



# AN INTRODUCTION TO COMIC BOOKS

## *SOMETHING'S TINGLING*

Something new happened in the world of comics in August 1962, in the last panel of a story introducing a new superhero in *Amazing Fantasy* #15. The magazine was one of a half dozen or so books Marvel published throughout the fifties that featured tales about rampaging monsters like Fin Fang Foom, or supernatural incursions into everyday life with *Twilight Zone*-style twist endings. Written by editor Stan Lee and illustrated by Steve Ditko, this story told the tale of one Peter Parker, a high school student bitten by a radioactive spider and thus transformed

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into the much-misunderstood hero Spider-Man. At first Parker tries to cash in on his new “spider” powers – strength, speed, stamina and a sixth sense – by becoming a wrestler, appearing on TV and trying to sell his new formula for adhesive spider-web to skeptical scientists. Yet when he lets a thief escape the clutches of a pursuing policeman, then later discovers that his Uncle Ben was murdered by the same robber, he comes to a startling revelation in the final panel: “with great power there must also come – great responsibility!” It was the beginning of the Silver Age of comics, when superheroes would return to their prominence in the comics medium not as paragons of virtue like Superman, but as ordinary people faced with ordinary problems who were given great powers, often thanks to the mysterious forces of atomic radiation. It would take a decade or two and a gradual erosion of the repressive Comics Code of 1954 before these new heroes realized their full potential as superhumans in a real world. Lee, Ditko and Jack Kirby’s comics of the sixties set the scene for the development of the medium not just as an arena where powerful purely good beings slugged it out with powerful purely bad ones; but as one illuminated by shades of grey; by ethical, social and political debates within and without the text bubble. It was the beginning of the end of the Manichean view of life seen in most comics in the Golden Age, one only partially relieved in the fifties by EC Comics’ social satires. It was the beginning of philosophical politics in this once disposable and juvenile medium. This book is about these debates. But before we get to the burning ideological issues this book centres on, let’s go back to the basics of comics, and look at the mechanics of how they work, followed by a brief history of the medium and a visit to the comic book zoo.

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### *THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL MECHANICS OF COMICS*

Don't be scared, "epistemological mechanics" isn't as complicated as its sounds. The "mechanics" of something is how its parts fit together and move to produce a desired effect. "Epistemology" is a branch of philosophy that studies how we know things, from the Greek word for knowledge, *epistēmē*. So the epistemological mechanics of comics is nothing more than how the parts of comics work together to produce a type of knowledge – usually a story, often about adventure or conflict.

In this section, I claim little originality. Like Doctor Strange, I have already journeyed to the inner sanctum of comic book wisdom to read the books of the masters, with Scott McCloud's magisterial *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, a comic book about how comic books work, standing as the most powerful book of magic in this regard. Much of what I say in this section is a gloss on McCloud's ideas. First up are the labours of definition. Will Eisner's definition has become the traditional "technical" term for comics: they're a form of *sequential art* since they feature two or more panels containing drawn or painted images placed in some sort of meaningful order. These usually contain text, though there's nothing strange about the inclusion of silent panels in a comics' narrative. This invites comparisons of comics to other art forms, specifically to fine art, novels, photos and film. Comics contain elements of all of these forms, yet are distinct from each. Sure, as early as the mid-1960s comic artists such as Jack Kirby and Jim Steranko were experimenting with photomontage and black-and-white street scenes as the background to their drawings of figures in action in books like *Fantastic Four*, *Captain America* and *Nick Fury, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.* But the essence of comics, unlike

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individual paintings and photos, is that their placement in a sequence tells some sort of story.<sup>1</sup>

