UNDERSTANDING
COMICS
THE INVISIBLE ART
SCOTT McLOUD
“A REMARKABLE NEW BAEDERKER OF THE TOONS.”
—GARRY TRUDEAU, NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW
CHAPTER FOUR

TIME FRAMES.

SO! LET'S SEE: EACH PANEL OF A COMIC SHOWS A SINGLE MOMENT IN TIME.

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

LIKE A LINE DRAWN BETWEEN TWO POINTS.

NAAH! OF COURSE NOT!

TIME IN COMICS IS INFINITELY WEIRDER THAN THAT!

RIGHT?

CLICK

LET'S TAKE A CLOSER LOOK!
SMILE!

AAGH!! THAT FLASH IS BLINDING, UNCLE HENRY!

PAF!

HEE-HEE!

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

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

CHECK!

HMMMM...

SURE YOU WANT TO MOVE THERE, JED?

SINGLE MOMENT? HARDLY!

WHIRRRRRR

EVEN THE BRIEF SOUND OF A FLASHBULB HAS A CERTAIN DURATION. SHORT TO BE SURE, BUT NOT INSTANTANEOUS!

PAF!

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

SMILE!

PAF!

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

AAGH! THAT FLASH IS BLINDING, UNCLE HENRY!

HEE-HEE!

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

WITH ALL ITS ACTIONS AND REACTIONS, A PANEL SUCH AS THIS COULD LAST A GOOD HALF MINUTE OR SO.
BUT HOW COULD THIS BE ANYTHING BUT A SINGLE MOMENT? OUR EYES HAVE BEEN WELL-TRAINED BY THE PHOTOGRAPH AND BY REPRESENTATIONAL ART TO SEE ANY SINGLE CONTINUOUS IMAGE AS A SINGLE INSTANT IN TIME.

BUT THE ACTIONS THAT WE SEE OCCURRING SEEMingly AT THE SAME TIME-obviously can't be!

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

EACH INCH REPRESENTS A SECOND.

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

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

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

SMILE! AAGH! THAT PAP IS BLOODY, UNCLE HENRY!

PAP! KEE--ME
Those figures, faces, and words are matched in time as well.

The properties of the single continuous image meanwhile, tend to match each figure with every other figure.

Portraying time on a line moving left to right, this puts all the images on the same vertical axis.

Single image.
Single moment.

Perhaps we've been too conditioned by photography to perceive single images as single moments. After all, it does take an eye time to move across scenes in real life!

Snap! Snap!

Crash!

And tangled up time beyond all recognition!

Each figure is arranged from left to right in the sequence we will "read" them, each occupying a distinct time slot.

In some respects this panel by itself actually fits our definition of comics! All it needs is a few gutters thrown in to clarify the sequence.

One panel, operating as several panels.
NOT ALL PANELS ARE LIKE THAT, OF COURSE.
A SILENT PANEL SUCH AS THIS COULD INDEED BE SAID TO DEPICT A SINGLE MOMENT!

HE'S GIVING IT HIS ALL, FOLKS!

IF SOUND IS INTRODUCED, THIS CEASES TO BE TRUE...

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

HE WAS GIVING IT HIS ALL, WHEN--

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

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

ALL EXCEPT ONE.

-- SO TOO IS THE PANEL ITSELF OVERLOOKED AS COMICS' MOST IMPORTANT ICON!
These icons we call panels or "frames" have no fixed or absolute meaning, like the icons of language, science and communication.

Nor is their meaning as fluid and malleable as the sorts of icons we call pictures.

The panel acts as a sort of general indicator that time or space is being divided.

The durations of that time and the dimensions of that space are defined more by the contents of the panel than by the panel itself.

Panel shapes vary considerably though, and while differences of shape don't affect the specific "meanings" of those panels vis-à-vis time, they can affect the reading experience.

Which brings us to the strange relationship between time as depicted in comics and time as perceived by the reader.
IN LEARNING TO READ COMICS WE ALL LEARNED TO PERCEIVE TIME SPATIALLY, FOR IN THE WORLD OF COMICS, TIME AND SPACE ARE ONE AND THE SAME.

