MEND THE GAP:

VISUAL WRITERLY STRATEGIES, THE MISSING PIECE OF READER ENGAGEMENT IN COMICS

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Abstract

How do comics engage readers? Scholars argue that comics readers become invested in the story by using their imagination to fill in narrative gaps created by the gutter spaces that mark missing visual details in between panels. Theories of the gap, however, do not approach gaps as images that like other ambiguous images create instances of narrative uncertainty that prompt the interpretative input of readers. Inspired by Roland Barthes's distinction between the readerly and the writerly, this thesis proposes that to reach a plausible, coherent comics narrative, readers either 1) adopt visual readerly strategies to decode conventional images (including the gap), or they 2) employ visual writerly strategies to creatively interpret unconventional, indeterminate images and reach a plausible meaning through inference. In the latter case, the narrative input of readers is extensive and necessary for the narrative to cohere.

Several scholars have examined how comics guide readers to decode their conventional visual language. By contrast, little work has been done in relation to the increasingly common use of indeterminate images that demand the writerly input of readers. This thesis addresses this gap in scholarship, adopting a narratological approach to study how unconventional images in nine comics activate the engagement of readers so that the narrative coheres. Because readers enter stories primarily through the thoughts and feelings of characters and narrators, this thesis focuses on the indeterminate visual representation of characters' or narrators' minds. Specifically, this thesis demonstrates how:

1) the visual doubling, joining, or blending of cues of minds encourage readers to writerly perceive at once the intramental and the intermental thinking of characters (Chapter One);
2) in the absence of cues of mind, spatial cues enable readers to writerly characterize characters with unreadable minds (Chapter Two);
3) the altering of documents function as focalization cues that prompt readers to writerly respond to the manipulative, confused or ambivalent mind of the narrator who compiled them (Chapter Three).

In all instances, the indeterminacy of images and the writerly engagement they trigger draw readers into the storyworld and into the minds of its agents, thus uniquely investing readers as co-creators of the comics narrative.

General Summary

This thesis examines how comics foster reader engagement. Scholars argue that narrative gaps created by the gutter spaces that mark missing visual details in between panels are the primary means by which comics invite readers into the narrative experience. Theories of the gap, however, do not approach gaps as images that like other ambiguous images create instances of narrative uncertainty that prompt the interpretative input of readers. Inspired by Roland Barthes's terminology, this thesis proposes that to reach a plausible, coherent comics narrative, readers 1) adopt visual readerly strategies to decode conventional images (including the gap), or 2) employ visual writerly strategies to creatively interpret unconventional, indeterminate images or infer a plausible meaning. In the latter case, the readers' narrative input is extensive and necessary for the narrative to cohere.

Several comics scholars have examined how comics guide readers to decode their conventional visual language. By contrast, little work has been done in relation to the increasingly common use of indeterminate images that demand the writerly input of readers. This thesis addresses this gap in scholarship, adopting a narratological approach to shed light on how unconventional images in nine comics require the active engagement of readers for the narrative to cohere. Because readers enter stories primarily through the thoughts and feelings of characters and narrators, this thesis focuses on the indeterminate visual representation of characters' or narrators' minds to address how they activate writerly reading strategies. Specifically, this thesis demonstrates how:

1) the visual doubling, joining, or blending of cues of minds encourage readers to writerly perceive at once the individual and collective thoughts of characters (Chapter One);
2) in the absence of cues of mind, spatial cues enable readers to writerly characterize characters with unknown thoughts and feelings (Chapter Two);
3) altered visual documents prompt readers to writerly respond to the manipulative, confused or ambivalent mind of the narrator who compiled them (Chapter Three).

In all instances, the indeterminacy of images and the writerly engagement they trigger draws readers into the storyworld and into the minds of its agents, thus uniquely captivating readers as co-creators of the comics narrative.

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Theoretical Introduction

A Conspicuous Absence: Images in Comics and their Impact on Reader Engagement

Reader engagement and, specifically, what it is that compels readers of comics to get invested in the story is central to this thesis. Comics scholars who have tried to explain how readers are drawn into a comics narrative have put forth what I call the theory of the gap as visual absence or gap theory for short. Several scholars agree that the gap in visual information introduced by the gutter—the space in between the panels—invites readers to participate in the narrative's meaning-making process by asking them to infer or fill in the missing information, which, in turn, engages them with the particulars of the narrative they are reading.

This thesis points to the limitations of theorizing the gap as the primary means of reader engagement with comics, arguing that while visual gap theory cannot be dismissed altogether, it overlooks or grossly undervalues the many visual strategies used *within* comics images that also invite the input of readers. Whereas gap theory posits that readers complete the narrative and are immersed in it because of an absence of representation, I propose a more holistic model of reader engagement based not on the absence of visual information or the lack of visual details, but also and more importantly on the presence of images (including the gutter as a visibly marked pictorial absence). In particular, I propose that the inherent indeterminacy of all images triggers cooperation (at different degrees) from comics readers as they make sense of what they are seeing and try to make the narrative cohere. Readers are drawn into the story through their attempts to decipher or infer the meaning of images.

In what follows, I briefly review theorizations of the gap as a visual absence or lack of representation that serves as the main gateway to reader investment. I then demonstrate that this popular model of reader engagement in comics is incomplete by highlighting its failure to account for the potential of images in all comics to engage readers. Thinking differently about reader engagement with comics, I propose a model (detailed below) that is focused on images and takes into consideration both conventional images that readers can interpret by relying on visual readerly strategies to reach meaning, and unconventional, highly indeterminate images that prompt readers to adopt visual writerly strategies for the images to signify and for narrative coherence to be achieved. Dividing comics images into two categories allows me to distinguish between different types of reader engagement strategies, and to detail how the gap functions as a conventional image that due to its standardization often requires a readerly (and not writerly) engagement from readers. Finally, in this introductory chapter, I detail my thesis, introduce my methodology, and provide an overview of the analytical chapters that follow.

State of Affairs: The Theory of the Gap as Visual Absence

Comics scholars argue that "gaps are responsible for engaging the reader" (Uhlig) with the narrative—in particular, the gaps created by the (usually) blank space or the gutter in between panels. Comics are "challenging" and "offer a form of reading that resists coherence" because of their characteristic sequential storytelling form (Hatfield xiii). Yet, as Douglas Wolk puts it, the "gutter is where the fun happens," since "a lot of the pleasure in reading comics is filling in *all* the blank space" (*Reading Comics* 131,

132; emphasis in original). Although most commonly a visually empty space between panels, the gutter can also be marked by a simple line, an elaborate design, or other visual marks that function to separate two panels, thus fragmenting the narrative while also signalling a relation between the narrative fragments.[1] While defined as "an absent space," the gap or gutter is also an integral "part of the story" (Chute, *Why Comics* 23) and its telling; it acts as "the site of a semantic articulation, a logical conversion" where readers, in their minds, unite "a series of utterables (the panels) in a statement that is unique and coherent (the story)" (Groensteen, *The System of Comics* 114). In comics, gutters do not only separate narrative units; they also serve a linking or "arthrologic function" (Groensteen, *The System of Comics* 114) that activates in readers the process of narrative closure. Closure, which Scott McCloud defines as the "phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole" (63), is essential in comics reading and occurs because some of the story is 'lost' in the gutter space.[2] Consequently, the comics narrative cannot come into meaning unless readers bridge or stitch the different panels together to reconstruct the story fragment by fragment by imagining what unfolds between panels, in the gutter.

While the gutter is obviously *the* visual gap comics readers must fill in to make sense of the story, Barbara Postema demonstrates in *Narrative Structures in Comics* that absences abound in comics, creating different gaps that at once demand and facilitate reader investment. Among the many gaps of comics, she includes blank panels or the

[1] See, for instance, Groensteen (*The System of Comics* 43-45) and Duncan and Smith (166) on some of the various ways comics picture the gutter spaces (and the narrative gaps they create).
[2] For more on the process of closure, see McCloud (60-93).

"abstraction" of "detail and specificity" of cartoon images (*Narrative Structures* xiii). Postema clarifies that "gaps in comics […] continuously ask to be filled, which is one of the main reasons why comics are so engaging, so immersive: they foreground the process of narration and invite the reader to participate" (*Narrative Structures* 125). McCloud, too, declares that cartoon images' lack of details or high level of abstraction prompts readers to fully immerse themselves into the storyworld, arguing that "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!" (36). Gutters are not the only means by which comics introduce gaps in narrative information; the absence of visual details in comics images are also at the basis of reader engagement with any comics narrative.

Comics scholars are not the first to propose the theory of the gap when theorizing reader engagement. The concept of a gap that readers have to fill in as they read was also proposed by literary theorists, most notably by Wolfgang Iser and Umberto Eco.[3] Iser's highly influential reader-response theory posits that gaps or blanks in narrative information are "basic element[s] for the aesthetic response" and engagement of readers ("Indeterminacy" 12). As he explains, "if the reader were given the whole story, and there was nothing left for him to do, his imagination would never enter the field, the result would be the boredom which inevitably arises when everything is laid out cut and dried before us" (Iser, "The Reading Process" 280). It follows that gaps in information fulfill an

[3] See also, for instance, Roman Ingarden's argument (at the basis of Iser's theory of gaps) that readers shape literary works of art by filling "spots of indeterminacy" through a schematic processing called "concretization" (246; 332).

important narrative function; they allow a narrative to "be conceived in such a way that it will engage readers' imaginations in the task of working things out for himself, for reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative" (Iser, "The Reading Process" 280). Stimulating the imaginations of readers by asking them to provide the missing storyworld information, Iser argues that gaps ensure readers' pleasurable participation in narrative meaning-making.

Theorists who study the gap in comics, such as Groensteen (*The System of Comics* 113-114) or Postema (106-107), among many others, admittedly draw from Iser's theory of reader-response to frame their argument. For them, the empty space of the gutter and other visual spaces readers must fill in contribute to their engagement and their interpretation of the narrative, perhaps even more than the content of the panels themselves. They postulate that "comics is as much about what is *outside* the frame as what is *inside* it" (Chute, *Why Comics* 23; emphasis in original), since "meaning is produced by the intericonic gutter (the 'entr'image') at least as much as is produced by the images themselves" (Groensteen, *The System of Comics* 112). The extensive use of sequential images separated by gutters in comics narrative ensures that comics readers, who strive to achieve closure, play a central role in narrative meaning-making, to the point that comics scholars sometimes refer to readers as the comics artist's "silent accomplice" or "equal partner in crime" (McCloud 68). Readers are made to work "alongside the creators as a kind of contributory author, both by interpreting the panel content, and by filling in the gaps" (Round, "Visual Perspective" 317) in narrative information.

In comics, the process of closure may seem natural or instinctive since "from the moment various pictures are grouped together in a series or sequence," as Pascal Lefèvre writes, "the viewer or reader is prompted to look for relations among them" or "look for some minimal coherence or narrative" (Lefèvre, "Some Medium-Specific Qualities" 26). According to Scott McCloud, readers can fill in the gap of the gutter, or what he calls "panel-to-panel transitions" by imagining six types of transitions between panels: moment-to-moment, action-to-action, subject-to-subject, scene-to-scene, aspect-to-aspect, and non-sequitur (70-72). On the one end of the spectrum, McCloud tells us that "moment-to-moment" transitions require "very *little* closure" because readers only have to imagine what happened between two successive moments that are, by definition, very close in space and time (70; emphasis in original). "Non-sequitur" panel transitions are on the other end of the spectrum. Offering "no logical relationship between panels whatsoever," non-sequitur transitions entirely depend on reader interpretation to become meaningful. In these cases, McCloud specifies that "there is a kind of *alchemy* at work in the space between panels which can help us find *meaning* or *resonance* in even the most *jarring* of combination. Such transitions may not make '*sense*' in any traditional way, but still a relationship of *some* sort will inevitably *develop*" (72-73; emphasis in original). In all six types of transitions, the content of the panels on either side of the gutter determines what transition readers will enact and, by extension, the degree of their input in the process of closure.

Whereas McCloud's understanding of closure addresses how readers process panels one after another, in a linear fashion (70-73), Postema argues that gap filling is not a natural process when reading comics and at times can be quite difficult because it is less

linear than one might think. For her, gap filling is a complex exercise that "call[s] for a process of retroactive signification," a reading process that requires readers to "loop back" to weave the content of the successive panels together where "each panel, as a signifier, gives a certain amount of information, which is re-evaluated with each new panel, if necessary by revisiting earlier panels" (Postema 50). Groensteen's theory of "iconic solidarity," too, accounts for the non-linear or fluid reading patterns of comics (*The System of Comics* 20). He posits that readers look for relations among all aspects of the comics, so that even panels that are not placed next to each other may be semantically linked together. For Groensteen, narrative meaning-making is comparable to "an optical and mental leap" (*The System of Comics* 113) that can occur through the closure of the gutter in a sequence or at the level of the page and the text whenever "holes" or "gaps in the meaning" (Groensteen, *The System of Comics* 10) are filled in by readers. He specifies that comics is "not only an art of fragments;" it is also, and more importantly, an "art of linking together" (Groensteen, *The System of Comics* 22).

Comics scholars agree that any gap-filling activity or linking together of panels across a page or a comic book is guided and constrained by the rules and conventions established in the text. Paul Fisher Davies, who is interested in the narrative meaning-making of readers, approaches comics reading as a communicative act between comic artists and readers. Davies proposes that both artists (when they create the comics) and readers (when they read the text) adhere to underlying principles learned from experience that he calls "maxims of comics," "assumptions," or "tacit expectations" (73; 98; 309). Adherence to these principles is necessary for the comics to be readable, but also narratively meaningful. To elucidate his claims, Davies identifies five principles of

maxims of comics readership, pointing out that while "the principle is foundational," the maxims "carry the proviso, *unless we signify otherwise*" through "breach and flouting [that] will be signaled elsewhere in the text" (199). He sums up the principle and maxims as follow:

- "The principle of synecdoche," when "an image is to be read as representing part of a larger object, even, space or narrative";
- "The maxim of identity," when "a sufficiently similar figure appearing across (or sometimes within) panels *is* a single individual";
- "The maxim of continuity of time," which posits that "following panels occur at a contiguously later time";
- "The maxims of continuity of space," which posits that "the location has not changed between panels";
- "The maxims of causality", which posits that "what happens in comics diegesis is *caused* by elements elsewhere in the diegesis" (Davies 199).

Davies posits that readers follow the maxims of comics readership upon first entry into and even before starting to read a comic book, because the maxims aid readers to determine what cues to look for in the text and piece together the narrative. Without the maxims, readers would read the comic book as a collection of unrelated drawings in frames. For instance, to be able to read a comics narrative, readers must assume that each panel is part of a sequence, that similar images drawn in different panels are of the same thing (the same character or place, for instance), and that although the images are static,

time is passing in the storyworld, actions are ongoing, and so forth. For these reasons, the maxims of comics are essential for readers to be able to construct a narrative from contiguous individual panels. They constitute the first step in the narrative interpretive process of readers, positing underlying principles readers abide by to fill in the gap of the gutter.

Aside from the maxims of comics, comics also "teach viewers how they ought to be read" (Chaney, *Reading Lessons in Seeing* 1); they "set up structures to teach readers their own conventions" (Postema 120). Conventions across modes of representation and narrative genres are as important as maxims to reader participation in gap-filling and narrative meaning-making. They allow readers to comprehend and interpret the "words, ideas, images, sounds, rhythms" present in the text through "a process of translation" that Robert Crosman equates with reading (152). Although conventions are culturally marked or aimed at specific interpretive communities,[4] and new conventions are created all the time, while others become obsolete through a lack of use, they nonetheless function as semiotic signs or encodings that readers detect and decipher through the act of reading.[5] Conventions, be they verbal or visual, provide "interpretive short-cuts" that allow readers to "absorb information more efficiently and comfortably" (Kostelnick and Hassett 24). To be detectable and meaningful, conventions have to be shared by both the sender (e.g., the author) and the receiver (e.g., the actual readers) who, having learnt them from previous encounters in other texts, decipher them from patterns they notice in the text they are

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[4] See Fish, for instance.

[5] For more on conventions and their interpretations by readers, see Jonathan Culler's *Structuralist Poetics* (in particular 153-187) or Steven Mailloux's *Interpretive Conventions.*

reading. In comics, the content of the panel, including conventional formal devices such as framing, style, or colour, and panel composition or layout (among others) are couched in conventions that facilitate the process of closure by helping readers create continuity between the panels that make up the comics.[6]

When readers are faced with a narrative detail they perceive as meaningful and yet cannot easily decipher because they are unfamiliar with the convention or because it is unconventional, they have to "use inference to make reasonable guesses" (Kostelnick and Hassett 199) as to what it signifies.[7] It follows that any "deviations from the system" or from what is commonly referred to as the language of comics[8] become salient features that prompt readers to "wonder what could be [the] motivation" behind them and the meaning they are to understand from them through inference (Lefèvre, "No Content without Form" 78). To determine the meaning of the unknown convention or unconventional element, readers draw logical conclusions based on various clues present in the text, as well as from what they know to be true or logical from experience with narratives or with the narrative universe. Once the meaning of a salient and repeated feature is established, it, too, becomes a new convention *within that particular text* that helps readers decipher or infer the information they need to fill in the gaps in the narrative and achieve a plausible reading. If an initially unconventional feature becomes

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[6] For more on the visual conventions of comics and the way they participate in coherence-building in comics, see Kai Mikkonen (*The Narratology of Comic Art*) and Theresa Bridgeman.
[7] For more on the process of inference as a reading strategy, see *Inferences during Reading* edited by Edward J. O'Brien et al.
[8] See, for instance, Cohn (*The Visual Language of Comics*), Hick, or Saraceni who have all written on conventional formal devices as part of their study of the language of comics.

extensively and commonly used in a wide range of comics, then it too becomes part of the language of comics; it turns into a convention.

Despite its crucial role in comics narrative-meaning making, the process of inference has seldom been thoroughly examined by comics scholars. To date, only Neil Cohn has extensively studied the issue, adopting a linguistic model to describe various visual techniques that generate or guide inference in comics. Among the techniques Cohn lists are: "framing," where a "panel frames certain elements from a scene instead of others;" "blend," where a "depiction requires mapping between mental spaces to be understood (metaphoric, metonymic);" and "text" that "connects a sound effect to the unseen event" ("Being Explicit about the Implicit" 90; 81). Through the close readings that follow, this thesis, too, will indirectly examine the process of inference as it engages with some of the visual markers that guide readers' inferencing—or what I refer to below as writerly engagement—caused not by gaps (as absence), but by what is present in images.

To fill in gaps in comics is "a matter of convention, not inherent connectedness" (Hatfield 41) as shown by the maxims and conventions comics follow. It is also a matter of "bridging inferences" or engaging in interpretative processes that rely heavily on the content of the panels, which "provide bottom-up content for a reader to infer the link between them" (Cohn and Wittenberg 2). In this way, panels and their visual content function as "a guide or set of hints" (Wolk, *Reading Comics* 132) that direct readers in their quest for coherence.

A Limited Theory: A Problematic Theorization of the Gap in Comics

Although this thesis agrees with theories of the gap and reader engagement presented so far, it finds issues in the way they: 1) conceptualize the absence of visual representation as the dominant and even the only means by which gaps are created in comics; and 2) undervalue how images in comics affect the narrative meaning-making process of readers. As I prove below, gaps are images; they are visual representations of absences that work alongside other visuals to engage comics readers. *All* images are inherently indeterminate. Consequently, they all prompt the interpretation of readers, affecting their narrative input and investment.

To begin, I argue that in adapting Iser's theory to the study of comics, comics scholars have taken his concept of the gap too literally, hailing the gutter and other visual ellipses as *absences of visual representation*, rather than as *visual representations of absences*. That is to say, conventional gutter spaces or blank panels, for instance, are not lacks of images. Instead, like other visual gaps, they are best envisioned and actually present as placeholder images for something missing that readers need to fill in. Therefore, the literal conceptualization of the gap does not fully account for how gaps are actually images: they are *visible* absences. In approaching gaps as absences of representation, and positing them as the main gateway to reader investment, comics scholars have overlooked the engaging potential of what is visible in comics: images in all their various configurations. In claiming that gaps are images present on the page, I wish to emphasize that they are visibly marked and join the many other visual strategies of comics to engage readers. In contrast to the narrow definition of gaps as absences or lacks that readers complete with the help of their imagination, I support Hannah

Miodrag's theory that "the spaces in comics over which readers must make imaginative links are far more diverse" (66) than what theorists of the gap have proposed so far.

Comics from the late twentieth and early twenty-first century have been noticed for their use of unconventional visual gaps that demand a concerted effort on the part of readers to reach narrative meaning and coherence. As Groensteen observes, "in contemporary comics . . . there is an innovative current characterized by a poetics of reticence, ambiguity, and indeterminacy" (*Comics and Narration* 30). Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth*, Richard McGuire's *Here*, Adrian Tomine's *Killing and Dying*, and many other recent comics, including the ones examined in this thesis, rely heavily on visual indeterminacy and are thus demand a great deal from readers in terms of meaning-making. They use "gray areas, images that are cut adrift, message-jamming strategies of all kinds, and, in general, create connections between panels that work through harmonies, resonances, correspondences, eschewing the kind of relationships that are immediately decodable in terms of narrative logic and meaning" (Groensteen, *Comics and Narration* 30). These types of comics contain gaps far more diverse (and arguably complex) than comics scholars have theorized so far—including, as this thesis demonstrates, gaps triggered by what the panel image shows.

For theorists of the gap, though, images in comics serve one primary function: to provide the clues that enable readers to fill in the missing narrative information, and thus, the gap. For some comics scholars, images in comics even limit interpretive possibilities. For instance, in *Comics and Sequential Art*, Will Eisner (who is also a cartoonist) writes, "in comics the imagining is done for the reader. An image, once drawn, becomes a precise statement that brooks little or no further interpretation" (122). David Carrier also

asserts that one of the central characteristics of comics is to "present the story transparently, making the meaning of the depicted action obvious to everyone in the culture" (85). For him, comics narrative should be "absolutely unambiguous, for they need to be read quickly" (Carrier 85); if "the artist's image is visually ambiguous—capable of more than one plausible interpretation—then he or she has failed to communicate" (Carrier 33). Eisner and Carrier postulate the creative act of readers as minimal. According to them, even though the sequential telling of comics necessarily renders the narrative full of gaps symbolized visually on the page by the gutter, readers simply have to absorb what is unambiguously shown to them on the page to understand what transpires in the gutter and make the narrative cohere.

While it is true that a possible function of images is to guide the gap-filling activity of readers, they do not always do so, and if they do, they do not always do so unambiguously. Eisner's and Carrier's claims are riddled with misconceptions about how all types of images communicate. For several decades, art theorists have countered thinking that approaches images as transparent and in need of minimal if any interpretation. As early as 1960, Ernst Gombrich emphasized "the beholder's share,"[9] remarking that "to see is to interpret" (xiii). Seeing, in other words, is never a neutral activity: people's ability to see images and attribute a signification to them is conditioned by their personal experience and knowledge (Sturken and Cartwright 46). Every act of seeing is a personal act of meaning-making that requires interpretation. To be clear, to see is to translate visual encoded signs on a page into a meaningful representation of a known

[9] Gombrich's concept is a more developed version of Alois Riegl's "beholder's involvement" (Seth 380).

(visual) experience, and as such, it is an act of interpretation. Expanding the role of readers in making meaning of visual representations by also addressing the context in which images present, contemporary visual art scholars emphasize that images are "less scrutable, less transparent" than what is commonly believed (Mitchell 48). They are indeterminate and inherently ambiguous—"effectively and forever without meaning" (Elkins, *Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles* 14)—and this makes them in need of interpretation: the "beholder's share" in images resides in "the resolution of ambiguities" (Gombrich 23; see also 181-290). Eric Kandel, who traces the development of the concept of ambiguity in art theory, specifies that "the extent of the beholder's contribution depends on the degree of ambiguity in the work of art" (192). The more unconventional, unfamiliar, and indeterminate images are, the more viewers must draw from their imagination to reach understanding.

In comics, images of all sorts, including the gutter space or any blank images, are indeterminate. Although it is true that the interpretation of the visual content of each panel must be somehow narratively linked by readers to both previous and successive panels—a sequential telling that therefore limits meaning-making possibilities—, it does not mean that indeterminacy is completely forgone. Indeed, even if interpretation is informed by the sequential telling, what readers see in the images and how this process informs the link they envision between panels is still indeterminate and thus open to various interpretations. Although many comics scholars acknowledge the indeterminate nature of images, noting their "fluid and variable" meanings (McCloud 28), some like Karin Kukkonen even declaring comics a narrative genre particularly "prone to duck-rabbitry" or polysemy ("Adventures in Duck-Rabbitry" 342) due, in part, to its visual

storytelling, the working of images in the medium has not received much critical attention. Crucially missing from the scholarship—a lack this thesis addresses—is an extended analysis of how, due to their inherent indeterminacy, images raise uncertainty in readers, and thus function as 'gaps' that engage readers in narrative meaning-making.

In comics, images do not always allow readers to fill in the gap of the gutter (although they may, and very often do). At times, images actually trigger a gap that is marked by visible cues, rather than the marked absence of visual information (as the current theory of the gap has it). As a result, the work of images in comics deserves close examination not in order to determine what they communicate, but to determine how their indeterminacy engages readers.

Paving the Way: Tensing-up and Opening Gaps to Images

Over the years, Charles Hatfield, Maaheen Ahmed, and other comics scholars have been drawing significant attention to the complexity and richness of the medium's visual storytelling. Despite these advancements, however, their contributions have stopped short of envisioning how a refined understanding of the working of images asks theorists of comics to revise current visual gap theory as *the* means by which to engage readers. For instance, using significantly different terminology than the gap but not questioning its theorization, Hatfield develops a model of four "tensions" between "ways of reading" that are "played against each other" and, in so doing, introduce different kinds of gaps into the narrative (36). These tensions exist:

1) "between *codes* of signification" or signifying systems (such as words and images, or different types of images) that "can be played against each other—to gloss, to

illustrate, to contradict or complicate or ironize the other." This tension opens up spaces for the input of readers as they process the interplay of various verbal and visual codes of signification to construct the narrative meaning;

2) "between the *single image* and the *image-in-series*" that prompts readers to connect individual panels together, creating narrative sequences and achieving closure, by filling in the gap of the gutter space;

3) "between narrative *sequence* and *page surface*" or the interplay between the sequential reading of panels and the holistic reading of the comics page as a whole. This influences narrative understanding by opening up various interpretive possibilities;[10] and

4) "between *reading-as-experience* and the text as material *object*" or the gap that emerges from the way the overall design of the comics (the drawing style, but also the book format, binding, type of paper used, etc.) supports or challenges the comics' content and thus influences readers' interpretation of the book's overall narrative meaning (Hatfield 36; 37; emphasis in original).

While not explicitly about gaps, Hatfield's model nevertheless accentuates the in between space caused by various tensions between the formal elements in comics that present as openings readers must bridge or reconcile through interpretation. The sense of "incompleteness or indeterminacy" caused by the tension, as he puts it, "urges readers to take up the constitutive act of interpretation" (Hatfield 36; xiii-xiv). Although Hatfield takes into account the importance of images for the reading of comics, he does not

[10] As Hatfield points out, this tension is akin to the distinction comics scholar Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle makes between "linear" (or sequential) and "tabular" (non-sequential, or holistic) reading practices that co-exist in comics and inform narrative meaning ("Du linéaire").

critically engage with how his model puts pressure on the theory of the gap to illuminate a different facet of reader engagement with the comics narrative.

Comics scholar Ahmed also revises the theory of the gap without thoroughly envisioning how by doing so she questions its theoretical foundations. In her book *Openness of Comics*, Ahmed relies on Eco's theory of the open work (which shares many similarities with Iser's theory of gaps, but is not limited to literary texts), to argue that openness is "literalized in comics due to readers' involvement in the creation of a comics story through cognitively piecing the panels together" (4). For Ahmed, the sequential nature of comics storytelling as engaging a visible open space marked by the gutter is central to the creation of openness that, in turn, engages readers. Careful not to limit her theory to the gap, she argues that ambiguity through "the subversion of convention," which "often manifests itself in comics through indirect word-image relationships and transitions" from one panel to the next, as well as "ambiguity through suggestiveness," which "is often generated via figuration, including the use of tropes, the allusive rendition of stories and characters, as well as self-reflexive elements," also generate openness (Ahmed 7). Ahmed proves her point by examining strategies of subversion and suggestiveness across four broad comics genres—life writing, adventure and superheroes, crime, and fantasy and science fiction—to bring to light a breadth of techniques that contemporary examples in specific comics genres use to generate ambiguity. Through her study, Ahmed aims to prove that the openness of comics in its various manifestations "contradict[s] the stereotypes of simplicity attached to the medium" (3). She does so by identifying images that generate openness without delving into questions of reader engagement and how meaning is reached in face of indeterminate visuals. Hence,

although Ahmed goes a step closer towards a consideration of how visual (but also textual) information can create gaps that readers must engage with, her study of visual devices of openness does not overtly put pressure on the current theory of the gap. Engaging with narrative strategies, but not how they impact reader engagement, she does not significantly challenge theorizations of the absence of narrative information between panels as the comics strategy principally responsible for reader engagement.

I theorize gaps not as blank images that need to be filled in, but as visual cues that lead readers to engage with what they are reading and link the visuals together. I thus join critics who like Neil Cohn postulate that "the gutter does not provide any meaning—the content of the panels and their union does" and understand closure to be "an additive inference that occurs at panels, not between them" ("The Limits of Time and Transitions" 136; 135). Images in comics, and not absences, engage readers. That images trigger the engagement of readers leads comics scholar Pascal Lefèvre to contend that a visual style that appeals to readers may be "the primary entrance to a story" ("No Content without Form" 67). Accordingly, "if the reader does not perceive the representation as interesting, he would not continue his interpretation and reading activity" (Lefèvre, "Narration in Comics"). While I am hesitant to go as far as Lefèvre when it comes to considering style as the primary means to secure the attention of readers,[11] I too accentuate that images (including the gutters as visual representations of absences) are comics' primary resource for reader engagement. Thus, without negating the importance of the gap (as absence) on

[11] The choice readers make to read a comic book over another is very subjective and cannot be limited to a question of style. Some readers, for instance, may be willing to make do with a comics whose style they dislike because they are invested in the narrative's theme, genre, characters, or plot, among many other possibilities.

readers' invested reading, I join other comics scholars who contend that the gap is "the biggest myth in comics theory" (Baetens, "Gap or Gag" 213). The gutter "does not merit fetishization" (Groensteen, *The System of Comics* 112), especially if, as of now, it leads comics theorists to "neglect what happens within the image itself" (Robert 211; my translation) and to overlook the engaging potential of what Jan Baetens refers to as the "no gutter-related gaps" ("Gap or Gag" 214). As I detail below, a closer look at images allows us to refine our understanding of how comics readers actively participate in narrative meaning making.

Thinking Beyond: Puzzling Images and Other Visual Games Comics Play

Although all images are indeterminate to various degrees, the noticeable trend in contemporary comics for using highly ambiguous images has prompted comics scholars to start examining images more closely for the puzzling, playful, and invested process of interpretation they activate in readers. Among them, "puzzle pictures" or images "without a determinative solution" (Chaney, *Reading Lessons* 98) feature prominently. As opposed to easily decipherable "direct images," puzzling or "complex images attract the greatest degree of attention" and engagement from readers (Ahmed 19). Faced with a challenge as they realize "there is something more to see in the images after all," readers are prompted to "un-puzzle drawn elements in order to read them better" (Chaney, *Reading Lessons* 118; 106), interpret them, and render the narrative coherent. Typical examples of puzzle pictures include metaphorical or intertextually rich images, as well as formal

experimentations (for instance, the depiction of games or game elements)[12] whose puzzling aspects introduce moments of hesitation in readers who need to puzzle them out, piecing together various, more or less subtle clues in order to make sense of the images and achieve narrative coherence.

To date, Davies is the comics scholar who has most extensively identified the kind of puzzling images present in comics, referring to them as "games comics play" (97). Davies' understanding of the games at work in comics is an analogy that describes the functioning of specific visual strategies used in comics to prompt readers to actively participate in the meaning-making process by playing—or engaging—with images in order for them to signify, and for the narrative to cohere. Davies identifies three categories of visual games in comics according to the type of engagement they ask from readers. In comics, games either 1) provide information readers must uncover; 2) demand that readers supply the missing information; or 3) invite readers' mental or physical action.[13]

Davies' first category of games asks readers to consider the text they are reading very closely and decipher its images to access the information they need to process the narrative. The visual games or strategies in this category either prompt readers to carefully compare or contrast similar images in consecutive or distant panels (i.e., what Davies calls games of "Spot the Difference"), invite their scrutiny as they look for the

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[12] For more on visual metaphors and the presentation of comics as games, see, for instance, Chaney (*Reading Lessons* 95-120), or Pedri and Staveley.
[13] Note that Davies specifies that at times, the distinction he makes between the different games within each category, or even the category themselves, are not as clear-cut as his typology makes it sounds. Rebus, in particular, is a borderline case, in that it can fit both in the first and second category of games comics play (111).

important information dispersed across a breadth of visual details (i.e., games akin to "Where's Waldo?"), or demand that readers combine visual and verbal signs to reach meaning (i.e., games of "Rebus") (Davies 103-110). Games in the second category raise questions for readers, inviting them to supply information missing from the text. Whereas tick-boxes, dotted-lines to be completed, or star-ratings encourage readers to fill in the gaps (i.e., "Questionnaire"), wordless and/or black-and-white comics ask readers to either supply the missing text (i.e., they function as "caption competition") or the missing colour (i.e., "colouring in"). "At the bare minimum, all comics fit into the second category of games because readers must always fill in the gap and imaginatively link the panels through time and space (i.e., readers of comics play "join the dots" or "spot the ball") to comprehend the narrative, unite its disparate components, and reach closure by relying on the panel's visual content" (Davies 111-118).

Whereas games in the first and second categories encourage reading practices that prompt readers to either "extract information" or "supply information, in the sense that something should be added to the image to complete or transform it," games in the third category "require action rather than content" (Davies 111; 118-119). Games in this last category invite readers to interact with the text and even use it as something other than a reading experience. Faced with these games, readers are made to contribute actively to narrative meaning. The first three games in this category—mazes, follow the numbers, and jigsaws—are based on mental actions. More or less complex page layouts as well as non-linear and multi-perspective narratives ask for readers to learn how to navigate the page or the text as a whole to organize the narrative in a meaningful way ("maze" games or the simpler game "follow the numbers"). Sometimes, readers have to envision a scene

by mentally assembling several panels that represent the scene from multiple viewpoints or through close-ups of details that are part of the bigger picture of the same scene that may later be shown (Davies refers to these visual puzzles as "Jigsaws").[14] The last three games in the third category—cut out and make, fold the page, and turn the page—are rarer and demand an even more active level of reader engagement. They exploit the materiality of comics to stimulate the actual physical engagement of readers or encourage them to imagine doing so. Examples of these games include pages depicting paper dolls, cut and assemble buildings, or other objects that readers can cut out, assemble, and play with (games of "cut out and make"), as well as pop-up features that invite readers to engage in hands-on-activities and even play with the comics in real life (games of "fold the page"). Finally, games of "peek-a-boo" (or "turn the page") create suspense and surprise by playfully hiding narrative information until readers turn the comics page (or look more closely at it) and are confronted with a surprising element (Davies, *Comics as Communication* 118-127). Davies's game categorization illuminates the important work done by images in comics in investing readers. It also inspires me to revisit the current theory of reader engagement based on the visual gap—a project this thesis tackles.

Building upon Ahmed's, Chaney's, and Davies' scholarship, this thesis endeavours to explain how inherently indeterminate and more or less puzzling images (including the gap) provide cues that direct the interpretative processes of readers and draw readers into the story as they resolve their visually-triggered narrative uncertainties—or play the game—to achieve coherence. Since this thesis's focus is not on

[14] Davies's game of jigsaw is the equivalent of what McCloud refers to as "aspect-to-aspect" transition (72).

the images themselves (and the type of games they introduce), but the cues they contain and the reading strategies readers adopt to make sense of them and fill in gaps in narrative information, I will not adopt Davies' thorough game analogy. Instead, as detailed below, I will be referring to *visual readerly strategies* and *visual writerly strategies* to account for different types and degrees of reader engagement—or playfulness—images trigger in comics.

A Revised Model: Visual Readerly Strategies, Visual Writerly Strategies, and Reader Engagement with Visual Indeterminacy

The current model of reader participation theorized in the theory of the gap needs to be revised for two main reasons. First, because of its reductive reliance on Iser's and Eco's models sheds light on how sequential storytelling engages readers. As explained above, their theories do not adequately capture the medium-specific nature of visual strategies that create gap-like effects in comics. Eco's theory of open texts,[15] which is broader in its scope than Iser's theory of the gap, partially avoids this pitfall by classifying comics narratives like *Superman*, for example, as "closed" rather than "open" (Eco, *The Role of the Reader* 8; 107-125)—a claim that comics critic Ahmed implicitly challenges in *Openness of Comics.* I do not adopt Eco's use of 'open texts' in my thesis, finding serious issues with using a concept whose initial definition excluded the type of narratives created in the comics medium. Second, Iser's and Eco's theories, which are focused on strategies that create gaps and openness, do not account for the different

[15] Eco argues that, in contrast to what he calls "closed texts," "open texts" are not limited to a single interpretation due to their openness.

degrees and forms of participations different types of images trigger in readers. By contrast, the details of reader engagement occupy a central position in this thesis.

To avoid the aforementioned pitfalls, this thesis proposes an alternative theoretical model inspired by Roland Barthes's distinction between "readerly" and "writerly" texts. In *S/Z*, an extended analysis of Honoré de Balzac's *Sarrasine*, Barthes distinguishes between "readerly" and "writerly" texts, between narratives whose gaps or openness invite a passive engagement from readers and narratives that invite an active one (4-5). "Readerly" texts are "classic texts" that "can be read but not written" (Barthes, *S/Z* 4); they are texts that lead to a disengaged reading experience "grounded in sets of conventions and code (for example: framing the novel, the detective story and other genres)" (Danvers 135). Readerly texts "are products (and not productions)" that favour linearity, coherence, and closure (Barthes, *S/Z* 5). In them, denotation takes priority over connotation, further facilitating comprehension and minimizing reader input in the process of narrative meaning making. When connotation is introduced in a readerly text, it is a "limited plural;" there is minimal leeway for diverging interpretations so that the text's meaning remains relatively stable even if the narrative leaves some room for personal interpretation (Barthes, *S/Z* 8). Although readerly texts contain various kinds of gaps, their highly regulated and directed presentation nonetheless leads to a limited number of interpretations.

By contrast, writerly texts "can be written (rewritten) today" (Barthes, *S/Z* 4) because they experiment with conventions and are "more elusive and avant-garde" than readerly texts (Danvers 135). Where readerly texts are built upon familiar and thus easily decipherable conventions, writerly texts are significantly unconventional and so riddled

with gaps that they prevent readers from reaching a determinate meaning and reach a conclusive narrative interpretation. Writerly texts disrupt traditional narrative structures, favour connotation over denotation, and generally put forth the "multivalence of the text" (Barthes, *S/Z* 20). When faced with a writerly text, readers do not merely fill in the gaps as they do in readerly texts. Instead, each gap in a writerly text creates "a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds." A writerly text "has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one" and "the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can reach, they are indeterminable" (Barthes, *S/Z* 5). Writerly texts reveal the polysemy of codes and the multiplicity of meaning that readerly texts try hard to control, a reflection Barthes later pursues in his intermedial autobiography *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (91-92; 121). In this later text, Barthes problematizes distinctions between truth and fiction in autobiographical writing, narrating his self across visual and verbal texts to emphasize the crucial role played by readers in interpretation. In *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, Barthes performs the findings he reached in *S/Z* regarding writerly texts, critically guiding readers through how writerly texts encourage readers to actively engage in a text's meaning-making process, requiring each reader to be "no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text" (Barthes *S/Z* 4).Through his own engagement with his self as text, Barthes emphasizes that writerly texts in all mediums trigger a self-conscious interpretive effort from readers that leads to a self-reflexive reading practice when they reach the realization that their input is necessary for the text to tentatively and only provisionally make narrative sense.

To understand Barthes's model of reader engagement, it is important to note that he does not propose a rigid distinction between readerly and writerly texts. As Barbara Johnson explains, "although Balzac's text apparently represents for Barthes the negative, readerly end of the hierarchy, Barthes's treatment of it does seem to illustrate all the characteristics of the positive, writerly end" (6). Through his close reading of the readerly text *Sarrasine,* a traditional nineteenth-century novella, Barthes demonstrates that it can also be read as a writerly text. He thus strongly suggests that the readerly and writerly are best envisioned as two modes of reading at different points on a spectrum. For him, the way the text is written and also who its readers are and how they read the text determine whether a given text is a readerly or writerly one for a specific reader. Thus, although Barthes's terminology gives precedence to the text over readers in suggesting that a text either presents as readerly or writerly, a closer look at his model reveals that how readers approach a text also influences its readerly or writerly qualities.

Barthes's distinction between readerly and writerly texts highlights how different storytelling strategies can engender different reader responses and levels of engagement, but its emphasis on the text—rather than the strategies it contains—does not account for how some aspects of a text may be more or less readerly or writerly, no matter what the text as a whole reads like. My thesis relies on the subtleties and fluidity suggested in Barthes' theoretical model to examine the reading techniques readers adopt in response to textual cues—visual ones in the case of this thesis, specifically—that impact how they approach narrative meaning-making. To account for the collaboration of text and reader in the creation and/or identification of (part of) a text as readerly or writerly, I refer to

"readerly strategies" and "writerly strategies" (and variations that convey the same idea, such as "readerly engagement" or "writerly processing," for instance).

Comics are riddled with (inherently indeterminate) images that readers interpret by relying either on readerly or writerly strategies to make the narrative cohere depending on the (un)conventionality of the visual. In most cases, readers simply draw from their knowledge of the normative, conventional language of comics, thus adopting readerly strategies to decode images, resolve their visual uncertainty, and attribute to them a narrative meaning that allows the story to cohere. Such is the case when the input of readers consists in realizing that a sudden change of setting from one panel to the next indicates that the character present in both panels has changed location, or that an initially unclear change of visual style is in fact a visual code or pattern that marks a change of timeline or focalizing agent, for instance. As long as readers can rely on readerly strategies to comprehend the images and the narrative as a whole, their role in the meaning-making process remains straightforward and the extent of their input rather minimal as it is heavily guided—or constrained—by the text and consists in piecing together a predeterminate meaning. While such readerly engagement may be daunting for comics readers unfamiliar with the conventions at work in the medium, readers accustomed to reading comics may find the visual strategies to be so easy to engage with that they do so without much thought; they may even forget about their own role in resolving the uncertainties images pose.

By contrast, I propose that when faced with unconventional, uncommon, or puzzling images that impede easy narrative comprehension, readers adopt visual writerly strategies to infer—rather than decode—a plausible reading for the images and the

narrative as a whole. Granting readers a high degree of freedom of interpretation, these images demand a considerable conscious cognitive effort from readers, who must rely on their own reading experiences to closely read the images, consciously compile the images' visual clues to speculate about the possible (but nonetheless indeterminate) narrative information these images contain. Indeed, through their writerly input, readers work toward (tentatively) puzzling out their narrative uncertainties. Through this process, readers contribute aspects to the story that are unclear or withheld (such as the thoughts and feelings of narrative agents), but that are essential for the narrative to be meaningful. Given the active engagement of readers in the making of narrative meaning, they can be considered the co-creators of the narrative for the writerly power they hold over its completeness, even if any interpretation they reach is not definite. In addition to demanding an active engagement with the artwork, indeterminate visuals or what Dario Gamboni calls "potential images," also lead to the conscious engagement of readers, who are made "aware—either painfully or enjoyably—of the active, subjective nature of seeing" (18). With indeterminacy, there is always room for re-interpretation, and readers remain aware of that fact.

Images that trigger the writerly engagement of readers are conspicuous and highly engaging because, more often than not, they rely on foregrounding and are thus what comics scholars commonly refer to as a marked visual. Foregrounding results from a "violation of the scheme" (Mukařovský 19). Through the breaking of conventions or the introduction of narrative strategies that disrupt the narrative comprehension and interpretation of readers, foregrounding leads to the "deautomatization" of reading (Mukařovský 19), a phenomenon akin to what Victor Shklovsky called

“defamiliarization” a few decades prior (24). In such instances, readers must work toward “refamiliarizing” themselves with the narrative by processing the foregrounding and inferring its meaning to reach provisional closure (Miall and Kuiken 404). This thesis details this process through a careful examination of some examples of visually-based foregrounding techniques found in contemporary comics that cue the characters’ or narrators’ minds, including marked deviations from conventional representations of characters’ thoughts and feelings (for instance, through the co-representation of individual and collective thinking, as seen in Chapter One), departures from familiar comics character-building techniques (for instance, the glaring absence of character detail or their lack of representation altogether, as discussed in Chapter Two), or unusual changes in the storyworld aesthetic (for instance, the inclusion of reproduced documents in an otherwise drawn comics, as analyzed in Chapter Three).

In their study of reading practices, Katalin Bálint and her co-authors demonstrate that foregrounding techniques, or what they simply call “deviation,” “led to some form of absorption” for readers that “may deepen their involvement” with the narrative or its characters (196). Davies concurs, arguing that “the deliberate flouting of tacit maxims” (as a foregrounding technique) deepens the “implicature” or engagement of readers who find these maxims “most interesting when they are breached rather than observed” (309; 22). The mental, writerly operations triggered by foregrounding bring readers to become aware of the purposeful use of specific strategies and reflect upon their interpretive effort and personal narrative input. These strategies can thus deepen their implicature.

However, the use of unconventional images in comics is not without risk. In some instances, the images may be so puzzling that readers feel so overtaxed that, unable or

unwilling to writerly engage with the images and the narrative as a whole, they give up on reading altogether. Indeed, when the indeterminacy remains active despite the best effort of readers, interpretation incomplete is at best, and the narrative or part of it remains incoherent. To mitigate the risk of incomprehensibility associated with unconventional images, cartoonists often put in place cues or pointers (but not readily decipherable codes) within or alongside the unconventional images that facilitate interpretation by triggering, but not constraining the writerly engagement of readers. This thesis will highlight some of these pointers in its examination of how visual indeterminacy is a subtle strategy that invests comics readers into the narrative.

Before delving further into indeterminacy and its role in reader engagement, it is worth noting that unconventional images can become conventional through repeated use and heightened familiarity that aligns their use with evermore established tacit rules that constrain their interpretation. For instance, the strategies of visual doubling, merging, and blending I identify in Chapter One are still uncommon, and what they suggest about the simultaneous representations of individual and collective thinking remains as of now open to writerly interpretations. But, if more and more comics creators adopt and adapt these strategies, their extensive, repeated codified use would render them part of the normative language of comics. They would become familiar to readers and present as part of comics's conventional language of representation that readers can readily—and readerly—decipher.