As for comics and novels, although they both tell stories, pictures generally only appear on the cover of novels. If pictures are contained within, they are an embellishment, and are usually found in children's books or pulp fiction. Sometimes a map or two is included, as at the start of fantasy novels about convoluted adventures such as J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Indeed, so-called "serious scholars" might feel uncomfortable with too many pictures in their favourite weighty tomes of literature. Yet a comic is defined by its pictures as much as by its words and story. Though this isn't immediately obvious, the medium that stands closest to comics is film. If we actually lay a strip of film on a table and examine it, we won't see moving images, but a series of still photographs in sequence with an inaudible soundtrack along its edge. Of course, when a film is projected we no longer see the individual still frames but *do* hear the soundtrack. Yet even in its passive form, film is quite different from comics. First, there are 130,000 individual frames in a ninety-minute movie running at twenty-four frames per second, while a twenty-page comic book will typically contain only eight to one hundred fifty panels. Second, we can quietly absorb and muse over a comics' panel in a way we can't with even the shortest sequence in a movie.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it's relatively easy to flip back a few pages and "replay" a story sequence in a comic book. Third, in a film we *hear* the soundtrack, which allows us to hear the inflections and pitch of the actors' voices and the variable volume levels of the background noises and music. In a comic we have to imagine what the characters and background noises sound like based on the situation, shape of the word balloon and, in some cases, the shape of the

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letters themselves. We provide our own soundtrack with our imagination.

In this and other senses, comics are what pioneering Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan called a “cool” medium. McLuhan thought that there were two types of media: hot ones were high definition and didn’t require a lot of audience participation, while cool ones were low definition, demanding more mental participation from the viewer or listener. Print, radio and film are hot, while television (surprisingly) and comics are cool since they demand that we “fill in” the empty spaces between the panels on the page or dots on the screen (remember, McLuhan lived in the age of the cathode ray tube in the 1960s when TV pictures were often grainy and flickering). Since comics involve a series of still images, the reader must make a mental leap from one panel to the next to make sense of a story. We do it without thinking when we watch our own high-definition TVs or films at the cinema: in the former case we “glue together” in our minds the pixels on the screen, in the latter we link together those twenty-four frames projected on the screen every second to create movie magic. With TV and films this act of closure is automatic. But with comics things are not so simple. When we read comics we have to provide closure between still images: we use our imagination to leap over the gutter between panels with mental images of what happened between them (guided by the skill of the writer and artist, of course). With film this leap is mechanical, not imaginative: the film projector’s sprockets pulls the film strip through a mechanism with a light source and lens that both illuminates and magnifies it so that we seem to see a very large moving picture on the cinema screen. When we read comics, *we* are the mechanism; *we* mentally join together the words

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and images into a moving picture. So comics require a species of imagination different from the ones we use when reading a book, looking at a picture or watching a movie.

In his opening chapter, Scott McCloud isn't satisfied with Will Eisner's original definition of comics as "sequential art." After a series of imaginary objections from a rascally rabbit and other members of the audience, he comes to the much longer though more bulletproof definition of comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (9). In other words, comics are pictures placed in some order that inform and entertain us. Yet the sequence in a piece of sequential art is all-important to understanding the comic in question.

Traditionally comic books featured a series of rectangular panels arranged in a left-to-right, top-to-bottom reading order. Yet this approach varied as early as the Golden Age of the 1940s by artists such as Eisner in his comic *The Spirit*, in which we see arms, legs, cars, planes and all manner of other things crossing over from one panel to the next. Eisner, Jack Kirby, Matt Baker and other Golden Age artists also played with panel shape and order, adding circles, ovals, triangles and irregular jagged panels to their artistic palettes. By the Silver Age of the 1960s innovative artists like Jim Steranko and Neal Adams were even eliminating the empty gutter itself, the boundaries between panels becoming a mere dark line, if not the face, hand or torso of one of the characters. Such innovations led to comics becoming even cooler than McLuhan first imagined, as variable panel shape and order, along with crossovers, forced the reader to spend more energy interpreting a page. Take for example this Neal Adams' sequence of the Beast being pushed out a window

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in *X-Men* #57. How do we read this page? It would seem that we should start with the panel on the bottom left, then move up to the top of the page to the thin panel in the centre, then to the three below it, finally (one assumes) to the one in the top right-hand quadrant of the page. It's not that hard to figure out what's going on here. Yet Adams' variation on traditional panel shapes and order forces us to think a bit more when we first read it. It's fun and exciting to escape the traditional linear structure of comics in a page like this – its layout con-



