superimpose on reality, the easier it is to objectify them. This objectification is almost a necessary concomitant to doing violence to them. The more violent we want our fantasies, the more the characters must be stereotyped and objectified. The more we want to do violence to others in “real life,” the more we try to construct them as stereotypes. In this fashion, the use of stereotypes abets violence.

Fig. 66. Screenshot from Grand Theft Auto San Andreas. Electronic game. Rockstar Games, 2005
My students are very uncertain when I ask them about stereotypes in Grand Theft Auto. They believe they recognize the characters in the narrative. Representations are generally inclusive and are rendered with the same level of caricature. Central characters are equally realized and real observation of historical period (the early 1990s) has gone into the apparel, language and attitudes of the characters as well as the apparatus of the environment. My students think of these characters as observed. What is less apparent to them is how the selection of characters flows from and reinforces stereotypes in the culture, and how we learn how to represent ourselves by the representations we give “the other.”

Because it is largely a narrative of violence, Grand Theft Auto must have a significant level of stereotyping of characters, situation and storylines. Such levels of violence are entertaining because the incidents of violence are perpetrated by stereotypes on stereotypes. This type of narrative is socially reassuring because when the player is real the illusion is that such things can’t happen to him or her because such things can only happen to stereotypes.

Stories in the Grand Theft Auto series are notable for the way they advance the idea of virtual space as a central story element. The exploration of space is such an important element that it substitutes in these narratives for the exploration of character. The creators of these games are making narratives of survival in which the player chooses a path through webs of
characters who are either to be used or feared. Relationships in this virtual world are temporary alliances of convenience impatient for the conditions of betrayal. It will be interesting to see if the writers of the next generation of virtual realities learn from the history of the comics. It is not just a question of “good” stereotypes versus “bad” stereotypes. The use of stereotypes is corrupting in itself. One of the features of this corruption is how the use of stereotypes teaches the audience to read the narrative of their own reality in stereotypical terms.

The antidote to the problems of stereotype in electronic gaming narrative may be the increasing development of the interactive elements of gaming. The more interactive a character becomes the more individualized and visa-versa. Advancements in the artificial intelligence of game characters are creating the conditions for more satisfying interaction in gameplay especially in respect to the deepening possibilities of interaction and even intimacy with simulated characters.

In the story Bitchin’ Bod the assaults that Crumb stage-manages on the person of Cheryl Borck are assaults on her as Devil Girl, sex object and archetype. Crumb’s tale is an allegory of objectification starring the male objectifying mind for which the objects of desire and the objects of beauty are useable phenomena outside any relation to the self, save as tools for the will to power. In his story Crumb replumbs Cheryl Borck into the ultimate object of desire, suppressing the most individual and interactive aspects of
her character, her face and head, in favor of the most fetishistic parts of her character, her body.

In Devil Girl, Mr. Natural has made his attempt to create his “natural” cyborg the old-fashioned analog way, with a length of pipe and a strap gasket. Reshaped by a few tools and male ingenuity, Devil Girl is a natural machine constructed to deliver sexual pleasure. This is the final refinement of male representation of female, that she is the vehicle for male pleasure and Crumb has his characters ride around on various parts of her. The idea of her “naturalness’ is just another male construction of her character, retained by suppressing those parts of her that are in conflict with this anti-platonic ideal.

The point of this allegory is that even the most extreme examples of shaping reality to fit the objectifying demands of desire does not prove to be sufficient to the needs of human males. The objectifying aspect of male sexuality pulls strongly in one direction but the forces of socialization and the need for intimacy pull another. In representational terms while our will to power wants to embrace stereotype, our need for intimacy requires individualization.
Intimacy requires specificity and individuality. One cannot be intimate with a stereotype. One, however, can be intimate with a simulation.

Certain forms of electronic gaming such as first person shooters or platform games will most likely continue to be peopled by stereotypes. Just as many forms of popular genre fiction in print media, tv and film. Stereotypical characters and formula plots retain their appeal even after some 200 years of audience exposure. At least Lara Croft now expresses regret when she blows away an animal by mistake, instead of one of her virtual human antagonists.