Overall, in proposing a theory of reader engagement based upon the readerly strategies and writerly strategies readers activate to achieve narrative coherence, this thesis contributes to the understanding of comics reader engagement in two fundamental

ways. First, it argues that images, rather than absences of representation, are the primary means through which comics engage the reader. Second, it establishes that to make sense of the inherent indeterminacy of images, readers either lean on visual readerly strategies to engage in an almost unaware deciphering of conventional images, or they rely on visual writerly strategies to consciously infer a plausible meaning for unconventional images. Both processes are necessary for readers to access and accommodate storyworld information and activate their narrative meaning-making. In demonstrating that the indeterminacy of images facilitates readers' investment in the narrative, this thesis challenges and revises the current theory of the gap and its relation to reader engagement with comics.

Onward: Methodology and Thesis Outline

While both the readerly and writerly strategies readers adopt to resolve visually-based uncertainties are part of my revised theorization of reader engagement in comics, this thesis will focus only on visual writerly strategies because comics scholars have already closely considered the normative language of comics and comics conventions to ask how they inform readers'—readerly—decoding of images (see, for example, Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics*; McCloud; Saraceni). By contrast, scholars have only engaged in a cursory examination of unconventional, openly—or expressly, and thus highly—indeterminate images, which are becoming more prevalent as contemporary comics favor ambiguity and indeterminacy. This thesis addresses this gap by examining specific writerly strategies readers are compelled to adopt to engage with highly indeterminate images that render interpretation difficult. It details how unconventional

images in comics guide readers' writerly inference and participation in the co-creation of the narrative's meaning. To reflect the contemporary tendency noted by Groensteen toward increasingly complex comics narratives that require that readers recognize and interpret all sorts of visual indeterminacy, this thesis engages a corpus of nine fictional and non-fictional comics that were released around or after the start of the twenty-first century, mostly in the 2010s. To better address the complex narrative work of images, I adopt an interdisciplinary approach that is principally grounded in narratology, but also borrows from various disciplines that critically examine pictures, including comics studies, but also visual, film, and video games studies.

Consequently, throughout this thesis, 'readers' is understood as a narratological concept; readers are abstract constructions, and not real flesh and blood people. To study real readers is to study reception, for instance, with the help of surveys, interviews, and/or psychological observations, or with reliance on cultural studies theories that explain how specific categories of readers respond to specific texts, etc. By contrast, to study abstract readers, as I do throughout this thesis, is to study textual features and devices used to address and guide potential readers. The focus is thus narrative, not the real-world responses of readers.

Sometimes named "the implied reader, model reader, and authorial audience," what I simply call the 'reader' (or 'readers') refers "to what constitutes, for a particular interpreter, the permissible range of inferences that can accrue to one or more textual features in a narrative" (Herman, "Reception and Readers" 153-154). As a textual construct, the reader is inscribed through various cues incorporated into the text by the author and that actual flesh and blood readers may, or may not, notice. In this sense, the

reader is “an image of a certain competence brought to the text and a structuring of such competence within the text” (Rimmon-Kenan 122). In Gerald Prince’s words, the implied reader is “a textual element, an entity deducible from the text, and a meaning-producing mechanism, a set of mental operations involved in sense-making (selecting and organizing information, relating past and present knowledge, anticipating facts and outcomes, constructing and modifying patterns)” (Prince, “Reader” par. 9). Such a narratological definition of readers, he adds, “includes the schematized aspects, the gaps, and the processes eliminating them, the constraints and directions set by the text as well as the mental activities of reading” (Prince, “Reader” par. 9). ‘Readers’ are thus abstract, theoretical entities that may or may not coincide with actual readers: only real readers who shares at least some competences with the (abstract) readers envisioned by the author will be able to notice the cues and infer a textually grounded meaning for them. Narratologically speaking, close reading is the only viable way to demonstrate that specific features have been put into play in a text to engage or invite readers’ interpretation, even though not all actual readers will read and respond to the cue (and, if they do, their interpretations may likely vary).

Since ‘readers’ is a pure construct, it is impossible to give a holistic, final account of all the qualities or competencies it must possess to detect the clues and interpret the text. To put it otherwise, it is impossible for real readers to fully embody the (abstract) readers established in the text because cues (and the way they are interpreted) depend on real readers who notice them—including me, the flesh and blood reader who identifies and interprets specific strategies used in the comics I examine. Thus, when I write about

‘readers’ in this thesis, I refer to conceptual readers inscribed in textual cues that my competencies as a comics reader allow me to uncover.

Narratology offers a comprehensive model of how narrative devices work to elicit a particular response and the processes involved in the telling and reading of stories. At this stage, my findings are theoretical and grounded in critical close textual readings of given visual strategies. This approach, although limited, does not exclude the possibility to adopt other reader-response approaches to examine and even empirically evaluate the impact visual indeterminacy can have on the narrative investment of comics readers.[16]

This thesis examines the unconventional, indeterminate visual representations of the characters’ or narrators’ minds (as the primary gateway into narratives, as detailed in Chapter One) in comics to ask how they guide readers’ writerly engagement. Each of its three chapters engages the same general questions, but in relation to the specific visual strategies they are targeting: What about the images makes them particularly indeterminate, to the point that they raise doubt or uncertainty in readers about their narrative comprehension? How do visual cues hail readers and encourage them to examine the images more closely in an attempt to move past or solve the indeterminacy not through decoding, but through inference? Finally, how does this process of engagement with indeterminate visuals lead to a ‘writerly’ investment with the narrative? In answering these questions, each chapter details the visual writerly strategies readers

[16] Approaches this thesis does not consider include the *psychological approach*, which focuses on “reader cognitive or subconscious processes and how those processes vary according to both unique individual personality and development level” (e.g., Norman Holland), the *social approach*, which focuses “on the influence of the social context on the reader/text transaction—the way, for example, that a book club context serves to encourage a lot of open-ended responses” (e.g., Stanley Fish), or the *cultural approach*, which focuses on “how readers’ cultural role, attitudes, and values, as well as the larger cultural historical context, shape responses” (e.g., Janice Radway) (Beach 8-9).

adopt to interpret unconventional images and reach a plausible reading. Together, they prove that comics storytelling as a whole relies heavily on the active engagement of readers with the images proper, and not just with gutters and other gaps as absences of representations.

Chapter One, "The One and the Many: Characters Thinking Individually and Collectively (or Intra-Intermental Thinking)," is built upon the narratological premise that to be invested in the narrative readers need to be able to access the mind of story agents. As I detail in the chapter, most research on this topic (including comics narratology) focuses on how specific narrative devices—particularly focalization techniques—give readers access to the thoughts, feelings, experiences, and knowledge of individual characters. Recently, narratologists have begun to consider how the shared collective thinking or social mind typically found in experimental second- and third- person plural (we- and they-) literary narratives (but also widely present—albeit in a subtler manner—in more conventional texts), engages readers with the minds of several characters at once. To date, this chapter is the first academic work to thoroughly consider the representation of social minds in comics. In it, I trace the type of writerly inferences social minds invite from readers and show that the doubling of individual visual cues of mind (e.g., Charles Burns's *Black Hole*), their joining (e.g., Jeff Lemire's *Trillium*), or their blending (e.g., Dash Shaw's *Bodyworld*) are some of the visual techniques used in comics to depict at once the individual and collective experiences of multiple characters. I reach the conclusion that these three unconventional renderings of characters' minds offer readers the chance to simultaneously perceive and engage with both individual and collective thinking to make the narrative cohere. This process requires readers to at once join and

distance several sources of focalization and to personally infer, engage with, and invest themselves in the (indeterminate) co-creation of the various and yet somewhat similar states of mind of multiple characters. As I further demonstrate, it is necessary for readers to identify and interpret these visuals as communicating several perspectives at once for the story's theme to emerge, for the characters' actions to be justified, and even for the narrative to cohere.

Having established that the indeterminate visual representations of characters' thoughts and feelings can lead readers to more deeply engage with them through writerly inference, I ask how readers are able to recognize characters, invest in their minds, and characterize them if the inner life of characters is not explicitly rendered (for instance, in focalized panels and thought balloons or through facial and bodily expressions). To answer this question, Chapter Two, "It Is All in the Indeterminate (Spatial) Details: The Writerly Characterization of Characters with Unreadable Minds," focuses on characters whose thoughts are not explicitly revealed through common comics cues of mind and thus seemingly present as 'mindless' characters. More specifically, it examines characters who do not show their faces (e.g., Camille in Cyril Pedrosa's *Equinoxes*), are non-figurative (e.g., the variously coloured dots in Raphael Coutinho's *Terror*), or are inanimate objects (e.g., the house in Josh Simmons's *House*) to propose that their indeterminate presentation requires an extra cognitive effort by readers who struggle to identify and characterize them. I prove that when visual strategies of indeterminacy withhold the mental processing of characters, readers turn to the storyworld space (as form and as content), paying close attention to spatial cues such as details in the setting, the placement of character and storyworld details within that space, the layout of the

comics, and other visual narrative features to piece together the inner lives and experiences of these unconventional characters. As a result, this writerly process of mind attribution and characterization affects readers' understanding of the story's theme, content, and mood.

Lastly, in Chapter Three, I turn my attention to the presentation of storyworld information in the form of altered visual documents to examine how they cue the mind of narrators. "Beware of Appearances: The Visual Alterations of Documents as Writerly Immersive Focalization Cues," considers how the uncertainty caused by the inclusion of documents (e.g., photographs, maps, artworks) whose content have been modified in more or less subtle ways impacts the writerly engagement of comics readers. I argue that documents that are imperfectly reproduced (e.g., Brian Michael Bendis and Marc Andreyko's *Torso*), or subjectively marked or annotated (e.g., Florent Chavouet's *Petites Coupures à Shioguni*), or display signs of visual infringements (in the form of style appropriation or metalepsis, for instance; e.g., Sonny Liew's *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*) present as a different narrative register used in the comics, and not as visual evidence that disrupts reader immersion. Specifically, these documents function as focalization cues that, in raising doubt or confusion in readers about their content, expose the manipulative, confused, or ambivalent minds of the narrator who compiled them. Contrary to what comics critics have argued to date, it is thus possible for visual documents in comics to foster readers' immersion. I trace how the documents reproduced in the comics studied in this chapter are marked with the narrator's subjective filter, arguing that the modifications to them serve as indeterminate cues of the narrator's mind. Across marked documents, the narrator prompts readers to writerly generate the mood of

the story, to playfully find a possible solution to the mystery at the heart of the narrative, or to cleverly detect and bring to the surface a counternarrative that may require a re-reading and a new immersive experience.

The thesis's conclusion reiterates that, in comics, images, and not only gaps, direct understanding and encourage readers' readerly or writerly engagement with them and the narrative as a whole. I highlight the effectiveness on reader engagement of critically overlooked, but nonetheless fundamental comics visual storytelling strategies to then detail how the dissertation's findings contribute to the field of visual narratology that emerged in the 1990s, but is now gaining currency in comics studies. Finally, I propose other avenues of research to explore that can further delineate the positive impact indeterminacy can have on the engagement of comics readers.

Mend the Gap: Visual Writerly Strategies, the Missing Piece of Reader Engagement in Comics proposes a new model of comics reading that elucidates some of the ways images and their narrative manipulation function to draw readers into the narrative, be it through readerly or writerly means. My approach encompasses but also extends beyond the gap theory to establish that the indeterminacy of all sorts of images, including the gap, invites readers' input that, in turn, invests them in the narrative. In particular, I focus on how unconventional images that withhold significant storyworld information about the minds of their story agents raise uncertainty in readers, asking them to achieve narrative coherence by writerly, and thus self-consciously, inferring a plausible meanings for the images. Through their highly demanding writerly reading practices, readers not only strengthen and enrich their engagement with the narrative; they also contribute meaningful aspects to the story, thus becoming the narrative's co-creators.

Chapter One

The One and the Many: Characters Thinking Individually and Collectively (or Intra-Intermental Thinking)

Before thinking of what in the comics universe may invest readers in what they are reading, it may be useful to take first consider why people read stories. In their respective manuscripts, *Why We Read Fiction* and *Fictional Minds*, cognitive narratologists Lisa Zunshine and Alan Palmer propose that people read fictional narratives because the experiencing of and reflecting on a character's or narrator's state of mind is an enjoyable process for readers (Zunshine, *Why We Read* 19; Palmer, *Fictional Mind* 10). As Zunshine explains, "by imagining the hidden mental states of fictional characters, by following the readily available representations of such states throughout the narrative, and by comparing our interpretation of what the given character must be feeling at a given moment with what we assume would be the author's interpretation, we deliver a rich stimulation to the cognitive adaptation constituting our Theory of Mind" (*Why We Read* 24). When readers infer the mental states of characters from the narrative, they interpret cues of mind and thus exercise their Theory of Mind. They draw from the narrative to attribute mental states to characters, a process that deepens their engagement with what they are reading (*Why We Read* 25).

The mind that permeates narratives also allows readers to make sense of the text and get invested in the plot. With Zunshine (*Why We Read* 10) and Caroll ("Minds and Meaning" 135-146), among others, Palmer proposes that "we comprehend narrative by working out and remembering which character perceives, thinks, wants, and feels what,

and how the different characters are likely to reason and respond to circumstances of the storyworld in which they find themselves" ("Social Minds" 208). Readers cannot process the narrative's progression and meaning without understanding the characters' thoughts, feelings, goals, and motivations. Although some—extremely few—scholars, such as Jonas Grethlein, posit that some narratives rely on plot and not the minds of narrative agents to secure the enjoyment of readers (257-284),[17] most narratologists writing today strongly argue that fictional minds motivate story events and the plot that ensues (Palmer, "Response" 285-288; Fludernik, "Plotting Experience" 288-293; Ryan, "Response" 293-298). As Fludernik explains, "plot depends on consciousness and cannot exists by itself in narrative. . . . [E]ven where plot is the main focus of a narrative, the plot is part of an experiential drama for the characters (and for the reader in the state of immersion)" ("Plotting Experience" 292). It is because characters have specific feelings, goals, or intentions in mind that they engage in specific actions that, in turn, constitute the plot that engages readers. In other words, the actions of characters indirectly reveal their mental and emotional states, that is, their minds. Indeed, both Zunshine and Palmer demonstrate that mind does not have to be told in thoughts; it can be told through the embodied actions of characters, through their body language and facial expressions, but also through how they behave and what they do. Consequently, "the distinction between thought and action in fictional texts is not as clear-cut as narrative theorists have assumed" (Palmer, *Fictional Minds* 15). Given their quasi-inseparability, rather than artificially setting apart

[17] While Grethlein concedes that the characters' mental processing is at the core of reader engagement in modernist literary fiction where minds abound, he argues that in some cases, such as widely popular page-turner 'popcorn thrillers' or even ancient Greek texts such as Heliodorus's *Aethiopica*, actions, or plot, take precedence over the mind of character for reader investment (257-284).

characters' thoughts and plot actions to determine which of the two should be considered the primary source of reader engagement with narrative, Palmer proposes instead to envision thoughts and action as belonging to the same spectrum of mind that he calls the "thought-action continuum" (*Fictional Minds* 15). In this approach, 'mind in thoughts' or 'mind in actions' brings readers to experience the minds of characters.

Narratives employ many strategies along the thought-action continuum to cue readers to the mind of characters. Cues of mind are so prevalent and diverse in narrative texts that Palmer goes as far as to argue that "a fictional narrative is, in essence, the presentation of the mental functioning of the characters who inhabit the storyworld created by that narrative" (*Fictional Minds* 12). It is no surprise, then, that narratologists have occupied themselves with the mental processing of characters. In his foundational book, *Transparent Minds* (1978), Dorrit Cohn devotes much attention towards uncovering techniques used to convey the mind of characters 'in thoughts.' In it, he details the principal techniques used to represent mind in nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction, including the use of psycho-narration (when the omniscient narrator grants the narratee knowledge of the characters' thoughts and feelings), quoted monologue (sometimes called direct speech, interior monologue or stream of consciousness), and narrated monologue (also known as free indirect discourse).[18] David Herman adopts an historical approach to trace the evolution of narrative techniques used

[18] Theorists have since revisited, refined, and adapted these techniques to considerations of other media. For a study of these different strategies in fiction and film, see Seymour Chatman's *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (146-260). For more on free indirect discourse and thought representation, see Monika Fludernik's *The Fictions of Language and the Languages of Fiction: The Linguistic Representation of Speech and Consciousness.*

to represent mind in English fiction (from 700 CE onwards). He does so with the aim to "cumulatively provide a basis for investigating the dividing line between "'cognitive universals'"—cues that always trigger readers' Theory of Mind —and "variable, period-specific techniques for representing minds"—cues that readers lacking the background needed to recognize, contextualize, and interpret the technique may miss) (*The Emergence of Mind* 3). Herman and the contributors to *The Emergence of Mind* include metaphors, character types, and folk psychology among the variable, period-specific techniques that provide access to the mind of characters without explicitly relaying the characters' thoughts and feelings. Herman is careful to remind readers that the strategies used to represent and read mind are culturally and historically marked: the representation of mind and readers' ability to mind-read "both shape and are shaped by sociocultural situation" (Herman, *The Emergence of Mind* 21). The writing and reading of minds depends on context, which guarantees that the strategies identified by narratologists are prone to change over time as some strategies become obsolete, and others are reconfigured or created.

Fludernik also adopts an historical approach to propose one of the most comprehensive lists of techniques used to represent consciousness in literary fiction to date. Modelled after Cohn's *Transparent Minds*, the first three categories "include the standard forms of (1) direct speech; (2) psychonarration; and (3) free indirect discourse." To these, Fludernik adds "(4) the description of gestures and physical expressions of internal turmoil; (5) the narrator's empathetic emotional alignment with the character, usually by means of an exclamatory phrase; (6) the use of similes and metaphors to characterize character's emotions and mind content; (7) collective thoughts; and (8)

fictive or virtual speech" ("The Representation" 41). Although Fludernik's eight categories account for many ways literary texts represent mind, they do not account for all of them. Missing from this list, for instance, is the use of character types mentioned by Herman and his contributors. Furthermore, as the title of her article suggests, "The Representation of Mind from Chaucer to Aphra Behn," Fludernik's extensive categorization remains limited to strategies used in literary texts written during the long Renaissance (14th-17th century), and thus, for instance, does not consider the specificities of mind-representation in 20th- and 21st-century literature or in multimodal texts, such as comics and graphic novels. Despite its limitations, this list provides a solid technical and methodological foundation to consider the representation of minds in all types of fiction, including graphic narratives.

Comics scholars who turn to narratology to examine the representation of consciousness in comics have uncovered several additional, medium-specific strategies that convey the mind of characters. Some of these strategies depend principally on words to explicitly communicate the thoughts and feelings of characters.[19] Such is the case, for instance, (1) when speech or thought balloons 'tell' readers what characters feel or think[20] or (2) when narrative captions reveal a character's state of mind.[21] Other strategies primarily, or even entirely, rely on the image to implicitly suggest the character's state of mind. This is the case when (3) various strategies of focalization visually—and often

[19] For a more detailed overview of the verbal techniques used in comics to present mind, see, among others, Mikkonen (*The Narratology of Comic Art* 203-220), and Groensteen (*Comics and Narration* 121-132).
[20] For more on characters speaking their mind, see Fresnault-Deruelle ("Le Personnage").
[21] For more on narration in (more or less direct) relation to characters, see Groensteen (*Comics and Narration* 79-120), and Thon ("Who's Telling the Tale?").

metaphorically—convey the focalizing-character's mindset,[22] when (4) characters embody common psychologically- or morally-loaded stereotypes (e.g., the 'ugly' supervillain),[23] or when (5) the gestures and facial expressions of characters visually convey their mental functioning and emotions.[24]

Although the list of techniques used in comics to convey mind is already extensive and as robust as the eight literary techniques Fludernik lists, surprisingly little attention has been devoted to the representation in comics of what Fludernik designates as 'collective thoughts.' In literary fiction, collective thoughts correspond to the type of group thinking in statements such as 'we wondered what was behind this door' or 'they decided to wait' that convey the cognitive processing (that is, the mind) of several characters at once. Although narratologists have recently begun to examine the representation of collective thoughts (as discussed below), in comics studies, such sustained narratological attention is severely lacking. To date, Silke Horskotte and Nancy Pedri are the only scholars (to my knowledge) who have stopped on the issue of collective thinking and its representation in part of their chapter "The Body at Work: Subjectivity in Graphic Memoir." In it, they argue that in comics, the "conflated or entangled bodies" of characters often serves to visually convey their "tangled subjectivities" ("The Body at Work" 85) and, by extension, their communal thinking.

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[22] For more on focalization in relation to characterization, see Horstkotte and Pedri ("Focalization in Graphic Narrative"), Mikkonen ("Subjectivity and Style"), Pedri ("What's the Matter of Seeing"), and Thon (*Transmedial Narratology* 265-326; "Subjectivity across Media").
[23] For more on psychologically-loaded stereotypes, see Eco ("A Reading"), Glascock and Preston-Schreck, or Hatfield (115).
[24] For more on gestures and facial expressions in comics in relation to characterization, see Bremond, Chen and Chen, Groensteen (*Lignes de vie),* Tan, and Töpffer.

Their work draws on that of narratologists who, following the increased study in the early 2000s of collective mind in the humanities and social and cognitive sciences (with, for instance, the introduction of such concepts as collective consciousness,[25] collective intelligence,[26] or intersubjectivity[27]) and, more importantly, the publication in 2010 of Alan Palmer's foundational *Social Minds in the Novel*, examine collective mind and its rendition in narratives. Their work joins current narratological research[28] in suggesting that narratology has placed an "undue emphasis on private, solitary, and highly verbalized thoughts at the expense of all other types of mental functioning," and that not enough attention has been devoted to what Palmer calls "social minds" or an "externalist perspective on the mind [that] stresses those aspects that are outer, active, public, social, behavioral, evident, embodied, and engaged" (*Social Minds* 39). Apart from drawing attention to how characters' actions, and not only their private or intramental thoughts, reveal their mind, Palmer stops on the "social nature of fictional thoughts" (*Social Minds* 39), introducing the concept of "*intermental* thought" to account for "joint, group, shared or collective" thinking (*Social Minds* 41; emphasis in original). While most narratological discussions of mind in fiction focused on intramental thinking, Palmer's theorization opened up a new research area dedicated to the collective thinking of a group of people.

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[25] For discussions of collective consciousness, see, for instance, K. Smith or Walker.
[26] For discussions of collective intelligence, see, for instance, Jenkins (*Convergence Culture*), or Malone and Bernstein.
[27] For discussions of intersubjectivity, see, for instance, Morganti et al., or Zlatev et al.
[28] See, for instance, the articles in the special issues of *Style* on "Social Minds in Fiction and Criticism" (vol. 45, no. 2, 2011) edited by John V. Knapp and *Narrative* on "Social Minds in Factual and Fictional Narration" (vol. 33, no. 2, 2015) edited by Maximilian Alders dedicated to social minds in narratives.

Palmer insists that "intermental thoughts" or collective thinking "is a crucially important component of fictional narrative because, just as in in real life where much of our thinking is done in groups, much of the mental functioning that occurs in novels is done by large organizations, small groups, work colleagues, friends, families, couples, and other intermental units" (*Social Minds* 41). Narrative abounds with collective thinking (Alders, "Introduction" 114),[29] which informs significant aspects of narrative meaning-making and plot advancement. "If you were to take all of the social thought" out of *Middlemarch*, *Little Dorrit*, and *Persuasion*, Palmer writes about the texts he examines, "they would not be comprehensible" (*Social Minds* 42). Fludernik is of the same mind, proposing that "the collective can be traced in three narratological dimensions: that of (1) action (groups that do things on the plot level); (2) thought or attitude (groups that have a common viewpoint and express a common attitude); and (3) narration (groups that engage in collective storytelling as co-authors and co-narrators)" ("The Many" 141). Fludernik is joined by other narratologists who set out to determine the narrative techniques used to represent collective thinking, including the mention of groups that may think of themselves as such or not (e.g., "The Smiths believe" or "Those sitting at the back disagreed") or the use of parenthesis to present multiple viewpoints in one sentence, thus allowing readers to engage with the minds of several characters at once.[30]

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[29] See also Fludernik ("The Many" 140) and Palmer (*Social Minds* 213).
[30] For more detailed literary examples, see in particular, Palmer (*Social Minds* 71; 105-144) as well as Alders ("Introduction"), Cui ("Parentheticals and the Presentation of Multipersonal Consciousness"); Fludernik ("The Category of 'Person' in Fiction"; "The Many in Action and Thoughts"), Kukkonen ("When Social Minds Get into Trouble"), or Margolin ("Telling in the Plural").

Although some progress has been made toward a more thorough examination and understanding of intermental thinking in fiction, most, if not all, studies have been limited to literary texts. Since little to no attention has been given to the examination of intermental thinking in other media such as comics, many techniques other than the blending of bodies discussed by Hoskotte and Pedri still need to be uncovered and examined because mind, in all its configurations, invests readers. In overlooking intermental thinking in comics, comics scholarship has much work to do in determining how manifestations of collective thinking present and how they affect readers' comprehension of characters' states of minds, motivations, and actions—all of which have important ramifications in narrative meaning-making.

To begin to address this oversight, this chapter identifies and classifies uncommon or unconventional images that communicate intermental thinking. The analyses that follow yield two main conclusions. First, this chapter proves that the techniques used in comics to convey intra-intermental thinking manifest various degrees of visual complexity that render them more or less noticeable in the text and incite varyingly intricate interpretive processes from readers. By troubling readers' access to crucial narrative information about a character's mind, these techniques prompt the writerly engagement of readers with the image. Such an engagement is necessary for readers to be able to make sense of the thoughts and feelings of characters, the plot, and the narrative as a whole. To clarify the writerly process activated by the representation of intra-intermental thinking in comics, I group the visual techniques used to convey intra-intermental thinking into three main categories—visual doubling, visual joining, and visual blending—from the most visually simple or apparent techniques to the most

elaborate. In the comics examined throughout the chapter, these three categories (defined below) build upon each other and even overlap at times to convey the collective thinking of characters.

Second, this chapter demonstrates that the depiction of intermental thinking in comics challenges the assumption that it can only represent one-way thinking.[31] Jan Alber underscores one downside or danger of social minds: they risk not being able to communicate the intramental or individual thoughts of each group member at the same time they convey collective thinking, instances of intermental thinking "potentially appropriate individual mind" to the point of "conformism," or—worse—totalitarianism (214-215). By contrast, Uri Margolin contends that individual thoughts are always part of group thinking: "a group mental action can at most consist of the coaction of many: different individuals thinking, feeling, or perceiving the same thing at the same time, usually as a reaction to a common situation or event but without mutual coordination" (Margolin, "Telling in the Plural" 605). As I show, comics are well equipped to expose at once the intramental thoughts at the basis of intermental thinking. They can rely on various narrative strategies of doubling, joining, or blending to portray the coming together of various intermental thoughts that taken in all at once convey intermental thinking or what I refer to as 'intra-intermental thinking.'

My analyses begin by exposing the use and work of 'visual doubling' in *Black Hole* (2005) by Charles Burns. Visual doubling refers to the (im)perfect visual repetition of cues of mind to convey at once the personal and collective thinking of characters.

[31] One exception is the use of parentheticals in a sentence that allows for a plurality of viewpoints in one sentence; see Cui ("Parentheticals and the Presentation of Multipersonal Consciousness").

Through close analysis of the book's visuals, I propose that visual doubling cues intra-intermental thinking by presenting readers with characters that look alike, but that are not perfect replicas of each other or that see similar, but not identical motifs or images in their private thoughts. For the intra-intermental thinking of characters to shine through, readers have to notice and writerly interpret the similarities *and* the differences in the visual details between two (or more) repeated or mirrored images. Once cognisant of the visual doubling, readers infer that although the characters are generally of the same mind, their personal mental processes remain distinct, as suggested by the slightly different visual details of each repetition. I further prove that in *Black Hole*, visual doubling raises questions for readers, who are prompted to ask why the characters look so similar, who are the characters, why they see similar images and, more generally, what intra-intermental thinking communicates about the state of minds of characters and the narrative's overall theme. These and similar questions draw readers into the narrative as they ponder a plausible narrative meaning for the doubling.

Visual doubling is often (but not always) contained within techniques of visual joining, which I examine through a close reading of Jeff Lemire's *Trillium* (2014) in the following section of this chapter. I propose visual joining to designate separate visual cues of mind that, through their symmetrical presentation, appear to come together, join each other, or work together to form a whole—a convergence of two separate individual thought processes that convey intra-intermental thinking. Specifically, I look at symmetrical visual effects used in *Trillium* at the level of the two-page spread, the page, the panel, and the seldom examined margins (or what Groensteen calls the hyperframe) to determine how mirrored content writerly conveys the intermental thinking of its two main

characters, Nika and William. From there, I expose how visual joining invites readers to perceive the intra-intermental thinking of characters in the symmetrical layout and infer what motivates the characters' joint actions and desire to be together. By working through the unconventional representation of Nika's and William's minds, readers fill in or contribute crucial narrative information about their motivations that influence their understanding of *Trillium*'s plot.

Finally, as can be attested to in *Bodyworld* (2010) by Dash Shaw, visual joining pushed to an extreme gives way to what I call visual blending, an overlaying and melding of the visual cues of mind of different characters to communicate at once intramental thinking (in the different layers or parts that merge) and intermental thinking (through the metaphorical interpretation of the merging proper). Visual blending creates the most visually intricate and semantically puzzling images for readers to closely examine. In particular, the blending of characters' bodily features, the amalgam of characters' typical ways of being in the storyworld, and the superimposition of cues that mark character focalization call on readers to writerly interpret the techniques of visual blending in order to be able to piece together and follow the narrative. If readers do not engage with the many instances of visual blending, *Bodyworld* remains incomprehensible and incoherent.

Overall, visual doubling, visual joining, and visual blending require readers to engage with the narrative's visual details in order to be able to perceive and interpret them as techniques used to convey the intra-intermental thinking of characters. Reader engagement does not stop there, however. As the three comics studied in this chapter show, it is through the mind of characters that readers enter the narrative and also unlock the characters' motivations, the plot progression, and the narrative theme. The minds of

characters hold much narrative information readers need to be able to access and writerly piece together in order for the narrative to cohere. In the cases examined in this chapter, it is not a visual gap (as an absence of information), but a visual puzzle (as visual information readers need to personally interpret) that contributes to narrative meaning and to the engagement of readers with the narrative

Repeated Visuals Elements as Cues of Mind: Visual Doubling in *Black Hole*

Charles Burns's black and white body horror comics *Black Hole* (2005)[32] is a non-linear, multiperspective narrative that presents a complex storyworld. Its action takes place in the Seattle suburb in the mid-1970s and focuses on two late-teens, Keith and Chris, who, like many other teenagers in the area, contract 'the bug'—an STD that causes physical deformities—from their respective partners, Eliza and Rob. While some of the infected teens (including the four protagonists) can hide the physical manifestation of their disease and pass as healthy, many others cannot and find themselves ostracized, which leads them to seclude themselves in the nearby woods and, consequently, live in squalor. Chris, who inadvertently shows the physical manifestation of her STD—her shedding back—during an outing with friends eventually joins the most disfigured teenagers and experiences first-hand the horrific, murderous events in the woods.

Comics scholars who have written on *Black Hole* have principally examined it through a cultural studies or literary lens, studying the representation of the sick

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[32]*Black Hole* was serialized between 1995 and 2005; its twelve issues were collected and released as a single volume in 2005. Since the collected volume is more readily available, the discussion that follows considers only this version of the comics and thus does not consider the extra material present in the single issues. Moreover, due to a lack of pagination and chapter number, I cannot provide detailed references.

teenagers' grotesque bodies (Heimermann) by placing the narrative in dialogue with the 1980s AIDS crisis (Raney; Zeigler), the horror genre (Iuliano), or environmental crisis (Kunyosying). However, little attention has been devoted to the narrative's puzzling storytelling strategies and the type of engagement it demands from readers for the narrative to cohere. To begin, the story is told from multiple perspectives. Keith and Chris are the main narrators, but on two occasions, Rob or Dave (one of the teens who hides in the woods and who is also one of the killers) takes on the role of the narrator. Given the multiplicity of narrators, readers must sometimes piece together various versions of the same event from the perspectives of different characters to be able to fully comprehend what is happening in the storyworld. The narrative also adopts a non-linear structure and contains multiple thought scenes (i.e., flashbacks, but also the surreal and symbolically charged nightmares, premonitions, hallucinations, or wishful desires of characters, most of which are in panels with wavy borders) that readers have to situate within the narrative's temporal progression. Lastly, *Black Hole* incorporates multiple techniques of visual doubling that complicate the reading process.[33] At the same time, these techniques also play a central role in bolstering readers' investment in the narrative by offering up important insights into the minds of characters as long as readers writerly infer that visual doubling marks the intra-intermental thinking of characters, even if the meaning of these thoughts remains indeterminate. Although it is arguably unnecessary for readers to engage in such a writerly processing of visual doubling to understand *Black Hole*'s plot,

[33] What I call visual doubling can be but does not have to be limited to a single instance of repetition. In other words, visual doubling also accounts for visual tripling, visual quadrupling, and so on. The repetition and not the number repeated instances is central to the concept.

readers who do not perceive and reflect on the intra-intermental thinking of characters and what it communicates will miss out on pleasurable opportunities to stimulate their Theory of Minds. Likewise, such readers will not get the chance to experience, by proxy, the characters' confused states of mind, which deepens reader engagement with and general appreciation of the narrative.

The visual doubling of characters' representation (their faces, in particular) is likely to be the technique readers will first notice because it makes it difficult for them to recognize a character and distinguish that character from other characters. As Christopher Priest remarks, in *Black Hole* "most of [the] teenagers look alike: they have the same kind of hair, same kind of face; they wear unmemorable clothes." In particular, Keith, Chris, Rob and, to a lesser extent, Eliza[34] look so similar that comics scholar Laura Perna describes them as "visual doubles" of each other, emphasizing that they can be "considered identical because they look alike" (10). Although the visual doubling of characters makes readers struggle to tell the different characters apart, its main purpose is to incite readers to attribute a similar state of mind or some kind of collective or intermental thinking to the group of characters that look alike. Visual doubling thus departs from the popular understanding that the visual depiction of characters across a comic book allows readers to individuate each character and, more importantly, ascertain the mind of a particular character by creating "visual shortcuts to identify a given character's personality" or "interior state of mind" (Aldamá, "Characters" 323). Visual doubling blurs distinctions of mind, bringing to the fore a shared mental experience. For

[34] Although Eliza had a different hairstyle than the other three, comics scholar Laura Perna remarks that "Chris looks very much like [her], both when her hair is wet and when she floats in water" (10).

instance, in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, the metaphorical animal depiction of Germans as cats and Jewish people as mice groups characters according to a (perceived) shared ideology or religion.[35] Likewise, the four protagonists in *Black Hole* look alike to suggest some kind of communal mental bond, experience, or thinking amongst them.

At the same time, slight differences in physical appearance serve to communicate the individual mind of a character. Readers can distinguish the characters from each other by closely scrutinizing the details of their faces: for instance, Keith has a unibrow, Chris has a beauty spot on her cheek and wears earrings, Rob has some hair on his chin, and Eliza has longer hair than the others and no bangs. Moreover, while hidden by clothes most of the time, the physical symptoms of the bug further differentiate them: Keith grows tadpole tails on the side of his chest, Chris has a big scar along the length of her back that makes her skin sheds away, Rob possesses a second mouth at the bottom of his neck, and Eliza has a lizard tail. The deforming physical symptoms also hint at their intramental thinking. In an interview with Hillary Chute, Burns explains that the bug is a form of "teen plague [that] is a physical manifestation of whatever is going on internally" (Chute, "An Interview") so that the teenagers' mutations function as "corporeal manifestations of their inner souls" (Arnold). For some critics, the characters' physical deformities are representative of their repressed or unconscious personal fears. For instance, in her online review of *Black Hole,* writer Ellen Elizabeth Stone argues that the mouth at the bottom of Rob's neck that sometimes speaks on his behalf symbolizes "a psychological desire to speak his mind" when he lies or bends the truth. Chris, who

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[35] Of course, *Maus*'s animal metaphor is much richer than what I describe here (see, for instance, Angelis; Ewert; and Loman).

presents as a character who has a hard time letting go of the past and embracing novelty, “malts [*sic*] her skin, suggesting a fear of change and growth,” while “Keith grows mutations similar to the tadpoles he once let die, suggesting a fear of responsibility” or an inability to take care of others (Stone). In this reading, the deformity is squarely associated with the individual mind of a character.

By contrast, I propose that the visual doubling of the main characters’ bodies fulfils a twofold function through the process of comparing and contrasting it triggers in readers. On the one hand, the striking similarities between the protagonists’ appearances suggest that their state of mind is the same, and that their thoughts are collective. On the other hand, the subtle differences in the characters’ bodies allow readers to distinguish among the lookalikes and be reminded of their personal, unique thinking. Even though Keith, Chris, Rob, and Eliza generally look alike and do share a collective thinking, the unique physical details they exhibit allow readers to also recognize them as individual characters endowed with their very own unique personality, feelings, and intramental thoughts. Given this dual directive, the ‘doubling-with-subtle-differences’ of Keith’s, Chris’s, Rob’s, and Eliza’s body convey their intra-intermental thinking.

Since some cues tied to the embodiment of characters are so subtle that they can be missed by readers who may not take note of or question the similarities (and differences) in their appearances, Burns sometimes uses panel composition to accentuate the visual doubling of bodies and, more pointedly, to draw attention to the simultaneous intramental and intermental thinking of characters. In a flashback sequence in which Chris recalls the moment she and Rob realize that he infected her with the bug, the panel on the left shows half of Rob’s face, whereas the panel on the right shows half of Chris’s

face so that taken together they form one full face. At first sight, it is not easy to tell them apart: they look very alike because Rob's distinctive goatee and Chris's beauty spot is out of the frame. In addition to looking alike, the composition of these two panels is such that they visually complete each other to show one face, thus metaphorically revealing their intermental thinking through the visual doubling of their faces and their coming together (or what I call joining in the next section) across the wavy-edged gutter. For some scholars, the composite image "invites the reader to associate [Chris's and Rob's] fear" (Raney) about the bug, thus conveying their intermental thinking. However, despite the visual and psychological unity suggested by the general similarities between Rob's and Chris's face and their interlocking composition, small differences in their individual facial expressions and the significant presence of the gutter (that unites, but also splits the composite face in half) accentuate the physical and mental differences between the two lovers. On the one hand, Rob's emotional state is that of shock. His left eye is wide open, his mouth is gaping, and sweat or tears are running down his cheek, which coupled with his assertive statement "but… you knew… you said that you **knew**" (Burns; emphasis in original) suggest that he is dumbfounded, possibly because he realizes that he misunderstood her earlier and consequently transmitted the bug to Chris. On the other hand, Chris, who replies "Knew what? I… I just…," seems embarrassed (Burns). Aside from her blushing cheek, her right eye is slightly contracted, and her mouth also gapes a little as though she is confused by what Rob is telling her and, perhaps, disgusted or ashamed of learning she contracted the bug. In this sense, the tension between communal unity and personal division that results from the imperfect visual doubling of the character's appearance and the clever use of panel composition invites readers to unite the

characters' mental processing into a shared state of mind while also taking into account the specificities in their thoughts. The two-fold interpretive process triggered by the visual doubling thus leads readers to establish Rob and Chris's intra-intermental thinking.

Throughout the narrative, the imperfect visual doubling of the bodies of characters (and, by extension, the doubling of their minds) also prompts readers to ponder 1) what kind of intermental thoughts and feelings the main characters share that would justify their visual doubling; 2) why the bug manifests differently from one character to the next, and what this physical difference suggests about the character's intramental thoughts and feeling; and 3) what is the significance of the noticeable change in appearance in Keith and Chris (while Keith cuts his hair much shorter, Chris's hair gets significantly longer, thus putting an end to their visual doubling), and also in Eliza in the last third of the book.[36] *Black Hole* does not provide any conclusive answers to these questions even though they would provide great insight into the main characters' individual and collective states of mind. Instead, readers are invited to writerly attribute meaning to the imperfect visual doubling of characters (and its disruption at the end of the book). By drawing from what the narrative states or strongly implies about the personalities and experiences of characters, readers come to their own solutions to the questions the visual doubling raises about the shared thinking of characters. Regardless of what writerly interpretation readers reach about the visual doubling, the visual technique puts in motion a process that exercises readers' Theory of Mind: readers are asked to ascertain the intra-

[36] Rob's appearance does not change because he is no longer alive at that point in the story.

intermental thoughts and feelings of characters. By doing so, it deepens their investment with the minds of protagonists and the narrative as a whole.

Mark Heimermann argues that *Black Hole* displays "adolescents whose bodies are both familiar and strange" and that "despite the differences in each deformity, [they] become misfits whose self-perception often becomes one of being outcasts" ("Grotesque" 90). Speaking more generally, Burns states in an interview for the *Los Angeles City Beat* that *Black Hole* presents "adolescence as [a] disease" and a shared experience "you suffer through," but one that "affects people in different ways" ("Charles Burns"). Heimermann and Burns concur that the adolescents that populate *Black Hole*'s storyworld are at once engaged in a communal and individual physical and mental experience. Visual doubling speaks to this complex enmeshing of the collective and the individual: characters look alike because they share a communal experience of being teenagers, becoming sexually active, and contracting the bug, which connects all of them mentally and emotionally, while subtle differences in appearance simultaneously reveal that they also perceive their experience from their own standpoint. It is thus not surprising that the protagonists start to look noticeably different from one another in the last third of the book as they grow out of adolescents and into adulthood.

In addition to the visual doubling of characters' bodies, *Black Hole* also makes extensive use of the doubling of images and motifs, especially in the private nightmarish thoughts of Keith and Chris.[37] In the first chapter of the book, Keith and Chris are in a

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[37] As mentioned in the introduction of this section, it is difficult to determine whether the characters' private thoughts are (lucid) dreams, hallucinations, or even visions of the future. For simplicity, dreams or nightmares refer to focalized passages when a character mentions or is shown passing out, sleeping, waking up, or taking drugs, and their mind is somewhat weird, out of place, and thus dream-like or nightmarish.

biology class when, upon dissecting a frog, Keith has a feeling of "a déjà vu trip, or something… a premonition" (Burns). Just before fainting, Keith sees various odd and seemingly unrelated images and patterns, including the frog with its stomach cut open, a foot with an incision on its sole, a woman's back with the skin split open and shedding away, a hand covering female genitalia, as well as a snake, a gun, a joint, some bones, a beer can, a beer bottle, and tadpoles. Keith's thoughts are presented over two adjacent pages that open (on the left page) and close (on the right page) with a close-up panel of Keith's eyes directed towards the puzzling images and patterns.[38] In addition to Keith's narration (in the narrative text boxes), the direction of his line of sight suggests that he is focalizing the comics sequence while also prompting readers to take account of his intermental thoughts as presented in the content of the focalized panels. At this point in the narrative, it is not clear how readers are meant to interpret these seemingly unrelated images and, due to Keith's own uncertainty regarding the status of the thoughts, whether the images refer to things that belong to his past, his present, or his future, or to something else entirely. The indeterminacy of these images—in relation to diegetic levels and to Keith's knowledge of the diegesis—creates an engaging mystery for readers, who are taxed with keeping an eye out for them as they continue reading. However, although the motifs appear several times throughout *Black Hole* (not all at the same time, not always as perfect repetitions, and not always related to Keith's focalizing), rather than helping readers determine their position within the narrative structure, their repetition

[38] For a close analysis of these two pages, see Protic and Finlayson.

deepens the mystery of their meaning and origin. Each repetition brings readers to further wonder what it means for characters to be seeing the same images.

This very questioning, I argue, leads readers to become aware of the intermental thinking of the main characters, especially of Keith and Chris whose nightmares are permeated with these visual motifs. In an article about narratives written in the first-person plural (or what narratologists call we-narratives),[39] Amit Marcus remarks that "the dream is conventionally treated in modern Western tradition as a sphere of private consciousness completely inaccessible to others" (Marcus 50). Yet, he adds that "perhaps for this very reason the dream has become, in some we fictional narrative, the paradigmatic case of such close connections" between characters (Marcus 51). Although *Black Hole* is not obviously a we-narrative, a similar reasoning about visual doubling in Keith and Chris's dreams applies in this case: essentially, the visual repetitions in their dreams suggest that they are of the same (collective) mind and establishes their intermental thinking.

The doubling or the repetition of images or motifs in comics is a narrative technique commonly referred to as "braiding." Thierry Groensteen, who coined the concept, explains that braiding "programs and carries out [a] sort of bridging" (Groensteen, *The System of Comics* 146) between the repeated images within a panel, across the page, or across the comics. Every time readers notice a repeated image, they are reminded of similar images or motifs that came before and, equipped with the knowledge of the newly discovered visual repetition, revisit the meaning of those

[39] Although Marcus does not mention social mind or intermental thinking, it goes without saying that we-narratives are emblematic of social minds and intermental thinking in fiction.

previous encounters. Braiding thus "manifests into [readers'] consciousness the notion that the panels of a comic constitute a network, and even a system" (Groensteen, *The System of Comics* 158). It "confers unity via fragmentation" (Fischer and Hatfield 84-85) as readers link the repeated images together and attribute a narrative meaning to the individual image, but also to their connection.

In *Black Hole*, the repetition of the images and motifs across the dreams of Keith and Chris highlights their shared mental connection. The image of the cut foot introduced in the first chapter when Keith is passing out is repeated (albeit not perfectly) four more times throughout *Black Hole*: in Chris's nightmare (ch. "SSSSSSSSSS"), in the paratext preceding the chapter "Cut", in the diegetic reality when Chris cuts her foot on a shard of glass and Keith helps her extract it (ch. "Cut"), and in Keith's dream (ch. "The End"). Although it's possible to conclude that Keith and Chris are dreaming about the foot because they both experienced the cut in the diegetic reality (a claim that, as I discuss below, is problematic), other visual motifs that are braided throughout their dreams establish at once their personal and collective thinking—that is, their intra-intermental thinking. Whereas Chris dreams herself walking naked on detritus by the waterside when she cuts her foot on a shard of glass (ch. "Cut"), in his dream, Keith enters a cave filled with trash and stumbles upon a naked Chris who shows him the wound on her foot (ch. "The End"). The snake-like creature swimming in water in front of an arch rock formation pictured on the scroll that Chris removes from her wound in her dream sequence is replaced by a lizard on top of a rock in a desolate American southwestern-desert landscape in Keith's dream sequence. Crossing between narrative levels—from the

real diegesis into Chris's and also Keith's dream worlds—solidifies their intermental thinking.

At the same time, significant variations in the visual doubling suggest that although Chris and Keith think collectively, they also think individually. Although the different drawings on the similar scrolls (and other differences and similarities in the dream sequences) lend themselves to countless interpretations, other instances of visual doubling bring readers to conclude that the arch and the lizard refer to memories Keith and Chris have of their respective partners. Notably, the same dream arch features in the diegetic setting when Chris camps by the beach with Rob (ch. "Under Open Skies") or when she returns there on her own after his murder (ch. "The End"), and in her dreams about Rob (ch. "SSSSSSSSSS" and ch. "Summer Vacation"). In a similar fashion, the lizard and the desert landscape in Keith's nightmare evoke Eliza's nickname "lizard queen" (ch. "Lizard Queen"), the place she is currently visiting with him in the diegesis, and the photograph of Monument Valley she showed him as a place she wants to go to (ch. "The End"). In light of these visual doublings, readers understand that the variations in the details of the characters' similar dreams mark the intramental thinking of each character. It follows that similar, but not identical dreams can convey at once the intra- and the intermental thinking of characters, making it possible for readers to infer that the specifics of the personal situation of characters inform their shared thoughts.