THE PROBLEM IS, THERE'S NO CONVERSION CHART!

THE FEW CENTIMETERS WHICH TRANSPORT US FROM SECOND TO SECOND IN ONE SEQUENCE COULD TAKE US A HUNDRED MILLION YEARS IN ANOTHER.

SO, AS READERS, WE'RE LEFT WITH ONLY A VAGUE SENSE THAT AS OUR EYES ARE MOVING THROUGH SPACE, THEY'RE ALSO MOVING THROUGH TIME -- WE JUST DON'T KNOW BY HOW MUCH!

IN MOST CASES IT'S NOT HARD TO MAKE AN EDUCATED GUESS AS TO THE DURATION OF A GIVEN SEQUENCE, SO LONG AS THE ELEMENTS OF THAT SEQUENCE ARE FAMILIAR TO US.

FROM A LIFETIME OF CONVERSATIONS, WE CAN BE SURE THAT A "PAUSE" PANEL LIKE THIS LASTS FOR NO MORE THAN SEVERAL SECONDS.

I ALWAYS FIGURED MARY-ANNE WOULD GO FOR GILLIGAN.

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

D'YA THINK THE SOX COULD FINALLY DO IT THIS YEAR?
I GUESS.

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

HEY, I DESERVE A BETTER JOB! I COULD BE A BULLY SIMMONS.
I GUESS.

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

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

THAT MADONNA MAN, HE'S ONE HOT DAME!
I GUESS.
EVER NOTICED HOW THE WORDS "SHORT" OR "LONG" CAN REFER EITHER TO THE FIRST DIMENSION OR TO THE FOURTH?

IN A MEDIUM WHERE TIME AND SPACE MERGE COMPLETELY, THE DISTINCTION OFTEN VANISHES.

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

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

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

HEY, ARE YOU EVEN LISTENING TO ME?

I GUESS

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

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

AND ITS PRESENCE MAY BE FELT IN THE PANELS WHICH FOLLOW IT.
WHEN "BLEEDS" ARE USED — I.E. WHEN A PANEL RUNS OFF THE EDGE OF THE PAGE — THIS EFFECT IS COMPOUNDED.

TIME IS NO LONGER CONTAINED BY THE FAMILIAR ICON OF THE CLOSED PANEL, BUT INSTEAD HEMORRHAGES AND ESCAPES INTO TIMELESS SPACE.

SUCH IMAGES CAN SET THE MOOD OR A SENSE OF PLACE FOR WHOLE SCENES THROUGH THEIR LIMBERING TIMELESS PRESENCE.

ONCE AGAIN, THIS IS A TECHNIQUE USED MOST OFTEN IN JAPAN AND ONLY RECENTLY ADOPTED HERE IN THE WEST.
In comics, as in film, television and 'real life,' it is always now.

This panel and this panel alone represents the present.

Any panel before this—that last one, for instance—represents the past.

Likewise, all panels still to come—this next panel for instance—represent the future.

But unlike other media, in comics, the past is more than just memories for the audience and the future is more than just possibilities.

Both past and future are real and visible and all around us!

Wherever your eyes are focused, that's now. But at the same time your eyes take in the surrounding landscape of past and future.

Like a storm front, the eye moves over the comics page, pushing the warm, high-pressure future ahead of it, leaving the cool, low-pressure past in its wake.

-3 -2 -1 +1

Wherever the eye hits land, we expect it to begin moving forward.

But eyes, like storms, can change direction!
THE IDEA THAT THE READER MIGHT CHOOSE A DIRECTION IS STILL CONSIDERED EXOTIC.

I'LL JUST DRIVE AROUND A WHILE.

OH MY GOD! I'M IN THE WRONG HOUSE!

SIR, I JUST WANTED TO RENT ANOTHER VIDEO.

DO YOU HAVE CARNIVAL OR SOULES?

NAH! I'LL GO LEFT!

OH, MR. GORDON!

CARY.

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

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

THE INVOICE: MR. SALT

NOW I CAN GO OUT TO DINNER!