Most forms of virtual reality narrative will inevitably lean toward characters and settings with more detail and specificity as the technology of
digital representation improves. What will really drive greater specificity and individuality in character representation and design in electronic gaming will be the medium’s quest for more and more interactivity. More virtual interactivity seems to require more individuality of representation, because the more individual and specific the characters, the more one can uncover and know about the others within the context of the game.

The essence of interaction, and the pleasures of virtuality, are in coming to know more about someone, something, or yourself. In virtual reality narrative we scout around environment, observe apparatus, communicate interactively with others who occupy the same virtual space. The information we get is multi-modal, made up of what we see, what we hear, and what we read. The more information there is available to us, the more there is that can be revealed and understood. The central action in virtual reality is uncovering. The more there is to uncover the more the central action is made manifest.

The biologist and post-modern futurist Donna Haraway in her “Cyborg Manifesto” proposes an “informatics” of a narrative environment that has been radically shifted “from an organic, industrial society to a polymorphous, information system” (Haraway 161). She outlines the nature of this shift in a series of dichotomies:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Representation</th>
<th>Simulation</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bourgeois novel, realism</td>
<td>Science fiction, postmodernism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organism</td>
<td>Biotic Component</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depth, integrity</td>
<td>Surface, boundary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heat</td>
<td>Noise</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Leading the list of those dichotomies is the proposed opposition of representation and simulation. Haraway’s manifesto points us to the way that we are all “chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, …cyborgs.”
For Haraway, “The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation” (150). In realizing those possibilities, Haraway believes the hegemony of representation will be surrounded by new structures of social reality imagineered by experiences of simulation.

Representation, to Haraway’s thinking, is tied inevitably to

....the traditions of ’Western’ science and politics--the tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism; the tradition of progress; the tradition of the appropriation of nature as resource for the productions of culture; the tradition of reproduction of the self from the reflections of the other …

Simulation is, by definition, made up of alternatives that branch and recurve. The concept of representation is to represent, in some way, social reality. Simulation is about pursuing alternatives to existence proscribed by social reality. Representation itself is caught up in the dialogics of self and other. If we are to truly consider how to build character, world, environment and the pleasures of reality/virtuality we should consider character design that is founded not on the principles of representation but on the concepts of simulation.

Simulation is ultimately built out of interconnectivity. Representation places others at a specific distance, nearer or farther depending on the mechanics of the representation and the quality of the icon. The icon is the entry into the virtuality of the two dimensional world of the printed graphic
narrative. Character simulation is a outgrowth of three dimensional media and many of the techniques of character simulation may be already backloaded into two dimensional narrative. One of those backloads may be the transcendence of simulated characters over stereotypes.

Ethics, effectiveness, reputation and empathy are all compromised when artists resort to stereotypes. Audience is narrowed and distanced. Any sense of fairness or equality within the narrative is disturbed. The promise of simulation and virtual reality is to enable the transfer of dreams. Will we all be able to place ourselves fairly within those dreams? Will the dreamspace of virtual reality be a place of empathy or one of violent unconcern? Narrative choices will shape that space.
Summary Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to demonstrate the importance of the graphic narrative as a genre through which we can connect traditional literary study with the study of complex multi-modal narratives. I attempted in this discussion to connect the study of the graphic narrative to the study of narrative in emerging technologies like electronic gaming and virtual reality. The controlling thesis of the exposition has been that “icon,” “representation,” and “virtuality” are key elements to consider when reading multi-modal narratives, including graphic narratives. By considering how these elements are realized in various types of graphic narratives, I have hoped to elucidate how discourse around these elements can highlight issues common to the act of reading across the technological continuum of storytelling.

My exposition began by looking at elements of multimodal narrative in William Hogarth’s *A Harlot’s Progress*. After locating *A Harlot’s Progress* as a prototype of the graphic narrative and Hogarth as a prototype of the graphic narrator, I have tried to develop the ways in which virtuality manifests in this narrative in a similar fashion to the ways it often manifests in narratives for electronic gaming. I have attempted to take terms and tools
from the developing discourse around stories being told in gaming and early virtual reality technologies, and apply those tools to the investigation of similar narrative phenomena within graphic narratives.