**The Beast Takes a Tumble. (Roy Thomas, writer; Neal Adams, pencils.) *X-Men* #57, 12 (1969). © Marvel Comics**

veys Hank McCoy's panic at falling better than the traditional structure would. Furthermore, the size of panels can also influence the information and emotions we read from them. A panel that fills a full page – a splash page – is usually meant to dramatically introduce a key character or show us an important event. It makes us pay attention. A series of very small panels scattered around a page – perhaps containing different views of a given character's face or body – are usually meant to give us different perspectives on the same person or event, offering us the hand-drawn equivalent of slow-motion photography. This brings us to a basic choice that comics writers and artists make, to offer us either a compressed or decompressed narrative. A compressed story will move the reader along quickly

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from action to action or scene to scene within the comic. The typical American superhero comic book is likely to offer such compression, in part to keep its largely young audience's attention. Action and adventure films over the last twenty years have also tended to offer compressed narratives with lots of car chases, space battles or fist fights jammed into ninety minutes of entertainment. On the other side of this dialectic is the decompressed narrative; this is very common in manga, which often run to hundreds of pages in length. Here things move at a much slower pace, with a whole page dedicated to a character turning around to face danger, having a discussion with a friend or musing as she sips a coffee. Decompressed narratives offer us a variety of perspectives on a given event. Ironically, they can often be read much faster since little closure is needed between panels. A decompressed comic comes closer to looking cinematic since we see more of what would happen in the gutter of a traditional comic. Indeed, the storyboards of action movies often look like crude versions of decompressed comics. In both types of narrative, as we move through comics space, we're also moving through comics time, though at a much slower narrative rate in decompressed stories.

Comics use a whole visual vocabulary that is obvious to their fans, but perhaps strange to newcomers. At their most basic, comics feature a series of static images. Yet these images can seem like they're moving, both as a result of the closure the reader's mind provides when jumping a gutter, and by the use of several artistic techniques within a panel (see McCloud, chapter 4). The most obvious one is the drawing of motion lines

FACING PAGE **Poetry in Motion: Artist Gene Colan uses irregular panel shapes, crossover speech bubbles, motion lines, photographic blurring and multiple figures to indicate movement in the battle between Daredevil and the Jester in *Daredevil* #46, 14 (1968). © Marvel Comics**





**PTAM!**

SO THERE YOU ARE!

NOW WHAT?

IF WE HAVE TO DO THE SCENE OVER AGAIN--!

IT WORKED! HE'S HERE!



HEY! WE'RE FILMING NOW!

YOU CAN'T COME IN HERE!

ON THE CONTRARY! IT IS YOU WHO CANNOT LEAVE--TILL I ACQUIESCE!

I THOUGHT YOU'D NEVER ASK!

NOW-- BEFORE I PUNISH MY WITLESS IMPERSONATOR--

LET ME SEE WHO MY VICTIM IS!

**YOU!!**



YOU SURVIVED OUR LAST ENCOUNTER--

BUT THIS TIME YOU WON'T BE AS FORTUNATE!

YOU'LL HAVE TO DO BETTER THAN THAT, NEEDLE-NOSE--

IF YOU WANNA PLAY IN MY BALL PARK!

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behind an object, for example, when Thor throws his hammer, we know it's moving very fast because Jack Kirby has drawn a series of straight black lines in its wake. Second, motion can be indicated by multiple images of a single figure within a panel, as when Gene Colan shows the Jester somersaulting over the lunging Daredevil in the panels on page 9. Third, motion can be shown by photographic streaking, seen on photos using conventional film when the object photographed moves during the brief time the shutter was open. Gene Colan started using such streaking in his late Silver Age work with Marvel, with many artists in the last twenty years following suit, given the increasing ease of achieving this effect with computer graphics. Fourth, as McCloud points out, Japanese comics often use "subjective motion," where the central figure appears to be moving rapidly through space given the clearly drawn foreground and blurry background we see in the panel. Lastly, we sometimes see a polyptych, where the central figure moves from one place to another against a static background over several panels.