THE END
Comics readers are also conditioned by other media and the "real time" of everyday life to expect a very linear progression, just a straight line from point A to point B. But is that necessary?

For now, these questions are the territory of games and strange little experiments. But viewer participation is on the verge of becoming an enormous issue in other media. How comics addresses this issue—or fails to—could play a crucial part in defining the role of comics in the new century.

Time will tell.
AS MENTIONED EARLIER, TIME AND SPACE IN THE WORLD OF COMICS ARE CLOSELY LINKED.

AS A RESULT, SO TOO ARE THE ISSUES OF TIME AND MOTION.

AS DISCUSSED IN CHAPTER THREE, MOTION IN COMICS IS PRODUCED BETWEEN PANELS BY THE MENTAL PROCESS CALLED CLOSURE.

—USUALLY BY TRANSITION TYPES ONE TWO... BUT LET’S NOT GET INTO THAT AGAIN!

DESPITE COMICS’ THREE THOUSAND YEAR HISTORY, IT WASN’T UNTIL TOPPER’S MID-1800S DOODLINGS THAT SPECIFIC MOTIONS WERE PORTRAYED IN COMICS IN THE NOW-FAMILIAR PANEL-TO-PANEL FORM.

WITHIN A FEW YEARS, HOWEVER, MOTION WAS A HOT TOPIC INDEED!
IN THE LAST QUARTER OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, IT SEEMED LIKE EVERYONE WAS TRYING TO CAPTURE MOTION THROUGH SCIENCE!

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

MY STROBOSCOPE IS SUPERIOR TO THE OBSCURE ZOETROPE!

BAH! MY PRAXINOSCOPE IS BETTER!

FOOLS! MY KINEMATOSCOPE WILL SHOW YOU THEY ARE BUT MERE TOYS NEXT TO THE AWESOME PHANTASMATROPE!

FRAUDS ALL! MY ZOOPRAXINOSCOPE WILL...

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

IF YOU'RE GOING TO PAINT A WORLD...

--FILLED WITH MOTION--

--THEN BE PREPARED TO PAINT MOTION!

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

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

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

IT WASN'T A BAD IDEA!

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

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

I'M SURE YOU CAN ALL GUESS WHICH MEDIUM I MEAN!
FROM ITS EARLIEST DAYS, THE MODERN COMIC HAS GRAPPLED WITH THE PROBLEM OF SHOWING MOTION IN A STATIC MEDIUM.

AND IN COMICS, UNLIKE PAINTING, IT WAS MORE THAN JUST A THEORETICAL QUESTION.

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

THOUGH SEQUENTIAL ART SURVIVED FOR MANY CENTURIES WITHOUT DEPICTING MOTION, ONCE THE GENIE WAS OUT OF THE BOTTLE IT WAS PERHAPS INEVITABLE THAT MORE AND MORE EFFICIENT MEANS WOULD BE SOUGHT. AT FIRST, THIS SEARCH CENTERED ON MULTIPLE IMAGES IN SEQUENCE.

BUT JUST AS A SINGLE PANEL CAN REPRESENT A SPAN OF TIME THROUGH SOUND--

--SO TOO CAN A SINGLE PANEL REPRESENT A SPAN OF TIME THROUGH PICTURES!

SOMEBEFORE BETWEEN THE FUTUREST'S DYNAMIC MOVEMENT AND DUCHAMP'S DIAGRAMMATIC CONCEPT OF MOVEMENT LIES COMICS' "MOTION LINE."
In the beginning, motion lines—or "zip-ribbons" as some call them—were wild, messy, almost desperate attempts to represent the paths of moving objects through space.

Over the years, these lines became more refined and stylized, even diagrammatic.

Eventually, in the hands of heroic fantasy artists like Bill Everett and Jack Kirby—

Those same lines became so stylized as to almost have a life and physical presence all their own!
BECAUSE OF THEIR ABILITY TO DEPICT ACTION WITH DRAMA, SUCH CONSPICUOUS ACTION LINES HAVE BEEN AN AMERICAN SPECIALTY FOR YEARS.