My discussion of *A Harlot's Progress* points to the way the reader assembles the elements of the narrative from an exploration of each panel, as if the panel was a room in the story-space, filled with clues through which the reader infers the story. I noted how Hogarth's mode of representation is rooted in observation and how his representative choices evoke in iconic fashion the specific time and space of the London of his lifetime. I have tried to show how Hogarth's pictorial novel in the form of a progress is a social fiction in iconic style, a style that emphasizes metonymic as opposed to metaphorical devices. This reliance on metonymic devices helps Hogarth implement a narrative strategy that emphasizes showing the reader the story rather than telling it to them. This emphasis on "showing" is the inherent strategy of stories expressed in electronic gaming and other interactive and virtual reality media.

My discussion of Hogarth as a prototype of a graphic narrator, a prototype shared by such graphic narrators as Winsor McCay, Carl Barks, and Will Eisner, focused on how graphic narrators of this type in particular, as a result of their interests in business and technology, recognize that advances in technology require new paradigms of narrative practice. The central problem all these narrators are working on is how the storyteller can overcome the barrier of not being in the presence of the audience when the
story is being related. This problem can be addressed only by making the presence of the storyteller more virtual, by making the audience more virtually present within the world and events of the story, or by both. Thus the continuum of absence to presence as a measure of our relationship to the experience of the story, and as a measure applied to elements of virtuality in the relating of the story, are inherent in mediated narrative.

In Chapter Two, I provided some context for the reading of graphic narratives in general and why I have selected “icon,” “representation,” and “virtuality” as the key terms for examination in this exposition. Ideas introduced in Chapter Two are more fully developed in Chapter Three, where I used the essay *Illustration* by J. Hillis Miller to leverage discussion of the relationship between text and illustration, or more essentially, word and image, as expressed in the last two hundred years of literary discourse. My discussion recalls various ways that historically, word and picture have been put into opposition and how this oppositional arrangement has made it especially difficult for works that combine word and image to be considered on a par with works that eschew one for the other.

This oppositional positioning of word and image seems exacerbated by the increasing anxiety expressed by those who are still largely centered within the paradigm of print. In Post-Modern and Post-Structuralist contexts there is a tendency to highlight the oppositional elements in any binary. This seems inevitable in discourse that assumes that any oppositional pairing manifests hierarchy and that one term will always be privileged over
the other. I have tried to make the case that in word and image relationships within the graphic narrative, there are tensions and dynamics that do reflect this oppositional model; however, in the graphic narrative, word and image are married, they work together in their expression of the story. Any descriptive model of relationships between word and image within the graphic narrative needs to account for the sometimes ambiguous and contradictory dynamics of this marriage. The relationship between word and image in any graphic narrative can certainly be examined with an eye toward how power in the relationship is distributed and which partner is privileged or dominant. But this relationship, like any marriage, also needs its cooperative and interpenetrative arrangements described in order to complete the whole picture.

The genre of the graphic narrative seems to require models that are more continuous than binary and oppositional. While these continuities might flow between poles such as word and image, absence or presence, and realistic or abstract, our descriptions need to reflect fields of continuities, with descriptive values that are dynamic instead of static. I have tried to imply that it is the multimodal aspect of the graphic narrative that inherently balances the narrative between the poles of its constituent components (word and image). This aspect requires continuous rather than binary descriptors and exposes the limits of the critique of privilege and opposition. Such critiques tend to miss the more complex pattern of
arrangements around power and networks of cooperation that define, in a continuous fashion, interdependent and interactive relationships.

As I conclude near the end of Chapter Two, the development of the graphic narrative is the inevitable outcome of the efficiencies brought to storytelling by improvements in the technology of printing. Similar developments of the narrative have been recently set in motion by improvements to the technology of multi-modal, multi-media storytelling. These developments have been prompting the application of critical descriptors that are based on continuities rather than on oppositions. “Icon,” “representation” and “virtuality” are descriptors of this type.

In Chapter Three I looked more extensively at what constitutes virtuality. In introducing this subject I hypothesized that future discussion of the act of reading the comics and other forms of the graphic narrative will have to take into account the descriptive phenomenology being advanced by recent studies of how the mind perceives and assembles interior simulations of imagined events from multimodal sources. As yet I have found no organized experiments in recording and analyzing functional images of the perception of comics or other narratives of juxtaposed images or image/word combinations. Eventually data from such experiments can be expected to replace the conjectures that currently inform our phenomenological descriptions of the act of reading, providing us with more specific information as to how the brain simulates when constructing
imaginative experience through narrative. Such information is really essential to accurately understand how icon and virtuality function in various types of stories.