Where film uses an audio track to indicate a character's tone of voice, comics use speech bubbles. Characters typically talk within oval speech bubbles. When they're thinking, these bubbles become cloud-shaped. An icy retort might be contained within a speech bubble dripping icicles. A character speaking in a booming voice will have his speech bubble outlined with a triple-thick line. When a character is speaking or thinking "off camera," his or her words are often contained within a rectangular insert placed within a panel picturing another person or place. The use of off-camera speeches is especially effective in bridging from one scene to another, creating a greater flow to the story. Some comics, such as Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight*

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*Returns*, actually colour-code speech and thought bubbles according to who's doing the speaking or thinking (e.g., Superman is blue; Batman, grey; Robin, yellow; and so on). Also, word art – text in a dramatic, oversized font splayed across a panel or page – is traditionally used for sound effects like “WOOSH!,” “KRRRUNCH!” or “KABOOM!”

Another key element of the epistemological mechanics of comics are the types of transitions from panel to panel the artist can draw on. In his third chapter of *Understanding Comics*, McCloud lists six types of transitions. The three most common transitions in American comics are:

⇒ **Action-to-Action:** This features two distinct actions in the same scene by the same person or thing. For instance, a man swings a golf club in one panel, hitting a ball in the next. This is the most common type of transition in superhero and adventure comics.

⇒ **Subject-to-Subject:** This is a transition within the same scene between two distinct events or characters. For example, in one panel Batman reaches into his utility belt, while in the next we see the Joker laughing. This requires more active closure: in my example, we have to decide, why is the Joker laughing at Batman?

⇒ **Scene-to-Scene:** This is where we move across distant times or places. For example, we might see the Dark Phoenix consuming a star in one panel, then Professor X furrowing his brow in consternation back on Earth in the next. This transition is often used to switch from one story to the other in a multi-layered narrative, saying, in effect, “meanwhile...”

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There are three more types of transitions, all of them rare in the mainstream American comics, but more common in manga and independently published graphic novels:

⇒ **Moment-to-Moment:** This transition illustrates successive moments in a story that are only a second or two apart. This is the most cinematic form of transition, echoing a slow-motion scene in a film. A decompressed narrative might spend a whole page on one emotional moment by using a series of moment-to-moment transitions focused on a character's face.

⇒ **Aspect-to-Aspect:** This transition features panels that show different aspects of the same event or place, with time more or less frozen. This transition has traditionally been rare in monthly American comics.

⇒ **Non Sequitur:** This is when there is no logical relationship between the panels at all. Yet even here we try to make sense of the story. For example, we see unrelated successive pictures of a banana, a fighter jet and a pretty woman's face, and conclude that it's a story about an air force pilot eating a banana before a dangerous mission as his wife sits at home worrying.

To give you an idea of the breakdown of transitions in a typical superhero comic, I analyzed *The Amazing Spider-Man #3* by Lee and Ditko, Spidey's first confrontation with Dr. Octopus. In it there are a total of one hundred twenty-three transitions. Of these, 71% are action-to-action, 15% scene-to-scene, 13% subject-to-subject and 1% ambiguously moment-to-moment. There are no aspect-to-aspect transitions or non sequiturs.

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This focus on action, mixed with the occasional scene shift, is typical of most major genres of American comics until the end of the 1980s.

It goes without saying that colour can be used to create mood. Up until the end of the Bronze Age (the 1970s and 1980s), a comics' colourist filled in the empty spaces between the black lines of a panel with swaths of colour provided by dyes, ink or paint. Prior to the advent of computerized colouring in the early 1990s, most comics used a series of monochromatic fields of colour within a given panel, though various mechanical overlays could provide texture. That's why older comics, even when reprinted on high quality paper, tend to look primitive to the modern fan used to the broad colour palette, variable shading, distortion and light effects that computer programs like Photoshop can provide.<sup>3</sup>

Colour can create mood in other ways. Superheroes are often colour-coded by their costumes: Batman's menacing grey and black outfit; Captain America's patriotic red, white and blue; Iron Man's iconic red and yellow. Costumes can act as instant identifiers, especially useful when there is a change of artist in a comics title or when the reader is trying to sort out just who all those characters are in a crowd scene. Further, colour creates mood in a more traditional way by the association of given shades with certain emotions: a bright red "CRASH!" could indicate an angry attack, while a dark grey alley makes us sense mystery or danger. A graphic novel might deliberately adopt a limited colour palette to express a given mood, as Daniel Clowes does in *Ghost World* (1993–97), where he limits himself to black and shades of blue. For good reason: our ghost world of strip malls, fast-food franchises and glowing TV sets is, indeed, very blue.