Although the braided images convey the intra-intermental thinking of characters, it is unclear what these symbolically-charged images and the characters' surreal nightmares in which the images figure are meant to communicate about that thinking. Despite providing direct access to the characters' individual and collective thoughts, the

oddness of the visual doubling prompts readers to wonder which characters are seeing similar images in their nightmares, why that is the case, and what these images means with regard to the characters' psyches. Several readers of *Black Hole* have asked themselves these questions, often adopting a Freudian lens to engage in a writerly interpretation of the nightmares and the repeated images. Reading the beer bottles, bones, and snakes as phallic symbols; the slits, wounds, or openings as yonic; the gun, bones, and dead frog as evoking danger and death; and the discarded joints or crumpled beer cans as unpleasant garbage, these critics claim that the repeated motifs convey the collective conflicting feelings that the teen characters have regarding sex as something they at once desire, fear, and find repulsive (Dadey; Zeigler). Other critics argue that the dark content of the nightmares and the repeated images of trash symbolize the teenagers' impression of "becoming invisible remainders (waste) consigned to darkness" (Lowther 11) after contracting the bug that leads their peers to shun them. Although it is impossible to reach a definite interpretation of the characters' nightmares and the visual doubling that joins them, their extensive use throughout *Black Hole* suggests that the narrative, at its core, is about the shared thoughts and experiences of a group of angsty teenagers who have to come to terms, individually and collectively, with the unfamiliar, ambiguous, alienating, and horrendous feelings caused by their sexual awakening, their illness, and the end of their carefree childhood. While it is not necessary to be aware of every instance of visual doubling to generally understand the plot of *Black Hole*, it certainly contributes to deepening reader investment in the narrative by prompting them to personally engage with the characters and their bewildered and bewildering state of mind. It brings readers

to perceive the characters' confusion and also leads them to experience that confusion for themselves.

Indeed, the extensive use of braiding in *Black Hole*'s non-linear, multiperspective narrative turns the text into a time-warping narrative filled with obscure nightmares from indeterminate sources of focalization. Consequently, reading *Black Hole* may be an intricate, disorienting process for readers who closely engage with it and try to make sense of its interlinking details. Emma Kafalenos refers to "those narratives in which a chronological sequence cannot be established" as having an "indeterminate *fabula*" ("Toward a Typology of Indeterminacy" 394). In them, indeterminacy arises, as is the case in *Black Hole*, when "repetitions and contradictions make it impossible to establish a chronology" (Kafalenos, "Toward a Typology of Indeterminacy" 394). The initial uncertainty about the status of Keith's thoughts in the biology class scene and, by extension, the braided motifs make it impossible for readers to determine with certainty where to place the characters' nightmare sequences in the narrative timeline, and how all these nightmares combine. Faced with an indeterminate *fabula*, readers are asked "to reshape their processes of thought and to experience a loss of control: to put themselves in an uncomfortable situation as they read" (Kafalenos, "Toward a Typology of Indeterminacy" 405). The indeterminacy created in *Black Hole* primarily through visual doubling impacts the reading experience of readers by cueing confusion and chaos that readers are invited to witness and possibly even made to experience for themselves.

Furthermore, in conjunction with the temporally indeterminate storytelling, the presence of braided images focalized through different characters creates further indeterminacy in what Kafalenos calls "the parameter of *sjužet* focalization" ("Toward a

Typology of Indeterminacy" 388). Readers are unable to determine who is the initial focalizing agent (Keith, Chris, or someone else entirely) and what the narrative status of the repeated images and motifs is, which thus further draw them into the narrative's and its puzzling details. Kafalenos explains that the indeterminacy that arises when "the source of the focalization cannot be identified … forces the reader to reread or rethink" the text, which "enriches the reading process" ("Toward a Typology of Indeterminacy" 390). In *Black Hole*, the indeterminacy born from an uncertain source of focalization implies the collective focalization at the core of its storytelling. The rich experience of collective focalization, however, can only be achieved if readers acknowledge the unclear source of focalization and embrace the narrative confusion caused by it. Readers who writerly engage with *Black Hole*'s extensive visual doubling thus face a confusing experience that resonates with—and is enhanced by—the feelings, thoughts, and desires of the teen characters who are themselves puzzled by the horrific and uncertain events they experience both individually and collectively.

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In the final chapter of *Black Hole*, Keith and Chris share yet another dream in which visuals are repeated. The sequence begins as Keith falls asleep in his motel room. He thinks about his current girlfriend, Eliza, and then dreams about bits and bobs of the various motifs in his premonition (e.g., beer bottle, bones, gun, etc.) and other scattered objects. More objects are present on the subsequent two-page spread, but this time they are presented in such a way they form half-circles on either side of the spread that are separated by negative black space (Figure 1). The nightmare continues on the page following this two-page spread, but this time Chris, and not Keith, is the focalizing agent.

Although this shift in focalization is not evident at first, several cues point to Chris as the focalizing agent of the rest of the nightmare: 1) these final two pages are filled with images of feet in water and snakes that are commonly found in Chris's nightmares; 2) the non-grid-like 'crooked' page layout is only used in *Black Hole* when Chris is the focalizing agent and thinking about something that marked her in some way, as when she is worried Rob impregnated her (ch. "Racing Towards Something"); and 3) Chris is shown waking up startled from the nightmare when the sequence's wavy panels end. Given the marked shift in the source of focalization, confusion arises as to whether or not the content of the two-page spread placed in-between Keith's focalized nightmare and Chris's can be attributed with certainty and/or in its entirety to either or both of them.

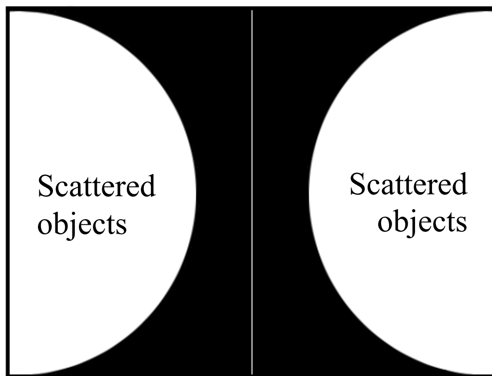

Figure 1. The presentation of two-page spread unites Keith's and Chris's individual dreams. Personal rendition modeled after Charles Burns, *Black Hole* (Pantheon, 2005).

In this in-between spread, the visual doubling depicts familiar objects that pertain to Keith's and Chris's experiences suggest that although both minds are presented in the panels, they also remain separate. Whereas some of the objects on the left originate in Keith's private life, some on the right belong to Chris. At the same time, though, some of the doubled objects, including the shattered beer bottle, the rope, the broken bones, and

the frog, symbolize Keith and Chris's shared experiences. Although these 'communal' objects are secluded on either side of the spread, they nonetheless encourage readers to bridge the minds of the two focalizing agents and thus perceive their intermental thinking. This linking of Keith's and Chris's mind is further prompted by the presence of many scattered detritus not only in the spread, but also in the panels that precede it (focalized through Keith) and those that follow (focalized through Chris). This visual technique gives the impression that the various objects in Keith's nightmare flow across the spread to spill into Chris's nightmare. While not a technique of doubling *per se*, the continuous presence of detritus throughout the sequence creates a visual channel across the negative space that ties the two characters together through their personal thoughts as well as their shared thinking.

Yet another visual technique, which I call visual joining and examine thoroughly in the next section, brings together Keith's and Chris's intramental thinking to convey their intermental connection. Although the spread can be split in two different parts with one half-circle standing for Keith's thought and the other for Chris's thoughts, the spread's symmetrical composition creates an effect of visual resonance between its two pages, while the spread itself invites a "synchronic reading of, or global look at, the whole of the composition" (Mikkonen, *The Narratology of Comic Art* 65). Taken together, these two techniques collaborate to encourage readers to see the separate content of the two pages, but also interpret it as part of the same unit so that the separate intramental thinking of characters comes together to reveal their intermental thinking. An examination of *Trillium* by Jeff Lemire in the next section details additional strategies that trigger the process of visual joining in readers' mind.

Symmetrical Compositions of Cues of Minds: Visual Joining in *Trillium*

Jeff Lemire's *Trillium* (2014) is a nine-chapter time-travel comics.[40] Like *Black Hole*, *Trillium* is a complex non-linear, multiperspective narrative with two independent storylines that soon intersect. The first storyline, set in a 3797 space colony, is narrated by Nika, a human scientist, who is dispatched to the planet of Atabithi to collect trillium flowers—the only known cure for the Caul virus that has been decimating humanity across the universe. Nika, readers eventually learn, witnessed her mother's death in 3769, and is still traumatized by the event, and her loneliness exacerbated by it. The second storyline unfolds on Earth in 1921, and follows William, a former WWI British soldier who suffers from what is now designated as PTSD. The story opens as he is sent to Peru to find the Incas's lost temple. As it turns out, the temple on the Atabithi planet and the lost temple of the Incas are somehow linked and function as time portals that make it possible for Nika and William to meet in 1921 at the end of Chapter 1 and eat a trillium flower that leads them to swap memories before returning to their own timeline. Yet, following this strange experience, both decide to find their way back to each other, which they do, but only right before disintegrating in the bombing of the temple where they reunite. Neither dies, however; each wakes up in alternative versions of each other's timelines.[41] Although Nika now lives in 1921 and William in 3797, both eventually

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[40] Although the comic book has nine chapters in total, the concluding one is Chapter 8 because the first two chapters that introduce the two main characters are titled "Chapter 1: 3797–The Scientist" and "Chapter 1.2: 1921–The Soldier" to encourage readers to interrelate the two storylines that unfold almost two millennia apart. Because *Trillium* is unpaginated, I am only able to situate the quotations and images within their chapter.

[41] Even the secondary characters, such as Nika's commander or William's brother and army companion, Clayton, are present in these alternative timelines.

remember their previous life and each other, prompting each of them to return to the temple (or what is left of it) and seek the other out. After many complications, Nika manages to return to 3797 where she finds William. Reunited, they conclude that they are "meant to be together" (Lemire, ch. 8) and jointly decide to sacrifice themselves to save the world from the Caul virus while remaining united even in death.

Trillium's narrative force does not originate in its time-travel story, but rather in its experimental visual telling. Although Nika and William live in different times and places for most of the narrative, various visual techniques—most notably, strategies of visual joining—prompt readers to perceive the desire, and more generally, the minds of the two protagonists as linked. Such a reading is not evident, though. First, readers have to notice the visual joining techniques and understand them as the representation of intermental thinking. Then, they have to writerly determine what that joining signifies about Nika's and William's individual minds as well as their collective mind, how to interpret the collectively-oriented actions they individually take, and what motivates the two protagonists' desire to be together (e.g., love, curiosity, ethics, past trauma…). Readers who do not or cannot engage with the book's visual joining techniques may be disappointed by the story: the story's content alone does not explain how two characters who spend so little time together have such a deep connection that keeps bringing them together despite significant obstacles. By contrast, readers who do engage in such a narratively rewarding process are likely to find the connection between characters and the plot's progression much more meaningful once they ascertain the characters' motivations.

A two-page spread early in *Trillium*, when the two protagonists meet for the first time in the 1921 Amazonian jungle in Chapter 2, presents a most remarkable and

straightforward example of visual joining that depicts intra-intermental thinking (Figure 2). In many ways, the composition of this two-page spread is reminiscent of the last example from *Black Hole* discussed above because it too employs a technique of doubling—albeit an imperfect one—to unite the visual content across its two pages. William occupies the left page of the spread; drawn from the side, he faces the right page, eyes closed, mouth open, and his left hand extended to give the impression that he is about to shake hands with Nika, who is drawn on the right page in the same position as William, but facing the left page. She, too, has her eyes closed, her mouth open, and her left hand ready to shake hands with William. Two separate light-green trails of smoke or light that resemble the tails of speech or thought balloons emanate from the mouths of both protagonists to jointly create some kind of Indigenous motif between their heads.[42] The visual joining is further emphasized as the Indigenous motif splits again into two parts, each framing unconventional thought balloons that emanate from the back of William's and Nika's head to indicate what is in the mind of each protagonist.[43] On the left page, William's thought balloon foregrounds an image of Nika in her spacesuit against images of the research station she works at, Atabithi people and their leader, and a young girl and older woman in spacesuits that readers will be able to recognize in retrospect as a young Nika and her mother. On the right page, Nika's thought balloon depicts William dressed as a soldier in the foreground with various images of WWI (e.g., barbed wires, soldiers in pain or visibly hurt, and others wearing gas masks), Big Ben and

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[42] The image evokes traditional Incan design (William, after all, is searching for an Incan temple), to possibly depict an Atabithi's deity, thus joining the two timelines through visual means.
[43] For more on the variety of balloon and tail designs used in comics, and the wide range of visual or verbal content they can convey, see Forceville et al.

William's wife, Sylvia, as well as Indigenous people that William recently encountered in the Amazon's jungle in the background. The tails from Nika's and William's thought balloons jut from their mouths and come together to bridge the content of their individual thought balloons to indicate, through the joint creation of the Indigenous motif, that their experiences and minds are connected.

That Nika and William are engaged in intra-intermental thinking is further revealed by the spread's composition. In it, much visual weight is placed on its centre, which is also where the indigenous motif and other visual cues of joining link the minds of Nika and William. From the indigenous motif that illustrates Nika's and William's minds to their facing faces from which the tails of their individual thought balloons emanate, from their extended open hands to the similar composition of their thought balloons, joining visuals that address their intra-intermental thinking abound in the centre of this spread. Since the centre of an image is the place "that gives compositional meaning to each component" of a visual composition (Arnheim, *The Power of the Center* 93), the visual emphasis placed on the two protagonists' minds and bodies that visibly join at the centre of the page strongly suggests that their connection and, more specifically, their intra-intermental thinking is of great importance to the meaning of the spread, and of *Trillium*.

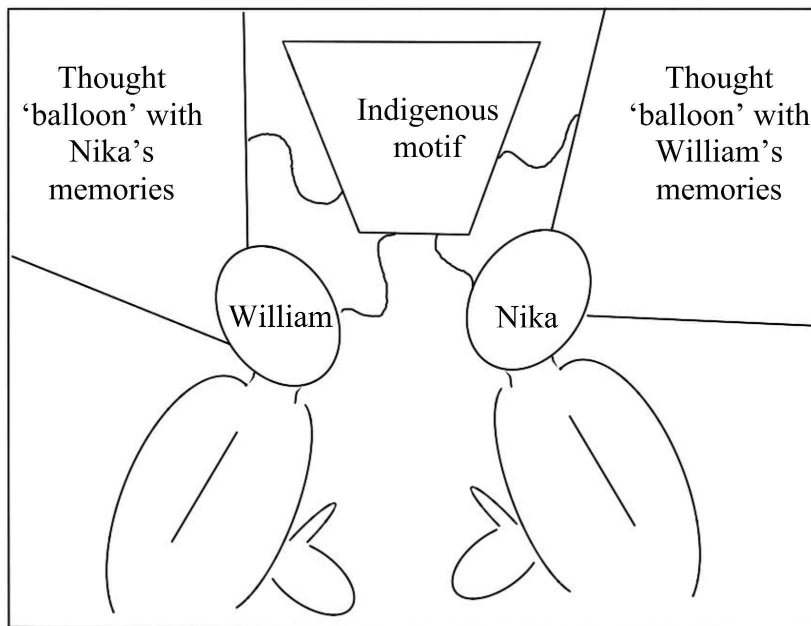

Figure 2. Aside from the linked thought balloons, the (imperfect) visual symmetry in this two-page spread functions as a technique of visual joining that conveys William's and Nika's intra-intermental thinking. Personal rendition modeled after Jeff Lemire, *Trillium* (Vertigo, 2014), ch. 2.

The narrative importance of the centre and, additionally, the vertical central axis along which the symmetrical content of the two pages join are keys to such meaning-making. As Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen note, whenever visual elements in a composition "are placed at equal distance from each other, given the same size and the same orientation toward the horizontal and vertical axes," then an "equivalence . . . is visually realized by a symmetrical composition" (79). The visual elements in a symmetrical composition can be similar (i.e., visual doubling informs the mirroring), but they do not have to be. In the double-page spread, Nika and William look different and are easy to tell apart, and their thoughts are widely distinct. Yet, the visual doubling of their embodied actions (i.e., conveyed by how they hold themselves and are both engaged in the process of thinking) and the position and joining of their thought balloons

establishes a symmetry, and therefore a visual correspondence between the content of the two pages. In this spread, while discrepancies in the mirrored doubling still remind readers of the protagonists' intramental thinking, the symmetry in the spread visually joins the two pages and, by extension, the characters' bodies and minds along the same vertical axis at the centre of the spread to give a sense of shared thoughts and experiences. Taken together, the (imperfect) visual doubling and visual joining communicate the intra-intermental connection between Nika and William.

Although the composition of the two-page spread encourages readers to read the joining of characters' bodies and thoughts as the simultaneous representation of their personal and collective thinking, the lack of textual narration and other visual cues blocks readers from knowing with certainty what the scenes depicted in the thought balloons mean to the characters and what they are meant to suggest about their state of mind. One cannot even know the narrative status of the thoughts depicted. As Forceville and his colleagues note, "thought balloons … are often the equivalent of interior monologue, conveying information that a character may suppress, or depicting dreams and hallucinations" ("Balloonics" 87). Since thought balloons can present all sorts of thoughts, it is not clear from reading the thought balloons in this two-page spread what type of thoughts William and Nika are having. Consequently, these highly indeterminate images prompt readers to writerly decide whether the thought balloons' visual content is illustrative of the depicted character's past memory, trauma, fear, nightmare, or some other type of thought. All readers can conclude is that, by the look of it, instead of personal thoughts, William has Nika's thoughts on his mind and she has his thoughts on her mind. From here, readers understand that Nika's decision to eat a trillium flower in

William's presence (showed in the two pages that precede the spread) leads them to engage in intermental thinking.

The representation of intra-intermental thinking in this spread also invites readers to wonder what it means for William's and Nika's minds to join. More specifically, the first two panels following the spread show William looking baffled, asking "N-Nika?," to which Nika, tears in her eyes, replies "William," right before they go their separate ways (Lemire, ch. 2). Clearly, William and Nika know each other's names, but it is not clear why. Did they learn each other's names when they shared their thoughts, or did they recognize each other from a previous encounter? If they did recall each other, what kind of relationship did they have? Although readers may logically expect to find answers to these questions in the narrative, none are provided. Instead, the nature and depth of William and Nika's relationship lie within readers' writerly interpretation, since readers are made to decide what unites the protagonists and their thoughts and to what extent. This, in turn, impacts how readers understand William's and Nika's current state of mind and what they think or feel about each other. Readers who do not writerly, and thus, creatively, interpret this scene (and others like it) are likely to find William and Nika's relationship throughout *Trillium* to be shallow and artificial because nothing in the narrative justifies why the protagonists are drawn to each other and want to reunite. The writerly determination asked of readers influences how they will interpret the upcoming narrative events and the characters' motivations behind them. In other words, although it is clear from the narrative that the characters take great pains to be together, the reasons for their efforts are left to the imagination of readers.

One of the main difficulties readers face in their attempt to writerly engage with William and Nika's relationship is that the two characters seldom interact because they are rarely in the same place at the same time. In addition, many techniques seemingly underscore their temporal and spatial distance, but also their disconnect, rather than their bond. The visual layout of Chapter 5, for instance, opposes the characters' different timelines —or so it seems. In it, both William and Nika wake up in alternate versions of each other's timeline after disintegrating in the bombing of the temple at the end of Chapter 4. All the pages in Chapter 5 are organized in the same way. The basic page layout is composed of four rows (with a varying number of panels in them). The two top rows are right side up, and show Nika's life in the alternate 1921, whereas the two bottom rows are upside-down, and depict William's life in the alternate 3797. As soon as they start reading the chapter, a note on top of the top panel ask readers to "please read upper section of report first." In addition, a blue arrow at the bottom right of the second panel encourages readers to read *all* of Nika's storyline first. Together, these direct readers to read until the end of the chapter, and then turn the book around, and begin reading William's storyline. The unusual layout and reading order in this chapter draw attention to the separate lives and lack of interaction between the two protagonists.

Yet, attention to the arrangement and content of panels reveals how the unusual layout hints at Nika and William's mental link. Although readers are prompted to read all of Nika's story before reading William's, the symmetrical page layout also encourages readers to contemplate their respective storylines as complementary storylines that will eventually unite, rather than as parallel storylines that never converge. More specifically, the unusual page layout, where the placement of panels in the top and bottom rows mirror

each other, demands a nonlinear reading practice. Enrique del Rey Cabero considers comics page layouts to argue that they often demand a "multidirectional" (i.e., "in multiple directions") and a "multilinear" (i.e., "several parallel narrative lines on the space of the page") reading engagement from readers to render the narrative meaningful (9-10). Hannah Miodrag concurs, specifying how some comics page layouts do not encourage readers to "suture adjacent moments in time," but rather to link "proximate correlatives to make, not a temporal sequence, but a conceptual jigsaw" that informs narrative meaning (75). Such is the case of the puzzling page layouts in *Trillium*'s fifth chapter: they forego a temporal uniting of *all* the panels on the page in favour of a more conceptual, multifaceted linking that relies on readers' writerly engagement to become meaningful.

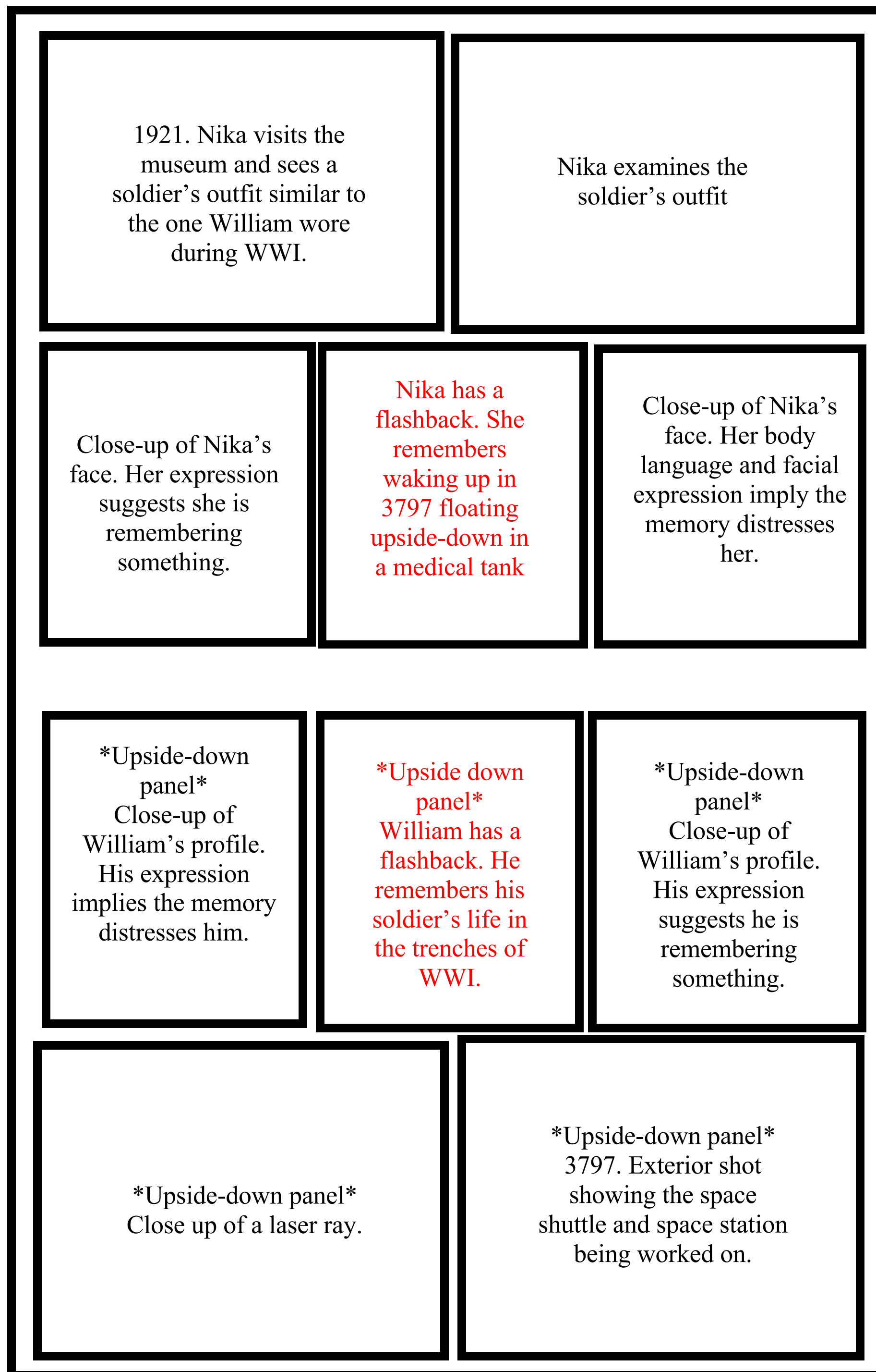

Figure 3. Both Nika and William have a flashback in opposite panels in the symmetrical page layout, which invite readers to link their minds together. Personal rendition modeled after Jeff Lemire, *Trillium* (Vertigo, 2014), ch. 5.

When considered in light of the experiences and reflections of our protagonists in the chapter, the effects of symmetry in the arrangement of panels presents as an effective visual technique that joins separate instances of intramental thoughts as cues of intermental thinking. For instance, in another page from Chapter 5, the first two rows on top of the page that present Nika's story are composed of two panels with three smaller panels underneath them (Figure 3). The two bottom rows that convey William's story adopt the same panel composition, but in a mirrored way. Whereas the symmetrical page layout helps join the protagonists' storylines, similarities in the content of their focalized panels points toward their mental connections across time and space. As Groensteen theorizes, "the *positioning* of the frames" and "the distribution over the page of the *iconic content* of each panel, linked by effects of *resonance*, counterpoint, *symmetry*, extension, etc." establishes "from the visual point of view, the *solidarity* of the images across the surface of the page" (*Comics and Narration* 34; my emphasis). The symmetrical or mirrored visual doubling of the position and content of the panels conveys Nika and William's intra-intermental thinking. The two rows of panels on top show 1921 Nika visiting a museum, and upon seeing a soldier's outfit similar to what William used to wear during WWI, she has a flashback (in the middle panel on the second row, which she focalizes) of waking up in 3797 floating upside-down[44] in some medical tank where she was placed in a "quarantine bath" because she was found "delirious" after "wandering near the Atabithian wall" where she meets William for the first time (Lemire, ch. 3). In a similar way, the two rows of upside-down panels on the bottom of the page show 3797

[44] Therefore, although seemingly upside-down, this panel is actually in the proper reading order, as confirmed by the upward direction of the air bubbles coming out from Nika's nose and mouth.

William fixing a space shuttle, an action that, coupled with the surrounding noises, leads him to remember his soldier's life in the trenches of WWI (in the middle panel on the second row, which he focalizes). Although the content of Nika's and William's focalized panels differs in that it reveals their intramental thinking, the similarity of colour, the placement of the panel in the centre of the page, and the symmetrical panel arrangement encourage readers to discern a link between their minds. Furthermore, the similarities in Nika's and William's actions that the symmetrical layout underscores give the impression that they are of the same mind and that their intermental connection is still active even though they are not part of the same world. In the course of the chapter, both recover memories that lead them to progressively recall elements of their previous life (both of them are remembering something) and eventually remember each other, which leads them individually but, at the same time, also collectively to decide to find their way back to each other. In this sense, the unusual symmetrical layout in Chapter 5 draws attention to the similarities between Nika's and William's individual minds and actions, but also to their ultimately collectively-oriented thoughts and actions.

Similar interpretive principles are used in Chapter 6 of *Trillium* when Nika and William, who now remember each other, are trying to reunite. In it, the doubling and joining of their symmetrical actions are even more pronounced, and the joining of their minds more noticeable (Figure 4). In these two pages, Nika emulates (in an upside-down panel) every action William performed in the previous panel.[45] The symmetrical

[45] There is one exception to this perfect doubling of characters' actions: the two panels on top of the left page show William driving toward the temple entrance while Nika runs toward it. Although they are technically doing two different actions, the scenes unite through the idea of rushing.

presentation of their actions functions as a joining technique to suggest that the two protagonists are coming together, physically and mentally.[46] Since characters' minds determine their actions, that William and Nika perform similar actions expresses what Uri Margolin describes in another context as a "shared intention" or some "joint commitment" ("Telling in the Plural" 602). By revealing their intermental thinking, this "pooling of wills" establishes the characters as a "joint collective agency" (Margolin, "Telling in the Plural" 602). Moreover, the visual symmetry between William's and Nika's individual actions gives the impression that they are acting as if one intermental thought 'instructs' their two distinct bodies to perform the same action at the same time, so that the actions they individually but also jointly take to find their way back to each other reveal their intra-intermental thinking.

Yet an additional and more subtle technique supports reading the two pages as expressive of intra-intermental thinking: the commingling of Nika's and Williams' respective cues of focalization in what is called "the hyperframe" (Groensteen, *The System of Comics* 30). The hyperframe is the space—often white, sometimes black, and rarely illustrated—that surrounds and unites the grouping of panels on a comics page. Comics scholarship often overlooks the hyperframe (Groensteen, *The System of Comics* 31), although, as in *Trillium*, it can fulfill a major narrative function. For instance, Karin Kukkonen demonstrates that the hyperframe, what she calls the frame, can be used in

[46] William's and Nika's individual and yet shared reflections about loneliness (and togetherness) in this passage also hint at their mental and emotional connections. Nika, as the narrator of her storyline, tells upon looking at the wall around the temple that "[her] mother told [her] we are never truly alone," while Williams, upon reaching the threshold, says to Essie, his AI companion, that he does not "feel alone" there (ch. 6). Since words and not images convey the characters' thoughts, I do not discuss them in this thesis.

comics to indicate the focalizing of a grouping of panels by a specific character so that readers know that the content of the panels is filtered through the character-focalizer's mind ("Comics as a Test Case" 34-52).

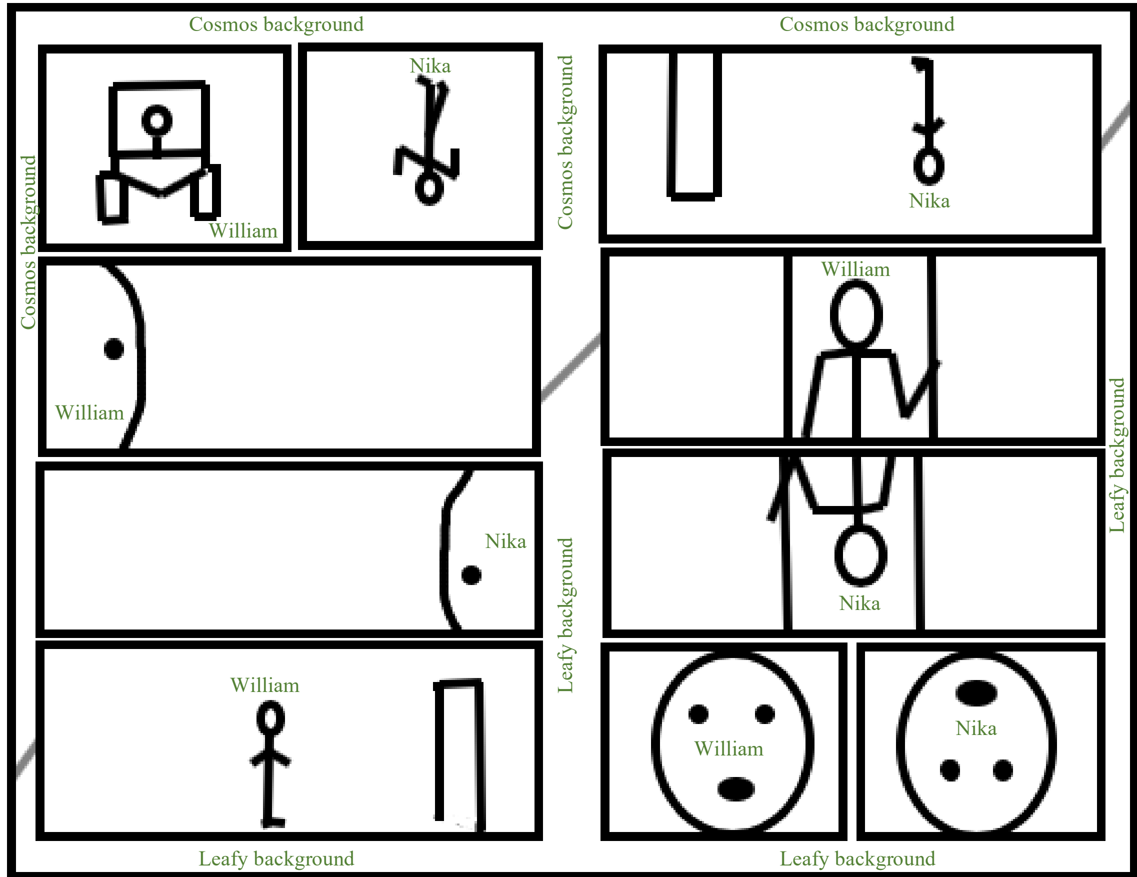

Figure 4. Effects of symmetry in the layout of the pages, coupled with the merging of Nika's and William's focalization cues in the hyperframe point to their intermental thinking. Personal rendition modeled after Jeff Lemire, *Trillium* (Vertigo, 2014), ch. 6.

Lemire creatively employs the hyperframe in the second chapter of *Trillium* when Nika and William meet for the first time and cannot communicate because they do not speak the same language (Figure 5).[47] In this sequence, which will serve as a backdrop to

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[47] They are somehow able to understand each other in their subsequent encounters (presumably thanks to the trillium flower).

understanding how the hyperframe joins our protagonists in the pages under discussion here, two main cues point to Nika as the character-focalizer of the left page: the content of William's speech balloons is illegible and, more importantly, the cosmic qualities of the hyperframe (i.e., the orange specks on the brown background evoking a starlit sky) refer to Nika, who is a space explorer and scientist. Conversely, Nika's unreadable response to William and the leafy hyperframe on the right page signal that William, a jungle explorer, is focalizing the content of the right page. This shift in the hyperframe's visual pattern, in addition to the division caused by the crease between the two opposing pages, underscores the initial distance between Nika and William. However, after eating the trillium flower, the two protagonists begin to connect mentally, so that by Chapter 6, the visual joining of their respective cues of mind or focalization in the hyperframe works alongside the symmetrical layout and their shared actions to reveal their intra-intermental thinking (Figure 4). Here, the coming together of cosmos and leaf details in the hyperframe of both pages indicates that the content is presented through Nika and William's combined perspective. Readers are thus cued to intermental thinking. At the same time, traces of Nika's and William's individual thinking still permeate the hyperframe because although combined, their respective visual markers remain distinct. Consequently, the hyperframe simultaneously communicates Nika's and William's individual and collective filtering of the scenes. It thus joins other visual features of page layout used here and throughout *Trillium* to hint at the protagonists' intra-intermental thinking.

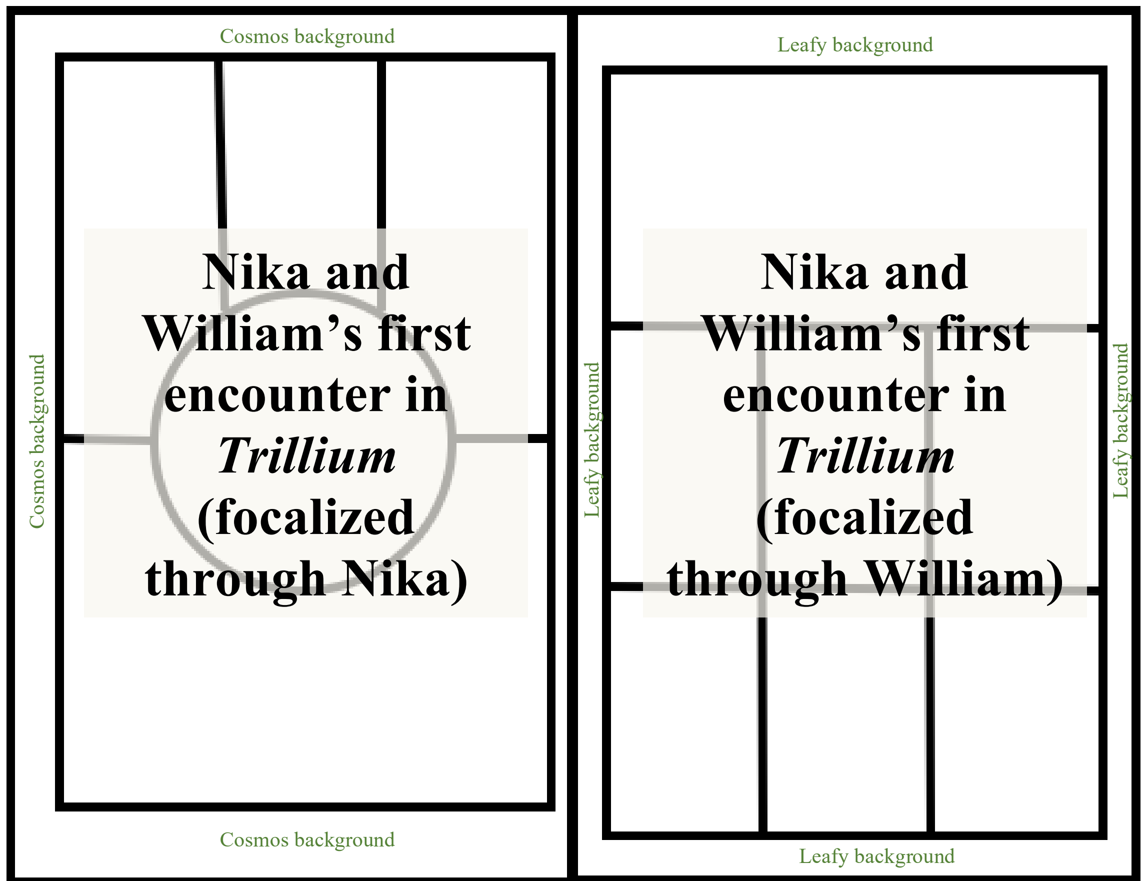

Figure 5. The change of hyperframes indicate that Nika focalizes the left page, and William the right one. Personal modeled after Jeff Lemire, *Trillium* (Vertigo, 2014), ch. 2.

The visual joining techniques of the page layout used to communicate Nika's and William's intra-intermental thinking also encourage readers to writerly engage with the shared mind(s) of the protagonists. Since the narrative does not explain what motivates Nika's and William's collectively-oriented individual actions and their drive to be together, readers must writerly engage with the narrative to understand the characters and their experiences, process storyworld events, and make sense of the plot. Such a writerly reading with the narrative is also necessary for their pleasurable engagement with the narrative as a whole. Readers' information regarding the characters' mind—"the inner

disposition of characters and … their logical reasoning"—influences the way they interpret the narrative and become invested in what Ryan refers to as a "good plot" ("Cheap Plot Tricks" 57). Unless readers can understand the motivations behind the characters' actions and their effect on the text's plot and themes, it is difficult, if not impossible, for the narrative to remain engaging and coherent (Eder at al. 24).[48] As Kafalenos explains, "any information that guides us [readers] to explore causal relations arguably makes a narrative more interesting as well as more meaningful" (*Narrative Causalities* 25). Consequently, readers are inclined to "strive to locate causal relations" whenever possible. Conversely, if readers do not manage to find a causal link between the characters' motivations, their actions, and the narrative's progression, they will "generally soon lose interest" in the plot and the narrative as a whole (Kafalenos, *Narrative Causalities* 24).

Furthermore, if readers failed to perceive and writerly interpret Nika's and William's intra-intermental thinking and their collective motivations at the core of much of the narrative progression, the visual storytelling in *Trillium* presents as gimmicky and its plot riddled with what Ryan calls "cheap plot tricks" and "plot holes" (Ryan, "Cheap Plot Tricks" 57). By contrast, upon identifying the visual joining techniques, readers can writerly engage with the text and make important decisions about what thoughts or motivations Nika and William have in common and that push them to act as they do.[49] Readers may decide that Nika and William are trying to reunite because they are in love,

[48] For more on the integral link between characters, their minds, plot events, and narrative progression, see Phelan.
[49] For more on how readers can 'read' the mind of characters when it is not (always) explicitly conveyed, see the next chapter of this thesis.

because they want to know what connects their spatially and temporally distant experiences together, or because they believe that collective action may yield better results in their fights against the Caul virus, or because of something else entirely. What readers decides motivates the characters' actions establishes a causal relationship that strongly influences readers' narrative expectations and interpretations. For instance, it may lead readers to classify *Trillium* as a time-travel romance (if they believe love links Nika and William) or as an action-adventure science fiction comic book (if they focus on Nika's and William's joint desire to save humanity from the virus). Either way, readers can have a rewarding, satisfying reading experience as long as the characters' intra-intermental thinking and actions are justified, the unusual visual storytelling made narratively relevant, and the plot holes filled.

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Trillium ends on an open-ended note, with a few indeterminate two-page spreads that once more depend on readers' writerly engagement for them to gain in meaning. By the end of the narrative, William and Nika are both in 3797, and they have to sacrifice themselves to save humanity from the Caul virus. Rather than waiting for their certain death in space after their air runs out, they decide to explore a black hole and see "what's on the other side" (ch. 8). Two of the three spreads in this sequence employ visual techniques of doubling and joining similar to those discussed above to show the coming together of William's and Nika's mind and body as they jump in the black hole. However, the last spread in the sequence joins their bodies so seamlessly that the protagonists blend into one body. The visual joining suggests their physical, but also their mental connection: as Nika and William embrace, their bodies and heads (and by

extension their minds) meld together. The visual joining is pushed to such an extreme that it gives way to visual blending where the two protagonists intertwine, transform, and eventually meld into a single bright white star on the left corner of the two-page spread. Examining a similar blending of characters' bodies in Sarah Leavitt's *Tangles: A Story about Alzheimer's, My Mother, and Me*, Silke Horstkotte and Nancy Pedri argue that the bodies of the sick mother and the caring daughter "that meld into one another" function as a visual metaphor, communicating the "blending of [their] viewpoints, minds, and subjectivities" ("The Body at Work" 85). I suggest that the blending of body and mind in *Trillium* similarly represents the protagonists' intermental connection. In Joan Ormrod's words, the "merging of Billy and Nika" creates "a hybrid existence and being" (259) that blends body and mind.[50] But, how does visual blending communicate intermental thinking? The following section of this chapter offers an answer to this question by examining Dash Shaw's *Bodyworld*, which is suffused with visual blending techniques the way *Black Hole* is with visual doubling techniques and *Trillium* with visual joining techniques.

Visually Combined and Overlayed Cues of Mind: Visual Blending in *Bodyworld*

Originally published as a webcomic, Dash Shaw's *Bodyworld* was published in a print edition by Pantheon in 2010.[51] *Bodyworld*'s story is generally told in a linear fashion (except for a few significant flashback scenes that give readers access to the characters' memories) and takes place at the turn of the 2060s, when suicidal and divorced drug-

[50] William's nickname is Billy.
[51] Since *Bodyworld* is not paginated, I situate the quoted passages within their chapter.

addict Professor Paul 'Paulie' Panther moves to Boney Borough to research a strange plant that has started growing in the woods behind the local high school. There, he meets the story's other central characters, namely science teacher Jem Jewel and two of her students, Pearl Peach and Billy-Bob Borg, who are dating. Trying to learn more about the plant and its effect on humans, Paulie decides first to smoke it by himself, and then in Jem's company, with Pearl and, finally, with Billy, to whom he provides a detailed verbal explanation of how the plant works: "Here's what happens: you smoke [the plant] and you start 'reading' the other person's body. Your associations with a place or whatever will become my associations. Or, like, my hand will know what it's like to be your hand. I start adjusting to being inside your body. . . . I can 'send' you stuff too" (Shaw, ch. 8). Characters who smoke together can also read each other's mind. Consequently, characters unwillingly share their secret acts, private thoughts, and memories with the character they are smoking with, at times creating conflicts. Midway into the narrative, Paulie learns that aliens brought the plant to Earth to do away with individual thinking and create a unique human hive mind —what the aliens call a bodymind— that is far easier to manipulate and control than countless individual minds. Shortly after this revelation, Paulie accidentally causes a forest fire that advances the aliens' project: the smoke from the forest fire propagates the plant's effect all over town. Thus, a growing number of the town's inhabitants become part of the bodymind and their private thoughts and feelings are shared indiscriminately with everybody. This turn of events fosters serious conflicts that culminate with crowd riots and Paulie's death by shooting in front of his seedy motel room. *Bodyworld* ends on an ambiguous note: for unclear reasons, following Paulie's death, Jem, Pearl, and Billy begin to look a bit like Paulie, and Paulie's boss, who came to

Boney Borough to retrieve Paulie's body, brings it to New York City that is under the influence of the plant's smoke due to an enormous plant specimen catching fire. After a brief eulogy praising Paulie for being a "weirdo" and a "real 'individual'" (Shaw, ch. 12), the boss cremates Paulie's remains before sending his ashes to space, where they finally disperse.

Although this summary of *Bodyworld* presents the narrative as being relatively straightforward, its telling is unusually complex. Indeed, comics critics praise the book for its creative, or even experimental, use of the medium that encourages readers to "make meanings that do not conform to established narrative patterns" (Worden 69).[52] Even before reading the comics, readers have to hold the book so that the spine's crease is in a horizontal position, thus reading the story from top to bottom rather than from left to right. This unusual reading position indicates that this comic book (and, by extension, its story) is like no other and that reading it will be a different kind of experience. Other paratextual clues further suggest that *Bodyworld* is a narrative puzzle that readers will have to piece together. The front and back endpapers contain flap pages printed on a thicker paper stock than that used in the rest of the comics. The recto of the front flap page depicts and identifies *Bodyworld*'s four main characters, while the verso provides a map of Boney Borough with places of interest clearly marked. The recto of the back flap page depicts and names twelve secondary characters, while another map of Boney Borough on the verso indicates the main streets and provides statistics about the town's population. The content of these flaps hints at and prepares readers to engage with a

[52] See also Brenner, and Wolk ("At the Speed of Thought Balloons").

complex narrative: the character guide specifies that the story contains a wide cast of entangled characters, whereas the maps invite readers to pay attention to the places where the storyworld action unfolds, while also underscoring the narrative importance of the local community. Finally, a tongue-in-cheek note left by Shaw on the copyright page reads, "This book is for 'ideal readers' only!!!" Shaw's shout out to 'ideal' readers—presumably readers attuned to and able to writerly engage with *Bodyworld*'s unconventional visual storytelling practices—warns that without such writerly abilities, characters' state of mind and *Bodyworld*'s storyworld will not and cannot make much sense.