This emphasis on virtuality and the use of the term in relation to reading I traced to Wolfgang Iser and the foundations of reader response theory. For Iser, virtuality is the way the reader imaginatively reconstructs the text as an experienced phenomenon. From a discussion of virtuality in Iser, I moved to a discussion of illustration as seen by J. Hillis Miller, whose work shares some of the same phenomenological underpinnings as Iser’s. In my discussion of Miller’s essay, I brought to the surface the charge, prominently expressed by Mallarmé, that illustration is toxic to the evocative power of words. I have tried to answer this charge against illustration by a reading of Max Ernst’s *Une Semaine de Bonte* in which the evocative aspects of the narrative are centered in the images and in such an evocative and associative fashion as to rival the effects of poetry. I used Ernst’s work as an example of how some of the simplest applications of the formal elements of visual narrative, elements like juxtaposition, deliberate sequencing and the display of images within certain containers, can create the most sophisticated of narratives even from found images.

In further discussion about virtuality I distinguished between “old school” virtuality in which the neural system is stimulated by the schematics of language and imagery into imaginative recreation of experiences that the reader has never had, and “new school” virtuality, in which the experience is
projected at the perceiver with the expectation that the sensory system will translate the projected illusion as if the experience were actual. The emphasis is still on simulation but on simulation external to the sensory system of the perceiver, not within it. I see the graphic narrative as one of the first genres to explore a multisensory approach to narrative, an approach that organizes both internal and external techniques of imaginative simulation. This exploration is documented by an examination of *Little Nemo* by Winsor McCay. I conclude that Ernst’s high art, elite market surrealism simulates the juxtaposition of symbol and memory and recreates the interior landscape of dreaming. McCay’s low art, mass-media surrealism recreates the exterior landscape of the dream and the unpredictable high adventure of dreaming. These two examples show something of the continuum of virtuality within the tradition of the graphic narrative; each emphasizes one of the two forms of virtuality. Ernst’s work emphasizes the virtuality of reading that comes from evocation of the resources within, a form of virtuality like that constructed by Iser. McCay’s *Little Nemo* emphasizes the possibilities of imagery to wrap the reader in a projected virtualization. This part of the discussion concludes with the observation that *Little Nemo* is a progenitor of what will likely become an enlarging body of works that are far more about setting and the exploration of created environments than about plot or character. The focus of the graphic narrative need not be either character nor action, but can be simply the milieu of the narrative as an imaginative space—a space through which the reader navigates, often through an iconic
avatar, sometimes with little more object than having the adventure of exploring that space. This exploration of virtuality in Ernst and McCay shows how “virtuality” is an important emerging thread of literary discourse that can be drawn through time, space, culture and medium, a thread that spins from the core of the reader’s response.

After looking at the continuum of ways virtuality is constructed in the graphic narrative in Chapter Three, in Chapter Four I chose to discuss the ways icon functions within a range of graphic narratives. I advanced the view that one of the significant differences between graphic narrative and traditional monomodal textual narrative is the emphasis within the techniques of graphic narration on devices of metonymy, especially the icon. I tried to take note of the way that this can be a little disconcerting to readers who may be more conditioned to devices of metaphor and may be somewhat disoriented within the metonymous technique of the graphic narrative.

I clearly see icons as metonymies, at the very least in their initial formulation. It must be said, however, that many icons can initiate such complex chains of association that they slide toward the condition of metaphor. One of the most important conjectures about the way icon functions is developed by Scott McCloud in his well-known and influential discussion of icon, *Understanding Comics*. I accept this conjecture and use it as a basis for discussing icon and the way iconic devices and style place
the reader within the virtuality of the story. This relationship is constructed along the continuum of absence/presence. My conclusion about McCloud’s conjecture is that it implies an entire theory of iconic fiction in which the more iconically the central characters are drawn, the more the audience can be expected to inhabit the characters, to be present in the narrative. On the other hand, if the author represents his or her characters more “photorealistically,” that is, represents the characters with a plethora of fine detail, the more the reader can be expected to remain outside the story, an observer of the narrative.