IN THIS APPROACH, BOTH THE MOVING OBJECT AND THE BACKGROUND ARE DRAWN IN A CLEAR, ARTICULATED STYLE, AND THE PATH OF MOTION IS IMPOSED OVER THE SCENE.

OTHER ARTISTS TRIED ADDITIONAL EFFECTS SUCH AS MULTIPLE IMAGES OF THE SUBJECT, ATTEMPTING TO INVOLVE THE READER MORE DEEPLY IN THE ACTION.*

STILL OTHERS, SUCH AS MARVEL'S GENE COGAN, BEGAN INCORPORATING PHOTOGRAPHIC STREAKING EFFECTS WITH SOME INTRIGUING RESULTS IN THE SIXTIES AND SEVENTIES.

* MULTIPLE IMAGES CAN BE FOUND IN THE WORK OF KRISSTEIN, INFANTINO AND OTHERS.
COLAN, WHO WAS ALSO A FILM-BUFF, WAS OF COURSE AWARE THAT WHEN A CAMERA'S SHUTTER SPEED IS TOO SLOW TO FULLY FREEZE A MOVING OBJECT'S IMAGE, AN INTERESTING BLURRING EFFECT OCCURS.

A CAR GOING AT 60 MPH MIGHT LOOK LIKE THIS.

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

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

AND IN EUROPE WHERE MOTION LINES WERE USED ONLY SPARINGLY, IT WAS LIKewise IGNORED.

BUT IN JAPAN, ONCE AGAIN, A VERY DIFFERENT COMICS CULTURE EMBRACED THIS VERY DIFFERENT CONCEPT OF MOTION AS THEIR OWN!
"SUBJECTIVE MOTION," AS I CALL IT, OPERATES ON THE ASSUMPTION THAT IF OBSERVING A MOVING OBJECT CAN BE INVOLVING, BEING THAT OBJECT SHOULD BE MORE SO.

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

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

ARE THESE THE ONLY WAYS WE CAN PORTRAY MOTION IN A SINGLE PANEL? THINK ABOUT IT.
IN A MEDIUM WHERE TIME AND SPACE MERGE--

--THE STORYTELLER HAS SOME UNUSUAL TOOLS AT HIS/HER DISPOSAL--

--SUCH AS THE POLYPTYCH, WHERE A MOVING FIGURE OR FIGURES--

--IS IMPOSED OVER A CONTINUOUS BACKGROUND.

IN COMICS, COMPOSITION FOLLOWS A VERY DIFFERENT SET OF RULES THAN IN MOST GRAPHIC ARTS.

BY INTRODUCING TIME INTO THE EQUATION, COMICS ARTISTS ARE ARRANGING THE PAGE IN WAYS NOT ALWAYS CONDUCTIVE TO TRADITIONAL PICTURE-MAKING.


--AND THE COMPOSITION OF MEMORY.

IF THE COMPOSITION OF A SINGLE PANEL IS TRULY "PERFECT," DOESN'T THAT IMPLY THAT IT CAN—OR EVEN SHOULD—even STAND ALONE?

THE NATURAL WORLD CREATES GREAT BEAUTY EVERY DAY, YET THE ONLY RULES OF COMPOSITION IT FOLLOWS ARE THOSE OF FUNCTION AND CHANCE.

COMICS, AT ITS BEST, SHOULD DO NO LESS.
As we've seen, the interaction of time and comics generally leads us to one of two subjects: sound or motion.

Sound breaks down into two subsets: word balloons and sound effects.

Both types add to the duration of a panel, partially through the nature of sound itself and by introducing issues of action and reaction.

Motion also breaks down into two subsets: the first type—panel-to-panel closure—was important enough to merit its own chapter.

The other type—motion within panels—can be further divided into several distinct styles. I've covered the ones I know, but there may be many others. Time will tell.

The workings of time in comics should be as simple as:

One...

Two...

Three...

—but they're not.
I've been trying to figure out what makes comics "tick" for years and I'm still amazed by the strangeness of it all.

But no matter how bizarre the workings of time in comics is --

--- the face it presents to the reader ---

--- is one of simple normality.

Or the illusion of it, anyway.

All depends on your frame of mind.