Undoubtedly, of the three comics studied in this chapter, *Bodyworld* most directly addresses intra-intermental thinking, introducing the idea of "superorganism," "group think," "mirror neurons," and "hive mind" (Shaw, ch. 2; 10; 11). That "society is one mind" (Shaw, ch. 9) is thematized throughout *Bodyworld*, as is "the tension between individuality and the 'hive mind'" (Hammond 145) or between what I call intramental and intermental thinking. Ultimately, *Bodyworld* reflects on the risk to community and self of a shared consciousness. It proposes that chaos ensues when minds are unified too perfectly or when extreme intermental thinking blocks all possibility of intramental thinking.

In it, a wide range of visual techniques conveys the intra-intermental thinking of characters. Apart from visual doubling and visual joining techniques akin to the ones in *Black Hole* and *Trillium*, *Bodyworld* also makes use of visual blending techniques that mix or overlap characters' bodies, actions, and overt visual cues of mind to reveal the mental states of characters. In contrast to *Black Hole* and *Trillium*, most of *Bodyworld*'s

narrative derives from characters sharing each other's thoughts and experiences. Consequently, readers are left with no other choice but to perceive and writerly interpret the visual blending as representing the character's intra-intermental thinking if they wish to even begin to understand the narrative events or determine what the characters are feeling or thinking. Indeed, most of the narrative is about how the characters come to understand that smoking the plant triggers intra-intermental thinking. It is also about what characters do with their new knowledge of other characters' thoughts, and how they respond to their private thoughts being shared with other characters. The sharing of memories, thoughts, and feelings is indeed the engine behind the narrative, so that if readers do not or cannot writerly make sense of the intra-intermental thinking and the way it impacts the narrative, *Bodyworld*'s characters, plot, and meaning remain incoherent.

A "blend," as Neil Cohn defines it, is a "depiction [that] requires mapping between mental spaces to be understood;" it is an "inference generating technique" that necessitates readers use their imagination to interpret it ("Being Explicit about the Implicit" 90). In other words, blends function like metaphors. Through the readers' processes of interpretation, they produce "new meanings that exceed those that would naturally arise from the combination of input spaces" or "traditional source and target domains" that, once blended, allow for "interpretations that are genuinely insightful" (Fludernik, "Blending in Cartoons" 161).[53] As Fludernik specifies, "A typical example given for the usefulness of a blending analysis is the phrase *My surgeon is a butcher*, where the added implication of incompetence is generated from the confrontation of the

[53] For more on blending theory in relation to narratives, see Schneider and Hartner. For more on blending in comics, see also Forceville.

two input domains" (Fludernik, "Blending in Cartoons" 161; emphasis in original). Whereas Fludernik's research uncovers some verbal and visual blending techniques comics can use to generate humour through the discrepancies that arise from the blending of two different "input spaces," her work can also help explain how the extensive use of visual blending techniques (detailed below) in *Bodyworld* communicate at once the individual thinking of characters (as two separate input places) and, through their blending, their intermental thinking.[54] In *Bodyworld*, the blend represents the intra-intermental thinking of characters because the two (or more) input spaces remain visible at the same time as the intramental thinking of characters is visually addressed.

To begin, the visual blending of characters' distinctive bodily features (facial, in particular) frequent in *Bodyworld* builds upon the same interpretive principles as the doubling or joining of characters' bodies in *Black Hole* and *Trillium*. Like doubling in those two comics, visual blending in *Bodyworld* combines the minds of characters and by way of metaphor reveals their intra-intermental thinking, such as when Paulie's face blends with Pearl's double-sided bun hairstyle (Figure 6a) or when Pearl's face merges with Paulie's receding hairline (Figure 6b). The blends metaphorical revelation is even more evident when the blending is being done or undone, such as when the features of both characters are simultaneously present on the face of a single character (Figure 6c). In all instances, however, readers may experience difficulty determining which of the two blended characters the blended representation is depicting, and must thus draw from details in the setting—the red floor (Figure 6a) or the bedsheet (Figure 6b)—to

[54] For examples of blending theory in relation to the representation of intermental thinking in literary fiction, see Copland; and Semino.

distinguish between the characters whose features are blended. On the one hand, the blended image cues readers to a character's personal mind, marking intramental thinking through the representation of distinct features that readers can identify and trace back to their original character. On the other hand, the commingling of features belonging to different characters to create some kind of blended character presents readers with *one* body and mind—a visual communion that metaphorically conveys intramental thinking by intertwining the individual embodied cues of mind of more than one character. Hence, the composite image created by the blending communicates the characters' intra-intermental thinking.

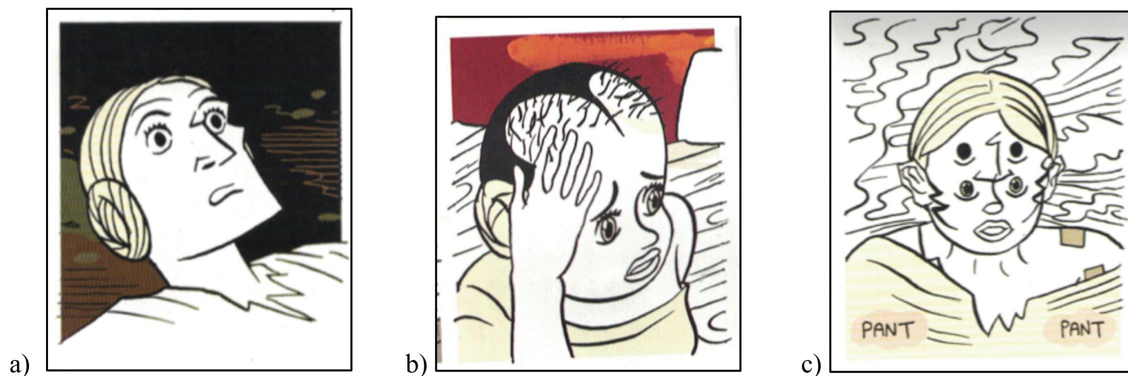

Figure 6. The blending of characters' features reveals their mental connection. Dash Shaw, *Bodyworld* (Pantheon, 2010), ch. 4; ch. 7. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

The stacking of the silhouettes of individual characters is a blending technique that explicitly addresses intra-intermental thinking (Figure 7). When Pearl exclaims, "Yeah. I need a cigarette" (Shaw, ch. 7), a yellow silhouette labelled "Pearl" and a smaller grey silhouette labelled "Paul" feature stacked inside her actual head, all three 'faces' facing in the same direction.[55] The yellow silhouette within Pearl's head

[55] In addition to the visual stacking I am describing, Pearl and Paul's features are also blended in this panel since Pearl is pictured with Paul's eyes.

metaphorically symbolizes her mind (as it shows her face), while Paul's grey silhouette within the yellow silhouette held within Pearl's head suggests that he is visually on her mind and also that his mind is on her mind too. Whereas the two silhouettes illustrate Paulie's and Pearl's individual, intramental thinking, their stacking within the confine of Pearl's actual head visually links their individual minds to establish their intermental thinking. Collective thinking, in this example of visual blending, manifests in the form of a shared desire to smoke that leads to a shared action. Paulie's mind is in Pearl's mind, influencing her willingness to smoke and prompting her to ask for a cigarette. Here, Pearl craves a cigarette just like Paulie, who is a heavy smoker, would crave one. Bodies and minds blend, but so too do actions, since Pearl says and does what Paulie would typically say and do.

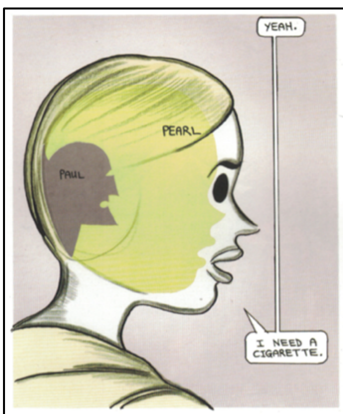

Figure 7. The overlapping of silhouettes within the confine of Pearl's head indicates that Paul's mind is influencing her, thus establishing their intermental thinking. Dash Shaw, *Bodyworld* (Pantheon, 2010), ch. 7. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

Narratologists posit that the consistency of character traits and behaviour "as it persists over part or whole of the story" is central to the identification and characterization of characters (Chatman, *Story and Discourse* 125). In addition, patterns in a character's actions and ways of being in the storyworld enable readers to build "a

coherent constellation of mental attributes" (Margolin, "Characterization in Narrative" 4) that they associate with a specific character and rely on to distinguish that character from the other characters.[56] The repeated and predictable patterns of behaviour permit readers to establish who characters are and how they think.[57] So, while characters may change across times, readers nonetheless expect "a greater measure of coherence within the character than we expect of actual people" (Price 373). In *Bodyworld*, blending highlights the unpredictable behaviour of a character, and exposes that character's out-of-character thinking and action as corresponding to the predictable behaviour of another character.

As explained above, Pearl acts like Paulie because Paulie's mind directly influences her to do so, or because her mind is now also partly Paulie's. Their blending of thoughts leads into a blending of action, which results in Pearl's 'performing' of Paulie's thought (i.e., smoking) that is now also her thought ("I need a cigarette"). The intermental thinking of characters takes the form of transference of a thought-leading action from the mind of one character to that of another (and vice-versa if both characters come together and experience each other's thoughts and feelings). At the same time, the intramental thinking remains perceptible in the actions performed by the character acting out-of-character, or, rather, acting as another character would, which suggests that the mind of the character acting out-of-character is under the influence of the mind of another character.

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[56] The following chapter explains the process of characterization (in comics, in particular) in more detail.

[57] As Omri Moses argues in *Out of Character*, some modernist literary texts offer a more flexible or "vitalist-inspired conception of character" (4) that puts pressure on the coherence and predictability of fictional characters.

For instance, although Paulie is introduced early in the narrative as a heavy smoker, when he smokes the plant for the first time with Jem, a panel showing him flicking away the cigarette includes an annotation, "doesn't smoke" (Shaw, ch. 3) with an arrow pointing to him (Figure 8a). In the panel, Paulie acts completely out of character. However, readers know that it is in Jem's character to discard a cigarette because she dislikes smoking and, considering the numerous visual doublings in this sequence linking Paulie and Jem, readers can hypothesize that due to the plant's effect, Jem's mind occupies Paulie's body, and that he is acting in line with her character. The mental linking process between the two characters that leads one to act like the other is further established over the course of three panels when Paulie and Pearl smoke together and Paulie, who had previously taught Pearl how to smoke, suddenly forgets how to use the cigarette stick, while Pearl acts out the contents of his thought balloon by considering how she holds her own cigarette, which leads her to reposition it in the next panel—a red dotted line draws attention to her questioning (Figure 8b). The sequence suggests that Paulie's out-of-character questioning of his smoking method is prompted by Pearl's thinking whether she is properly holding her cigarette. At the same time, Paulie's smoking expertise may trigger Pearl's action to change how she holds her cigarette. Furthermore, at this point in the narrative, Paulie's out-of-character behaviour cannot be explained with certainty because neither he nor readers know the effect of the plant. Consequently, readers are encouraged to writerly reflect on the characters' odd behaviour, making sense of the visual blending only once they become cognisant of the plant's influence through deduction, or as they read Paulie's explanation in Chapter 8. Only then

will readers be able to determine with certainty that blended actions convey the intra-intermental thinking of characters who smoke together.

Figure 8. The blended actions of characters acting out-of-character as another character points to an intermental connection. Dash Shaw, *Bodyworld* (Pantheon, 2010), ch. 3 and ch. 4. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

Although blended bodily features and actions abound in *Bodyworld*, the blending of characters' thoughts in the form of blended cues of focalization is the visually richest and most extensively used blending technique. It presents readers with intricate, highly experimental, and multilayered panels whose visuals evoke the photographic (and later on, cinematographic) technique of multiple exposure or superimposition, a visual layering that layers the disparate actions and thoughts of characters in one image. The first time

Paulie smokes with Jem and starts experiencing her thoughts, two distinctive visual styles are present that help readers engage with the blending superimposition technique (Figure 9). In this central panel, the concrete diegetic world is rendered in the style used throughout the comics: Paulie in the far left of the panel looks toward Jem who is sitting on a smoking motel bed, which Paulie almost accidently set on fire a few pages earlier. A partially transparent colour-pencil sketch portrait of an unknown blond man and silhouettes of a man and a woman standing by the door are superimposed onto the image of Paulie looking at Jem, who looks not at Paulie, but in the direction of the motel room door. Here, a change in style marks the overlayed images as originating in Paulie's and Jem's individual minds and not as pertaining to the concrete diegetic reality. Although some readers may think that these three characters are ghosts existing in the same ontological level, readers of *Bodyworld* are likely to conclude that the introduction of different drawing styles marks focalization and thus the images provide access to the intramental thoughts of Paulie and Jem. As many film scholars have noted, superimposition "has often been used to show the invisible, for instance, the intimate thoughts of individuals, or their dreams" (Meusy 2; my translation).[58] In *Bodyworld*, superimposition presents a visual blending that encourages such a metaphorical reading.

[58] For a similar point, see also Pocry, and Rebecchi (101).

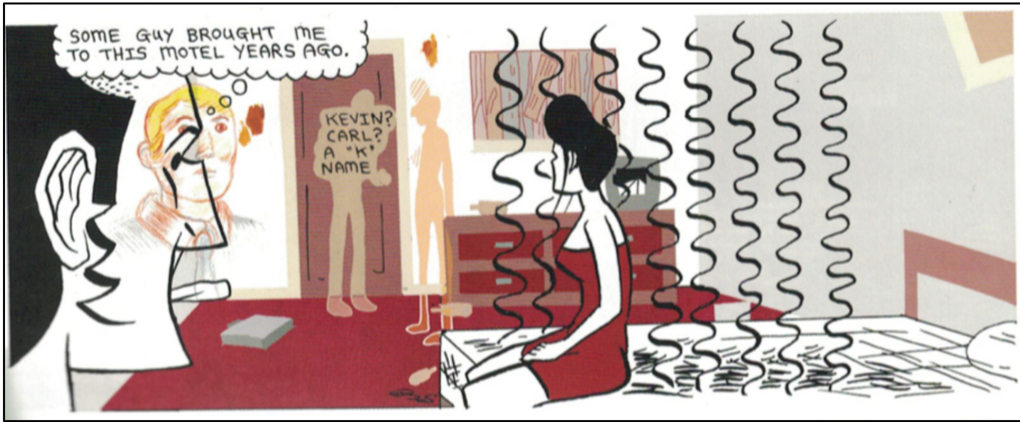

Figure 9. The superimposed images reveal Paulie and Jem's intermental thinking as he receives her thoughts. Dash Shaw, *Bodyworld* (Pantheon, 2010), ch. 3. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

Intermental thinking is also cued in this central panel, where the interaction of the individual visual components of the superimposition draws forth strong connections between characters.[59] As film scholar Jacques Aumont explains, "the first action of the mixing of images [through superimposition] . . . is to evoke something other than a binary logic in the meaning-making of the images. We cannot understand the mixing of two images by the simple thought of '1 + 1'; the eye refuses to do it, and the mixed images do not add up nor do they subtract from each other, but they interact, and form a new complex entity" (12; my translation). Superimposition introduces an inherent tension between the individual components conjoined in the superimposition and the resulting image or what Aumont refers to as the whole. It is precisely this interplay of different parts and whole that allows readers to writerly reconstruct the intra-intermental thinking of characters in *Bodyworld*'s superimposed panels.

[59] See Mikkonen, who examines how "the overlapping of panels [is used] to point out connections" between the panels' details (*The Narratology of Comic Art* 45).

More specifically, the placement of the overlayed visual components and the verbal content in this central panel suggests that the visual details focalized through Paulie and Jem are, in actuality, Jem's personal lingering memories (or intramental thoughts) that Paulie is also perceiving (as a form of intermental thinking). The image of the blond man is in Paulie's line of vision and also overlaps with his forehead to suggest that the blond man is the visual representation of Paulie's intramental thinking. That Paulie is thinking of the man is further confirmed by Paulie's thought balloon that reveals what he is thinking: "some guy brought me to this motel years ago" (Shaw, ch. 3). The silhouettes of the man and the woman in front of the door are also focalized through Paulie, as indicated by an annotation placed on the superimposed male silhouette that reads, "Kevin? Carl? A 'K' name," thus continuing Paulie's thought process (Shaw, ch. 3). The verbal narrative's continuity between the thoughts that are directly attributed to Paulie via a thought balloon and the unattributed annotation suggests that the silhouettes are also on Paulie's mind, and that the blond man and the male silhouette are the same person that Paulie is remembering. Yet, these visuals, which appear to be focalized through Paulie, are in Jem's intramental thoughts that Paulie is privy to through intermental thinking. Some significant clues within the superimposed image support this reading. Paulie is looking at Jem, but their respective lines of sight are also crisscrossing to suggest that Paulie is looking in Jem's direction because he is trying to read her mind to explain why she is suddenly looking away. Jem's sudden silence and passive stance in the panel, coupled with the fact that the silhouettes are also in her line of sight, suggest that she is lost in her thoughts, possibly reminiscing so that the overlayed silhouettes depict her intramental thinking. Indeed, that the silhouetted woman resembles Jem in

body shape and distinctive hairstyle further implies that she is remembering accompanying the man to the motel years ago. It follows that readers can writerly conclude that coming to the motel with Paulie triggered Jem's memories of, and questioning about, being there before with another man, a hypothesis that is confirmed in retrospect once the effects of the plants are fully known. As is often the case throughout *Bodyworld*, superimposition blends cues of focalization to convey the characters' intra-intermental thinking.

Even though details in the images that blend bodies, actions, and thoughts encourage readers to interpret them as the simultaneous representation of characters' individual and collective thinking, some degree of visually-based indeterminacy remains. The images are so visually complex that the source of focalization is not always discernable, creating indeterminacy as to who sends and who receives the thoughts and as to what thoughts are shared by whom. Interpretation is rendered even more difficult as the number of consciousnesses readers have to separate out multiply. For instance, when the same hotel room panel is reproduced, the combination of visual doubling and different forms of visual blending adds complexity to the original blended panel (Figure 10). The scene's context of Paulie and Billy smoking together and the panel composition where Billy covers part of Paulie's face and has Jem in his line of sight encourage readers to deduce that Billy not only shares Paulie's memories, but he also perceives Jem's thoughts through Paulie's in what could be called a 'triple cognitive narrative.' In *Social Minds*, Palmer introduces "double cognitive narrative" to designate "the presence of one person's mind within the mind of other characters," a narrative instance which presents intermental thinking in the form of a character thinking about what another character may be thinking

about, for instance (12). Following Palmer, the panel from *Bodyworld* is an instance of triple cognitive narrative: the presence of one person's mind within the mind of another character whose mind is within the mind of yet another character. The elaborate form of intermental thinking that arises necessitates readers' writerly engagement for them to even perceive the extended intermental thinking present in this panel, but also for them to identify the focalization sources, determine which thoughts are experienced first- or secondhandedly, and establish their spatio-temporal parameters within *Bodyworld*'s storyworld. Because the intra-intermental thinking of characters in *Bodyworld* carries significant and even essential narrative information, it is crucial that readers engage in such a writerly process.

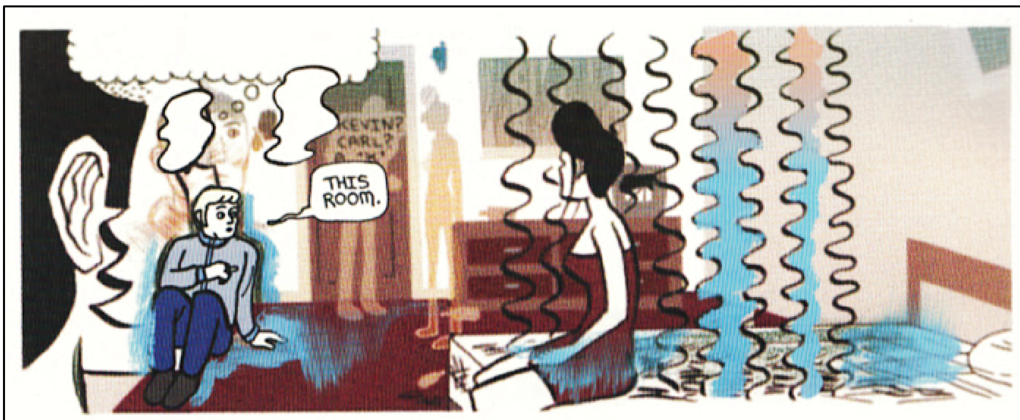

Figure 10. Billy experiences Jem's thoughts as they were filtered through Paulie. Dash Shaw, *Bodyworld* (Pantheon, 2010), ch. 8. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

Most often than not, the blending of thoughts extends over a sequence of panels, accumulatively granting readers insight into the motivations, fears, and desires of characters who transfer thoughts amongst each other. In this way, the narrative strengthens reader engagement with the minds of characters and, by extension, the narrative as a whole. This is particularly apparent when readers are invited to engage with

the minds of characters who receive thoughts that have an impact on their actions in the concrete diegetic world. In *Bodyworld*, the uncontrollable blending of thoughts also provokes interpersonal conflicts whose outcomes determine the plot events. For instance, through intermental thinking, Billy learns that his girlfriend Pearl has cheated on him with Paulie and, greatly offended, decides to collaborate with law enforcement officers to banish Paulie from Boney Borough for his improper conduct and drug addiction, a decision that sets off other actions that lead to Paulie's death. Billy's actions would appear to be erratic and unjustified if the mental link between Billy and Paulie is lost on readers.

The more characters Paulie smokes with, the more complex and elaborate the intramental thinking becomes; smoking together creates situations where characters begin to share the thoughts of other characters amongst each other, as in the instance of triple cognitive narrative discussed above. An extreme degree of the intricate multi-layered levels of intermental thinking presents itself when Paulie accidently burns a field of alien plants and the fire's smoke causes all inhabitants to experience and widely share each other's thinking. Paint is overlayed to drawn panels (Figure 11) or used for characters' silhouettes (Figure 12) to present readers with abstract painterly images that address an intensified form of blending that communicates the extensive, multilayered intermental thinking that is spreading. The paint's messiness and opaqueness suggest that, as Daniel Worden argues more generally about *Bodyworld*'s visual techniques, "characters can no longer see because they see and feel everyone" (65).

When pushed to an extreme, intermental thinking in *Bodyworld* ultimately leads to a kind of unique holistic thinking: if everybody knows everything there is in everybody

else's mind, there is no longer room for characters to experience truly independent, individual thinking. Readers learn through a strange character named Johnny who sowed the plant's seeds that this extreme multi-mind intermental thinking is the aliens' ultimate goal.[60] As Johnny explains, the "alien race is interested in human society and psychology," and has thus given him the task to "document the effect of [the] plant" not "on a mind of one, but on a culture" because "a society is one mind" (Shaw, ch. 9). As the smoke spreads, Johnny mentally communicates with the aliens, who conclude (in a painterly sequence) that the townspeople's "individualism is decreasing," adding that "when they're all of one bodymind, they'll be much easier to control" (Shaw, ch. 10). The increased use of paint as the smoke spreads and triggers a single, unified form of thinking (even one made of intermental thoughts) suggests that the alien's agenda is progressing well.

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[60] Instead of being drawn in a cartoony style as all the other characters in the comics, the aliens are painted in a relatively abstract manner (i.e., body shapes can still be loosely discerned).

Figure 11. The layer of paint suggests that the intermental effects of the alien plant are spreading all over town (as the central map shows). Dash Shaw, *Bodyworld* (Pantheon, 2010), ch. 9. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

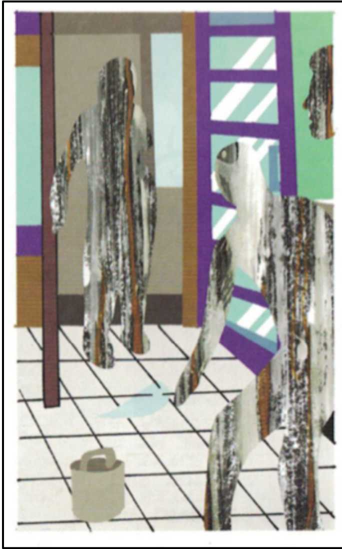


Figure 12. The abstract painterly silhouettes suggest that the people are all mentally connected and can no longer discern the individual sources of their various thoughts. Dash Shaw, *Bodyworld* (Pantheon, 2010), ch. 10. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

Readers' writerly activity does not stop at piecing together the aliens and Johnny's scheme and the success of their mission as communicated through the increased use of paint and other visual blending techniques that introduce further indeterminacy in the final two chapters of *Bodyworld*. When invited to reflect on who killed Paulie and what his death signifies for the narrative, readers are presented with images of gunmen that are nothing more than indistinguishable painterly silhouettes, which may very well be the point (Figure 13). The use of paint in the shooting scene suggests that the intermental collective of people formed by the Emergency Response Team and Boney Borough's inhabitants shot Paulie dead out of frustration. The notion of a single-minded collective killing is further supported by the superimposition of and the layering of paint over the faces of characters who are part of the crowd outside the Paulie's motel, including Billy, whose index finger moves as if he was pulling a trigger (Figure 14).

Figure 13. The use of paint to depict the gunmen and the rest of the crowd suggests that Paulie was killed because of too much intermental thinking. Dash Shaw, *Bodyworld* (Pantheon, 2010), ch. 11. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

Figure 14. The overabundance of intermental thinking in this page makes it difficult to pinpoint with certainty who ordered Paulie's killing. Dash Shaw, *Bodyworld* (Pantheon, 2010), ch. 11. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

Figure 15. Immediately after killing Paulie, the gunmen inexplicably die too. Dash Shaw, *Bodyworld* (Pantheon, 2010), ch. 11. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

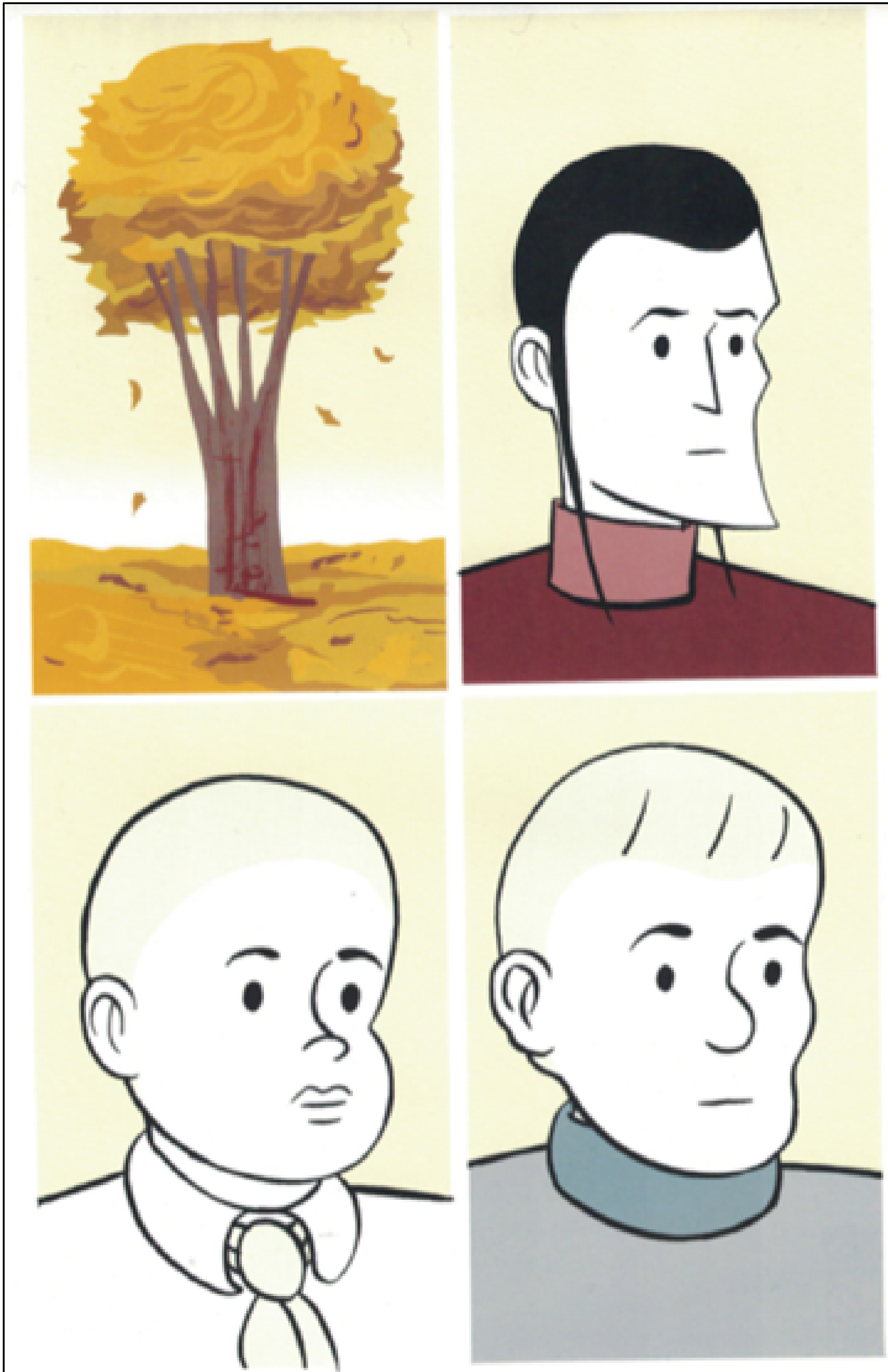


Figure 16. After Paulie's death, traces of his mental influence on Jem, Pearl, and Billy remain visible though visual blending. Dash Shaw, *Bodyworld* (Pantheon, 2010), ch. 12. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

Yet, doubt about who ordered Paulie's shooting abounds in this nine-panel page. Through the intricate blending of minds, readers are asked to contemplate if Paulie, who is suicidal, 'manipulated' intermental thinking in order to take his own life. In the middle pink panel in the final row, Pearl orders the shot to be fired as she experiences intermental thinking with Paulie, as implied by multiple techniques of visual blending: Pearl has Paulie's eyes, his profile overlaps with the back of her head, and the speech balloon that orders "fire" (Shaw, ch. 11) has two tails, one pointing to Pearl, and the other to Paulie's silhouette inside her head. The following panel replicates the pink panel, but with significant changes. In the final panel, the speech balloon has only one tail pointing to Pearl and several superimposed images and layers of paint, which communicate the blending of even more consciousnesses, is added to it. These changes make it impossible to pinpoint with certainty whether a single character (Paulie himself, or someone else) or a collective wanted Paulie dead.

The aftermath of Paulie's death raise further questions for readers to writerly engage with. After Paulie's killing, the gunmen drop dead too, but it is not clear why this is the case (Figure 15). Is it because they were sharing their minds and bodies with Paulie, hence by killing him, they essentially killed themselves, as the use of paint suggests? If this is the case, how does the shooters' act of 'self-sacrifice' relate to the aliens' mind-control project? Do the aliens wish to eradicate humanity by prompting people to kill one another through the plant's effect of connecting minds? The readers' questioning does not stop here. At the beginning of the next chapter, readers are presented with individual portraits of Jem, Pearl, and Billy; each character is portrayed having Paulie's eyes and each has

lost their distinctive hairstyle to resemble Paulie even more (Figure 16). Given the context, one way to interpret these visual changes could be that although Paulie is dead, his mind is still alive in those he left behind. But, why would it be so? And, what lasting effect did Paulie have on Jem, Pearl, and Billy's minds? Only readers can tell.

Conclusion

Based upon the premise that a character's mind is central for reader engagement with the narrative, this chapter has examined an understudied aspect of the representation of the minds of character in comics, namely, the representation of collective thinking. Examples from *Black Hole*, *Trillium*, and *Bodyworld* have allowed me to uncover and examine several techniques of visual doubling, visual joining, and visual blending used at once to represent not only intermental thinking, but also, intramental thinking, or what I have been calling intra-intermental thinking. Providing an indirect or puzzling access to the minds of characters, visual doubling, visual joining, and visual blending put into play a visually-motivated process that leads readers to writerly engage with the narrative and the characters' personal and collective thoughts. Such engagement is necessary for readers to access important narrative information, which enables them to make sense of the characters' psyche, and to reach a plausible understanding of the narrative's plot and themes. In this sense, the image, and not a visual gap, draws readers into the narrative storyworld and the minds of its characters.

Moreover, this chapter has argued that the visual nature of comics makes the medium well-suited to represent intra-intermental thinking. For comics scholars, this chapter has uncovered some of the techniques used in comics to represent intra-

intermental thinking and offered a preliminary taxonomy to distinguish between them. Doing so has led to the proposal of some possible pathways—the visual doubling / joining / blending of cues of minds through the characters' bodies / actions / thoughts—to further consider the representation of intramental and intermental thinking. Future research may continue to challenge some of the criticism received by literary renditions of intermental thinking as overthrowing intramental thinking. It may also bring to light variations of the techniques discussed in this chapter, or may unearth new techniques, thus adding to the taxonomy and understanding of intra-intermental thinking in comics.

The next chapter continues the investigation into the minds of comics characters, but this time I ask: What happens when a character's mind is (seemingly) nowhere to be found?

Chapter Two

It Is All in the Indeterminate (Spatial) Details: The Writerly Characterization of Characters with Unreadable Minds

The previous chapter affirmed that fictional minds are central to drawing readers into the narrative and keeping them immersed in what they are reading. It made a case for how indeterminate cues of mind influence the disposition of readers toward characters and narrators while also informing the text's thematic focus, the plot's progression, and even the narrative meaning as a whole. In this chapter, I continue to investigate characters and the representation of their minds to ask what happens to reader engagement and narrative coherence if cues of mind are (seemingly) absent from the narrative. Can comics readers identify characters and attribute psychological properties to them if common verbal or visual cues of mind do not overtly convey the thoughts and feelings of characters? And, if readers can engage in processes of character identification and attribution, how is that possible when faced with the apparent absence of cues of mind?

The consensus among narratologists is that characters must have a mind to be distinguished *as* characters by readers. Consequently, withholding crucial information about the mind of characters may thwart their identification by readers. Characters are "recognizable fictional being[s], to which the ability to think and act is ascribed. . . . In contrast to objects, characters have mental states, such as perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and aims. Accordingly, characters have both an outer appearance and an inner state of the psyche" (Eder et al. 13). The primary role of mind for character identification leads some theorists to posit an intrinsic link between mind and action, otherwise "a fictional entity

which lacks the power of actual or potential action dissolves into an aspect of setting" (M. Smith 235). Therefore, unless potential comics characters are given a mind that manifests itself through their speech, thoughts, actions, or ways of being, they are nothing more than figures akin to storyworld objects: inanimate background elements that are part of the setting.

The process described above whereby readers connect "information with a figure in a text so as to provide a character in the fictional world with a certain property, or properties, concerning body, mind, behaviour, or relations to the (social) environment" (Eder et al. 31) is known as characterization. Characterization is central to narrative because it leads to "the creation of person-like qualities and the understanding [by readers] of the personality traits of fictional characters" (Mikkonen, *The Narratology of Comics Art* 177). Characterization depends on "what information, especially of psychological nature, a recipient is able to associate with any character" (Eder et al. 34). Readers identify characters and attribute a mind to them through a dynamic process based on, and derivative of, the interaction between the text's internal properties and the external input of readers. At times, readers can easily determine character properties (particularly internal ones such as personality traits) by taking in what the text explicitly states (e.g., Mary was rebellious). Most often, though, readers have to decipher verbal and/or visual cues that hint at these properties (e.g., Mary rolled her eyes) or infer a state of mind not from the characters' behaviour, but from descriptions of the characters' personal surrounding (e.g., Mary's locker at school was covered in stickers promoting obscure metal bands) or of the weather (e.g., Just as Mary slammed the door in exasperation, the thunder growled outside) (Eder et al. 33-34). As the text releases

information about characters, readers rely on their knowledge of characters in literature and of the world in general to make sense of, expand upon, and make the information cohere. In engaging in characterization, readers serve a critical and active role in the making of characters by creating and revising dynamic mental models of characters. Ultimately, readers decide what, from the text, they will consider to be a property of characters.

Despite the centrality of characterization for narrative and for reader investment, and despite the consensus that characters are "one of the cornerstones of graphic storytelling" (Baetens, "Comics and Characterization" 84), scholars have just begun to address the specificities of "the vast topic of characterisation in comics" (Mikkonen, *The Narratology of Comic Art* 9). Considering what is essential for comics readers to identify and separate background figures (with no mind or mind in potential) from actual characters (with thoughts and feelings), Kai Mikkonen remarks, "not much is required of a thing to become a character in comics. Just an abstract shape is sufficient, provided that it behaves to some extent like a person, can speak or think, or engages in goal-oriented action" (*The Narratology of Comic Art* 183). Frederick Luis Aldamá also contends that although comics characters do not have to look human for readers to identify them as characters, they still need to have some kind of mind. Across mind, characters manifest motivations, taking on "humanlike qualities—agency, intentionality, sense of causality, and movement" that reveal "self-initiated actions" (Aldamá 319). But, how do readers engage in a process of characterization when comics do not use standardized cues of minds, thereby rendering the mind not as readily accessible or decipherable through the use of conventional, readerly means? Whereas the findings in the previous chapter concur

with Mikkonen and Aldamá that mind is central in determining and characterizing characters, this chapter introduces a new area of inquiry by asking how readers characterize characters who do not explicitly appear to embody and express humanlike qualities.

The three comics I examine in this chapter present very few or any standard and explicit expressions of character consciousness. In them, characters do not ‘speak’ their mind in speech or thought balloons; narrative captions do not reveal the thoughts and feelings of characters; and there are no focalization strategies put in place to convey their state of mind. Lastly, although given significant visual predominance, the appearances of characters reveal little about who they are, what they think, and how they feel. In Cyril Pedrosa’s *Equinoxes*, the face of one of the main characters is always hidden and her body language is not expressive of her mental state. In Rafael Coutinho’s “Terror,” the characters are differently coloured dots, and in Josh Simmons’s *House*, the house is seemingly presented as the narrative setting, until readers closely engage with the text and eventually perceive it as a character with a mind of its own. Despite the absence of explicit cues of consciousness, in these and similar cases where mind is not explicitly rendered, readers nonetheless identify these representations as characters and engage in the process of characterization.

Holding as a principle the fact that “there is no engagement with a work of art,” verbal or visual, “that is mind-free” (Zunshine, *Getting inside Your Head* 153), cognitive narratologists have also examined characters with “unreadable minds” (Abbott, *Real Mysteries* 123-139). For instance, H. Porter Abbott exposes reading strategies readers adopt in response to impossible mind-reading, proposing that when faced with the

unreadable minds of characters in literary texts, readers have three options: to read them as stereotypes of "crazy," pathological protagonists (*Real Mysteries* 125); to read them as foil characters—or "catalyst"—that bring out the personality of other characters (*Real Mysteries* 128); or, finally, to read them as allegories—symbols that "stand for" a concept or an idea— (*Real Mysteries* 129). In this chapter, I take my cue from these theorists to emphasize that in comics, the minds of characters can be visually conveyed—albeit indeterminately, and subtly—without the use of common or standardized cues of mind. However, in these instances, readers are asked to adopt writerly reading strategies to piece together possible visual clues that hint at the thoughts and feelings of characters. Characters with unreadable minds are thus not truly unreadable.

My stance thus misaligns with that of Lisa Zunshine, who does not consider the possibility that unreadable minds in visual media may invite the scrutiny of viewers. Instead, she argues that in trying to make sense of a painting that "actively prevents [readers] from attributing mental states to its subjects" (such as a Victorian "problem picture" or a surrealist painting that, like Pablo Picasso's Y*oung Tormented Girl* or Max Ernst's *Woman, Old Man, and Flower*, denies any body-language reading), readers adopt to main strategies. They either turn their theory of mind to the artist by trying to read the artist's intentions and influences in the painting and its paratext, or they transfer their "mind-reading impulse onto [themselves]," focusing on "the wishes, attitudes, and intention that the painting prompted in [them]" (Zunshine, *Getting inside Your Head* 149-150; 173).[61] For her, unreadable minds do not allow readers to mind-read characters in the

[61] See also Reicher (122).

(visual) text; rather, they displace the mind-reading process of readers outside of the world of the painting (or the story). Consequently, unreadable minds can and often do function as a (self-)reflexive strategy that pushes readers out of the narrative, thus stunting their engagement with the story. In her theorization of reader engagement, Zunshine does not entertain the possibility that in some cases (such as the ones I study in this chapter), characters' minds may be implied through visuals that direct the process of characterization from within the text and thus keep readers immersed in the storyworld. Unreadable minds, as this chapter demonstrates, can foster reader engagement by inviting close examination of subtle textual cues of mind that readers writerly interpret and assign to characters, ultimately providing characters with mental attributes. It argues that since readers must infer subtle mind cues to identify and characterize comics characters with unreadable minds, these cues are prone to differences in interpretation. They are indeterminate as is the characterization they writerly enable.

In comics, subtle mind cues are often inscribed across the representation of space, such as the setting, the décor, or the background, as well as the spatial or formal arrangement of the comics page and its storyworld. Although literary narratologists tend to consider setting to be part of the description and not the narration proper, in visual media such as comics, the setting is always visibly marked, even if that setting is minimally depicted or empty of details. The continued presence of the setting on the page alongside the narrative makes it evident that, as comics scholar Pascal Robert declares, in comics the setting "is in no way a decorum, but a mechanism in the story, and a story mechanism itself" (117; my translation). Spatial configurations of setting and layout are thus worthy of narratological consideration and, as this chapter shows, paying attention to

them is key to unlocking characterization. Thus, although Robert only proposes that characters and décor, "the two great unthoughts of comics theories . . . may be linked" (240; my translation), I affirm that the two are indeed intrinsically connected through their co-dependence in the process of characterization in comics.

As early as 1993, McCloud remarked that in comics, "backgrounds can be [a] valuable tool for indicating invisible ideas . . . Particularly the worlds of emotions," noting that "a distorted or expressionistic background will usually affect our 'reading' of character's inner state" (132). To prove that the background of comics panels can convey the inner life of characters, McCloud draws attention to expressionist painters Edvard Munch and Vincent Van Gogh, who used line patterns and colour to paint emotionally charged backgrounds suggestive of states of mind. Similarly to the metaphorical reading in literary narratives of setting details (such as the weather), these types of expressive techniques are indicative of the characters' states of mind.

However, unlike the examples McCloud uses to support his claim, a panel's background does not necessarily have to be stylized for it to cue readers to the mind of characters. In their 1949 *Theory of Literature*, René Wellek and Austin Warren already acknowledged that "setting in environment; and environments, especially domestic interiors, may be viewed as metonymic, or metaphoric, expressions of character. A man's house is an extension of himself. Describe it and you have described him" (221). More recently, James Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz have also proposed that readers characterize characters according to how they fit in a specific setting, or in light of the (lack of) abilities the characters demonstrate when they occupy and interact with(in) a particular place. They argue that "settings begin to merge with character—among other things—

because ‘environment’ and psychology begin to intertwine, both causally and symbolically” (85). Indeed, characters’ personal spaces can and often do convey changes in the characters’ psychological state, and setting responds to or highlights the specific and changing features, traits, thoughts, and feelings of characters. At times, setting—or space, more generally—is what permits characterization to happen at all.

Space in comics, or what Benjamin Fraser refers to as “comics topographies,” concerns “both content/depiction and . . . form/page layout” (*The Art of Pere Joan* 26). Fraser’s distinction between two types of spaces in comics corresponds to what narratologist Marie-Laure Ryan designates as the “space signified by the text,” that is, “the geographical, or topographic organization of the textual world” or its setting (as visual content) and “the space physically occupied by the text,” including “the codex format and the graphic design of the pages” or its layout (as visual form) (“Narrative Cartography” 336). Both types of space can grant readers some insight into the minds of characters. While most comics scholars focus on one aspect of space (as form or as content), often both space-as-form and space-as-content work together in comics to help readers identify and characterize characters. It is particularly so in comics that have (seemingly) unreadable characters.

Looking into the significance of space in comics for characterization, this chapter demonstrates that spatial configurations prompt readers to identify characters in need of characterization. As I show, the tension between the spatially-accentuated visual presence of unreadable characters and the absence of overt cues of mind raise uncertainty in the minds of readers about who these characters with unreadable minds are. This uncertainty, in turn, prompts readers to carefully consider space in the search for subtle visual cues of

mind from which readers can writerly, and thus indeterminately, infer the characters' minds and engage in the process of characterization.

The first section of this chapter examines Cyril Pedrosa's *Equinoxes* (2016) and, in particular, its unreadable main character, Camille, whose body language is minimal throughout the comics and whose face is hidden from view until its last panel. Recognizing that the absence of common cues of mind significantly complicates her characterization and thus puts pressure on the narrative's coherence, I trace how various spatial techniques, including the amount of space Camille's storyline occupies in the comics as a whole and in central panel compositions, render Camille particularly noticeable, thus facilitating her identification as one of the storyworld's main characters. The formal structure of the comics as a multi-protagonist narrative in which different characters' states of mind resonate with each other and her spatial presentation make it possible for readers, who are faced with an indeterminate tension between what is and what is not represented, to writerly achieve a sense of who Camille is. Moreover, while the places Camille visits enable readers to infer what transpires in her mind, they also enable them to mentally project themselves into that space and imagine what she may be thinking or feeling. These spaces (present both in the comics sections and the written passages that punctuate the narrative) also prompt readers to realize that Camille narrates the unattributed first-person literary interior monologues. In thus providing readers with access to Camille's thoughts and feelings, these monologues facilitate, but also complexify her characterization in such a way it affects the narrative's theme.

Having established that spatial cues can evoke—albeit indeterminately—the mind of unreadable characters who inhabit a space, I demonstrate that space informs the type of

characters, behaviours, and relations readers expect to see, and upon which they derive their writerly characterization of even the most unusual, unreadable characters. Specifically, I examine the storyworld of Raphael Coutinho's "Terror" (2013) that is populated by dots of various colours and sizes whose thoughts and feelings are never overtly shared. Although abstract, the consistent depiction of the dots throughout the narrative and, more importantly, their spatial movement within a figurative urban setting enables readers to identify them as potential characters and characterize them—although in a highly indeterminate and stereotypical way. While the setting calls to mind possible character types that commonly frequent such places upon which readers can base their characterization, the movements of the dots within the setting, the way they interact with it, and the spatial relations between the dots provide indeterminate clues from which readers can reach a sense of what the dots are doing, what their intentions may be, and what their relationships are. Together, these lead readers to identify the dots as characters. In addition, spatial disruptions as they pertain to the standard layout of the comics and presentation of the storyworld are used to draw attention to specific actions and their consequences and evoke the state of mind of specific characters. As will become apparent below, due to its experimental, almost abstract nature, "Terror" does not present as a narrative unless readers characterize the dots. Readers must writerly connect the setting, potential characters, and events or actions in the form of movement, and although indeterminate, characterization renders "Terror" meaningful.