I used this nascent theory of fiction in looking at the way icon is integrated into the style and devices of Kurt Vonnegut’s *Breakfast of Champions*, which I read as a graphic narrative. My reading of the novel focuses on the way that the images are incorporated into the novel and, in a real sense, define its style. The images in the novel are actually only illustrations in the broadest sense and function as icons that overlay and support the novel’s generally iconic narrative style. I argued that the iconic style of this work had direct connections with the ascendancy of Pop Art and its fascination with the icon and especially the iconic quality of the comics. My primary interest in discussing *Breakfast of Champions* was to examine how icon and virtuality functioned within a graphic narrative that was comprised mostly of words and in which words and images were arranged in a fashion most like a typical textual novel.
One of the by-products of this examination is a distinction between imagery that is employed iconically and to further the showing/telling of the narrative, and imagery that is deployed as traditional illustration, which amplifies elements of the text in visual fashion but does not contribute to the showing/telling of the story itself. In the second part of Chapter Four, I developed readings of three contemporary long-form graphic narratives along this illustrative continuum. The first, Craig Thompson’s *Blankets*, is a masterpiece of comics in which all the imagery is devoted to advancing the narrative; little is duplicated between what is told or implied by the words and what is shown or implied by the images. Thompson’s novel is a representation of memory. What is remembered in his novel is holographically transferred; the sense impressions that interpenetrate and even index the past are analogized and coded into a graphic narrative. As audience we are transported into not only the matter of memory, but the shape of recollection. What is subject is not only what is being remembered, but how it is remembered and how the deepest felt matters of the heart are interwoven with whatever we imagine we remember. The result is not a Proustian tale accompanied by illustrations, but an illustration of the Proustian mind.

*Blankets*, with its literary provenance, provides tangible evidence that there is a continuum along which text and illustration can be described in a relationship that constructs a novel. To place them in opposition would be like pitting plot against character. One can be descriptive about the amount
any work might favor words or pictures or the balance of the two in its construction, and/or one can describe the interactions between word and image in the structure of any particular work.

These are the descriptive maneuvers with which I approach readings of Phoebe Gloeckner’s *Diary of a Teenage Girl* and Posy Simmond’s *Gemma Bovery*. Gloeckner organizes her illustrated novel to develop virtuality at three levels of the narrative—the words, the illustrations, and the comics. Gloeckner uses the portion of her story written in comics as a means of dropping into the third person; the voice of the narrator is a voice speaking in comics. Moving so readily among these three major modes of narrative discourse, Gloeckner is able to produce a reading experience that gives great verisimilitude to the reader’s presence within her character’s world. Alternating among these modes, she is able to modulate the virtuality of the story, creating sophisticated levels of absence and presence for the reader. *Diary of a Teenage Girl* is a prototype of the varied virtualities that can be tapped by the illustrated novel.

Posy Simmonds similarly stitches traditional textual narration together with book illustration and comics in her illustrated novel, *Gemma Bovery*. In this work, the maker of the comics is the stylist of the story, adjusting the illustrative elements in a fashion that often indicates her judgments, her attitudes and her points of view. The author’s presence is strong in this work: through the diverse inventions of her drawing and her devices of visual communication, she never lets us escape the
consciousness that we are reading a graphic narrative. Of the three stories considered, this is the only one that was written for serial publication, and its weekly appearance seems to have encouraged the creator to experiment with a number of illustrative effects that add to the virtuality of the story or that embellish the story with metaphors or even allegories. *Gemma Bovery* is a prototype of the illustrated novel because it uses so many illustrative strategies and devices to show and tell its story. The novel contains both traditional types of illustrations as well as passages in comics and these, together with the written word, are braided quite tightly together on most pages of the narrative to form a very dense music with many overtones that decorate its captivating storyline.

The novels of Gloeckner, Vonnegut and Simmonds all show ways in which illustration can be artfully integrated with texts in novelistic fashion and for novelistic effect. When the story is to be advanced by both the words and images, some close approximation to what we call comics is the form such narrative passages most efficiently take. At the center of the continuum between the novel of words and the novel of images is the novel in the form of the comics. Comics as a mode of discourse has found itself highly adaptable to the form of the novel in various ways. Sometimes comics will be used to relate the entire novel, at other times, only passages. There are also forms of graphic novelistic discourse, like those used by Vonnegut, that suggest the comics without becoming them. In all these forms of graphic narrative, we have seen how icon, representation and
virtuality function within the various continuums of word and image (text and illustration) to shape the experience of reading the work.

It was impossible to write an exegesis on all the issues regarding representation as manifested in the graphic narrative in this context, there are far too many issues. Instead, in Chapter Five I constructed a treatise to explore one of the most important issues of representation in the critique of the graphic narrative and that is the use of stereotypes. My discussion specifically addressed a proposition put forth by Will Eisner in his work of practical criticism, Graphic Storytelling. In that proposition Eisner outlined his belief that effective and efficient graphic storytelling is dependent on the use of stereotypes.

I discussed in detail Eisner's enunciation of this theory and attempted to contextualize it within Eisner's position as a prototype of the graphic narrator in the manner of Hogarth, rooted in middle class values and shaped by his experience and instincts as a businessman.

I pointed out the ambiguities in regard to this issue in examples of Eisner's own practice as a graphic narrator, as well as the conflation in his own use of the term “stereotype” to include what we might better call “stock” characters.

I noted that the efforts of graphic narrators between Hogarth and Eisner were attuned to the efforts of distillation, of finding reproducible images that could embody, at a glance, a set of characteristics that would be
instantly recognizable and easily placed within the virtual narrative of the reader. The paradigm of print favors simple schemata that are the easiest to reproduce. Artists within the paradigm of print quite naturally flow with the grain of the medium toward the most essential aspects of representation, the most telling of details. Inevitably the techniques of print favor the speed of impression, both the impression made by the plate to the paper and the impression assembled by the reader from the words and images on the page. Against this background, the use of stereotypical representation can seem reasonable and even necessary.

There have been many analyses put in motion about the social effects of stereotypes and the psychological effects on individuals as they measure themselves against these stereotypical standards of beauty. There are fewer efforts to confront stereotype directly within the theory of graphic narrative. We can understand that stereotyping people is probably not a good thing, but we can find it hard to imagine that the comics can work without resorting to stereotype in some way. Many of us can fall victim to the often expressed opinion that there must be some truth to a stereotype, or otherwise why would it be a stereotype.

To test the assumption that there must be some truth behind stereotypes I made use of the anthology of images collected and glossed by Fredrik Strömberg in his *Black Images in the Comics: A Visual History*. An examination of Strömberg’s collection of images clearly establishes that stereotypes are not based on observation. Stereotypes are not iconic
because they are not metonymous, they have no inherent observable relationship with what they purport to represent. Icons are metonymies. Strömberg shows through a number of examples that it isn’t that hard for graphic narrators to create non-stereotypical representations of black people that fit into pretty much any artist’s stylistic universe.

Stereotypical representations of Black people are not the embodiment of any pattern recognition. Stereotypes are exaggerated and, often, demeaning models of humans with which we try to insist that reality comply. It is not unusual for people to see validation for stereotypes in their observations of others because, in large part, what to observe and how to interpret what is observed has been coded in advance by the stereotype. This is the reason I conclude that the history of stereotypical representations of Black people in the comics tells us nothing about Black people. The history of stereotypical representations of Black people does tell us some things about White people.

The use of stereotypical imagery does not seem to materially aid the graphic narrator in establishing or developing character. Any development of a stereotypical character works against the character’s stereotypicality. One suspects that stereotypical representations are not really present in a narrative to enhance the readability of the narrative or to develop the characters; they are actually present to reassure the reader of the safety of their opinions and prejudices, whether this is known by the author or not.
It is true that our consciousness of stereotype has evolved in such a way as to now allow for stereotypes to be deployed ironically if not always sensitively. Such a case may be the way very racist and sexist imagery shows up in the work of Robert Crumb. Crumb brutally exaggerates his stereotypes. Crumb wants to reveal the cruelty in these images and rub our noses in what they mean about our collective culture. Nonetheless, even in Crumb’s ironic use, it is my view that the use of stereotype, particularly demeaning stereotypes, has a corrosive effect on the lasting perception of a representation, no matter how nuanced or artfully expressed. The essence of the problem of stereotype in graphic narrative involves the way in which the virtuality of the experience is interrupted by the stereotype instead of encouraged. Black stereotypes cannot convey African-American readers through the story because the manner of their representation is completely exterior to African-Americans, the image exists to control, to contain, to reduce, to limit, repress and restrain. The stereotype is not configured to be inclusive.