Having demonstrated that unreadable, abstract characters such as the dots in "Terror" can be characterized according to the spatial presentation of the storyworld (i.e., the setting, but also everything it contains, including other characters) and the

positioning of the dots-as-character within it, I turn my attention to another type of unusual protagonist with an unreadable mind: the non-anthropomorphized setting-as-character. My study of *House* (2007), a horror comics by Josh Simmons, exposes how spatial cues direct readers toward the setting as a potential character and hint at its state of mind. Although the paratextual space invites readers to pay particular attention to the house and to the details within it, it is the house's spatial predominance over the human characters who visit it (thus indirectly showcasing the house's 'personality') that presents it as a character. The house's mind also indirectly manifests itself through spatial means, including the repetition of a portrait closely associated with the house, the house's unusual spatial dimensions, and changes in the layout of the comics page. Readers' writerly interpretations of these indeterminate spatial cues of mind transform a mere setting into something that resembles a character and, in doing so, exacerbates its horror, thus further investing readers.

Overall, this chapter argues that characterization in comics can occur even in complex situations in which readers have no overt access to the minds of characters. It demonstrates that when readers cannot rely on common cues of mind to readerly characterize characters, they may be prompted to writerly engage with images to identify potential characters and characterize them. Specifically, I argue that spatial cues in images draw attention to characters in need of characterization even if their mind is unreadable. Spatial configurations can also provide readers with some clues that although forever indeterminate nonetheless aid them in inferring how characters may be feeling or what they may be thinking. Consequently, such writerly engagement with indeterminate

mental cues affects how readers understand the story's theme, experience the narrative, and reconstruct it into a coherent whole.

Narrative Structure, Spatial Composition, and Storyworld Experiences: Characterizing an Unreadable Human Character in *Equinoxes*

Set in contemporary France, Cyril Pedrosa's *Equinoxes* (2016) is a comics that follows the more or less overtly intertwined lives of a wide cast of characters over the span of a year, from fall to summer. Vincent, Louis, and Camille, the three most prominently featured characters in the narrative, are each at a crossroads, reflecting on who they are and questioning their life choices. Vincent is a divorced father who is in the midst of an existential crisis while dealing with the conflicted relationships he has with his teenage daughter, his ex-wife, and his brother. Louis is an old dying activist who reflects on the political actions taken by a female minister he mentored, mourns the loss of his ideals, and struggles to come to terms with the death of his son and his own mortality. Finally, Camille, a young photographer, wanders through the storyworld taking candid photographic portraits of the other characters, who do not know her, as they go about their lives. Through her photographic pursuit—she takes twelve photographic portraits in total, three per season—Camille is the common thread uniting the storylines of the individual characters.

Divided into four 'seasonal' chapters that each have a distinct visual style, *Equinoxes* is rigidly structured, as the chart below, makes clear (Figure 17). Each chapter—or season—begins with a short silent comics sequence that relates the (mis-)

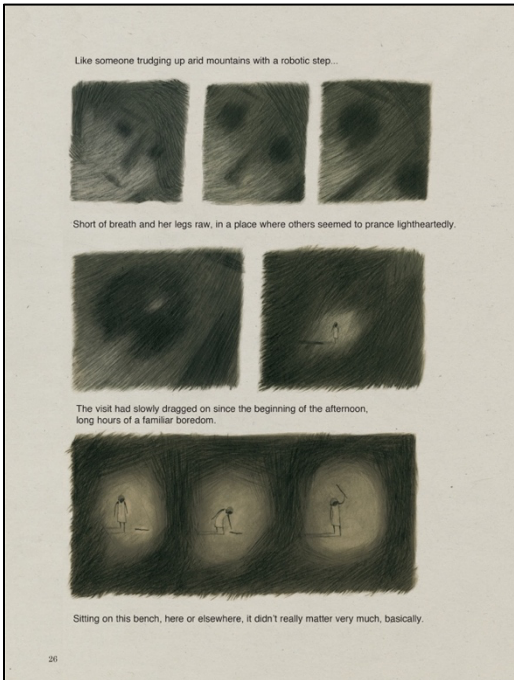
adventures of a young non-gender-specific prehistoric character.[62] After the introductory comics, the three characters' respective storylines alternate multiple times per chapter and, at times, even intersect. Camille's storyline is always the first to follow the silent prehistorical sequence, and always shows her exploring different places with a camera in hand and ends with her taking a photograph of a character who captured her attention. This photograph, rendered as a grayscale drawing, always features as a closing panel positioned on the bottom of the right page and ends Camille's comics sequence. The first sentence of an unattributed third-person internal monologue about the photographed character is written under it. The monologue continues on the next page. It is delivered one sentence at a time, appearing on the top and the bottom of the next page, as well as in between a total of three rows of grayscale panels whose content is always a progressive close-up of the photograph from the previous page that transforms over the course of several images transforms into another picture. An image or a number of images similar to the one that appears on the last panel is then reproduced on top of the next page, where it gives way to a page or several pages of unattributed third-person internal monologue about the photographed character that concludes the sequence (Figure 18). These verbal narratives are followed by standard comics sequences that relate the lives of Vincent, Louis, and other secondary characters in no particular order. They are interrupted with Camille's sequences three times per chapter.

[62] The significance of this storyline only comes to the forefront at the very end of *Equinoxes* when a cave this character frequents is discovered late in the novel on the site of a proposed airport, halting construction. A dispute over this construction has been a central conflict in the narrative.

Lastly, each chapter closes with a page comprised of five square greyscale panels that depict landscapes, architectural details, or interior designs in a visual style that is reminiscent of Camille's photographs and other photographs included in the diegesis and are thus presumably photographs. A sentence concludes this page: the first sentence of the first-person internal monologue that continues on the next page(s) and relates the unnamed narrator's memories and thoughts on their current life (Figure 19). This monologue is also unattributed and, as proven below, it is only by deciphering spatial and other visual clues that are present in both these literary passages and the comics sections that readers will be able to deduce that Camille is the narrator. Finally, the comics concludes with yet another photograph, namely, Camille's self-portrait, followed by a page of interior monologue not in the first-person as expected, but in the third-person (Figure 20). In spatially disrupting the book's established narrative pattern, this last seasonal monologue thematizes the indeterminate characterization of Camille and others.

Storylines succession in each chapter	Seasonal chapters			
	AUTUMN (CHAP.1) pp. 7-85	**WINTER (CHAP. 2) pp. 87-175**	**SPRING (CHAP. 3) pp. 177-261**	**SUMMER (CHAP. 4) pp. 263-330**
	Prehistorical character	Prehistorical character	Prehistorical character	Prehistorical character
	Camille + photographed character	Camille + photographed character	Camille + photographed character	Camille + photographed character
	'Distorted photos' + internal monologue **3rd person**	'Distorted photos' + internal monologue **3rd person**	'Distorted photos' + internal monologue **3rd person**	'Distorted photos' + internal monologue **3rd person**
	Louis	Vincent	Louis	Louis
	Vincent	Louis	Vincent	Vincent
	Louis	Vincent	Camille + photographed character	Louis
	Camille + photographed character	Louis	'Distorted photos' + internal monologue **3rd person**	Vincent
	'Distorted photos' + internal monologue **3rd person**	Vincent	Vincent	Louis (dies)
	Vincent	Louis	Louis	Camille + photographed character
	Louis	Camille + photographed character	Vincent	'Distorted photos' + internal monologue **3rd person** *(that mentions Camille)*
	Vincent	'Distorted photos' + internal monologue **3rd person**	Camille + photographed character	Vincent
	Louis	Vincent	'Distorted photos' + internal monologue **3rd person**	'Louis' (relatives)
	Camille + photographed character	Louis	Secondary character (Pauline, Vincent's daughter)	Vincent
	'Distorted photos' + internal monologue **3rd person**	Vincent	5 'photos'	'Louis' (relatives)
	Vincent	Louis	Internal monologue **1st person**	Vincent
	5 'photos'	Vincent / Camille + photographed character	Unique grayscale panel (no character; landscape detail that evokes the prehistorical storyline) at the centre of the page	2 pages (3x5 panels each) of alternating panels showing 1) the image of (prehistoric) footprints in dried mud, 2) one specific moment in the life of all the characters in the book
	Internal monologue **1st person**	'Distorted photos' + internal monologue **3rd person**		Camile taking a *photo of herself*
	Unique grayscale panel (no character; landscape detail that evokes the prehistorical storyline) at the centre of the page	Secondary character (Heavy equipment operator)		Self-portrait of Camille in a mirror + internal monologue **3rd person**
		5 'photos'		
		Internal monologue **1st person**		
		Unique grayscale panel (no character; landscape detail that evokes the prehistorical storyline) at the centre of the page		

Figure 17. *Equinoxes*'s organization. Personal chart.



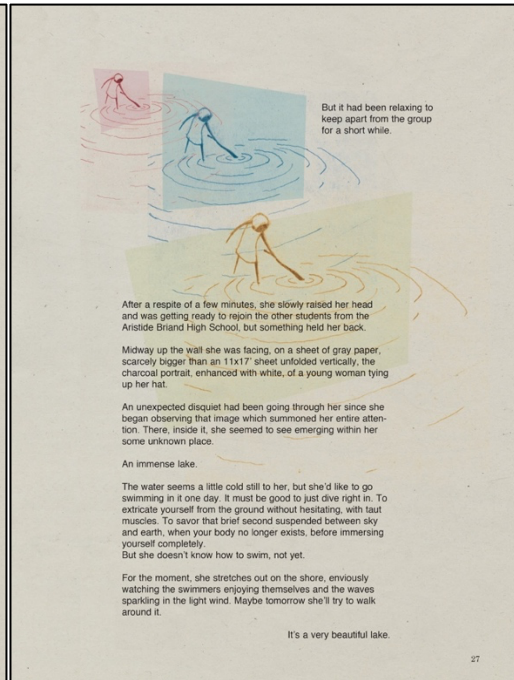


Figure 18. Example of a passage of third-person internal monologue. Cyril Pedrosa, *Equinoxes* (NBM Publishing, 2016), pp. 25-27. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

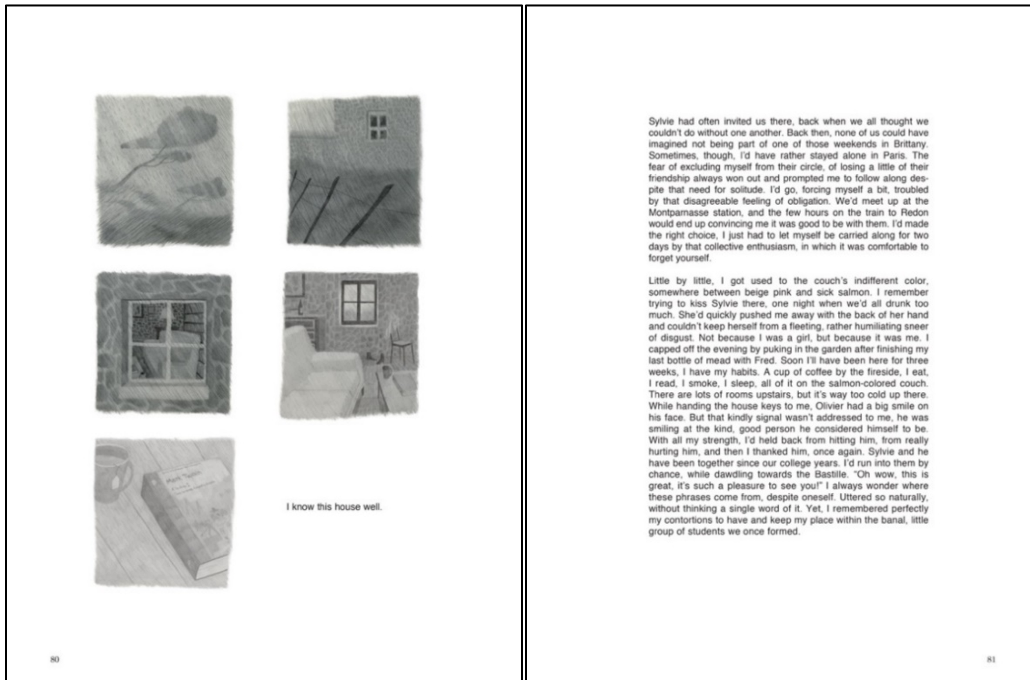


Figure 19. Example of a first-person internal monologue concluding the seasonal chapters. Cyril Pedrosa, *Equinoxes* (NBM Publishing, 2016), pp. 80-81. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

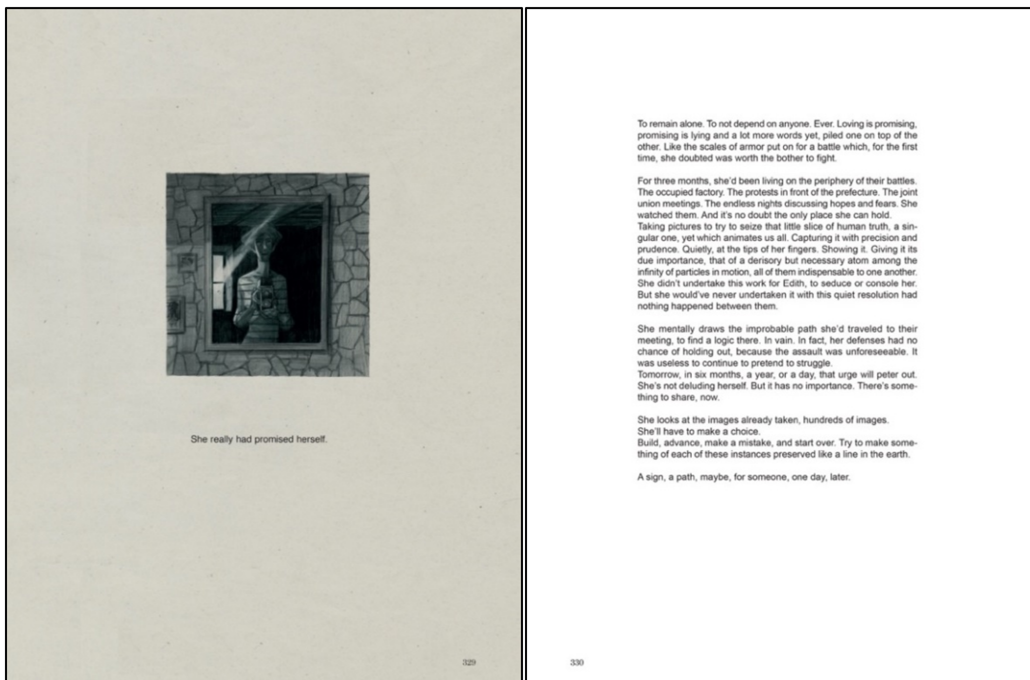


Figure 20. The last seasonal monologue: Camille's self-portrait and, on the next page, the last interior monologue in the third-person. Cyril Pedrosa, *Equinoxes* (NBM Publishing, 2016), pp. 329-330. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

Readers may overlook Camille's storyline and not identify her as a protagonist in need of characterization because her storyline is so tightly intertwined with that of the character she photographs that her presence in the storyworld may be mistakenly perceived only as a means to focus attention onto the photographed characters. Camille's presentation supports this theory. Firstly, she remains unnamed until the last quarter of the story and, even then, she is named only three times in the 330-page comic (196; 276; 309). Secondly, she is always drawn from the back or with her face either out of view or shown from the side, obscured by objects, or cropped out of the panel. This technique is often used in comics to portray background or secondary characters so as not to distract readers from the main characters (Samson 221-234). Lastly, no common cues of mind grant readers access to her thoughts or feelings. For instance, Camille's body language is barely expressive and she is mostly silent, except for a handful of 'hellos'. Throughout most of *Equinoxes*, Camille's portrayal is void of cues that could prompt readers to get invested in her story and her state of mind to characterize her. She seems to present as a secondary or background character whose function is to highlight the actual protagonists or contribute to the setting.

However, despite a lack of obvious narrative information that would help readers engage in the process of characterization, spatial cues still prompt readers to identify her as a central character in *Equinoxes*. First, the comics sequences dedicated to her storyline occupy a significant amount of space in the book. Out of 330 comics pages, 45 of them (13.64% of the book) feature her exploring the storyworld and taking photographs. In addition, the end-of-chapter monologues (a total of 17 pages) are retrospectively attributable to her, thus bringing the total of pages devoted to Camille to 62 or 18.79% of

Equinoxes.[63] The sheer number of pages devoted to Camille's storyline suggests that she is a central character.

Although some may argue that Camille's sequences are about the characters she photographs, her spatially triggered saliency in them asserts her status as a main character. For instance, the first time Camille appears in the comics, she is visiting the Musée d'Orsay; there, she takes a photograph of a teenage schoolgirl named Pauline (Vincent's daughter), which concludes the sequence. Camille appears for the first time on a splash page (Figure 21). The establishing panel presented in a long shot introduces the spacious museum Camille is visiting. In it, perspective is used to great effect: in emphasizing the size and depth of the place, it also accentuates the open space around Camille, which singles her out in the composition. In addition, Camille figures in the light, while the other museum goers are in the shadow, and, stands out among all the people who occupy the space because she is the only one who is not enthralled or distracted by museum activity. The perspective, which is accentuated by the tiled floor and the coffered ceiling, also establishes a single vanishing point—the point in perspectival composition where all the vanishing lines meet and where the eyes of readers tend towards (Borji et. al 1-22)—with Camille in its centre.

In this first panel, much attention is also placed on Camille's head and, by extension, her mind. According to the 'the rule of thirds,' compositional elements placed along an image's one-third or two-third vertical and/or horizontal dividing lines (and, in

[63] Since it is impossible to determine with certainty who narrates the monologues that Camille's photographs trigger (24 pages), I do not include them in the count. If readers were to decide Camille narrates them, Camille's verbal and visual presence in *Equinoxes* would total 86 pages or 26.06% of *Equinoxes*.

particular, at the point where these lines meet) tend to captivate the attention of viewers more than any other point in the image (Peterson 193). As a result, these lines have conventionally marked points of interest in visual compositions. If one were to draw a horizontal line to mark two-thirds of the panel from top to bottom, it would cut Camille across her head, thus emphasizing it. Finally, the placement of three speech balloons that only say “bla bla bla” (Pedrosa 21) and can, at best, be attributed to unremarkable and unfinished scribble-like figures in the margins of the panel also form a line that coincides with Camille’s head. These spatial techniques draw attention to Camille and to her head, where her mind resides.

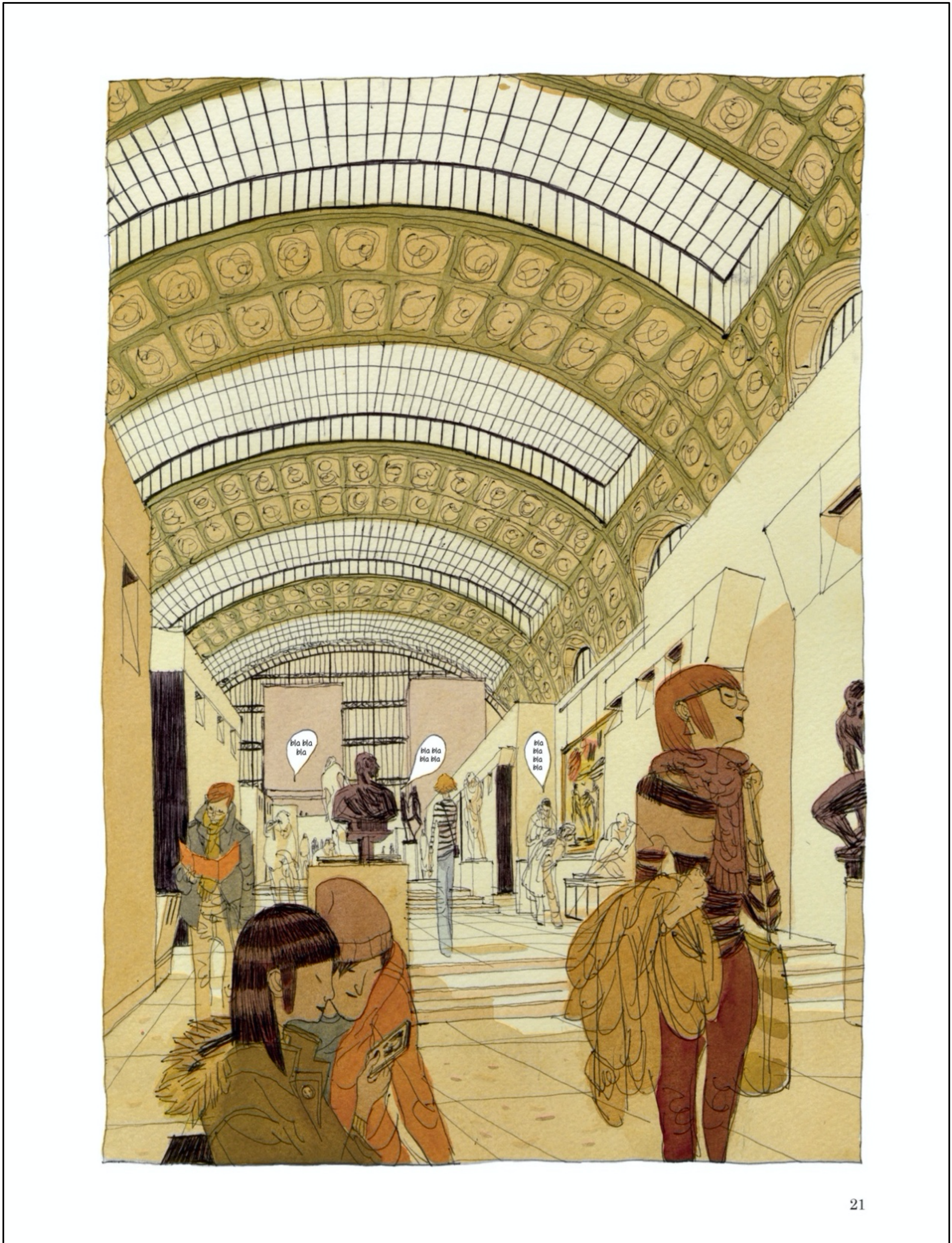


Figure 21. Spatial cues in the composition of this panel encourage readers to notice Camille, the character with the striped sweater in the middle ground. Cyril Pedrosa, *Equinoxes* (NBM Publishing, 2016), p. 21. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

Other spatial techniques keep the focus of readers on Camille on the following page (Figure 22). First, Camille is the only character that is repeated from the establishing panel. Readers are quick to recognize Camille's distinctive marine stripe sweater and hairstyle as well as her camera; her extensive presence across the space of the page underscores her central role in the sequence. Second, several diegetic elements, such as doorways, staircase frames, or wall borders encase her, further spatially marking her out as the sequence's lead character. Furthermore, a zoom-in effect brings her progressively into view over several panels, ultimately culminating with a panel in the middle row devoted entirely to her. Whereas this progressive close-up evokes the cinematic technique of "indexing," whereby "a camera is moved toward an object" and "functions ostensively, like the gesture of pointing," the panel showing Camille's body makes use of a "bracketing" visual technique, whereby "what is on screen," that is, "what is inside the frame or bracket is important" (N. Carroll 90). Together, they indicate to readers that Camille is important, and urge them to keep looking at her.[64] Indeed, in this museum sequence composed of twenty-two panels, four panels bracket Camille through a zoom-in effect that excludes everything except her body from the panel, thus visually insisting on her. Similar techniques are used throughout the rest of the sequence, and the comics as a whole every time Camille appears.

[64] As N. Carroll remarks, "indexing" and "bracketing" (alongside other techniques) often work "in tandem" to guide the viewer's attention (91).

Figure 22. Camille's continuous presence, her diegetic framing, and her positioning in the panels draw attention to her even if her face is never shown. Cyril Pedrosa, *Equinoxes* (NBM Publishing, 2016), p. 22. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

Paradoxically, some of the spatial techniques that encourage readers to identify Camille also work against her characterization or, at the very least, complicate it. Throughout the entire narrative, bracketing prevents readers from seeing Camille's facial expressions and, by extension, clearly or easily reading her state of mind because her head remains outside the frame or hidden from view.[65] Although Noel Carroll posits that "what is not inside the frame has been bracketed, excluded" and "should not . . . be attended to" (90), I suggest that in *Equinoxes*, the use of bracketing differs and has meaningful narrative implications. Specifically, the tension between Camille's accentuated visibility, which emphasizes her need for characterization, and the difficulty of doing so because her face and mind remain—seemingly—inscrutable, turns her into an indeterminate, puzzling character. Faced with such an unusual character presentation, readers can either get disengaged, finding Camille empty and the tension frustrating, or they can become even more invested in her as they writerly infer Camille's traits, thoughts, and feelings to characterize her. Given that they cannot directly access Camille's mind, readers who remain engaged will interpret other visual cues to achieve her characterization.

At first, even if Camille's mind remains inaccessible, her appearance and demeanour already provide clues about who she might be as a character. Readers know, for instance, that Camille is a slim, white, and able-bodied young woman who frequently goes on walks and takes photographs. Camille's medium-short strawberry blond hair and

[65] When her face is within the frame, it remains hidden because a camera or another diegetic element covers it or because she is drawn from behind.

basic earth-tone clothes make her relatively unremarkable as she visually blends in with her surroundings. Her appearance and style, coupled with her lack of body expressivity, prompt readers to note that she is someone who does not stand out from the crowd. Readers may speculate on reasons behind her wish to blend in: shyness, discretion, or practicality, for instance. Once readers see Camille, their writerly interpretation of her appearance and behavior begin to influence what kind of character traits they impart to her and what they believe her mind to be like.

However, it is once again space, as it pertains to the structuring of the narrative space Camille shares with Vincent and Louis and, to a lesser extent, the prehistoric character, that provides more substantial clues that put readers on the path of Camille's characterization. *Equinoxes* is what I call (borrowing a term from film criticism) a 'multi-protagonist' comics, that is, a narrative that contains a "multiplicity of characters of similar narrative relevance" with "more or less independent narrative lines" (Azcona 2; 1).[66] This type of narrative alternates and sometimes brings together narrative sequences dedicated to specific characters to "emphasize thematic patterns" and "human commonalities" (Parshall 6). Multi-protagonist texts are "characterized by the interaction of several voices, consciousnesses, or world views, none of which unifies or is superior to (has more authority than) the others" (Prince, *A Dictionary of Narratology* 19). Central to our engagement with these multi-protagonist narratives is "our sense that characters, situations, and activities tend to parallel one another" (Bordwell 211).

[66] The genre bears many names in film criticism, from 'ensemble film' to 'network narrative' or 'mosaic film.' For more on the nuances between all these different appellations, see, for instance, Parshall (1-20) or Azcona (1-45). Narratologists generally designate these texts as 'polyphonic.'

Equinoxes's tight narrative structure creates parallels between Camille, Vincent, and Louis through their alternating storyline sequences, thus joining other multi-protagonist narratives to cue readers "to notice how characters are sharply similar or different from one another" (Bordwell 211). Specifically, because Vincent and Louis are well-developed characters whose thoughts and feelings are often readily shared, readers can draw on what they know of them to begin characterizing Camille. Although Vincent and Louis live very different lives, they are both experiencing a kind of existential crisis. Both are questioning their life choices and trying to understand the kind of people they are and what their place in the world is. This information is central to their characterization and establishes their questioning of self and life as a thematic pattern in *Equinoxes*. By determining the pattern of thoughts and feelings Vincent and Louis share, readers also get an inkling about the thoughts and feelings of Camille, whose characterization they try to fit into the narrative's thematic pattern of finding oneself. Since she is a part of the same patterned multi-protagonist narrative, readers are encouraged to writerly hypothesize that she may be thinking and feeling in a way that is similar to or radically different from Vincent and Louis. Even in the absence of explicit cues of mind, the spatial structure of the narrative can provide clues that help forward characterization.

While the multi-protagonist structuring of *Equinoxes* encourages readers to hypothesize that Camille is either someone who knows who she is and is at ease in the world (unlike Vincent and Louis), or someone who questions who she is and tries to establish her place in the world (as Vincent and Louis do), her spatial presentation further substantiates the latter characterization. Specifically, her partial or fragmented portrayal

throughout the narrative visually triggers a sense of incompleteness that readers can indirectly and writerly attribute to Camille's psyche. As art critic Linda Nochlin remarks in *The Body in Pieces*, fragmented bodies in visual arts are categorized into two main interpretive categories depending on the visual context: on the one hand, "the fragment in its ritualistic or psychosexual manifestations—as sacrifice or fetish—,"[67] and on the other, the "rhetorical role" of the fragment "as metonymy or synecdoche" (56). In *Equinoxes*, Camille's fragmented presentation does not ritualize or sexualize her body; instead, it rhetorically draws attention to what has been cut-off from her representation or lost in the space of the gutter: her head. The presentation of Camille's body, but not her head suggests that she is inscrutable, that she is someone who does not have a complete and coherent sense of self or is experiencing inner turmoil that causes her to 'lose her head.'[68] Space-as-form, therefore, can metaphorically—and thus indeterminately—communicate something about the minds of characters.

Space-as-content or setting, too, helps readers reach some writerly insight into Camille's mind through the places she visits and how they are presented. In contrast with Louis's and Vincent's settings, the setting in which Camille appears is not an interior, private space that enables readers to gather information about her personality from the way her home is located, laid out, and decorated, for instance.[69] Instead, Camille is a

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[67] See also Mulvey.
[68] Since *Equinoxes* is originally a French comic book, it is relevant to bring up the French expression 'avoir la tête sur les épaules' (i.e., literally 'To have one's head on one's shoulders') that is commonly used to refer to someone who is lucid, stable, reasonable, and generally clear-minded. In contrast, someone who 'perd la tête' (i.e., 'loses one's head') is someone who is seen as unstable and confused. By depicting Camille without a head on her shoulders, Pedrosa visually evokes the expression and suggests to readers that Camille does not have a clear mind.
[69] With the exception of the last scene in the comics where Camille is shown inside her house, taking a picture of herself, as discussed further below.

flaneuse. She wanders through the outside, public world—museums, subways, city streets, beaches, country hills, parking lots—principally visiting various types of "non-places," or "contemporary spaces," which are "spaces of circulation, communication, and consumption where solitary beings coexist without creating any social bond or even a social emotion" (Augé 79). From these spaces, readers may infer that Camille is a solitary character, as her lack of interaction with other human beings further suggests. More importantly, one may consider more closely Camille's comings and goings in these non-places, examining her wandering as "a form of utterance" where "to walk is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of something of one's own" (De Certeau 103). In this way, the various places Camille explores can be seen as potential places of discovery, while her wandering may reveal that she is undertaking some kind of psychological itinerary to form her own sense of self.

But this type of inference, of course, is only one way in which space-as-setting can inform characterization. As film scholar Jinhee Choi argues, limited knowledge about characters' experiences and mental spaces "facilitates the viewer's central imagination" or triggers a type of "self-imagining" whereby the viewer imagines themselves "seeing the characters inside the storyworld" and "observ[ing] the events as they unfold" or imagining what they themselves "would do or feel in the situation that the characters are facing" (23; 21). In Choi's view, readers put themselves in the characters' shoes to imaginatively enact the characters' mental experience based on the cues they get from the setting and the narrative situation, which in turn enables them to writerly envision what characters may be thinking and feeling in the scene.

In *Equinoxes*, many techniques thus accentuate the sensescape of the setting to address the character's cognitive experiences. For instance, the visual presentation of the storyworld shifts in every seasonal chapter and evokes the change of lighting, temperature, and atmosphere brought by the change of season to better convey what it is like to live in the storyworld at a given point in time. *Equinoxes* also contains many onomatopoeiae and many, often differently coloured, speech balloons filled with music notes, radio excerpts, random people's discussions, or even unreadable text suggesting a faint voice in the background to let readers experience the ambient sound of the places characters occupy. These and similar cues facilitate imaginative insights into Camille's mind by prompting readers to reflect on why she acts as she does or how they would feel in her situation, thus encouraging them to draw on their empathic imagination and personal experiences to formulate hypotheses about what may be running through her mind. Given its dependence on subjective imagination and experience, this type of writerly inference based on a close engagement with the setting remains indeterminate. Camille's characterization remains open to the fluctuations of the imaginative projections of readers who focus on different aspects of the setting and draw on their personal experiences or mood at the time of reading.

Lastly, spatial clues prompt readers to realize that Camille narrates the unattributed first-person internal monologues that conclude each seasonal chapter (Figure 19). They thus get a wide and less indeterminate access to Camille's mind and backstory. The clues become increasingly obvious as readers progress through the sequence and through *Equinoxes* as a whole. To begin, the five greyscale photographic panels of scenery or interior décor that open the sequence visually evoke Camille's photographic

portraits and suggest she may have taken them. More importantly, the spatial content of these photographs is also directly mentioned or implied in the monologue that follows, thus tying the photographic panels (and the person who took them) to the verbal passage. The stone house in Figure 23 for instance, is prominently featured on three of the five panels, and the narrator draws further attention to it by saying "I know this house well" (Pedrosa 80). Readers are thus encouraged give the house a closer look and register that it is made of stone. Because this house has a typical Breton architectural style, it subtly links the photographic images to interior monologue that mentions (in the first paragraph) the region of "Brittany" and the specific town of "Redon" (Pedrosa 81). The image of the Mark Twain book that features in the bottom left panel of the page works similarly: it too is a spatial clue that is also present in the written passage, thus uniting the photographs to the monologues and, by extension, their creator: Camille.

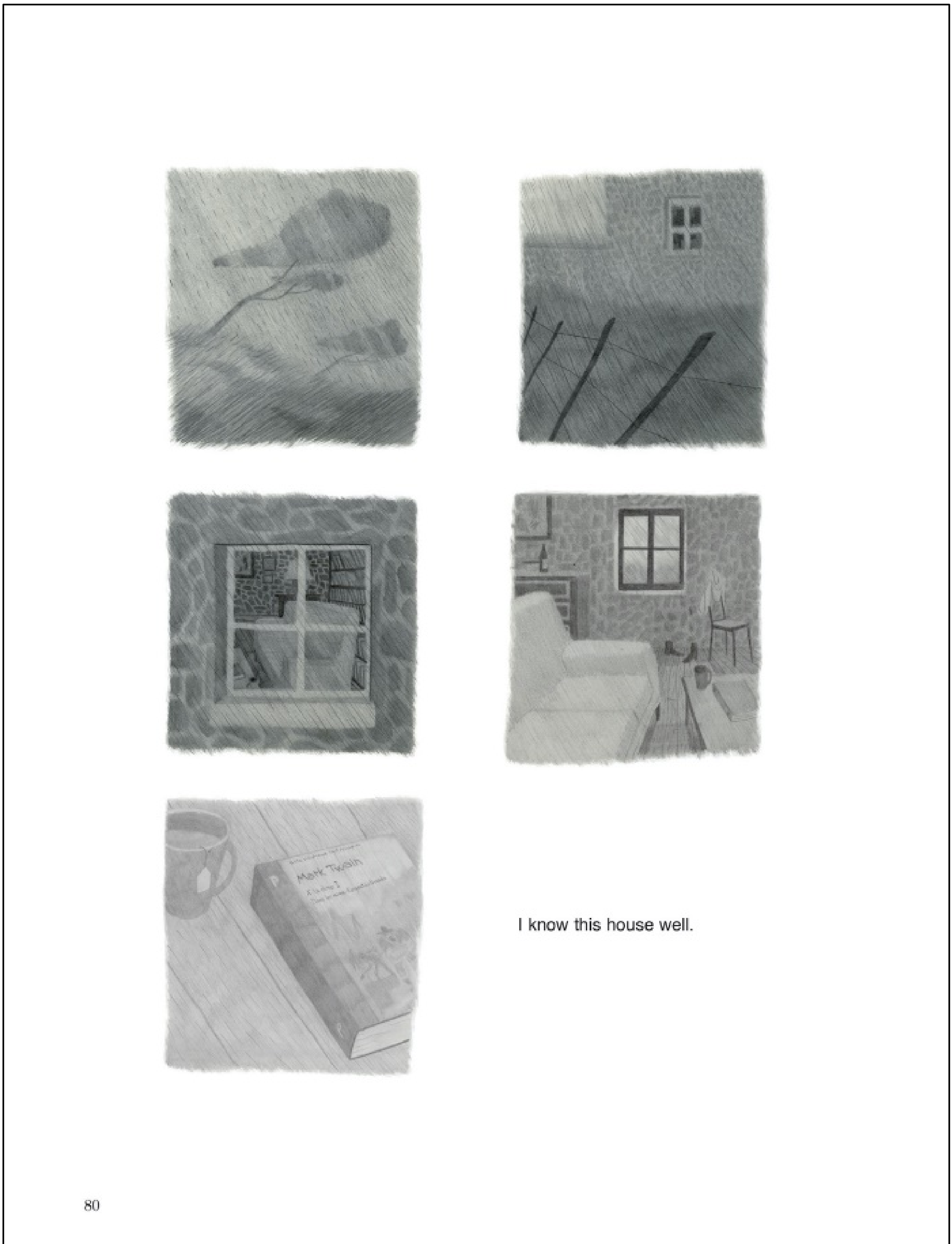

Figure 23. Spatial clues in these photographic panels tie them to the internal monologue that follows, and help readers deduce that Camille took these photographs and narrates the monologue. Cyril Pedrosa, *Equinoxes* (NBM Publishing, 2016), p. 80. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

For readers to conclude that the photographs are Camille's and that she narrates the monologues, they first need to notice other spatial cues that link the photographs and the monologues to Camille's storyline in the book's comics sequences. Readers may note that the photographic panels of outdoor and indoor spaces evoke or represent places that Camille frequents at some point or another in the narrative, thus suggesting that she photographed the places. For instance, a photographic image of the "Breizh-Bay" [70] factory (Pedrosa 254) is mentioned in a first-person internal monologue, and its worker strike is featured in Camille's comics storyline in the last seasonal chapter (Pedrosa 259; 305-307). Likewise, "the patches of fuel oil on the beach at Carré" (Pedrosa 173) in the winter first-person internal monologue figured a bit earlier in Camille's comics section (Pedrosa 163-165), while the mention of undeveloped rolls of photograph that the narrator of the monologue took at a "rain construction site" and a "supermarket parking" (Pedrosa 257) evokes places Camille goes to in the winter or the spring (Pedrosa 103-105; 247-249). These and similar examples expose photographic spatial clues as essential to the narrative; they suggest the importance of Camille's narrative role and tie her and her photographs to the verbal monologue. Hints in *Equinoxes*'s verbal passages further establish Camille as the narrator of the first-person internal monologue, including the mention that the narrator is "a girl" who is "thirty-one" and recently "bought an old reflex camera" (Pedrosa 81; 173; 83). She is also someone who, like Camille in the comics, "take[s] a long bike ride" when "everyone in the house [is] dancing" (193-197; Pedrosa 256). These clues not only align with Camille's description, but they also match her

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[70] Breizh means Brittany in Breton language, which ties the factory to the other mentions of Brittany in the comics.

experiences and the places she visits. They thus encourage readers to take note of the presence of the same details in the photographic panel images and the monologues and to writerly deduce that Camille narrates the first-person monologue at the end of each season chapter.

These seasonal monologues provide readers with substantial information about Camille's past, while also retrospectively sharing her thoughts and feelings about the places she explores, the people she encounters, and the relationships she develops with them (notably with Edith, who becomes her lover). For instance, Camille remarks about the stone house that "Sylvie had often invited us there, back when we all thought we couldn't do without one another. . . . The fear of excluding myself from their circle, of losing a little of their friendship always won out and prompted me to follow along despite that need for solitude" (Pedrosa 81). In a similar way, but about the Breizh-Bay worker strike, Camille tells readers "that's when [she] met Edith and her anger for the first time" (Pedrosa 259), before continuing to share her thoughts about the worker strike and her role there as a portrait photographer. As readers learn, she would "really like to pull off showing them just as [she] see[s] them" (Pedrosa 260). The monologues thus highlight the importance to Camille of the places she photographs, influencing the readers' understanding of those places, but also of Camille. Through links drawn between photographed space and the monologues, readers are thus made to understand that the photographs appear to trigger in her what Claire Portal describes in relation to another comics as a form of "introspective geodiversity" whereby the setting "become[s] the subject of an internal reflection" (my translation). In other words, the spatially motivated and attributed thoughts, feelings, and memories that form the bulk of the seasonal

monologues give readers access to Camille's mind that inform her characterization. To gain access to her mind, readers must writerly engage with the spatial cues.

The last seasonal monologue, however, spatially disrupts the pattern established by the previous monologues and, in doing so, troubles Camille's characterization to render it in flux or indeterminate. To begin, instead of the expected five drawn photographs of landscape or interior décors, the last monologue opens with a single grayscale photograph finally showing Camille's face (Figure 20). Camille took the photograph herself, snapping her portrait in a mirror—an act of self-representation that is anything but direct. Looking at comics that use mirror self-portraits, Michael Chaney traces how this type of "doubled self-portrait invokes the classic topos of *mise en abyme*, a reflection of a reflection" that "dramatizes the subject's discordance between an integrated perception of self and a fragmented one" (Chaney, "Terrors of the Mirror" 22; 38). The multiplicity involved in the act of self-representation visually evokes a layered, and not a stable or unique sense of self. Building upon this idea, Camille's self-portrait is actually thrice removed from her 'actual' self: it is (1) a photograph of (2) her reflection in the mirror that has been (3) drawn in a comics. It is a reflection of a reflection of a reflection. The multiplication of layers in Camille's photographic self-portrait prevents readers from having direct access to her face and, more importantly, posits her not only as a multifaceted or fragmented character, but also as one that has an elusive sense of self, a will to sustain a disguise, or someone who seeks to dramatize the inaccessibility of the self to others. Either way, through her drawn photographic self-portrait in a mirror, Camille reminds readers that what they see of her in the comics is not 'really' her, but

only a representation or an appearance, and thus not someone who can be characterized with certainty.

Camille's self-portrait also reminds readers of all the previous character portraits she captured throughout *Equinoxes*, the first-person monologue they triggered, and the uncertainty of characterization they accentuated, albeit less overtly. All of Camille's earlier comics sequences end with a drawn grayscale photographic portrait of one of *Equinoxes*'s characters. The first sentence of an unattributed third-person internal monologue is placed right under it (see Figure 18, for instance), and continues on the following pages. One at a time, these sentences are interspersed with multiple grayscale panels that show the original photographic portrait transforming into a completely different image over a handful of panels. On the next page, these images eventually give way to full written passages of internal monologue about the photographed character. In these sections, the visible transformation of each initial portrait suggests that despite what the photographed person seems to be, they may be something else altogether.

The unattributed internal monologues, too, raise uncertainty that affect characterization because it remains unclear if they are narrated by the photographed characters, who are writing about themselves in the third person. It may be that Camille or someone else entirely is writing about what she sees or imagines seeing in the people she photographs. Given this uncertainty, the thoughts, feelings, and memories presented in these third-person internal monologues cannot serve as reliable sources of characterization for the photographed characters.

More significantly, these monologues also pressure the idea of a fixed, determinate characterization, as their content is about people questioning their sense of

self, what made them who they are, and how they think people see them. Notably, one of the monologues mentions that "our perception of others will never reveal to us who and what they are. No more than the reflection of himself seen in the rearview mirror says who and what he is. We are permanently inaccessible to one another" (Pedrosa 109). These reflections summarize the function of *Equinoxes*'s third-person monologues and the transforming portraits: they encourage readers to perceive and reflect on the tension between 'seeing oneself (and others) as' and 'being seen (as),' and the discrepancies that may arise between the way characters present and see themselves and the way others see them. Such reflections, in turn, seriously trouble characterizations that are based primarily on appearances, as is often the case in comics, and reveal that any form of characterization is an ongoing, indeterminate process. It follows that Camille's photographic self-portrait, which opens not a first- (as expected), but a third-person internal monologue, breaks with the established seasonal monologue pattern to disrupt attempts at reaching a definite characterization for Camille.

Camille's complex characterization and, by extension, that of all the other characters, particularly those photographed by her, is thus thematized in the narrative to remind readers that characterization is always subjective, incomplete, and in flux. Characterization, as *Equinoxes* suggests, is a writerly process where indeterminacy reigns: cues of minds come together questionably and with uncertainty through the imaginative writerly acts of readers.

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This close study of Camille, a main character with a seemingly unreadable mind, has argued that, in comics, spatial cues can accentuate storyworld figures as actual

characters in need of characterization. The amount of space taken up by potential characters in comics marks them as significant, as does the composition of the panels, including details in the setting. The spatially informed structuring of the narrative and the presence of characters in a setting encourage readers to infer (through symbolism), imagine (through personal experiences), or deduce (through the linking of various clues) the thoughts and feelings of characters. As readers writerly interpret subtle cues of mind, they deepen their characterization of characters and strengthen their engagement with both the characters and the narrative.

In *Equinoxes*, that Camille is a human character who lives in contemporary France facilitates and in a way also limits characterization. Although fictional, she is a paper person whose experiences readers could be expected to relate to in order to get a sense of who she and what her life may be like, and thus engage in the process of characterizing her. However, what happens to the process of identification and characterization when the character does not look even remotely human? In the following chapter section, an examination of the dots-as-characters in "Terror" addresses this question and, in doing so, further untangles the complexities of the role of space in characterization.

Setting-Induced Stereotypes and Spatial Movements: Characterizing Non-Figurative, Abstract Characters in "Terror"

"Terror" (2013),[71] by Brazilian artist Rafael Coutinho, is a four-page wordless experimental comics that follows a rigid 3-by-4-panel grid. The entire story is presented from a high angle and set at a street intersection where various violent, but indeterminate

[71] I am unable to provide detailed references for "Terror" due to its lack of pagination.

events occur. Taken together, the events seem to tell a story of unrest, which the title of the comics also suggests. Although the storyworld and its various elements, such as buildings, cars, and street signs are depicted realistically, the characters are not. Instead, non-anthropomorphized dots of different colours and sizes that figure in different positions in the storyworld symbolize the characters. These dots-as-characters do not visibly display any thoughts or feelings. Consequently, "Terror" delivers a highly indeterminate narrative that is entirely dependent on writerly interpretations of readers, who must identify the abstract figures as characters and characterize them despite the absence of explicit cues of mind.

The absence of figurative bodies in "Terror" prompts readers to wonder whether it presents a narrative and whether the dotted shapes are characters or not. Various spatial techniques, including the sequential storytelling, the text's coherent structure, and the narrative progression implied by the repetition of storyworld elements from one panel to the next, encourage readers to interpret the comics text as a narrative and not, for instance, as a mere collection of illustrations, in which they can expect to find characters or traces thereof. Acting on this expectation, readers look for characters or cues of their existence, most likely stopping on the different coloured dots, which are consistently presented throughout the short comics. According to Mikkonen, for readers to be able to identify and follow comics characters throughout a narrative, characters must be visually unique, consistent, and have "a coherent set of features" (*The Narratology of Comic Art* 185). Characters must be "distinguishable from other individuals" and have "some persisting sense of identity in temporal continuity despite all the changes that the figure may undergo in the course of the narrative" (Mikkonen, *The Narratology of Comic Art*

185). Through repetition across space, the dots in “Terror” begin to be identified as characters. Furthermore, whereas differences in the colour of the dots allow readers to identify them as different characters and follow them throughout the narrative, similarities in colour urge readers to see some dots as belonging to the same group and even as sharing similarities of mind.

However, the absence of bodies and explicit cues of mind in “Terror” complicates the identification of characters. Relying heavily on anthropocentric notions of characters, some comics scholars contend that figures in comics cannot be considered characters unless they first and foremost “[behave] to some extent like a person, can speak or think, or [engage] in goal-oriented action” (Mikkonen, *The Narratology of Comic Art* 183). Likewise, Aldamá argues that characters must have “humanlike qualities,” such as “agency, intentionality, [and a] sense of causality,” but also “movement” for readers to identify them as characters amid the other visual elements that constitute the storyworld (319). In comics, more than characters’ appearances, their propensity to speak, think, and act purposefully, as human beings do, enables readers to identify them as such. In “Terror,” only the potential characters’ movements in space could cue their consciousness. However, given the narrative’s unusual telling, it is not readily evident that the dots’ movement results from their deliberate mental choices, which would identify them as characters, or not. For instance, the dots could symbolize details that move in the setting, such as leaves being blown around in the wind, rather than characters endowed with minds. Given the absence of other clues of mind in “Terror,” movement alone fails to prove or disprove that the dots’ movement is a conscious act; it does not guarantee the identification and writerly construction of the dots as characters.

Instead, as will become apparent in the analysis that follows, it is the simultaneous reading of 1) the setting; 2) the dots' movements in space; 3) the dots' spatial relation to each other; and 4) spatial details in the layout that enables readers to writerly identify and characterize the dots in "Terror." With the title, the setting sets the story's atmosphere, cuing readers as to the type of narrative they can expect. "Different spaces are not just different landscapes," as Franco Moretti notes: "they are different *narrative matrixes*. Each space determines its own kind of actions, its plot—its genre" (84; emphasis in original).[72] Building upon the link between genre and setting to accommodate characters, Jens Eder and his colleagues argue that "genre schemata . . . combine typical plot elements, and sometimes settings, with typical types and/or functions of character. Any of the classical Hollywood genres, for instance, seems to involve certain character types: cowboys in the Western, singers in musicals, soldiers in the war movie" (Eder et al. 42). It follows that the spatially-informed expectations set up by the setting can serve readers in their quest to determine if the dots in "Terror" are characters or not.

On a superficial level, the grid layout, the uniformity in the representation of the dots, and the banality of the urban setting in "Terror" generally creates an unremarkable storyworld where conformity, monotony, and dullness seem to dominate, even though the presence of graffiti points to the existence of a subculture that celebrates minor illegalities (Figure 24). Details, such as the presence of intersecting roads, street signs, crosswalks, traffic lights, cars, a fenced lawn, buildings, and graffiti on walls, suggest that the narrative takes places at a street corner of a non-descriptive town in the Western world at

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[72] See also Baetens (*Rebuilding Story Worlds* 21)

the end of the twentieth or the beginning of the twenty-first century.[73] From these cues in the setting, readers are likely to deduce that they are reading an urban comics, where they can expect to encounter characters such as pedestrians, drivers, shop owners, panhandlers, gang members and petty-criminals, law enforcement, and other people that commonly frequent the streets in such a storyworld, and that the dots may symbolize. [74] In this sense, the setting becomes "the fictionalized environment [. . .] against which the protagonists are characterized" (Vermette 146).[75] In this comics, setting enables specific story possibilities and eliminates or, at the very least, reduces others, which in turn narrows down the type of characters or "character's genre-related roles" that can be attributed to potential characters in the comics (Mikkonen, *The Narratology of Comic Art* 193-194).

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[73] The high angle from which the whole comics is drawn evokes the field of vision of a CCTV camera, which further suggests that the scene takes place in the late twentieth or early twenty-first century.

[74] Setting does not preclude a particular type of character because narratives break genre conventions and new genres emerge all the time. Nonetheless, genres tend to follow certain setting tropes, and readers can expect to encounter certain types of characters based on where the story is located and when it takes place.

[75] Note that the relationship between settings and characters is reciprocal. While setting influences characterization, characters impact readers' spatialization of the narrative. For more on the latter point, which I will not discuss here since it is beyond the scope of this chapter, see, for instance, Ryan ("Cognitive Maps and the Construction of Narrative Space"; "Space").

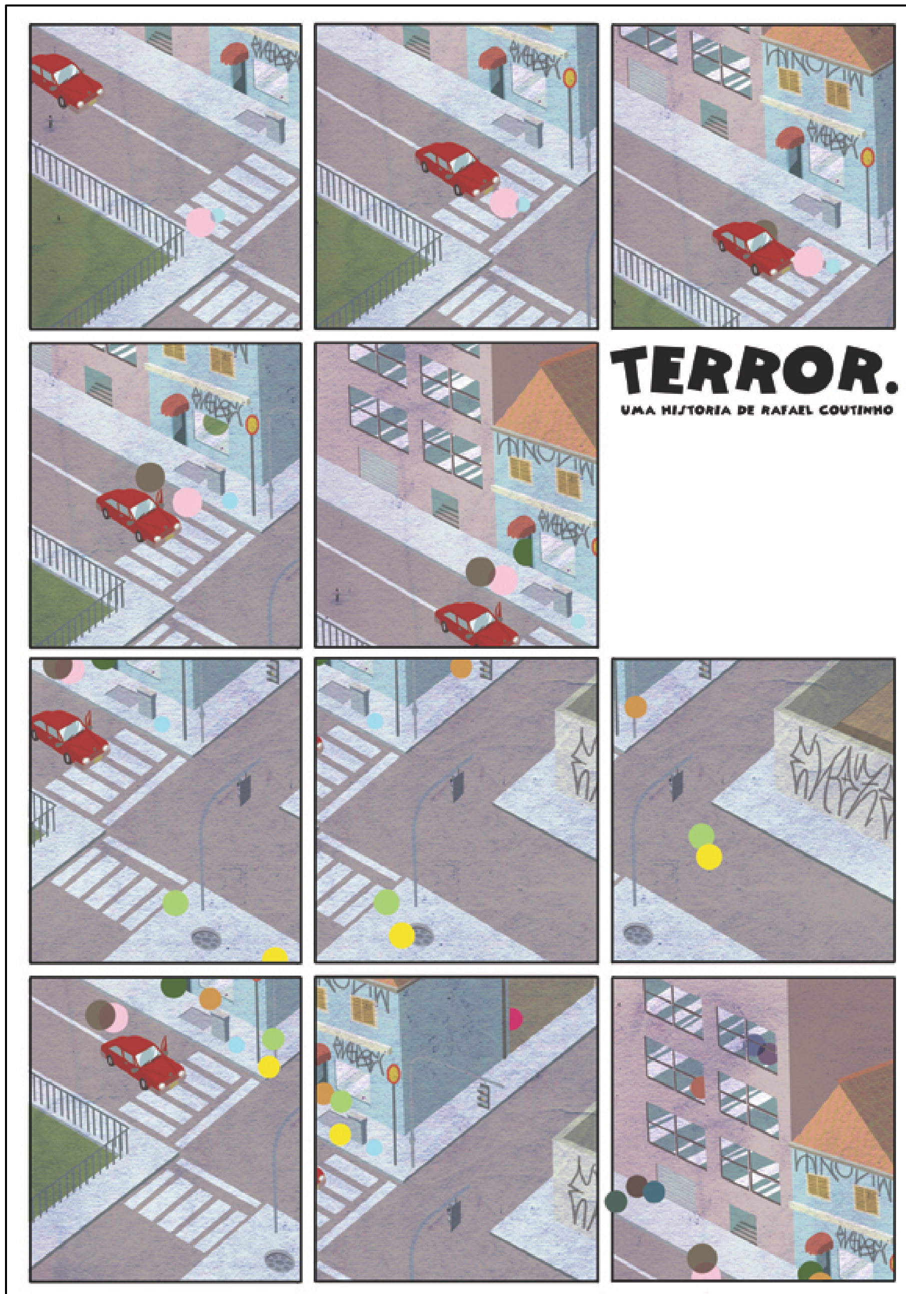


Figure 24. The page layout and the setting facilitate the characterization of the dots. Rafael Coutinho, “Terror” (*Samba* #3, 2016). Reprinted with permission of the artist.

Setting not only informs the general atmosphere of the story, the narrative genre, and by extension the types of characters one can expect to find in the narrative; it also situates and activates the actions of characters. Setting establishes the time and space in

which the action unfolds and calls to mind certain "activity types" or "activity schema" that can be performed there. These, in turn, "enable the reader to infer much about a character, particularly about the character's social role (i.e., their social function within the activity type)." Such "schematic inferences" based on "activity types" present in a narrative is "a crucial part of characterization" (Palmer, "Social Minds in *Persuasion*" 187), granting readers some (stereotypical) insight into the states of minds of characters that act in the setting. From the setting and how the dots move around in it, readers of "Terror" can writerly form various hypotheses regarding the possible urban roles or character types symbolized by the dots, which they test out, adjust, accept or rule out based on how the dots behave in the storyworld. For instance, readers may characterize the multiple light blue dots as police officers because they appear in an urban setting, they share the same blue colour associated with police uniforms, and they move around in pairs or groups as police officer do, either accosting other characters or hiding behind identical black and white cars (Figure 25).[76] Based on this identification of the blue dots as potential police officers, readers can then infer that they may be on the scene to ensure or restore order, if not to abuse their policing power, thus attributing to them motivations and a mind. In this example, readers have drawn from spatial cues of setting to identify the blue dots as characters.

[76] Although not directly an element of the setting, the light blue dots also seem to have guns or weapons, symbolized by a minuscule yellow dot right by them, that can cause the other characters to bleed, as suggested by the recurring presence of red stains—spatters and smears—soon after the minuscule dots appear. Other dots of different colours have minuscule green dots by them, which may mark a different kind of weapon or a non-police weapon, for instance.

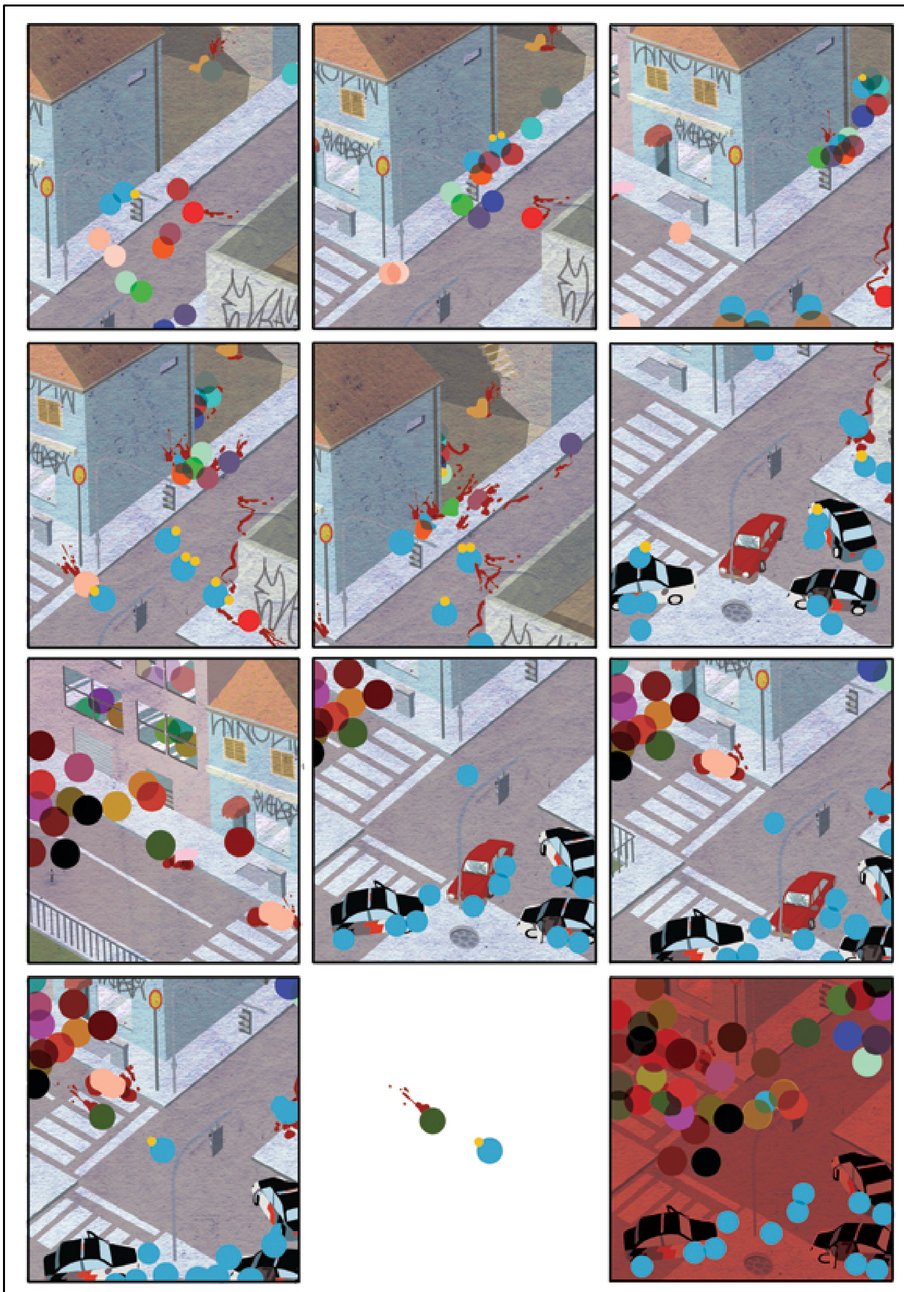
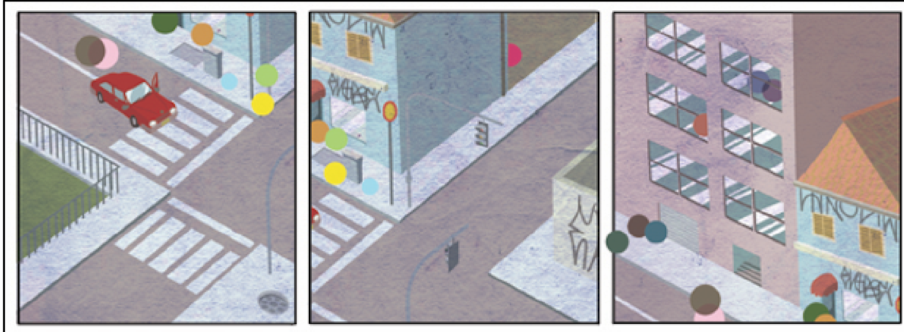


Figure 25. The similarities between the blue dots and their movement in space suggest they may belong to the same group of characters, which affects their characterization. The break in visual presentation in the last two panels draws attention to them and invites readers to writerly infer the state of mind of the characters present in two panels. Rafael Coutinho, "Terror" (*Samba #3*, 2016). Reprinted with permission of the artist.

This characterization of the light blue dots as police officers, however, is indeterminate because the clues provided by the setting and other storyworld details are not precise enough to indisputably mark them off as a particular type of character. Consequently, some readers may interpret the same clues slightly differently, and characterize the light blue dots as gang members, for instance, or some other character types or things entirely. Either way, any characterization readers reach remains valid as long as the actions and interactions of characters within the setting remain consistent with the types of characters readers initially imagined based on the clues supplied by the setting. If incongruities arise, readers must revise their characterization in light of new clues, which they attempt to accommodate into their reading. In other words, readers test and refine the hypothetical role they writerly attribute to potential characters by considering the types of actions or behaviours they perform in a particular setting.

In "Terror," the lack of visual details in the depiction of characters, setting, and storyworld elements certainly makes it difficult to precisely know what stereotypical, genre-informed role each character embodies. Nonetheless, the dots move in a particular way in a particular setting. These movements evoke possible narrative situations that urge readers to interpret changes in their spatial distribution as the motivated actions of characters. Specifically, details of setting and storyworld enable readers to get a sense of what the characters are doing (in the form of action, reaction, and interaction) based on their location in a given space and time (Roberts 138). Therefore, even though the dots do not look like human beings, the setting and where the dots are placed within it or seem to interact with it bring readers to writerly interpret the behaviours of the dots and infer what

could motivate their action as individual characters or as representatives of a particular type of character.



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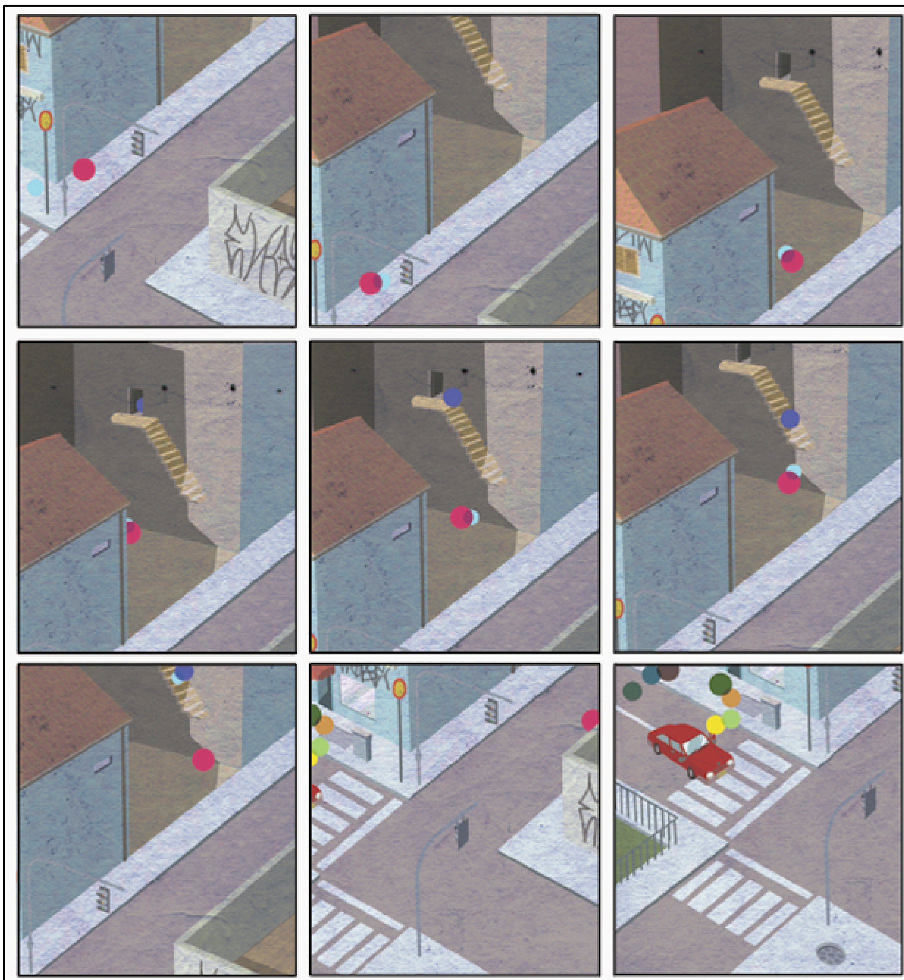

(Excerpt from p. 2)

Figure 26. Readers can characterize the bright pink dot based on how it (inter-)acts with(in) the setting. Rafael Coutinho, “Terror” (*Samba* #3, 2016). Reprinted with permission of the artist.

For instance, the movements of the bright pink dot, who appears first in the middle panel on the last row of the first page and in most panels on the second page (Figure 26), provide readers with clues as to what unfolds in the bright pink dot's mind. The first time the bright pink dot appears, only half of its 'body' is visible; the back wall of a building covers its other half. The uncharacteristic obstruction of part of the bright pink dot from the view of readers (most dots are fully visible up to this point) also prompts them to ask what motivates its partial appearance. Given the bright pink dot's positioning and the relatively empty urban back lot and adjacent street it occupies, some readers may interpret its action in the panel as that of a character that is hiding, and speculate that it may be spying on other dots-as-characters or that it may be afraid—two of many possibilities that influence how they characterize the bright pink dot. On the second page, in the first panel, the bright pink dot appears on the sidewalk, moving toward the intersection in the direction of a baby-blue dot, who figured quite often on the first page. The bright pink dot and the baby-blue one eventually unite before the bright pink dot returns to where it initially was, retracing its steps and taking the baby-blue dot to the yard behind the building, where a dark purple dot descends some stairs in the direction of the two dots. In the following panel, the dark purple dot goes up the stairs, followed by the baby-blue one, as the bright pink dot moves away once again, this time disappearing entirely from view. Interpreting the bright pink dot's movements does not enable readers to understand with certainty what transpires in this scene. However, it does allow them to writerly characterize the bright pink dot as the baby blue dot's helper if they see the bright pink dot as retrieving the baby-blue dot to bring it to safety in the

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building or as the baby-blue dot's foe if they see the bright pink dot as abducting the baby-blue dot and handing it over to the dark purple dot, who entrapped it. Despite the coexistence of these and other possibilities, readers can attribute provisional thoughts and feelings to the dots, identifying them as characters and justifying their actions even in the absence of explicit cues of mind. To do so, readers draw on their genre expectations and their interpretations of a character's actions in a given setting, triggering the process of a writerly engagement with the dots that ultimately leads to an indeterminate characterization.

Although the setting and the movements in space of potential characters play a central role in characterization, the characters' relations to and interactions with other characters is also crucial to the process. Narratologists refer to what "puts all the character of a fictional world in relation to each other" as a "character constellation" (Eder et al, 26-27). Writing about the importance of character constellation for characterization, Margrit Tröhler stresses that "individual characters attain individuality, psychological depth, and complexity mostly through (often conflict-laden) interaction with other characters" based upon "a network of interrelated emotions, intentions, and personal histories" that conceives characters as "multi-faceted social and relational subject[s]" (468). This network, link, or constellation of characters and, by extension, the way it informs the characterization process can be examined in many ways. According to Eder and his colleagues, "constellation analysis" investigates "various kinds of relationships," including the characters' "social relationships (conflicts and bonds), their values and norms (moral and otherwise), their diegetic and aesthetic similarities and differences (parallel and foil characters), the hierarchies of relevance (main vs. minor characters), and

their dramaturgical and thematic functions” (27). I propose that in comics these relationships often transpire through spatial means, thus joining comics scholar Geraint D’Arcy, who argues that through the setting or what he calls the décor, “we can configure the dramatic function of the spaces presented, we gain a sense of the world the characters exist in, a sense of how the interactions between those characters effect [*sic*] the characters and information about the characters themselves” (47).

Although “Terror” does not allow an in-depth constellation analysis due to its lack of narrative details, it is still possible for readers to examine the spatial relations between the characters in a panel or a scene to infer their disposition toward one another. For instance, in the first panel of the comics, the difference in size and the proximity between the big baby pink dot and the small baby blue dot suggests that the baby-pink dot is an adult and the baby-blue one is a child, even possibly the baby-pink dot’s child. While this specific character constellation does not provide readers with specific information about the characters’ minds, it nonetheless impacts the way they approach other character constellations that provide more clues about the characters’ actions, reactions, and possible states of minds. In the example of the bright pink dot and the baby-blue dot described above, the way readers have been characterizing the baby-blue dot influences the way they interpret its relation to the bright pink dot, which, in turn, encourages readers to writerly interpret the bright pink dot’s actions as those of a possible helper or a kidnapper, for instance.

Cause-and-effect in the actions and reactions of a constellation of characters enables readers to imagine what the dots may be thinking or feeling at a certain point in time. For instance, two light blue dots appear for the first time in the comics in a scene in

which the baby-pink dot, who now looks like a deflated balloon, appears to be lying on the ground with a red stain under it, as eight differently coloured dots congregate around it (Figure 27). Although at this point in the narrative, this panel alone does not provide many clues to readers about the type of character the two light blue dots are, the rest of the comics does through character constellations. As the comics narrative progresses, the differently coloured dots seem to flee the scene in a car or by foot, as a light blue dot appears to be attending to the deflated baby-pink dot, before joining other light blue dots to chase the dots that flee from the scene. Without going into too many details about how the story unfolds (for the sake of brevity), the cause-and-effect relation between the differently coloured dots in this handful of panels suggests that the light blue dots initially entered the scene in reaction to and possibly to counter the possible violence enacted upon the baby-pink dot by the differently coloured dots. Generally speaking, by taking into consideration not only a single character, but a constellation of characters, and examining the spatial relations between them, readers are able to identify the dots as characters and characterize them based on their writerly interpretation of the dots' motivations.

(Excerpt from p. 2)

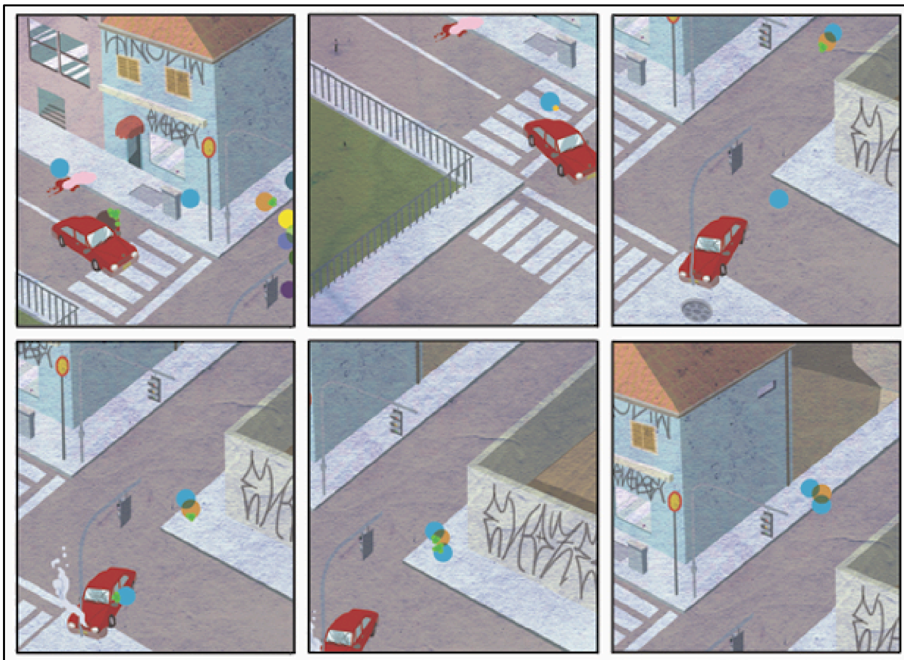
(Excerpt from p. 3)

Figure 27. The spatial relation between character and the way they relate to each other as part of the same character constellation affects their characterization. Rafael Coutinho, "Terror" (*Samba* #3, 2016). Reprinted with permission of the artist.

Lastly, space-as-form or breaks in the established formal pattern of a comics can also provide information about characters' state of mind. As Barbara Postema argues, "most comics texts have a default format," and thus "a variation in the format becomes a source of signification in itself" (45). In "Terror," such variations often cue mind. The first disruption in the comics' formal space occurs on the last panel of the first page of the comics, where a dark green dot on the left side of the panel spills into the gutter space

(Figure 24). Traditionally, comics characters stay within the panel in which they are depicted. When comics characters stray beyond the panel's border and break the frame, a metaphorical meaning is often being communicated. Given the narrative context and rigidly structured storyworld of "Terror," the unruly spatial positioning of the dark green dot can metaphorically suggest that it is a character that does not quite fit in, cannot be contained, or walk the line, among other writerly interpretive possibilities.

Two additional visual breaks in the spatial presentation of "Terror" occur on its last page (Figure 25). The second-last visual break stands out because, in contrast with all the other panels in the comics, it is not framed and, instead of showing the street, its background or setting is completely blank. Two dots occupy the centre of the panel's visual space: on the left, a dark green dot with what looks like a reddish-brown stain—possibly blood—behind or underneath it, and on the right, a light blue dot with another much smaller yellow dot on it marking, for instance, the light blue dot's gun, or something else entirely, depending on the writerly meaning readers attribute to the dots and the setting in which they act. Although the two dots are in the same position and are equally distanced one from the other as they were in the previous panel, where the dark green dot features on the crosswalk and light blue dot in the middle of the intersection, they gain in meaning because of the absence of setting details and of a panel frame in this unusual panel. By breaking with the established grid page layout of "Terror," the panel draws attention to the characters and their actions, rendering the depicted moment memorable and narratively meaningful. It does so by separating out these two characters from the others, while also evoking the panel on the first page where the comics' title appeared in a similarly unusual comics panel (Figure 24). By repeating the title panel's

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use of white space in a borderless panel, the second-last panel encourages readers to associate the title of the comics, “Terror,” with what unfolds between the two dots: they are subjecting or subjected to terror.

Along the same line, the absence of the panel frame metaphorically suggests an erasure of boundaries and order; their absence urges readers to infer that “Terror” has taken over. It follows that although space-as-form does not directly inform readers about the state of mind of the dark green dot and the light blue dot, through braiding and visual metaphors it still provides hints that readers can interpret to reach an understanding about what the characters may be experiencing in the panel. Finally, the presentation of space in the last panel of the comics’ concluding page once again breaks with its established pattern; in it, the setting is coloured in red. The dots, however, have not been tainted by the red filter, but their number has considerably increased. Considered in relation to the previous panel and the narrative context as a whole, the filtering may mark an increasing violence or feeling of anger, symbolized by the colour red, that is spreading in the storyworld and affecting the characters within it. In this case, as in the two aforementioned examples, it is possible for readers to writerly interpret the spatial divergences in layout and setting as cuing the thoughts and feelings of the dots in the panel in question.

As a whole, characterization in “Terror” depends on readers’ writerly genre-based inferences and thus necessarily remains open to revision and reinterpretation. As Henriette Heidbrink remarks in relation to literature in general, “certain narrative settings are supposed to motivate certain acts or call for certain types of actions and agents, but the exact rule of the interactions between the hero and the semantically and topologically

structured textual environment remains unclear" (82). In "Terror," the setting, the movements in space of the characters, the characters' constellation, and other spatial clues enable readers to identify the dots as characters and attribute states of minds to them. However, due to the indeterminate representation of the dots and the absence of verbal cues, it is impossible to know for sure who the characters are, what they are thinking, feeling and doing, and what unfolds in the narrative. Despite the indeterminacy of characterization, it is necessary for the dots to be characterized for "Terror" to even tell a story, as it is readers' visually-based writerly inferences that turn a fairly abstract rendering into a plausible narrative. As can be expected, the resulting narrative is indeterminate as well. To me, for instance, "Terror" addresses random acts of public violence and raises the issue of peace officers as actual violent offenders, thus turning the full comics into a reflection on police brutality. It goes without saying that the current North American political climate influenced my reading of this highly abstract narrative. Other readers will likely have other and as equally meaningful writerly interpretations.

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This study of "Terror" showed that even when characters do not physically resemble humans and readers are given no direct access to their minds, readers can and often will rely on space to identify and characterize characters. The repetition of shapes and their movements throughout the comics spatial setting suggests that they may be characters in need of characterization. The movements of the moving shapes must appear motivated, though, to communicate characters' minds, even if only indeterminately. After bringing to mind possible stereotypical characters evoked by the setting, readers writerly process the shape's movements, interpreting what they see in relation to the setting by

considering how characters interact with it. Readers can also consider how possible characters occupy space and how they relate to each other to understand what may motivate them to behave in a certain way. Readers can gain insight into a character's state of mind in specific moments in the narrative by examining the spatial relations and other spatially- and visually-informed details of character presentation, including the page layout. Therefore, although there are no cues of mind that convey the thoughts and emotions of the dot characters, by writerly engaging with the text, readers of "Terror" can still engage in the process of characterization.

The analysis in this section thus supports Robert's claim that if comics characters seem to manifest a "psychological state" or mind, "it is the product of the bodies, their relative positioning, the relationship between the characters, the setting and the architecture of the scenario" (229; my translation). At times, though, the setting (or part of it) becomes a character, as in Josh Simmons's *House*. In what follows, I examine *House* to ask what prompts readers to identify and characterize the setting as a character despite its unreadable mind and absence of a body.

Spatial Predominance and Active Space as Sentience: Characterizing the Non-Anthropomorphized Setting in *House*

House (2007),[77] by Josh Simmons, is a black-and-white silent horror comics that relates the adventures of three nameless protagonists, a young man and two young women, one blonde and one brunette, who explore a dilapidated manor in a forest. The story is straightforward: the three young characters visit different spaces inside the house

[77] I am unable to provide detailed references for *House* due to its lack of pagination.

as their relationships with each other evolve and gain in complexity as the blonde-haired woman and the man become romantically involved, and the brown-haired woman does not seem pleased about it. About mid-way into the narrative, the characters find a hidden passageway near a fireplace that leads them into the house's underbelly, where they eventually get separated from each other, get hurt, and find themselves trapped as the narrative concludes. This brief summary does not do justice to *House*'s complex narrative unfolding, whereby indeterminate images progressively prompt readers to writerly piece together that the house may not only be the setting of this mysterious tale, but a character. This process, in turn, generates a feeling of horror and suspense that keeps readers engaged and guessing at what is happening until the very end of the narrative, and even beyond.

Whether or not the house is a character in the story is central to the indeterminacy at the core of *House* and to the writerly engagement of readers with it. As Simmons reveals in an interview with Kristy Valenti, the house "is almost like the fourth character in the book . . . I think houses can have a very particular personality, depending on what went on there" (88-89). Simmons's hesitant categorization of the house as almost like a character serves as a starting point for my examination of the complex process that turns spaces—typically considered part of the setting—into characters. Although a place may be configured as having a kind of personality and be perceived to be cozy, cold, or frightening, for example, a sense of a place's atmosphere is not enough to identify it as a character with a mind. This chapter section asks by what means is a space made alive and akin to a character with thoughts, feelings, and motivations.

As yet, comics scholars have argued that anthropomorphizing is the primary technique behind the characterization of inanimate objects and other setting elements. For instance, Mikkonen argues that the apartment building in Chris Ware's *Building Stories* "has thoughts and emotions," while the automated house in Wally Wood's "There Will Come Soft Rains" has "a sense of time," and, more generally, "several humanlike qualities" that manifest in speech or thought balloons, including "a voice" (*The Narratology of Comics Art* 176). For him, these and similar standard cues of mind "allow the reader to imagine the house as a potential character who is at least to some degree, no matter how illusory, a sentient and anthropomorphic being" (Mikkonen, *The Narratology of Comics Art* 176). In other comics, inanimate objects come to life, transform themselves, and start moving throughout the narrative setting as animate entities with minds of their own. In such instances, they present as anthropomorphized characters that although not human-looking, move and behave like humans (Baetens, *Rebuilding Story Worlds* 22). In *House*, there are no such anthropomorphic cues: speech or thought balloons are not used to convey the house's state of mind, and the house does not somehow become animate, moving around, acting and reacting the way a humanlike character would or could. Nonetheless, for Simmons, as for astute readers, the house in *House* can be read as a character endowed with a mind of its own. As in *Equinoxes* and "Terror," in *House* too, indeterminate spatial cues enable readers to identify and writerly characterize the house as a character in its own right.

The privileged and attention-grabbing paratextual space of the title and comics cover is an example of space-as-form that provides the first hint that the house may be a character. As Mikkonen remarks, in comics "the identification of the protagonists

probably takes place already before the reading" because of "extratextual reasons" such as "the title and the cover image tell[ing] us who the protagonists are" (*The Narratology of Comics Art* 180). Mikkonen's observation applies to comics such as Barbara Yelin's *Irmina* or Jérémie Moreau's *Max Winson* that use the name of the main character for the book's title and use a drawing of the character for a cover image. *House*'s case is more complex, though. Whereas Irmina and Max Winson are names that can easily evoke a (humanlike) character, House refers to a physical structure, thus making it less obvious to readers that the title may be referring to the comics's protagonist. The lack of a determiner that would more pointedly suggest that the story is about a particular house further complicates the characterization of the house. Moreover, another complication arises because instead of showing a house, the cover of Simmons's *House* features an image of an older man shown from the torso up (Figure 28).[78] He wears a double-breasted navy military jacket and has a full grey beard and grey hair. His expression is stern, and his eyes are invisible; only a black shadow or gaping hole marks where the eyes should be, giving the portrait an eerie feeling. This man may be a character in the comics and he may even be House, but it is unclear who he is. Therefore, because the paratextual space does not at this point suggest that the house is a character, the unexplained title and cover image can still spark the curiosity of readers, inviting them to look for both the house and the man in the comics. The paratextual space thus facilitates the writerly identification of the house and the portrait it contains as characters by giving them significance.

[78] As discussed in a later part of this section, the image of the man on the cover is a close-up of a painted portrait placed above a fireplace mantel in the last room the three characters visit.

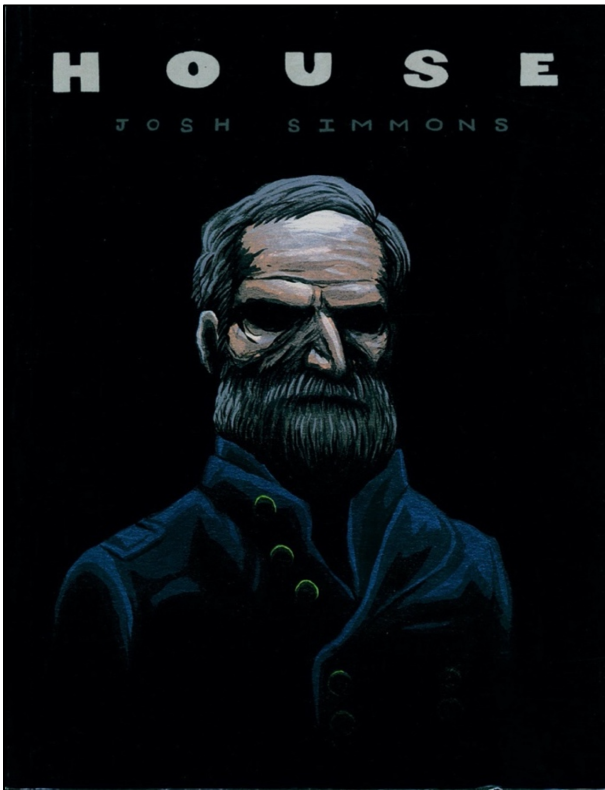

Figure 28. The paratextual space of the cover provides the first clue that the house is a sentient character in the comics. Josh Simmons, *House* (Fantagraphics Books, 2007). Reprinted with permission of the artist.

That the house features predominantly throughout the entire comics and even spatially dominates the characters through various spatial techniques strongly suggest that it is more than the setting for the adventures of the three human characters. Readers are first introduced to the house through the male character who sees it 'peering' out from a clearing in the forest. The house is shown from a low angle, towering over the young man who walks in its direction; the suggestion is that the house is a powerful entity that could subject the human to its will (Figure 29a). On the following two-page spread, the house once more takes visual precedence over the young man. An aerial shot exposes the gigantic dimensions of the house and its architectural details, rendering it as an imposing building that fills a vast portion of the image and presents the young man as a small,

barely visible element among the trees in the background (Figure 29b; see the red arrow that I added here for emphasis). The spatial and visual contrast established between the highly detailed and visually dominant house and the more simplistic human character remains in place throughout the narrative. These artistic choices mark the house, and not the human character who often blends into the spatial environment, as central to the narrative's construction and signification.

The house features so predominantly that it functions similarly to what Jan Baetens observes in the comics series *Les Cités Obscures*:[79] "the [humanlike] character becomes instead the observer of a spatial environment whose formal and thematic properties, as well as its incessant metamorphoses, prove to be the real protagonist of the series. . . .The main character is the setting, the architecture, the space" ("Un chronotope à personnage ajouté" 121-122; my translation). In *House*, too, the presence and actions of the human characters who explore the house's nooks and crannies expose the house's different facets and the diversity of its spaces, including underwater spaces, rooftop space with a view over the forest, long spacious corridors, and hidden staircases that seem to descend to the bowel of the earth. The house, in turn, changes and develops in complexity with each room or space the human characters visit, revealing itself to be a character in its own right. As the narrative unfolds, the house's structure and the way its spaces look function as an archeological remnant that bestows upon the house a history or backstory and provides a sense of what the house is like.

[79] Only the first five books of the series (out of eleven) were published in English, under the name *Cities of the Fantastic* (rather than the literal translation 'The Obscure Cities').

These clues encourage readers to writerly identify the house not as a setting in which the actions of characters take place, but as a character with a mind of its own. Here, as is often the case in the horror genre, "exploring an old, unfamiliar house is an activity that involves engaging with the 'strangely familiar.' It is often its 'character,' its anthropomorphism and idiosyncrasy, that tempts its new owners or investigators up the drive, or path, to its door" (Curtis 31). It is because the human characters visit and engage with the unfamiliar, large space that the house gains a personality and becomes a sentient house.

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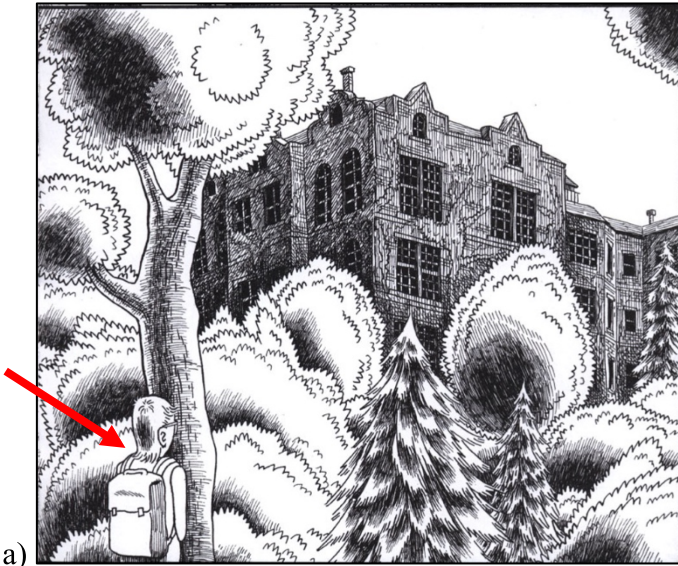

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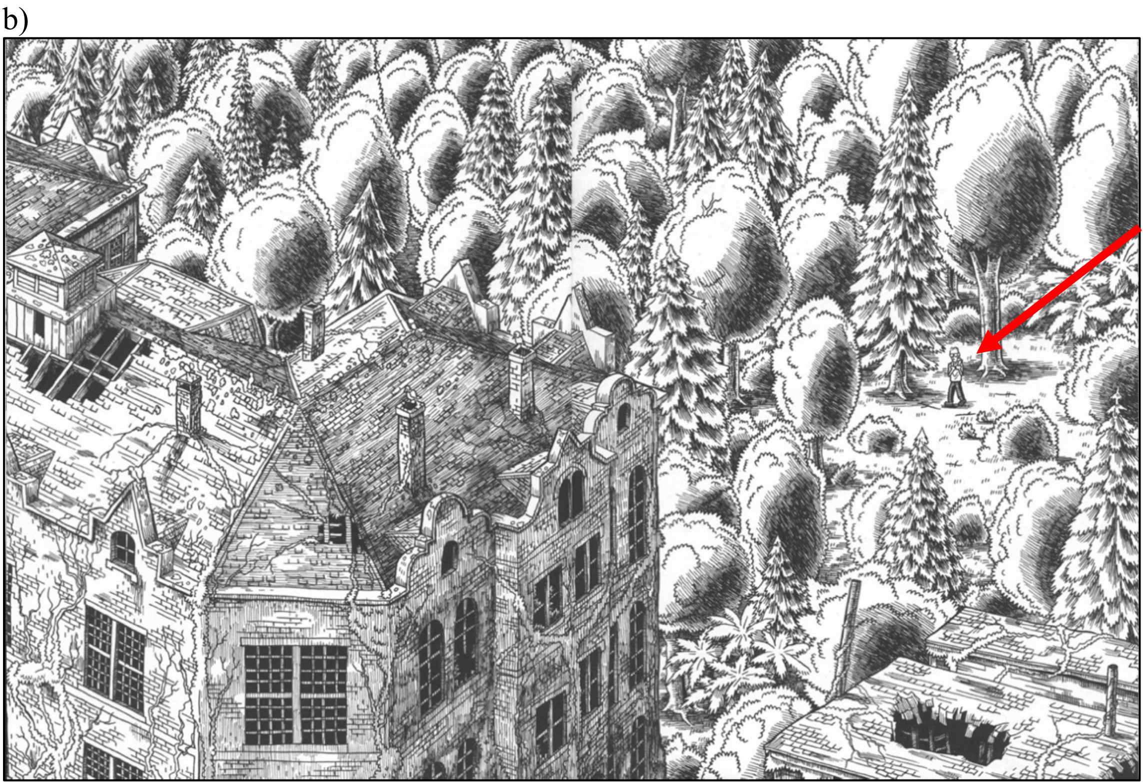

Figure 29. From its introduction, the house's visual predominance over the human characters suggests that it is a character and not a setting. Josh Simmons, *House* (Fantagraphics Books, 2007). Reprinted with permission of the artist.

Sentient houses abound in supernatural literature, horror fiction, and other types of haunted stories, such as the one presented in *House*.[80] Cristiana Pugliese, who offers one of the most thorough overviews of these types of houses-as-characters, argues that sentience "may range from full consciousness and self-awareness to mere reaction to stimuli. A truly sentient house is one that has some kind of will of its own" (Pugliese 301). Fictional houses display their sentience as they "react and/or interact with their environment and human inhabitants in various ways" (Pugliese 303). Authors of haunted stories often "opt for houses that either have ghosts or contain the energies of dead people," such as a dead previous owner who haunt the place, or houses that "pose a deadly threat their human inhabitants" (Pugliese 303-304) by forcing them into dangerous, horrendous, or truly evil situations through various means, including undergoing a metamorphoses. In these types of stories, the house actively exerts a threat on the other beings within its confines, thus urging readers to perceive it as a sentient house, as a living character with some awareness, thoughts, and feelings that push it to act.

It is common in horror fictions for "portraits, as representations of previous owners, or of unknown people, . . . [to] occupy an ambiguous atemporal psychic space" and "photographs of previous owners" to operate as "early signs that the house is still possessed by other subjectivities and narratives" (Curtis 66; 124). In *House,* the eerie image of the bearded man in the navy military jacket on the cover of the comics is revealed to be a portrait hanging over the fireplace mantel in the last room the three

[80] As is the case in *House*, sentient houses in horror fiction are also often named (e.g., "The Fall of the House of Usher," by Edgar Allan Poe).

human characters explore before they discover a passageway to the hidden stairs that lead to the house's underbelly. Different techniques draw attention to the portrait throughout the comics: 1) it is present both on the book's front and back covers, which are notable spaces in book design; 2) it is the only painting in the whole house that has not been damaged, destroyed, or turned around, which marks the portrait as a different type of image that is worth taking note of; 3) it appears—only partially, at times—in ten panels over a four-page sequence, again drawing notice to it; and 4) it captures the sustained attention of all three characters, who examine it across four panels (Figure 30). In addition, the repetition (or braiding) of the portrait throughout *House* works in conjunction with horror conventions to encourage readers to scrutinize the portrait and to writerly infer that the man whose portrait haunts the comics pages may be possessing the house.[81] In other words, readers may attribute a mind to the house and characterize it according to the traits they see the portrayed man having based on his stern, mysterious, and/or menacing appearance.