I contrasted Crumb’s representation of black people with his representation of women and I speculated that Crumb’s representation of women, by virtue of their basis in observation and rendering as archetypes, had more potential to be inclusive of female readers. Both of these examples in Crumb, besides clarifying questions about stereotype and representation, show the linkage among stereotype, icon and virtuality.
The treatise finishes with an analysis of approaches to representation that avoid stereotypical treatment but that are both inclusive and sufficiently flexible to be expressed through caricature. I tried to apply this analysis and these approaches from these studies in graphic narrative to issues of representation within electronic gaming narrative. Among my conclusions on the subject is that ethics, effectiveness, reputation and empathy are all compromised when artists resort to stereotypes. Audience is narrowed and distanced. Any sense of fairness or equality within the narrative is disturbed. These issues should be of great concern to gaming narrators who can learn from the history of stereotypical representation in the graphic narrative.

“Icon,” “representation,” and “virtuality” are three important elements to consider when reading multi-modal narratives, including graphic narratives. In this dissertation I have tried to show how consideration of these elements can enrich readings of individual narratives. Through extended discussions of each of the three terms, I have explored how they can be applied to the study of literary topics generally and how they interact with one another to form some of the core experience of stories related in multimodal form.
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Notes

1. From email by Neil Cohn to the Comix Scholars listserv, July 10, 2004: “In the mid-seventies, a psychologist named Eleanor Rosch was able to show experimentally that concepts and categories are not necessarily discrete nor defined explicitly by certain properties. Instead, she showed that people have a "prototype" concept that fulfills the most idyllic properties, while other members of that category fall further away from that radial center. The most common example is the word "bird." The prototype of "bird" conjures a mental image of something like a robin-esque animal, as opposed to an ostrich or penguin. For instance, you can't try to define birds as being animals with feathers and that fly, because that would exclude featherless chickens and ostriches/penguins. Those are still members of the "bird" category, though they lie further away from the prototypical ideal of the category. www.emaki.net

2. I have heard another story about the origin of the term “cliché.” In this story supposedly typesetters would preset lines of type for phrases in common use by the writers the printers printed. Supposedly this type was
held ready on little sticks composing sticks called “clichés.” I have not been able to confirm that story as anything but an illustrative tale.

3. Charle Chan movies are perhaps one of the most ready examples where one can see actors struggling to work with astoundingly insensitive ethnic stereotypes. Often even the white anglo-european actors playing the title role have to struggle mightily against the confining stereotypical definition of the asian lead character.

4. This is very close to the same male represented by Woody Allen in many of his films, especially the ones in which he plays a leading part.

5. In a corollary to McLuhan’s dictum that new media tend to be containers for the older media that they supplanted (how we use TV to watch old movies, for example), the mediascape tends to be made up of generational strata. This is more visible now that we are laying down new layers in an accelerated fashion. Certainly older generations pick up on the newest media to some degree (My 85-year old mother owns a computer and uses it to browse and email), but the older media forms remain largely intact to service the generations who grew up with them. Consider the future of the newspaper.
Appendix A

Here is the Eisner illustration that begins Chapter 5 shown with the labels that indicate Eisner's intention for how each representation should be read.
About the Author

David Steiling was born Feb. 12, 1949 in Rapid City, South Dakota. He was raised in Wyoming and attended High School in Idaho Falls, Idaho. He received his B.A. in English from Carleton College in 1971 including a year at the Instituto Mediterraneo de Deya, Mallorca. He received an M.A. in Creative Writing and English from Boston University in 1974. From 1974 to 1980 he was a Poet-in-the-Schools for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and a Poet-in-Residence for Rural Libraries in the Commonwealth of Kentucky. From 1980 to 1984 he worked as a clown, magician and New Vaudevillian. From 1984 to 1988 he worked as an editor and journalist. He joined the Ringling School of Art and Design in 1988 and has been a full-time instructor and Coordinator of the Literature Program since 1990. He has taught a class in the Literature of Comics since 1992.