Whereas repeated spatial details such as the portrait encourage readers to writerly envision the house as a sentient building, the setting itself prompts readers to see the house as being 'alive' and able to act even if it does not move. As is often the case with the representation of sentient houses, the manor in *House* seems to be bigger on the inside than on the outside. For instance, when the characters discover a partially underwater village made up of several houses within the otherwise big, but still realistically proportioned manor, readers are made to understand that the house is a morphing entity

[81] Round describes braiding as "a haunting, an echo of something previously existent in the story" (*Gothic in Comics and Graphic Novels* 64).

that resembles a character in its ability to change and present as something other than its original or surface appearance. Moreover, and more significantly, the house also acts upon itself and others and indirectly makes others act; it thus behaves as characters do. For instance, although the house is in shambles and is heavily barricaded to prevent people from entering it, it inexplicably has one door whose pristine condition attracts the human characters: the two women are shown in front of it as if they are waiting for the man to arrive. The door also invites the characters into the interior space of the house: it is unlocked and the characters only have to move a rock to get inside the house though its main entry point. Inside, the house happens to have an intact and (possibly deliberately!) poorly concealed door or passageway to a secret staircase that the characters cannot resist exploring.

Although the house is not shown to be directly acting upon the human characters, the attraction it exerts on them is such that the house indirectly initiates the action that pushes the narrative forward, ultimately leading the human characters to their demise. Indeed, as the human characters descend the staircase into the darkness of the house's underbelly, the house acts as an adversary: parts of the staircase collapse, injuring the blonde woman and forcing the characters apart, and otherwise unaccountable forces ambush the brunette and the man in a dark underground tunnel. As the brunette tries to escape from the house's underbelly, she runs into a wall that knocks her unconscious, while a ghost-like figure frightens the man and ultimately leads him to yet another small passageway and even further down into the bowels of the house. Through its ability to endanger its visitors, and take autonomy away from the human characters, the house in *House* presents as what Robert describe as an "acting-setting" (Robert 101; my translation

of “*décor-actant*”) or, as Baetens puts it, an “architectural element [that] is the fundamental driver of the action” (*Rebuilding Story Worlds* 22). It thus occupies an active narrative role traditionally associated with characters. In *House*, the house’s living sentience is evident in its ability to morph and trigger actions in or exert force upon other characters who, through their dwindling agency and their reactions to the house’s doings, provide insights into the house’s state of mind to readers who writerly engage with what they see.

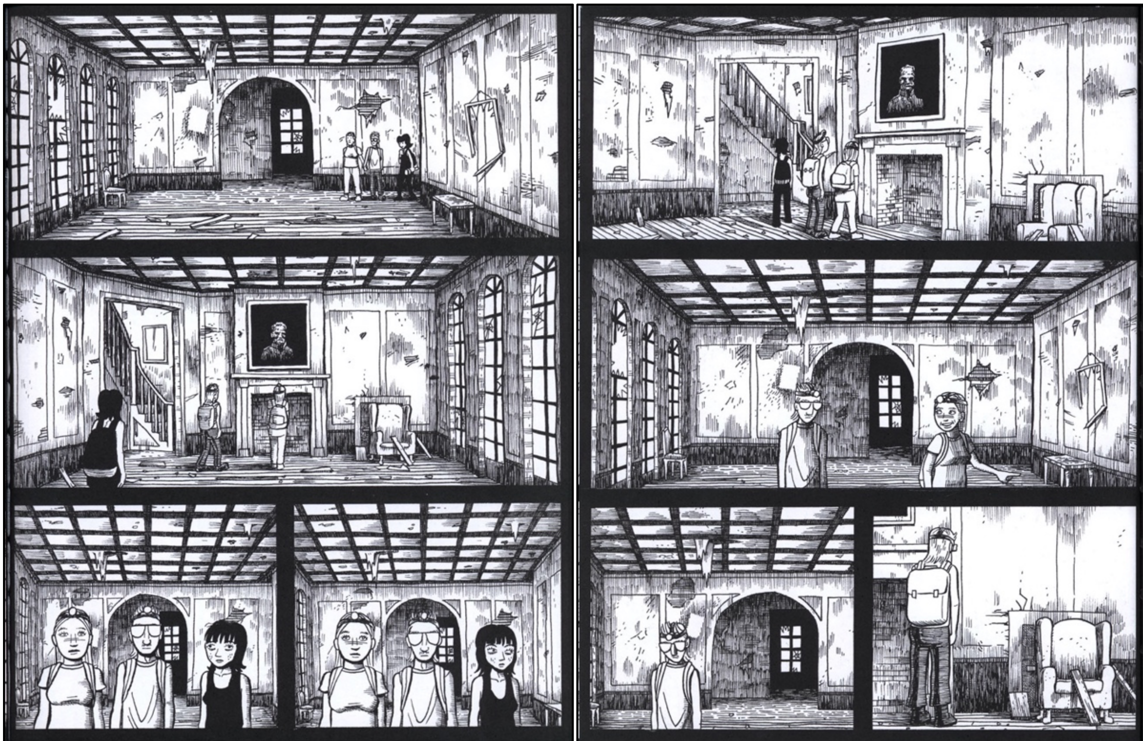

Figure 30. The accentuated, haunting presence of the portrait in these two consecutive pages suggests that the house may be possessed by the man in the portrait. Josh Simmons, *House* (Fantagraphics Books, 2007). Reprinted with permission of the artist.

Just as spatial changes in the house’s material appearance subtly suggest that the house may be consciously harming its visitors, the comics layout, too, spatially provides additional indirect (and writerly-dependent) cues of the house’s mind. Simmons

accentuates the importance of the book's layout in an interview, declaring that "*House* had to be very precisely planned out because of the structure of the book, with the shrinking panels" (Valenti 83). *House* is laid out so that each page progressively contains more panels, from one panel spread over two pages at the beginning of the story to more than eight panels per page at its climax when the characters try to escape from the house's underbelly, and cannot. At the same time that the panels shrink in size, the black space of the gutter increases, to the point of covering the full page at the end of the book. *House* does not maintain a consistent layout, but adopts what is best described (following Benoit Peeters's terminology) as a "productive" layout whereby "the organization of the page . . . seems to dictate the narrative" ("Four Conceptions of the Page"). Indeed, a closer look at the working of the shrinking panels and the increasing gutter space these enable suggests that the layout conveys the house's thoughts and feelings. Together, they spatially encourage readers to writerly interpret the black gutter space as a visual manifestation of the house's mind: they function as focalization cues that guide characterization.

The first few pages in *House* make use of a lot of white space, including only some sparse black lines and barely any gutter space at all (Figure 31). However, as soon as the man enters the forest and notices the house behind some trees, the images darken, the drawing style becomes heavily hatched, and the black of the gutter space becomes more noticeable as its line thickens (Figure 32). As a result of this sudden shift in the black to white ratio on the page and the increasing size of the black gutter space, both of which occur as soon as the house is introduced in the comics, readers are encouraged to writerly associate the colour black and the black gutter space with the house.

From this point onwards, the house—its features, its passageways, its décor, its structure—dominates the narrative, while the layout with its shrinking panels and increasing gutter size can be interpreted as conveying the house's state of mind. The technique becomes particularly noticeable in the staircase sequence that leads the characters to their death and concludes the comics. At this central point in the narrative, the house is no longer an exciting place to visit for the human characters, but rather a dangerous building from which they must escape. Unfortunately for the characters, the house prevents them from leaving and traps them further and further in its underbelly. Although the panels keep shrinking and darkening, and the visual content of the panel becomes less detailed, details in the house's architecture remain heavily featured to visually remind readers of its dominating presence and power over the destiny of the human characters. The colour black, too, becomes progressively more prominent as the diegetic black spaces of the house and its dark corners blend in with the black space of the gutter, thus visibly tying together the physical space of the house to the space of the gutter space through a shared blackness (Figure 33). At the same time, the combination of an increasing gutter space and shrinking panels visually crushes the distressed characters. In *House*, page layout thus spatially conveys the house's state of mind. Because of what readers already know about sentient houses, they may writerly interpret the shrinking panels and increasing gutter space as the house tightening its grip around its victims until they eventually disappear from view, swallowing them whole as indicated by the black gutter space that finally takes over on the last and entirely black page of the comics. In *House*, space-as-setting suggestively overlaps with space-as-form as the layout gives the impression that the sentient house is a maleficent predator of its occupants.

Figure 31. Before the house is introduced, the colour white dominates the visuals, and the gutter is only marked by a very thin black line. Josh Simmons, *House* (Fantagraphics Books, 2007). Reprinted with permission of the artist.

Figure 32. Once the house is introduced, the images become darker and the gutter space thickens. Josh Simmons, *House* (Fantagraphics Books, 2007). Reprinted with permission of the artist.

Notwithstanding the assertion that the house is a character, it is not possible to know for sure who or what is behind the house's mind, as is often the case with sentient houses in horror fiction. As Pugliese notes, "these houses pose a deadly threat to their human inhabitants, whilst the source of their powers and their motives remain incomprehensible" (305). In *House*, indeterminacy characterizes writerly readings of the house: the house may be alive, conscious, and intelligent, acting or pushing others to act in certain ways and employing agents, such as ghosts, to hurt its visitors, or it may not be in control of its mind, but possessed by the bearded man in the portrait and forced to act according to his desires. Alternatively, the house's mind may reflect the haunted or anxious mind and inner turmoil of its visitors, as suggested by one of Simmons's interviewers (Valenti 88). Differing writerly interpretations are made possible because space cues mind indeterminately. For instance, some layout changes in the form of blank black panels may be interpreted in many different ways. These blank black panels are unquestionably—and sparsely—used throughout *House* to mark a shift in location and storyline (see Figure 33, where they indicate a transition between a comics sequence that takes place underwater inside the house and the one on the next page that takes place on the house's roof). These blank panels are also used in the staircase sequence where they indicate a shift from one human character's storyline to another as they separately try to escape the house, as in the bottom left corner of Figure 34, where the young man's storyline ends and the brown-haired woman's begins. These blank panels can also be interpreted as cues of focalization as is often the case with blank panels, but their origin and actual meaning remain uncertain. Because these panels appear when human characters are experiencing strong emotions, such as when the young man and the blond

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woman kiss for the first time or when the characters get injured in the staircase sequence, it is possible for readers to presume that they convey the state of mind of the human characters. But, once again, it is also possible for readers to writerly interpret these blank black panels as suggestive that the house is turning a blind eye to or does not desire to witness what transpires in the scene. *House* thus follows the convention of the sentient-house genre, whereby the cause of the sentience must remain "an insoluble puzzle" (Pugliese 317).

Figure 33. The blank black panels that punctuate the narrative can be interpreted in many ways, including as cues of House's mind. Josh Simmons, *House* (Fantagraphics Books, 2007). Reprinted with permission of the artist.

Keith Eggener explains this process of fear creation in sentient house narratives thusly: "Buildings are just cold bricks and mortar. They do not want to hurt us. They do not want anything. But imagine if they did. Imagine that a building really did have will, that it wanted to be something, and that what it wanted was to be bad. Now that would be scary." It is not clear what about a sentient house triggers fear. For some scholars, "the real horror in sentient houses ... is the revelation that the family [or people] at the center of the haunting is fragile and can be easily damaged beyond repair" (Starling 68), thus sparking anxiety about the fragility of the family unit or the powerlessness of humans, for instance. Others propose that sentient houses induce fear because "they defy the boundaries between domestic and natural space, the wild and the domesticated subject and object, and the animate and inanimate" (Wilson 201-202).[82] In this case, fear—or, at the very least, discomfort—stems from the challenges sentient houses pose to categorical binary ways of thinking and the sense of blur or great unknown they ask readers to experience. In all instances, indeterminacy is key to bringing readers to writerly engage with the sentient house in different ways to trigger familiar fearful reading experiences.

[82] As this chapter argued, sentient houses also defy the boundaries between characters and settings.

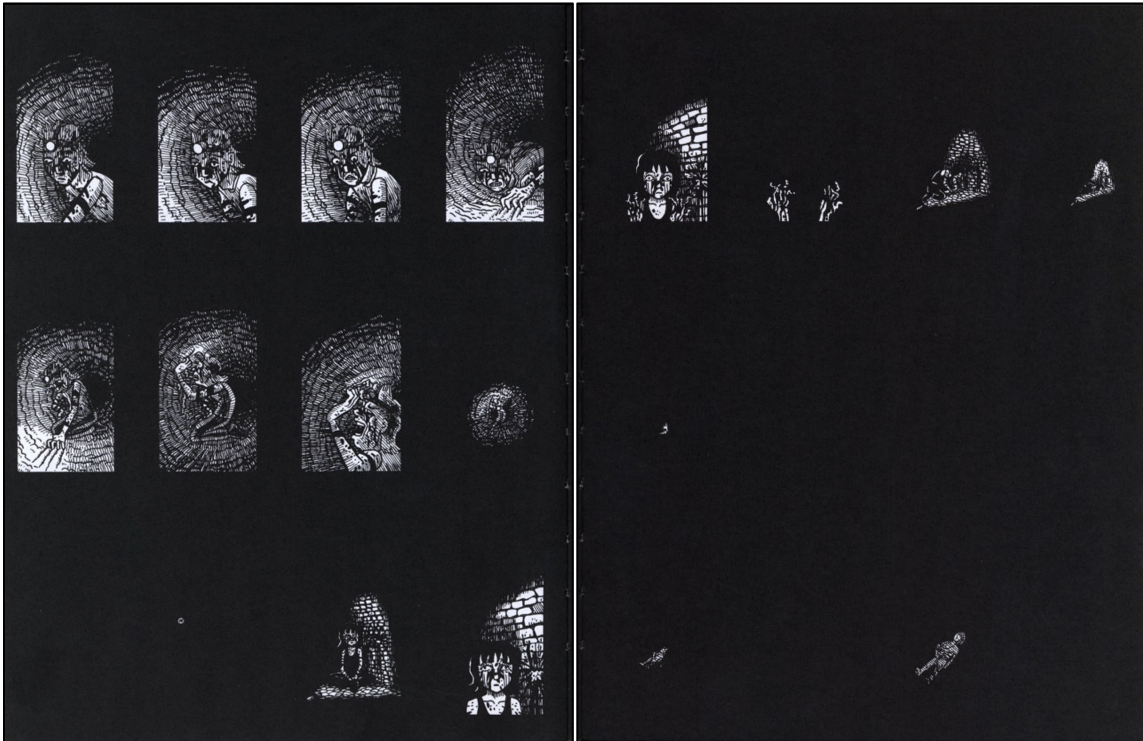

Figure 34. In the staircase sequence, although the panels shrink, the house's architectural details remain heavily featured, while the increasing black gutter and negative space visually entrap the human characters and separate storylines. Josh Simmons, *House* (Fantagraphics Books, 2007). Reprinted with permission of the artist.

Overall, this analysis of *House* argued that comics readers can ascribe sentence to and characterize setting or features of setting even when they are not anthropomorphized or associated with explicit cues of mind. In *House*, the use of the name of the setting for the book's title, which presents on the cover space, invites readers to consider the house depicted throughout the narrative as something more narratively significant than a mere background for the characters. This pre-reading consideration is reinforced throughout the narrative, since the visual dominance of the house over the other characters in the storyworld accentuates its preponderant role. Employing the common horror fiction trope of the sentient house, which often makes it resemble and behave like a character, *House*

urges readers to read the house's mind through spatial details. Steeped in a long tradition of conventional use, these spatial details show the house's mind in action as it acts upon the characters who are exploring it. Finally, changes in the formal, spatial presentation of *House*'s narrative can be visually linked to the house and can (indeterminately) communicate its state of mind through layout changes. Readers are thus able and even urged to writerly interpret the book's setting as a character, regardless of where the actual location or origin of its mind may be.

Conclusion

This chapter highlighted the importance of space as form and as content for the identification and characterization of comics characters and their impact on the writerly engagement of readers. Specifically, I focused on comics that use spatial devices to prompt readers to identify non-human figures as characters while at the same time thwarting their characterization by not supplying overt cues of mind. In these situations, it is not the absence of narrative information per se that triggers reader engagement, but rather the puzzle caused by the tension between the visual attention given to a particular narrative feature, such as a dot or a house, and the lack of cues of mind that would enable readers to characterize that feature. This enticing tension encourages readers to writerly engage with the visuals to solve the issue they are faced with, namely, how to characterize a comics characters whose minds are—seemingly—unreadable.

As my close readings of *Equinoxes*, "Terror," and *House* lead me to conclude, in cases of unreadable characters, space and spatial cues can facilitate character identification and writerly characterization. This chapter discussed several ways in which

space-as-form and space-as-content can cue mind, and exposed how the narrative's spatial structuring, the layout of pages and the comics as a whole, and the spatial positioning of characters in a panel can contribute to a highly personalized characterization process that invests readers. It reinforced this observation by drawing attention to setting and its details and highlighting how the personal experiences or genre expectations it evokes filters into the characterization process.

It was also suggested that this process of writerly characterization affects how readers may engage with the narrative as a whole. As Robert writes in a different context, "if the reader resists, if he does not accept the play of space and the play space offered to him by the comic strip, then he remains on the surface of things, understands nothing, and enjoys nothing, and the comic strip itself fails as a 'device' in its appeal to the reader" (Robert 239; my translation). Although not the main focus of this chapter, I briefly showed how spatially-informed characterization can influence reader engagement by enabling readers to construe a narrative (e.g., "Terror"), to attribute a mood or atmosphere to it (e.g., *House*), or arrive at its possible thematic meaning (e.g., *Equinoxes*). Future research in this area may uncover more ways in which space-as-form, space-as-content, and characters interrelate to affect not only characterization, but other aspects of narration in comics storytelling as well.

The next chapter continues to investigate indeterminate images that trigger the engagement of readers with mind, but whereas Chapter One and Two were about characters, Chapter Three focuses on narrators. Particular attention will be given to the way altered and fabricated documents included in an otherwise drawn comics universe raise uncertainty in readers, prompting them to notice and writerly respond to the

manipulative, confused, or ambivalent mind of the narrator who compiled them. Such a process, as I show, contributes to reader immersion.

Chapter Three

Beware of Appearances: The Visual Alterations of Documents as Writerly Immersive Focalization Cues

The previous chapter demonstrated how the storyworld's visual presentation can spatially cue the minds of characters and thus contribute to characterization. These markers are relatively subtle and demand not only that readers closely examine the image, but also writerly engage and interpret the storyworld's overall presentation to determine the character's thoughts and feelings. This chapter continues to examine minds, but this time to consider how the inclusion of different types of images, such as photographs, facsimiles, and other visual documents in an otherwise entirely drawn comics narrative can convey the narrator's mind. It opens by detailing how the increasingly common practice of incorporating different types of images in comics has been examined primarily for the pressure it puts on reader immersion. Following this theoretical overview, the chapter then explores how the opposite can hold true. It argues that the inclusion of other types of images in an otherwise drawn comics narrative can positively impact reader immersion, especially when their authenticity as documentary evidence is challenged, either by tampering with the original image or reflecting upon it, for example. In such instances, the different types of images incorporated into the drawn comics narrative present as cues of focalization, prompting readers to tease out what the images mean and what they suggest about the state of mind of the narrator-focalizer and about the narrative's overall meaning.

The building of a storyworld is at the basis of all narratives. As H. Porter Abbott declares, "world-making is a defining feature of narrative" (*The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* 173), and narratives are, for readers, "blueprints for a specific mode of world-creation" (Herman, *Basic Elements of Narrative* 105). At the very least, narratives provide readers with "a space in which things can exist and events can occur; a duration or span of time in which events can occur; and a character or characters who can be said to be inhabiting the world" (M. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds* 154). Although a spatiotemporal setting and storyworld agents are necessary components to build a storyworld, they are not all there is to it. As Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon argue, "physical laws," "social rules and values," and events, including mental ones, are also constitutive of storyworld (35-36). Indeed, storyworlds are "experiential" (M. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds* 25); they are for readers "mental models of the situations and events being recounted—of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what manner" (Herman, "Narrative Ways of Worldmaking" 73). Reading a narrative thus consists in readers building and immersing themselves in an imaginary storyworld that is itself filtered through the consciousness and experiences of narrators and characters.

Narrative world-making is only possible if readers join in its building and are able "to frame inferences about the situations, characters, and occurrences either explicitly mentioned in or implied by a narrative text or discourse" (Herman, *Basic Elements of Narrative* 106-107).[83] Central to this process of world-building is what Marie-Laure Ryan

[83] For a more comprehensive explanation of the steps involved in the process of world-building, see Goodman's philosophical approach (*Ways of Worldmaking* 7-17), Herman's translation of Goodman's model in narratological terms (*Basic Elements of Narrative* 77-78), or W. Wolf (*Building Imaginary Worlds* 18-20; 30-32).

calls the "principle of minimal departure" (*Possible Worlds* 48-60) and Kendall Walton, the "reality principle" (*Mimesis* 144-150), which posits that "unless we are told otherwise, we assume that the fictional world is a simulacrum of the world we live in" (Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* 151). Readers, in other words, rely on their own real-world experiences and build upon "the cues provided by the text" to "simulate mentally the changes that take place in the storyworld" and follow the narrative (Ryan, "The Aesthetics" 33). Walton calls these textual cues "props" in games of "make-believe" ("Metaphor and Prop Oriented Make-Believe" 39), thus suggesting that readers create the storyworld through the power of their imagination by drawing from their own realities to combine the textual cues and experience how story agents perceive or respond to them. In welcoming the aesthetic illusion created by the narrative text and its props and engaging in the text's game of make-believe, readers partake in a process of world-building whereby they bridge the real-world and the storyworld, which can lead them to feel immersed, absorbed, or transported[84] into the storyworld.

The reproduced photographs, maps, newspaper clippings, charts, scanned reports, and receipts that are included in the comics studied throughout this chapter are props that immerse readers in the storyworld by providing access to the minds and intentions of their focalizing agents. Although the mixing of different types of images in comics has only recently begun to garner the attention of scholars,[85] so far, they have not paid due

[84] For a more extensive list of different terms akin to immersion used by scholars, as well as a short overview of their nuances, see W. Wolf ("Illusion (Aesthetics)").
[85] See, for instance, the two special issues edited by Nancy Pedri, "The Narrative Functions of Photography in Comics" (*Image & Narrative*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2015) and "Mixing Visual Media in Comics" (*ImageText,* vol. 9, no. 2, 2017).

attention to the strategy's potential for securing reader immersion.[86] For instance, comics scholars Daniel Lawson and Margaret Flinn argue that the inclusion of photographs is a strategy meant to "surprise and cause [readers] to step out of the diegesis" (Lawson 325), interrupting the immersion of readers and distancing them from the storyworld. The visual documents, which are often rendered in a different style than that used throughout the comics, puts immersion under pressure by asking readers "to consider the narrative in which they are embedded in another way" (Lawson 325). For these comics critics, the inclusion of photographs, for instance, primarily serves an "aesthetic or documentary function" that disrupts the "narrative flow with something else (beauty, contemplation, etc.)" to foster non-narrative forms of visual appreciation (Flinn 141).

Theorizations that the introduction of other types of images in the comics universe distances readers from the narrative derive from the popular theory that medium transparency is necessary for immersion to occur and be maintained. Essentially, media[87] are said to be transparent when they do not draw attention to themselves as media and when their materiality is forgotten to the point that they appear to be simply neutral or objective narrative containers. Media transparency fosters an easy, straightforward, and immersive reading process because readers ignore the form of narrative to focus solely on

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[86] Most scholars who have considered the mixing of different types of images in comics consider it in relation to autobiography studies and issues of trauma and authenticity (e.g., Ernst; Hirsch; Pedri "Telling it Authentically"), or to reflect on the difference between drawn and photographic images (e.g., Cook; Cvetkovitch; Groensteen "L'hybridation graphique"; Pedri "Thinking about Photography in Comics").

[87] Following Besson's study, 'media' is understood as having three distinct facets: "[a] sense inscription, [a] media format and [a] milieu" (146). That is to say, all media have "singular sense inscriptions (a letter, a book, a text message, a film, a comic, a website) that take the shape within specific mediatic formats (stone, paper, screen) and are indissociable from a given milieu (a given society whose norms are the product of a specific historical moment) that is at once cultural, social, political, economical and technological" (Besson 146). Although I do not use these terms, these aspects of media inform my discussion of the mixing of different media in comics and their impact on reader engagement.

its content. Indeed, Lawson and Flinn concur with narratologist Ryan that forgetting about the narrative medium as one reads is essential to the immersive process of "recentering" whereby readers' "consciousness relocates itself to another world" (*Narrative as Virtual Reality* 103).[88] According to this theorizing, the introduction of reproduced documents in comics disturbs the narrative's presentation and thus draws attention to the media used in the storytelling. In other words, these visual documents are no longer transparent. As a result, "immersion" finds itself "hampered by difficult material" (Ryan *Narrative as Virtual Reality* 96) because, on the surface, the drawn and reproduced images do not visually form a coherent whole. Discussing multimodal novels in which different types of images combine with written text to narrate, Ryan argues with Thon that "the interruption of the process of reading" caused by readers having to jump from one medium to the next "results in a much more acute meta-semiotic awareness, or modal self-referentiality" (11). This process, the thinking goes, ultimately distances readers, who are made to reflect on the different media and to become aware of the constructed quality of the narrative.

Several narratologists, including Lawson, Flinn, Ryan, and Thon adopt a polarized model of reading, taking as a principle the theory that readers are either immersed in a narrative storyworld or they are not. As Ryan specifies, narratives can be "either self-reflexive or immersive or they can alternate between these two stances," but "they cannot

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[88] For instance, Bjørner et al. propose a model by which readers go through three steps (1. Reality, 2. Engagement, 3. Engrossment) before reaching immersion (when readers are "so involved that they detach themselves from the surroundings and lose sense of time") on the fourth step (4. Total immersion) (5). Ryan, who uses the terms immersion and absorption interchangeably, employs different keys words to sum up a four-step process: 1. concentration, 2. imaginative involvement, 3. entrancement, and 4. addiction (*Narrative as Virtual Reality* 98-99). For Ryan, this stepping into the fictional world does not mean that readers mix up reality and fiction in their minds (*Narrative as Virtual Reality* 98).

offer both experiences at the same time" (Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality* 284). In line with this thinking, the mixing of different types of images is generally seen as probing the critical or reflexive thinking of readers as they read, ultimately pushing them out of the storyworld and breaking their immersion. Recently, though, narratologists have begun to challenge or, at the very least, nuance the foundations of this dichotomous model of reading. Werner Wolf ("Aesthetic Illusion"), Jean-Marie Schaeffer and Ioana Vultur, and Barcu Dogramaci and Fabienne Liptay, among others, highlight that "in the course of the immersion process, the reader, spectator, etc. always remains conscious of the fact that he or she is indulging in a 'game of make-believe'" (Schaeffer and Vultur 238). For them, readers' reflexive awareness of engaging with a constructed storyworld is not incompatible with their immersion in the storyworld. That is to say, it is possible to be at once self-reflexive and immersed.

Some critics have responded to the dichotomous model of reading by proposing a radical view against immersion, arguing that "losing oneself in a fictional world" is only "the goal of the naïve reader or one who reads as entertainment" (Bolter 155).[89] Others warn against approaching immersion and distance as mutually exclusive reading outcomes, and re-envision them as part of the same continuum. W. Wolf, for instance, replaces the concept of immersion with that of "aesthetic illusion,"[90] which he locates on "a scale between the—as a rule excluded—poles of total rational distance and complete (and predominantly emotional) imaginative immersion in the represented or constructed

[89] For more on this point, see Ryan (*Narrative as Virtual Reality* 10).
[90] I will keep using the concept of "immersion" as it is the one that is most commonly used. My understanding of the concept is similar to W. Wolf's "aesthetic illusion," though.

world" ("Aesthetic Illusion" 16-17). He specifies that "while being predominantly a state of imaginary immersion and re-centering," aesthetic illusion "always also involves our meta-awareness that we are witnessing a representation or a medial construct only" ("Aesthetic Illusion" 16). Readers are always simultaneously caught somewhere on a spectrum "between critical distance and complete immersion" (Dogramaci and Liptay 12). Even if readers are aware and critical of the expressive features of the work, they can remain immersed in the storyworld, albeit at different degrees. This type of theorizing explains how and why, in some cases, the use of common illusion-breaking devices such as metalepsis, for instance, or even the mixing of different types of images in comics, as seen in this chapter, does not necessarily break immersion.[91]

The recent and more nuanced view of immersion has started to resonate in comics studies. Although Nancy Pedri does not explicitly say so, her scholarship on the mixing of types of images in comics aligns and supports the theory that an awareness of the medium does not necessarily trigger self-reflexivity to the point of breaking reader immersion. For her, the inclusion of different types of images in comics does not always "disrupt the coherence of storytelling" and may do more than "illustrate the story or sustain it with an evidential authority" ("When Photographs Aren't Quite Enough"). In some cases, the inclusion of documentary materials reads as equally integral to the comics narrative as cartoon drawings. Looking specifically at the inclusion of photographs in comics, she demonstrates that "instead of being subordinated to the cartoon drawings or the verbal text, the photographic images contribute on equal ground to the narrative so that the story

[91] For more on the compatibility between metalepses and immersion, see, for instance, Klimek; Limoges; Lutas; and Schaeffer ("Métalepse et immersion fictionnelle").

unfolds at the intersection of photography and cartooning and writing" ("When Photographs Aren't Quite Enough"). In her conclusion, she indirectly concurs with that of multimodal fiction theorist Wolfgang Hallet, who declares that the inclusion of documents in novels offers "a semantic, cognitive, or epistemological surplus that multiplies aspects and dimensions of the storyworld that are accessible to readers" ("The Rise of the Multimodal Novel" 153). In other words, Pedri and Hallet agree that for narrative meaning to be achieved in such multimodal texts, all types of documents and images contribute to the narrative and work together to facilitate the immersion of readers into the storyworld through their active engagement with all features of the narrative's presentation.

For readers to engage with and process the inclusion of documents in comics in a way that remains immersive, they must be "multimodally literate." They must be able to "decode and 'read' various semiotic modes and their combination in a single act of representation or communication." Such decoding is writerly or "intuition-based" at times, and especially so when images are involved (Hallet, "Reading Multimodal Fiction" 28). Such process also applies to the reading of multimodal comics. In addition to reading various sign systems, readers must also be able to interrelate the different types of images used in the comics, synthesize the narrative information collected in the various visuals, and writerly extrapolate a narrative meaning from it. Jaishree Odin describes the process thusly: "the act of reading such a discontinuous narrative involves reassembling it in imagination to grasp the relationship between its various elements," a process that invites "the reader to participate actively in the telling and untelling of the stories" (85-86). Although complex in appearance, such a process "often imitates or resembles a reader's

everyday meaning-making activities" (Hallet, "Reading Multimodal Fiction" 35).[92] If this is so, then mixing different types of images in comics and other types of texts may not create a reading experience as disruptive as Lawson and Flinn, among others, seem to imply.

Central to the argument in this chapter is the idea that the inclusion of different types of images in comics can be used to convey the state of mind of characters and narrators. As both Hallet and Pedri argue, the commingling of different documents in the narrative texts "relates to questions of focalization" (Pedri, "Photography and the Layering of Perspective"). The selection and use of different types of images "can, for various reasons, allow readers insight into the homodiegetic narrator's or any literary character's ways of 'world-making,' into their ways of looking at the world and conceiving or structuring it" (Hallet, "The Multimodal Novel" 144-145). It is their understanding that the use of various types of images can give readers access to a narrator's or a character's way of seeing the world, which, in turn, affects how readers perceive and experience the storyworld. Pedri, for instance, demonstrates that in graphic memoirs, photographs and other types of images cue focalization whenever the character-narrator, subjectively marks them through scrapbooking techniques and various other annotations ("Photography and the Layering of Perspective"; "Traumatic Layerings of Self"). Implied in their findings is the suggestion that by giving access to story agents' worldview, focalization contributes to and influences reader immersion. Contrary to what Lawson, Flinn, and others suggest, Hallet and Pedri thus indirectly establish that under

[92] See also Hallet ("The Multimodality of Cultural Experience and Mental Model Construction of Textual Worlds") for more details.

specific circumstances, the mixing of media in narratives can draw readers into the storyworld and engage them. Therefore, media transparency—if it is at all possible—is not a prerequisite to reader immersion, and it does not suffice to argue that the use of different types of images in comics creates distance between readers and what they are reading. Although such technique challenges passive reading on the part of readers who reflect on its significance within the narrative, it can either disrupt or enhance their immersion.

In extending Hallet's and Pedri's line of thinking, this chapter offers a counterpoint to Flinn's study of the inclusion of documentary evidence as a distancing strategy. Whereas Flinn surveys various ways in which reproduced images push readers out of the comics narrative, my goal is to further shed light on how different types of images in comics engage readers' reflection to retain their attention and immerse them in the narrative and its storyworld. Hence, this chapter asks: What visual strategies do comics put in place so that the mixing of different types of images contributes to an immersive reading outcome?

In answering this question, this chapter takes as a point of departure Pedri's argument that subjectively marked photographs convey the character's or narrator's standpoint and emotional investment in the lived experiences they recount, and thus contribute to the immersion of readers into the narrative and its storyworld. Markings and other types of alterations also occupy a central position in this chapter, but whereas Pedri's research examines altered photographs in graphic non-fiction exclusively, my approach is broader in the types of images and the comics genres it examines. Indeed, this

chapter considers a wide variety of images present in fictional and non-fictional comics to examine the richly engaging materiality of comics across genres.

Each chapter section starts by detailing how various visual markers alter the documents, raising doubt about their authenticity and marking them as focalization cues that serve to retain or facilitate reader immersion. Once establishing that the alterations to the images included in the comics universe shed light on the manipulative, confused, or duplicitous mind of the narrator, who is the focalizing agent behind the altered documents, each section then demonstrates that doubt seeps into other aspects of the storyworld and the narrative. The inclusion and altering of different visual documents in comics induce various forms of investigative reading experiences in readers who, to puzzle out their visually-triggered narrative uncertainties and achieve narrative coherence, are asked to writerly engage with the documents and the narrator's state of mind these relay. In doing so, readers immerse themselves in the storyworld as they writerly infer or co-create aspects of the narrative, thus deepening their engagement.

I begin by examining the commingling of different types of images in *Torso* (2001), a fictional crime comics (based on a real series of crime) by Brian Michael Bendis and Marc Andreyko. Reproduced images of documents, such as photographs, newspaper clippings, and autopsy reports, permeate the narrative. At times, they are used as photographic backgrounds or visual details in otherwise entirely drawn panels and, at other times, they stand alone, either as panels or appearing in the margins. These documents, however, are imperfect reproductions or have been altered in some way, which, I argue, bridges the ontological rift between drawn and photographic images and raises doubt about the truth or evidentiary value of the reproduced but overtly altered

images in a way that eventually encourages readers to interpret them as markers of focalization. More specifically, I demonstrate that through these alterations, *Torso*'s unknown narrator manipulates readers' narrative experience. The narrator taunts readers to closely examine the documents, while the alterations prevent them from doing so, almost always leading to frustrating results that evoke and intensify the narrative's mood and theme. The inclusion and alteration to visual documents thus productively contribute to reader immersion.

Having established that the altering of visual documents in non-fiction conveys the narrator's mind to readers, positively influencing their immersion through the doubt introduced by these alterations, I turn my attention to fictional comics, a genre that scholars interested in the mixing of different types of images in comics tend to overlook. First, I consider *Petites Coupures à Shioguni* (2015) by Florent Chavouet, a non-linear detective story presented as a police folder. This comics combines cartoon comics passages and many different types of images, including the detective narrator's handwritten notes on yellow newspaper as well as personal ID cards, maps, photographs, and newspaper clippings that the narrator has compiled. Although most of the documents look realistic, some contain elements that are obviously drawn, thus suggesting the fabricated nature of all the visual documents included in the narrative. The visible tension between realistic and non-realistic-looking documents not only invites readers to read *Petites Coupures* as a fictional text, but also prompts them to play the narrative game to solve the mystery. Readers are further invited to share in the narrator's investigative role by experiencing the confused mind of the detective narrator, who alters the visual documents with markings that raise questions without offering answers, who is very

disorganized when arranging and filing the visual documents, and is who is ultimately unable to close the case. Readers of *Petites Coupures* immerse themselves in the narrative, following the detective's work and even taking it on as they closely examine the documents for clues to writerly reach a plausible solution to the mystery.

I further explore the playful or investigative reading experience that the inclusion of visual documents in comics generates through the careful consideration of *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* (2015) by Sonny Liew, a fictional (auto-)biography made to pass as real. In telling Chye's rise as a comics artist in Singapore in the second half of the twentieth century, the narrator, Sonny, incorporates many facsimiles of Chye's comics, sketchbooks, mock-ups, advertisements, newspaper objects, and personal objects, such as family photos. First, I briefly establish that the focalized visual documents are among the strategies used throughout the book to dupe readers into believing the hoax. I then prove that they also incorporate visual metafictional techniques, such as the imitation of other artists' drawing style, the use of metalepses, or the merging of narrative voices, that alter their authenticity value and also lead readers to recast Sonny's narration as unreliable and his state of mind as ambivalent because by including the documents, he at once supports and unravels the hoax. Consequently, Sonny's narration prompts readers to revise their conception of the storyworld in which Charlie Chan Hock Chye existed from factual to fictional and reflect on the paradoxical position Sonny adopts. As I show, this process asks readers to read between the lines, to take note of and interpret the irony and double meaning inherent in the fabricated documents to only then reach a plausible meaning for the fictional, biographical narrative into which they must re-immerse themselves.

As these three examples strongly suggest, the mixing of different types of images in comics does not always disrupt reader immersion. Instead, as I argue, the use of altered documents raises doubt about their authenticity, which invites readers to consider the documents in a new light: as documents that cue focalization, rather than as documentary evidence. These documents foster uncertainty through their visual content as well, as they expose the manipulative, confused, or ambivalent state of mind of the narrator who focalizes them. The visual documents included in comics cue minds, albeit indeterminately. This renders them particularly efficient in triggering the writerly input of readers who, in making sense of them and their alterations through what they know about the mind of the narrator, supply narrative information that affects the mood and theme of the story, impacts the reconstruction of its plot, and reframes the storyworld from factual to fictional—all of which contributes to reader immersion.

Altered Visual Evidence: Responding to the Narrator's Manipulation in *Torso*

Brian Michael Bendis and Marc Andreyko's *Torso: A True Crime Graphic Novel* (2001)[93] is a true-crime black and white noir-style comics that follows the investigation into the 1930s Cleveland Torso Murderer. Apart from the gruesome nature of the murders—the Torso killer was known for dismembering his victims—and the large number of victims from marginalized groups,[94] the case also became famous for Eliot Ness's involvement in the investigation. Ness was a Chicago-based Prohibition Agent best known for leading a team of carefully selected law officers that helped incarcerate Al

[93] Henceforth, *Torso*. I am unable to provide detailed references for *Torso* due to its lack of pagination.
[94] The Torso killer killed at least twelve people, including homeless people, sex workers, and LGBTQ2SIA+ people.

Capone in 1931 on Income Tax Evasion charges. Narrated chronologically by an unknown narrator over six chapters, *Torso* begins as Ness settles into his new position as the Director of Public Safety in Cleveland, Ohio, at the time when the murders start. At first, Ness is not involved in the murder investigation. Detectives Walter Myrlo and Sam Simon lead the case, while Ness works toward eradicating Cleveland's notorious police corruption. Campaigning politicians and the press eventually pressure Ness to get involved in the murder investigation as the number of victims steadily increases. Ness, who has political ambitions, seizes the opportunity to climb the socio-political ladder, but ruins his chances when he makes the unpopular decision to raid and burn to the ground the shantytown from which the murderer abducts most of his victims. Although the investigative team made some progress on the case, the Torso killer was never officially caught.[95]

Apart from telling a sensational story, *Torso* is remarkable for its innovative use of the comics medium and yet it is seldom examined by comics scholars. Described as an "extremely sophisticated comic that will require close attention from the uninitiated" (Russell 293), *Torso* contains multiple creative, non-grid-like page layouts and, more importantly for this chapter's focus, reproduces many real-life documents throughout the narrative. Although most police files on the Torso killer have disappeared, Bendis and Andreyko researched various Cleveland archives, uncovering several documents, including crime scene photos, autopsy reports, police graphs recording information on

[95] In *Torso*, Bendis and Andreyko support the theory that Dr. Francis E. Sweeney, Congressman Martin L. Sweeney's cousin, was the killer. The police claim to have known that he was the killer, but could not arrest him because he committed himself to a psychiatric hospital following the Congressman's advice.

each murder, as well as press clippings about the case and its context.[96] The documents primarily, but inconsistently,[97] serve as the background of panels with characters drawn on top of photographic settings, [98] and also sometimes feature as their own panel.

Although they play an integral part in *Torso*'s storytelling, these documents may appear to be putting readers' immersion and coherency-building under pressure because of the inconsistent commingling of reproduced images and cartoon drawing in the same comics and even in the same panel. Indeed, as briefly addressed in this chapter's introduction, the visual combination of drawn and photographically reproduced images creates tension or an ontological incompatibility between the mediated, "eminently self-reflexive and autoreferential" (Marion qtd. in Baetens, "Revealing Traces" 149) hand-drawn depictions of characters and the indexical, referential qualities of the photographic documentary evidence as "imprint[s] or transfer[s] of the real" (Krauss 128). Whereas drawings remind readers of the subjective influence of the artists, the photographs, which are mechanically (re-)produced, seem more objective.[99] Indeed, such visual pairing is likely to first strike readers as odd because of the presence in the same panel or page of different types of images that do not fit together aesthetically and ontologically.

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[96] Bendis and Andreyko briefly explain their research process in the dossier included at the end of *Torso*. See also Skrtic (27) and Dean (101; 109). A note opening the dossier specifies that the documents reproduced there and in the comics come from the "Cleveland public library photography collection," the "Cleveland Plain Dealer," and the "Cleveland State University Cleveland Press collection and newspaper archive."

[97] That not all panels have a photographic background prevents readers from reading the inclusion of documentary evidence in *Torso* as a purely aesthetic choice to which they would eventually grow accustomed. Instead, the inconsistent use of photographic backgrounds surprises, and thus regularly draws attention to the mixing of different types of images as a deliberate visual strategy that communicates meaning.

[98] For more examples of comics that mix photographic and cartoon images in the same panel, see, for instance, *Solanin*, a manga by Asano, or *Whatever Happened to the World of Tomorrow?*, a retrofuturistic comics by Fies.

[99] As I discuss more below in the section on photography in comics, such thinking is flawed.

Reflective distance occurs as a result of this apparent incompatibility of objective and subjective images that nonetheless are made to combine and narrate together within the same narrative universe. Moreover, because photographs and other reproduced documents are only used intermittently, they also render the overall visual presentation of the storyworld inconsistent or without an easily discernable pattern. It is thus undeniable that the surprising and unpredictable inclusion of visual documents in comics can disrupt reader immersion.

Nevertheless, various visual strategies have been put in place to avoid, or at least limit, the initial distancing effect caused by the inclusion of photographic images in *Torso*. To begin, the ontological clash between the photographs and the cartoon drawing is continuously undermined. Indeed, most chapters in the comics open and conclude with a sequence of panels evoking a cinematographic fade technique whereby a dark screen progressively gains in luminosity to reveal the image (i.e., fade in) to then progressively turn darker (i.e., fade out).[100] The first chapter of *Torso*, for instance, opens with a page comprised of five superposed panels, each taking up a whole row. The panels are too abstract to allow for a precise, definite reading: all readers can see at first are dots of various sizes that, in getting smaller over several panels and across several pages, allow a photograph of trees and tall grass to progressively come into focus as more dots per inch are used. Once recognizable, this photographic image serves as the background of panels in which two drawn comics characters appear. While the visual clash between drawings and photographs might at first appear to be visually disruptive, the continuous presence of

[100] Fades do not have to fade in and out of black; they can fade in and out of other colours or fade into or out of sharpness, for instance.

the same photographic background, which originated in simple dots, serves to harmonize the two different types of images in readers' mind.

Besides reminding readers that all types of printed images are, at their core, made of dots, the use of this fade technique is also reminiscent of the halftone printing process often used in the production of comics.[101] In this way, the halftone fade in *Torso* evokes the technical, "fabricated nature" (A. Miller 123) of comics to reveal, or construct, the photographs as equally fabricated. In *Torso*, photographs present as impure, mediated, and thus subjective, fictional, and potentially narratively-charged representations. Despite their differences, the drawn and photographic images in *Torso* are revealed to be akin to each other at their core. The fade technique used throughout *Torso* thus bridges the ontological gap between the different types of images and counterbalances the initial distancing effect caused by mixing different types of images.

Details in the composition and layout of photographic images ultimately keep readers immersed. For instance, at the beginning of *Torso*'s first chapter, a visually complex and arguably confusing mixing of different types of images tests reader immersion (Figure 35). Indeed, it is not evident at first that the three panels in the centre of the page are part of the same event: the first panel on the left is entirely drawn, the second panel on the right is of a drawn woman against a blurry background that may be a photograph, a drawing, or a combination of both, and the last panel below these two depicts a drawn woman against a noisy, underexposed photograph. The commingling of different types of images in the centre of the page may momentarily put pressure on the

[101] The halftone printing process prints variously spaced (widely, closely, or overlapping) dots that when seen together create an image.

immersion of readers by making it harder for them to make the narrative cohere across the three panels. Indeed, as Kai Mikkonen explains, “stylistic variations” are typically used in comics to “indicate a change of modality, perspective, narrative situation, temporal frame, or narrative level (between frame and embedded narrative or between different storylines)” (*The Narrative of Comic Art* 115). In other words, the initial lack of visual coherence caused by the mixing of images fosters readers’ awareness of the conventions of comics, bringing them to wonder whether the shift in style marks a change of focalization, place, time, narrative level, or something else entirely. Until readers can establish a link between the different panels, their reading process and immersion remain stunted.

In *Torso*, readers must identify discrete visual cues to realize that these panels are part of the same sequence, make the narrative cohere, and consequently remain immersed in the story despite the mixing of different types of images. For instance, the distinctive 1930s car with a rear-mounted spare tire and details of the house (e.g., the garage door, the window) in the first two panels tie the panels together and, in a ripple effect, lead readers to deduce that the silhouette on the right of the drawn car in the first panel is the same female character as the one drawn against the blurry background in the second panel. Since time has passed between the first two panels, it makes sense that the car now appears behind her. The continuous presence of the woman with her distinctive hat, shawl, and grocery bag in all three panels links the third panel with the two panels that precede it, as does the fact that the third panel spatially overlaps with the other two. Similar composition and layout techniques are used throughout *Torso* to retain reader

immersion despite the shifts in style introduced with the inclusion of photographic images.

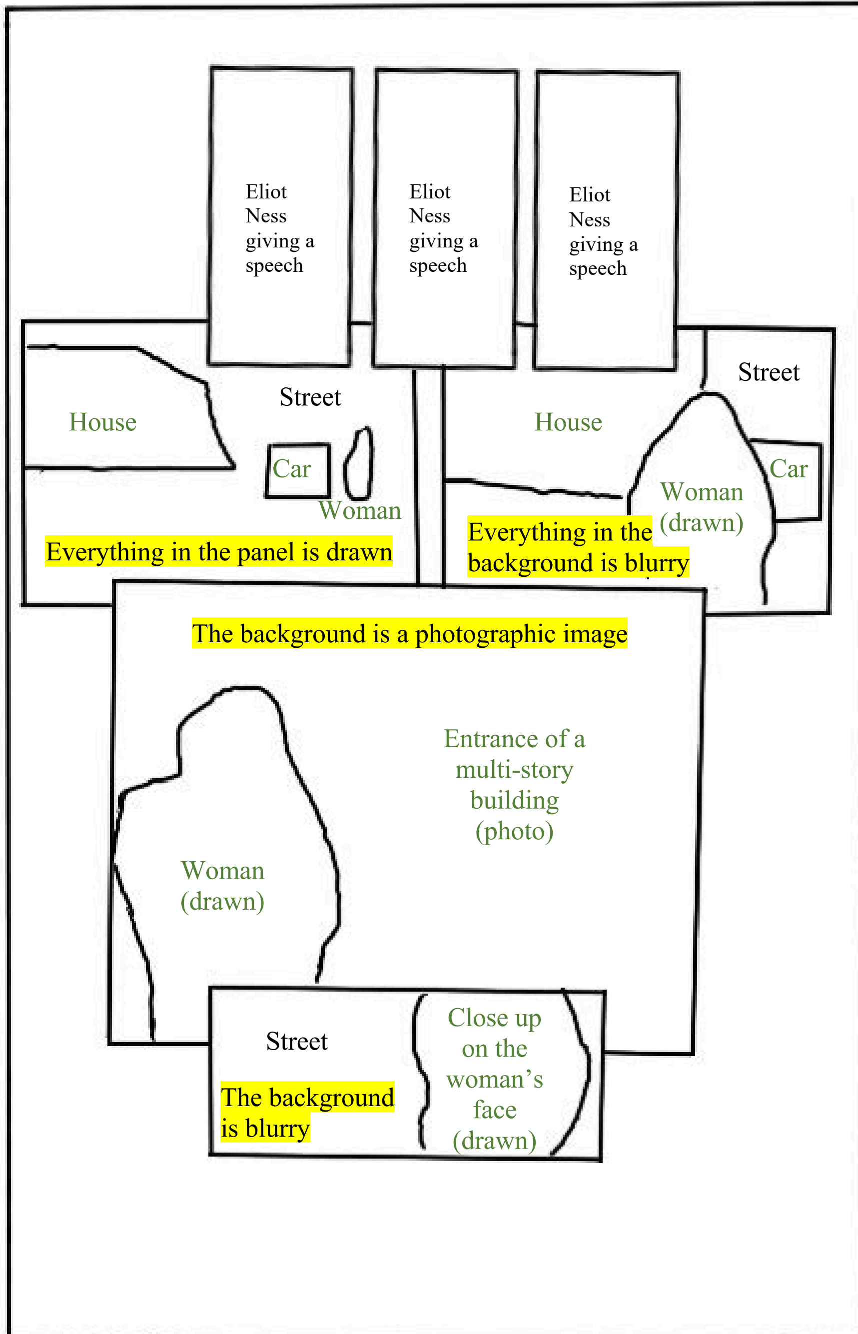

Figure 35. The three panels in the centre of this page belong together even though some employ drawn background and others photographic ones. Personal rendition modeled after Brian Michael Bendis and Marc Andreyko, *Torso: A True Crime Graphic Novel* (Image Comics, 2001).

Drawn and photographed images narrate together and in similar ways to represent the same storyworld not only when they are featured on the same page. Braided or repeated photographic images encourage readers to extend their writerly comparative reading across the whole comics. Specifically, the inclusion of a dossier at the very end of *Torso* that reproduces some of the archival documents gathered by Bendis and Andreyko activates such a reading strategy. Indeed, many images in the dossier are familiar to readers because they first appear in the narrative portion of *Torso*. The inclusion of these images both in the comics and in the dossier invites a comparison between them. As soon as readers begin comparing and contrasting the different renditions, they are likely to notice that the photographic images featured in the comics narrative are not perfect reproductions of the originals Bendis and Andreyko had at their disposition, as included in the dossier. Whereas many visual documents have been modified, others have been completely redrawn. For instance, one of the dossier images is of a hand pointing to a skull and various bones. The version in the narrative has been cropped out in a circle shape that excludes the coroner and focuses on the human remains. The quality of the photo, too, has been altered: the contrast between black and white is more pronounced in the version that appears in the comics so that the image is not as detailed in the version included in the comics storyworld. It is harder to distinguish the different bones, for instance, and identify many of the details in the original image.[102] Nonetheless, this

[102] An easy way to be sure that the images are not identical is to look at the coroner's hand. His nails are visible in the dossier photograph, while they are indistinguishable from the rest of his hand in the comics photography. Notably, the coroner in the narrative is identified as Dr. Albert Pearce, but the dossier identifies the man seen in two of these three photographs as a Dr. Gerber, further pointing to the manipulation as work in the narrative.

intriguing process of comparison and contrast works to immerse readers even more into what they are reading.

Taking note of the various degrees of manipulation, readers are likely to deduce that the image in the comics has been deliberately framed or altered as a means to influence meaning. Such visual alterations "reformulate the original photographic artifacts," which, as Pedri, who examines scrapbooking techniques, concludes, "signal a subjective adjustment to the photographic images. In other words, they signal the work of focalization" ("Photography and the Layering of Perspective in Graphic Memoir"). In *Torso*, the filtering of photographs and the information they are made to communicate come to light despite the absence of explicitly subjective hand-drawn markings that cue focalization, an aspect of the mixing of visual media Pedri and other comics scholars have yet to explore.

As argued above, the presence of photographs in *Torso*'s dossier incites readers to realize that the reproduced images in the narrative have been altered, marked, or tainted and thus cue focalization. In the absence of explicit character focalization cues,[103] readers can only infer that *Torso*'s unknown, disembodied narrator filters the visual documents. Through the subtle altering of documents, the narrator prompts readers to notice and engage with his manipulative mind. It follows that the narrator's altering of photographic documents establishes the destabilization of vision as a central narrative technique in

[103] The only exception to this statement is the sequence in Chapter 4, when an older man tells police the story of how he was abducted and managed to escape. In this sequence, the panels in which the character features have photographic backgrounds depicting the places the older man was taken to and/or visually suggesting the emotional and physical state he was experiencing. It is the only time in *Torso* that the photographs and other documents cue a specific character's mental, physical, and emotional processing.

Torso. As I argue below, through their alterations, these photographic documents hint at the photograph's inability to truthfully show, but also the readers' incapacity to see. To exploit "the dynamics of seeing and not seeing introduced by photography," as *Torso*'s narrator does, is to display the beholder's "limitations, failures, and blind spots in seeing" (S. Smith 7). In other words, by altering the photographs, the narrator manipulates readers into doubting the truth-value of photographic images as well as their own ability to see anything in them. This distrust and doubt, in turn, writerly spurs readers who engage with the differently rendered photographic images to establish how they support the narrative's mood and theme.

In *Torso*, uncertainty first arises from the tension between the culturally established truth-value of the reproduced photographic images and the narrator's overt filtering of them that raises doubt about their value as visual evidence. For Barthes and many other theorists of photography, documentary photographs like the ones included in *Torso* possess a strong "evidential force" (*Camera Lucida* 89); they are believed to carry truth-value and often function as evidence or proof of reality and real-world experience. The evidentiary status of photographic images principally rests on the medium's technical mode of production and the context in which photographs have been produced, received, and used. On the technical side, theorists like Kendall L. Walton argue that photographs are "transparent pictures," mechanically produced images that present an objective and unaltered representation of the subject, including indiscriminate details that a painter, for instance, might not have included in his representation of the same scene ("Transparent Pictures" 14-49). While many theorists disagree with such claims by accentuating how

photographs are always subjectively marked (Thompson 7),[104] Walton's understanding of photographs as replicating reality undoubtedly resonates with how photographs are usually perceived. As photographic historian and art critic Abigail Solomon-Godeau sums up, "phenomenologically, the photograph registers as pure image, and it is by virtue of this effect that we commonly ascribe to the photograph the mythic value of transparency" (180). The contexts of production and reception of photographs also contribute to the perception of their content as truthful. As John Tagg argues, "what makes the photograph real is the fact that the photograph is more than merely print and paper . . . what is real is not just the material item, but also the discursive system of which the image bears its part" (4).[105] Adopting a Foucauldian interpretative lens, Tagg approaches photographs as cultural products whose meaning and evidentiary status are for the most part ascertained by social practices and institutional powers (e.g., law enforcement, journalism agencies, etc.).[106] Be it because of the supposed transparency of the medium or because of the cultural practices surrounding photography, the crime-scene photographs and other visual documents about the murder case reproduced in *Torso* play with reader expectations about photographs as providing proof of a past reality. "Within photography," as Albers points out, "the crime scene genre is among the most factually obsessed; nowhere else are

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[104] See, for instance, Schwartz, who warns that "optical precision, of course, is not a guarantee of documentary neutrality" (4) or Arnheim (*Art and Visual Perception* 444-462). In comics studies, see Pedri ("When Photographs Aren't Quite Enough"; "Cartooning Ex-Posing Photography in Graphic Memoir"; and "Thinking about Photography in Comics").

[105] See also L. Smith, for instance, who writes that the "deconstruction of the truth of documentary has grown out of a recognition of the historical, material, ideological and psychic complexities implicit in Barthes's now familiar coinage, 'the evidential force of the photograph'" (13).

[106] By extension, the power of institutions over the evidentiary force of photographs means that photographs cannot be completely neutral, objective, and truthful because "the state apparatus . . . [controls] both the content of the images and then their power to stand as evidence or register a truth" (Tagg 62-63). In other words, the meaning of photographs is malleable, as their use in propaganda or fake news demonstrates.

the stakes higher for photographs to serve as evidentiary documents" (40). Consequently, readers of *Torso* are likely to initially read the reproduced documents as truthful evidence, mainly because they are used in a particular literary genre—true crime—, but also because they feature in an otherwise drawn comics .

However, the narrator's overt manipulation of photographs—cropping, visual alterations that increase visual clarity or render the image blurry, colour inversion, or the superposition of drawn and photographic images in the same panel—draws attention to their materiality and thus prevents a straightforward reading.[107] As Douglas Nickel argues, these altering techniques serve to "punctuate [the] transparency" of photographs (23), reminding readers that what they are seeing is a fabricated image and not something that has been captured on film without the actions of a subjective mind. This realization, in turn, prompts them to question the assumed transparency of photographs and other reproduced documents and their reliability as evidence. At the same time, the noticeable alterations foreground how a photographic support shapes how readers receive the content, thus reminding them that, as per Marshall McLuhan's famous saying, "the medium is the message" (7). Instead of creating reflexive distance between readers and the text, the alterations actually promote immersion by encouraging readers to closely consider the form, and not only the content of the reproduced photographic documents. Ultimately, the alterations ask readers to become critically engaged with the photographic images and, through their writerly reading practice, determine not only a plausible narrative meaning or message, but also the narrator's motivation behind their inclusion.

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[107] For more on the materiality of photographs, see, for instance, Edwards and Hart's *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images*.

To understand *Torso*, it is key to uncover the meaning of photographs and other reproduced documents. Indeed, many of its characters are often shown in the act of looking, and what they see is often rendered through a reproduced image. In such instances, the narrator doubly cues readers to engage in the act of looking. For example, in Chapter 6, detectives Myrlo and Simon are staking out the presumed killer, looking through the window of a house that faces the suspect's house. Myrlo and Simon are drawn, as are the large curtains and the window that frame what they are looking at: the suspect's house, which is rendered as a photographic image. The shift in the indexical quality of the two different types of images present in the panel, the framing provided by the curtains and the windows, the low angle of the image that gives visual dominance to the house, as well as Myrlo and Simon shown in the act of looking: all entice readers to closely examine the photograph for clues about the killer's possible lodging situation. Other careful acts of looking, such as Dr. Pearce looking through his microscope at cells or Ness staring at postcards that the Torso killer sent him, further encourage readers to writerly engage with the reproduced photographic images that are presented as investigative clues throughout *Torso*.

In cases in which no characters are shown looking, other strategies are put into play to prompt the critical attention of readers by situating them in the position of the looker. At times, a shadow appears on top of reproduced documents giving readers the impression that they are joining the character in the storyworld who is scrutinizing the documents by looking over his shoulder. This reflexive strategy suggests that if a storyworld agent—possibly the murderer themselves or a detective—cares enough to read the reproduced documents, then readers should also examine their content. In other

instances, characters in the storyworld appear to be directly addressing readers, as when detectives Myrlo and Simon stand behind a white-bordered photograph of a woman, facing readers and asking, "Do you recognize the woman in this picture?". This question calls out to readers and incites them to look at the photographic portrait of the victim, putting the reader in the position of a possible witness. Finally, the depiction of characters' hands, which handle documents (e.g.,"See.") or point at images that need to be seen (e.g., "See here. Here. Here. And here") serve as deictic visual (and verbal) expressions that cue readers to investigate the image in search for something that may crack the case open or, at the very least, that would offer up important information about the case or the overall narrative.

However, instead of helping readers make sense of the altered reproductions, the tension between the invitation to scrutinize the image and the difficulty or impossibility to see anything significant in the image to solve the case, deepens their uncertainty. The narrator's alterations to the photographs underscore the precariousness of their status as evidence by preventing readers from seeing much in the images at all. Considering blurry photographs, Nickel explains that "blur requires extra effort on the part of the viewer, as it withholds expected descriptive detail and replaces it with extraneous and semantically ambiguous information" (23). The same logic applies to other types of alterations present throughout *Torso*, a proposition with which Jeremy Russell, who discusses a memorable black-and-white *Torso* photograph, indirectly concurs. The photograph he examines depicts a crowd of people sitting at dinner tables at a black-tie event that Eliot Ness and

the Torso Killer attend.[108] Russell argues that upon seeing the photograph, readers "immediately comprehend the impossibility of determining who, in the scene before [them,] had not only been butchering the poor but also sneaking notes to [Eliot Ness]" (293). While the inclusion of the photograph suggests the killer might be in it, its rendering is so poor that it is difficult, if not impossible, for readers to determine who is pictured and thus see the photograph as evidence. The image has been taken from a distance; it is noisy, and the high contrast paired with the lack of colour efface the identifying features of the figures, who may be turning away their faces from the camera. While the photograph, even distorted, is full of information, the critical information—the evidentiary information—is impossible to discern. That is to say, even if readers scrutinize the image, they will not be able to identify the killer. Like all the photographs reproduced in *Torso*, the photograph of the black-tie event supposedly shows, but its details cannot be fully or clearly seen, or, perhaps, the photographs possibly show, but readers are unable to see what needs to be seen. In this way, they not only cue focalization, but also and primarily puzzle readers, which affects their engagement with and response to the narrative.

Specifically, the writerly process readers undergo as they attempt to narratively reconcile the mixing of different types of images in *Torso* contributes to and exacerbates the storyworld's mood and the narrative's themes, which, in turn, facilitate reader immersion. As Thierry Smolderen argues, in contrast with stylized drawings, photographs have a "cold neutrality in tone, which they share with technical illustration" (129). The

[108] It goes without saying that this photograph might not be an actual photograph of the related event; especially because it does not figure again in the dossier.

indexicality of photographs, the realness of what they represent, make them appear to be so raw, so cold, and so devoid of any personal or subjective touch (especially in contrast with drawings) that their presence in *Torso* bestows an austere, dreary mood unto the narrative. This effect is further reinforced, Russell argues, by "the natural roughness" of the photographs that "distance[s] the reader and dehumanize[s] the setting" (293). However, the narrator's deliberate altering of the photographs present them not as too raw or authentic, but rather as untrue and evidentially unsound. As Russell further states, the reproduced images in *Torso* can create in readers a "feeling of helpless frustration, oppression, futility, failure, and of course fear" (294). These feelings, I posit, originate in the doubtful, unclear, and hard-to-read images readers are trying but ultimately failing to properly see.

Scholars who have looked at the manipulation of photographs (through digital means, for instance) advance that in losing their transparency and truth value, altered images can make readers "panic about the loss of the real" (Kember 17). Faced with the overt mediation of photographic documents, readers who writerly engage with them are "disturbed" because they "must now acknowledge that any photograph might be digitally [or otherwise] altered" (Bolter and Grusin 110) and what they see, and believe to be true, might be false.[109] This newfound or, for some, restored distrust in photographic images creates a feeling of anxiety in readers; it threatens "the subject's position itself in the very act of beholding" (Değirmenci 97).

[109] See also Kriebel, who argues that "because manipulation in digital imagery is so easy . . . its evidentiary force—its truth value—as an authentic record is put into question" (40).

It follows that although readers of *Torso* might have read the use of photographs as a token of the narrator's unbiased, neutral, and objective storytelling at first, they are ultimately encouraged to notice and come to terms with the narrator's subjective manipulation of visual information. Ultimately, the narrator has a heavy hand in shaping the reading and narrative experience of readers, making it apparent to readers that they are powerless over what they can or cannot see in the photographic images. The alterations thus visually convey the storyworld as gritty and grim; in it, suspicion reigns. It is so because the photographic images appear rough and obscure, and because in engaging with them, readers are forced to confront and become suspicious about their own inabilities to see as well as the narrator's motivation for altering these photographic documents in the first place. Likewise, the alterations also emphasize *Torso*'s thematic preoccupations with political corruption and with police who are unable to see and care or turn a blind eye to the murders of sex workers and other marginalized people. Together, these effects incite readers' uneasy or distressed engagement with *Torso.*

However, as the analyses above show, the reproduced images' perplexing lack of clarity draw readers into *Torso*'s storyworld, and deepen their writerly engagement with the narrative. As art theorist James Elkins maintains about photographs whose details are difficult to discern, "there is a pleasing irritation in not knowing what is being shown." Like "an itch that [one] can't scratch," one is "attracted to that irritation" and cannot let go (Elkins, *What Photography Is* 219). To pursue Elkins's reflection and extend it to my critical reading of visual strategies in *Torso*, I propose that reader engagement is likely to be first triggered through an emotional appeal, such as the frustration of not being able to see what the altered document shows, that builds the curiosity of readers who are unable

to let go of it. Moreover, the altered photographs and their weakened evidentiary status propel “a relation” between readers and the image that does not “depend on resemblance” (Olin 6), but rather on imagination as readers speculate over what Pedri calls the “truncated narratives” of photographic images (“Photography and the Layering of Perspective in Graphic Memoir”) and Olin their “performative index” or the “index of identification,” which upholds “the relations between the photograph and its beholder” (69). Ultimately, the narrator’s altering of photographs and other documents reveals that they can deceive, be misread, or simply hard to see, and their meaning changed, but this does not distance readers from the telling. On the contrary, in *Torso*, altered images captivate and writerly engage readers not for what they show or reveal, but for what they conceal or are unable to show.

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The mixing of altered photographs and drawn images in *Torso* creates a tension between the theoretical possibility of seeing something in the photographic image and the actual impossibility to do so. This tension serves an important narrative function because, in restricting readers’ access to and raising doubt about narrative information, the narrator’s filtering presses readers into a writerly game of interpretation. The narrator’s alterations not only render readers both frustrated and curious; it also puts a heightened attention on corruption. The tension between seeing and not seeing and the awareness that results create a climate of suspicion that keeps readers immersed in and engaged with *Torso*’s true-crime narrative.

The next section moves away from true-crime to examine *Petites Coupures à Shioguni,* a fictional comics that extensively commingles different images. Apart from

some positive reviews, *Petites Coupures à Shioguni* has received no scholarly attention so far. Indeed, as the few scholars interested in the mixing of different types of images in comics have begun to lament, most academic publications on the topic "overwhelmingly" focus on "comics produced in a nonfictional mode" (Flinn 142). Branching out to fictional comics such as *Petites Coupures à Shioguni* (and later on, *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*) grants me the opportunity to extend my examination into how the inclusion of different types of images in comics represents the minds of narrators across different narrative genres. Specifically, it will further demonstrate that the visual scrutiny that altered documents invite contributes to their immersive capabilities, adding that this is so even in cases where the documents are fabricated and the storyworld in which they appear is fictional.

Disorganized Fictional Documents: Playing alongside the Confused Narrator in *Petites Coupures à Shioguni*

Written, drawn, and coloured by Florent Chavouet, *Petites Coupures à Shioguni* (2015)[110] is a humorous—even absurd—fictional crime comics set in the fake town of Shioguni, Japan. For the most part, the coloured comics sequences in it present the crimes and other related story events that take place on the night of October 26.[111] By contrast, the black-and-white comics sequences are of interviews with the main characters that take

[110] Henceforth, *Petites Coupures*. *Petites Coupures* has not been translated in English, but its polysemous French title, which can be translated as 'Small Clippings in Shioguni,' 'Small Bank Notes in Shioguni,' or 'Small Cuts in Shioguni,' is worthy of note for how it reflects the organizational principle behind the comics (i.e., the mixing of various clippings and comics sections) and hints at plot details (e.g., the money that is missing and the various acts of violence that punctuate the narrative). I am unable to provide detailed references for *Petites Coupures* due to its lack of pagination.
[111] The year is unknown, but visual details (e.g., images of polaroids or swiping cards) make it safe to assume that the story is set in the late twentieth- or early twenty-first century.

place after the fateful night. The narrative is told in a non-linear fashion, with multiple crimes, storylines, and characters intertwining throughout the comics. The telling is further complicated because it presents as a police report interspersed with comics sequences. The title page, which includes the expected information such as the book's title, the author's name, and the publisher, resembles a pale-yellow cardboard file folder. Stamped with the "Tosa Prefecture" insignia, it evokes a police file and, by playing with genre expectations, alerts readers that they are about to read an unusual crime narrative. *Petites Coupures* quickly presents as a game of who and what to believe, especially when multiple characters narrate the same events, but the details of their stories do not match up. The following diagram presents the main storylines that come together (sometimes, in confusing ways) at one point in the narrative:

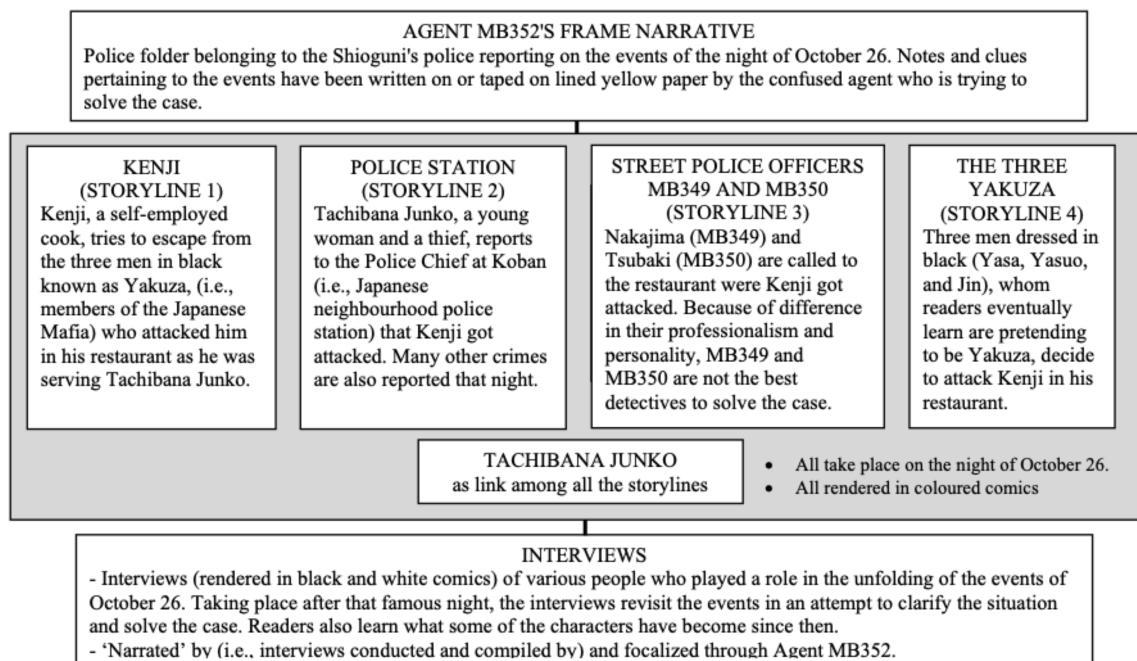

Figure 36. *Petite Coupure*'s narrative structure. Personal diagram.

Petites Coupures's police file folder contains a large number of documents and other storyworld artifacts, including pages of detective notes scribbled on legal yellow lined paper, maps, newspaper clippings, business cards, photographs, receipts, a work badge, and ads, that detective and diegetic narrator MB352 gathered.[112] These documents generally adopt a style described by Bolter and Grusin as one of "transparent immediacy" (272). The goal of this "style of visual representation . . . is to make the viewer forget the presence of the medium," leading readers to "believe that [they are] in the presence of the object of representation" (Bolter and Grusin 272). Many of the documents in *Petite Coupures* pass as reproductions of authentic material documents, including the yellow pages, Tachibana's calling card, or the maps and receipts. The Japanese writing characters at the top and bottom of all the yellow pages—the bottom characters are followed by "Tosa Prefecture"—, the URL on the bottom right margin of the official-looking map at the beginning of the text, as well as the inclusion of several phone numbers and a lot of business information written on contact cards, on ripped pieces of papers, on receipts, and other miscellanea, also contribute to the documents' believability. Even if they do not call the numbers or visit the places marked on the maps, readers have the impression that they could do so if they decided to, which indirectly gives credence to the documents. These minute, but important details thus assert the realness and authenticity of the documents, but only provisionally.

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[112] While for most of the narrative it is not clear who compiled the folder, MB352's signature on the last page of the folder indicates that she put it together after the police chief, who opened the file folder, gave it to her (as seen in one of the comics scenes).

Aside from the interplay of comics and documents, which, as discussed in the introduction, can distance readers from what they are reading, the wide variety and the sheer number of documents, as well as their lack of organization throughout the text turns the non-linear narrative of *Petites Coupures* into a complex puzzle readers must piece together if they want to make sense of what they are reading. This complex process may disengage readers altogether if, despite their best effort, they cannot mentally organize the documents and the comics sections to make the narrative cohere. Indeed, in contrast with traditional mystery narratives where readers' participation in solving the case is optional because this task is left to the detective or sleuth, in *Petites Coupures*, readers who wish to experience the story have no other choice but to play the game of detection. Unless readers immerse themselves into the storyworld and writerly engage with the material as a detective would, the convoluted, non-linear narrative does not cohere, and no plausible solution to the mystery can be reached, especially since *Petites Coupures* does not offer one. In *Petites Coupures*, immersion is not guaranteed and, if secured, continuously remains thwarted due to the demands posed by the unusual storytelling across various types of images. Therefore, a paradox seemingly lies at the heart of *Petites Coupures*: despite attempts to puzzle readers, immersion is necessary for readers to play the detection game required to make sense of the narrative. Reader engagement and immersion can only be secured once readers become critically aware of how the documents raise questions about their nature and purpose, and realize that the document's cue the narrator's confused mind.

As in *Torso*, the mediated, artificial quality of documents is foreground in *Petites Coupures* to ensure that readers are aware that they are reading a fictional narrative, and

that they understand that the cartoon images and the documents belong to the same fictional storyworld although they are different types of images. For instance, the artificiality of documents is highlighted when drawn photographs are integrated into other realistic-looking documents, such as press clippings or personal ID badges (Figure 37). It is also highlighted when readers recognize similarities between the drawn portraits of characters who are part of the comics sequences and the drawn portraits included in the photorealistic documents. Upon realizing that the portraits are of the same characters, readers draw a strong connection based in fictionality between the comics story and the documents in the police file. Such instances make readers aware, as Jean-Marie Schaeffer writes in another context, that they are simultaneously "seeing the presented object while knowing that one sees a mimeme," that is, an imitated thing. In doing so, readers are reminded that they are engaged in a "mimetic activity" or in "the production of something that is ontologically different from what is imitated" (Schaeffer, *Why Fiction* 77). Concretely, readers recall that the documents belong to the comics section's fictional storyworld and that they are reading a comic book called *Petites Coupures à Shioguni* that imitates an actual police file. Rather than breaking reader immersion, this self-reflexive visual strategy reframes the reading of documents in fictional terms. As Merja Polvinen explains, the "awareness of fiction as fiction . . . is paramount to the whole process of 'immersion in a semblance'" (106). Put simply, for readers to immerse themselves in *Petites Coupures*' fictional world, they first must recognize and keep in the forefront of their minds that the narrative is fictional. Only then can they surrender to the fictionality of the narrative and *all* of its components and begin to engage with and imaginatively immerse themselves into its storyworld.

Figure 37. Although many documents imitate real documents, all the images are meant to be read as photographs in *Petites Coupures* are drawn in such a stylized way that their artificiality becomes evident. Florent Chavouet, *Petites Coupures à Shioguni* (Philippe Picquier, 2015). Reprinted with permission of the artist.

Although Chavouet does not explain his choice to include real-looking documents in his fictional story, I wish to emphasize that the photorealistic appearance of the documents significantly contributes to immersing readers into the narrative and its storyworld. To begin, in the context of *Petites Coupures,* the documents function as props that engage readers in a narrative world similar to the contemporary world they live in; the realistic look of the documents carries those documents "into the reader's material world" (Fjellestad 46). Specifically, the realistic-looking documents draw on the logic of transparency to give readers "the perceptual illusion of non-mediation" (Lombard and Ditton). These documents readily draw readers into the storyworld because, according to the principle of minimal departure, in looking like legitimate, actual, real-world documents, they keep to a minimum the amount of cognitive effort required from readers to engage with them and partake in make-believe.

Moreover, the photorealistic documents function as a “pivot,” defined by Gibbons as a “mediating artefact that evokes, and enables a shift into, its imaginative world” (*Multimodality, Cognition, and Experimental Literature* 79), more so than if they were drawn non-realistically. Specifically, the photorealistic documents enable readers to experience what video game theorists call “sensory immersion” (Ermi et Mäyrä 101),[113] giving them the impression that they can touch tangible documents—a police file in the case of *Petites Coupures*. Furthermore, from their real-life experience, readers can infer that the documents presented as part of the police file hold evidence that may allow them to elucidate the mysteries of the night of October 26. As Hallet reminds us, “artefacts do not have a meaning as such;” instead, “they take on and produce meaning only in given sociocultural contexts and interactions” (“Reading Multimodal Fiction” 32). It follows that readers can decipher the documents in *Petites Coupures* because they resemble familiar real-world documents and are used in a storyworld that mirrors real-world experience. Readers, for instance, can make sense of the maps in *Petites Coupures* because they have seen and read maps before. Likewise, even though readers might not know how to read Japanese or Japanese-like signs, with the help of other cues such as phone numbers, schedules, or international brand names, they are still likely to understand that some documents are advertisements for different places in the storyworld, and thus may provide clues about the October 26 events.

The documents’ realistic appearance also helps readers understand that they have been purposely collected by the detective, and that their grouping reflects her thinking

[113] See also Therrien (451).

mind. The documents show signs of wear and tear: for instance, they are creased or stained, which suggests they have been touched and used before. Strips of tape keep the documents in place, indicating that they have been deliberately selected and arranged and thus subjectively marked. Folded corners, wrinkled or torn pages, and other indicators of use also function as "tangible manifestations of the material having been—at time roughly—handled" (Fjellestad 45), while the dust on the tape reveals that some time has passed since the documents were first collected and organized as evidence. That the documents are no longer pristine intensifies their "sense of materiality," making them appear "singular" or unique, and consequently encourage readers to think about who handled and collected them—thus, cuing their focalization once more. Finally, "the authenticity and personality traits" (Fjellestad 45; 50) associated with the reproduced handwritten annotations on the lined yellow pages, too, direct attention to the person who wrote on them and included them in the police file—that is, the detective as focalizing agent.

In *Petites Coupures*, the documents provide readers with access to the detective's state of mind, conveying her uncertainty about the case she is trying to solve. From the beginning of the comics, their scattered presentation suggests that the detective cannot coherently organize the numerous documents. For instance, the book's first five pages are comprised of several different types of documents (Figure 38): 1) the cover of a police folder; 2) a newspaper clipping promoting a sporting event in Shioguni taped to a lined yellow page from the Tosa Prefecture; 3) a professional-looking (i.e., not hand-drawn) map of Shioguni marked with the prefecture's URL address; 4) a flyer with ads from various car dealerships, bars, and restaurants in Shioguni; and 5) another lined yellow

page from the Tosa Prefecture with various handwritten notes, and the personal calling card of Tachibana Junko taped to the paper. On first appearance, it is not clear how these documents and all the other documents in *Petites Coupures* relate to each other apart from their link to Shioguni. Lacking in order, the case file reflects the detective's confusion about the case: the disorganization of its contents or her inability to present the documents so that they reveal how to solve the case thus cues focalization.

The detective's annotations, such as her markings on the lined yellow pages, further grant readers access to her mind, cuing narrator focalization and drawing notice to the detective's uncertainty. As Hallet notes in relation to the inclusion of visual documents in literary texts, "plans, maps and sketches of patterns or rooms represent the narrator's mental pattern" because "graphic elements represent the protagonist's and narrator's individual, specific way of looking at and conceiving of the world" ("The Multimodal Novel" 135). In *Petites Coupures*, annotations reflect the narrator's thinking and, for the most part, underscore her confusion and her attempt at keeping track of the intertwined events of the night. At times these annotations are quite intricate, combining a diagram with a light circled note, doodles, and arrows linking particular details to indicate that the narrator has unanswered questions and several working theories as she plots out a plan to help solve the case (Figure 39). The presentation and different combinations of documents, as well as the evident traces of careful scrutiny and consideration foreground the detective's failed or unfinished attempt at solving the mystery. In *Petites Coupures*, the narrator focalizer documents what she *cannot* see: she does not know what to see or read in the documents, and, as a result, her uncertainty trickles down to readers who, in

reading her annotations and the documents she compiled, are confused about what they are meant to understand about the narrative events.

With its inclusion of different documents that grant access to the narrator's confused mind, *Petites Coupures* presents itself as a puzzle game or mystery that needs to be solved—an interactive, or writerly, narrative game of detection. "The interactive text," Ryan writes, "is a machine fueled by the input of the user"; it results from "the collaboration between the reader and the text in the production of meaning" (*Narrative as Virtual Reality* 310, 210). The focalized documents ignite that interaction between the text and readers. Focalization, as André Gardies argues, "in having for function to regulate [readers'] diegetic knowledge," creates a relation of "partner-opponents" between readers and the focalizing agent that is charged with "ludic power" (144, 139; my translation). In *Petites Coupures*, the focalized information received by readers is at the core of their interactive engagement with the narrative. The detective functions both as a partner and as an opponent in that she provides some filtered information, but also simultaneously withholds some knowledge (presumably due to her confusion) that could be useful to reach narrative closure. The narrator-focalizer's control over the amount of diegetic knowledge accessible to readers fosters a "playful exchange" (Gardies 144) as readers attempt to gain control over the narrative by forming hypotheses about what is happening in it, to anticipate what is to come, and even to solve the mystery. Reading *Petites Coupures* is thus far from a passive reading exercise: as a puzzle that engages readers, its narrative fosters a ludic "challenge-based immersion" (Ermi and Mäyrä 101) grounded in and based on the detective's uncertainty. The documents included in *Petites Coupures* puzzle readers both in form and in content.

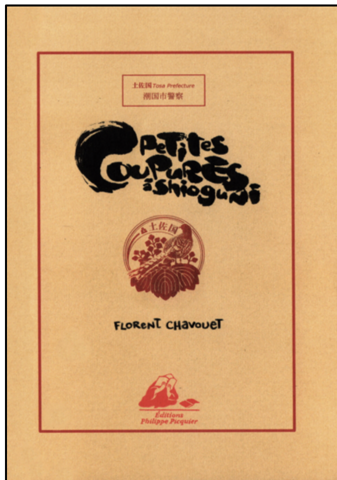
Henri Jenkins's concept of "embedded narratives" ("Game Design as Narrative Architecture"), akin to Ken Levine's concept of "pull narrative,"[114] can help shed light on how the mixing of different types of images in *Petites Coupures* encourages an active reading process triggered by the form of the text. Embedded narratives, as Jenkins defines them, "flow across multiple information channels" ("Game Design as Narrative Architecture"). Using the example of Neil Young's *Majestic*, Jenkins explains that within the context of a game world that employs embedded narratives,

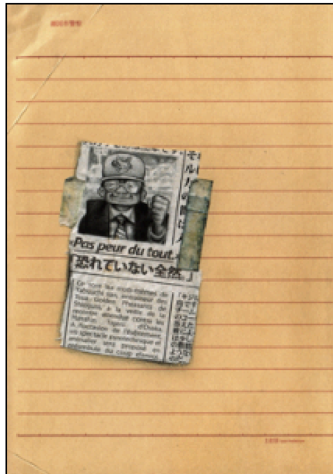
> the player's activity consists of sorting through documents, deciphering codes, making sense of garbled transmissions, moving step by step towards a fuller understanding of the conspiracy, which is the game's primary narrative focus. We follow links between websites; we get information through webcasts, faxes, e-mails, and phone calls. Such an embedded narrative does not require a branching story structure but rather depends on scrambling the pieces of a linear story and allowing us to reconstruct the plot through our acts of detection, speculation, exploration, and decryption. ("Game Design as Narrative Architecture")

Faced with embedded narratives, video game players make the narrative cohere from fragments of narrative information collected in the game world through various means. To reach that point, gamers need to adopt an "investigative approach," carefully considering and piecing together the different narratively charged objects and documents

[114] In his 2008 Game Developer Conference Lecture, Levine distinguishes between push and pull narrative in video games. While in push narrative, the narrative is pushed forward and given to the player via cut-scenes, in pull narrative the player has to find the narrative contents that hide in the game world. For more on this, see also Calleja (122-123).

or “storytelling artifacts” (Krainert 113) that are part of the storyworld’s design. Writing about the relation between video game design and interactivity, David Myers remarks on how “play can be motivated and directed by game rules but also appears without evocation by game design” (45). Pushing further, Mark Wolf advances that the more “representational” or realistic the visual elements of games are, the more “transparent and intuitive” the gameplay becomes (“Abstraction in the Video Games” 52). The less representational, or the more abstract these elements are, the more abstract and “less intuitive” the gameplay objectives (M. Wolf, “Abstraction in the Video Games” 52). If Wolf is right, it follows that the realistic look of the documents in *Petites Coupures* enables readers to understand their function more easily than if the same images were hand drawn. The fragmented nature of the telling and the photorealistic aspect of the documents in *Petites Coupures* thus encourage readers to infer that they are supposed to bring order to the text, to organize the documents, and draw links between the different types of images to uncover clues that support or disprove their deductive theories. They urge readers to adopt an investigative role, which requires nothing more from them than to writerly engage with the narrative.





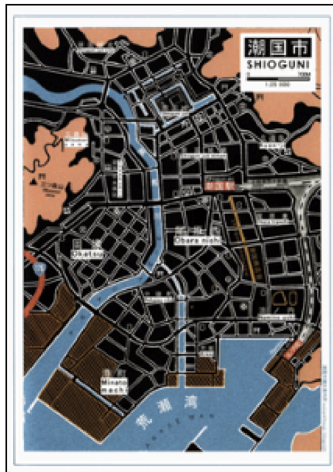


Figure 38. The first five pages of the comics give readers the impression that they are going to read a police file, and not a comic book. Florent Chavouet, *Petites Coupures à Shioguni* (Philippe Picquier, 2015). Reprinted with permission of the artist.

Figure 39. The unruly collecting of documents, in addition to the narrator's doodles and notes cue focalization, foregrounding her confusion that, in turn, engages readers' inquisitive and capable minds. Florent Chavouet, *Petites Coupures à Shioguni* (Philippe Picquier, 2015). Reprinted with permission of the artist.

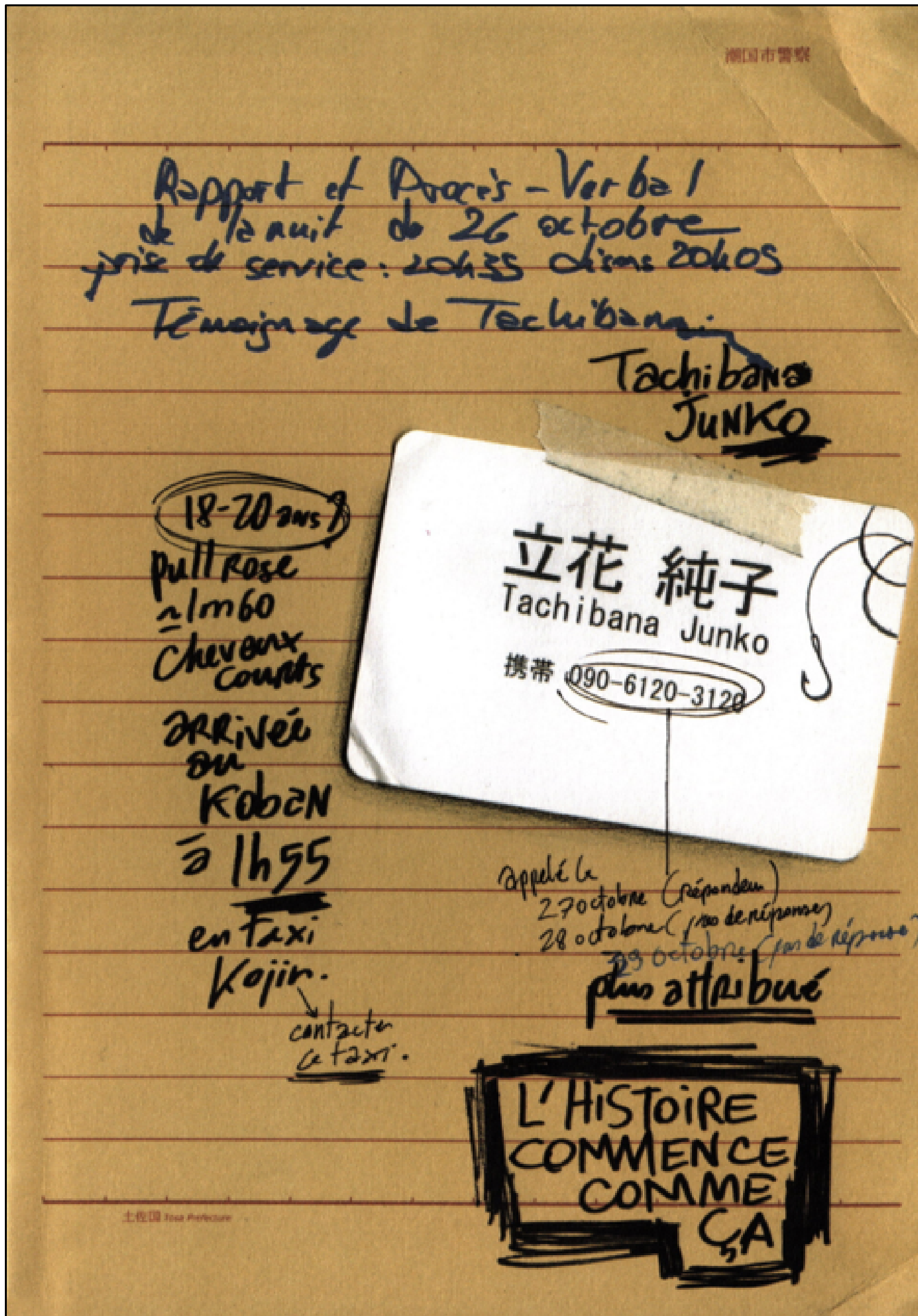


Figure 40. The first lined yellow page contextualizes the narrative, raises questions in the readers' minds, and prompts a gamified reading experience for readers as they attempt to find answers to their questions. Florent Chavouet, *Petites Coupures à Shioguni* (Philippe Picquier, 2015). Reprinted with permission of the artist.

In content, too, the diegetic narrator's handwritten annotations set up the interactive game of detection and provide leads for readers to follow to solve the mystery. For example, the notes on the first yellow paper page facilitate their immersive experience by providing a starting point from which to solve the mystery and some contextual clues to guide readers' reconstruction of the narrative (Figure 40). From the note on top of the page, readers learn that the yellow pages contain a police report written the night of October 26. Since the detective started working at 8:35 pm or 8:05 pm (this discrepancy in time is never clearly explained and creates reliability issues)[115], readers can deduce that the report—initiated with Tachibana Junko's testimony—was written after that time, which helps situate the action in time. Although at first purely informational, this report also prompts readers to wonder who Tachibana is and what prompted her to go to the police and offer her testimony. Readers are also visually intrigued: the handwriting for this note differs in style and colour from the other notes on the page, and the sloppy writing at the end of Tachibana's name suggests that the writer got interrupted while writing. Coupled with the subjective handling of the documents, the handwritten note on top of the page thus raises many questions about the voice: Who wrote these notes? Why can't the writer settle on a time and why are they no longer writing the report? And, who took over?

The other notes on the page raise even more questions, but about Tachibana this time. The writer is unsure about her age ("18-20 years?") and lists information about her as if she is a suspect and not a witness giving a testimony at the police station. Readers

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[115] "Prise de service: 20h35 disons 20h05" translates in English as "Start time: 20:35, let's say 20:05."

learn that she wears a pink sweater, is about 1.60m, has short hair, and arrived at the police station around 1:55 am in a Kojin Taxi whose driver the writer of the report intends to contact. The person who wrote the report is still working on the case several days after October 26: she tried calling her many times without success,[116] as the notes beside Tachibana's cards suggest. These notes bring readers to ask: Why can't Tachibana be trusted? Why did the writer of the note try to reach her for several days after the night of October 26, and why she did not answer? They also inform the reading of the rest of the narrative because readers expect to figure out the answers to these questions that originated within the narrative.[117]

The questions raised by the detective who wrote the notes, her working theories, and next steps of action not only enable readers to retrace the detective's line of thinking; they also guide the readers' game of deduction by providing clues about the steps they should take and the clues they should consider to solve the mystery. In that way, the focalized interactive strategies or, as Montembeault and Perron put it, "focaliz-action" cues (my translation) present in *Petites Coupures* through the form and content of the documents, serve, in Gibbons's words, to "doubly deictically" situate readers. Through them, readers are encouraged to "not just [project] into the world of the text, but also play a more active and corporeal role" by "imaginatively assum[ing] the role of a character" (*Multimodality, Cognition, and Experimental Literature* 78). The embedded narratives of the documents as storytelling artifacts join the focaliz-acting cues to prompt readers to

[116] The timeline of the attempted calls also indicates that the narrative spans multiple days.
[117] The last note on the page, the boldly bordered one, specifies that "the story starts like that," which suggests that the story will eventually have an end and that readers will be able to find answers to the questions they have been encouraged to pose.

imagine themselves as some sort of detective who can reconstruct the narrative from the interplay of *Petites Coupures*'s diegetic artifacts and comics section. This level of "narrative participation," as Gerrig and Bezdek argue, "represents a particular type of cognitive and emotional engagement that enhances aesthetic illusion" (89)—that is, immersion.[118] In endorsing the detective role, readers essentially immerse themselves in the storyworld.

In writerly engaging with the documents to weave a plausible story together and (tentatively) solve the main mystery, readers also essentially become *Petites Coupures*'s co-authors.[119] Unless readers manage to piece together the different pieces of the puzzle *Petites Coupures* presents to them through its many documents, the narrative never coheres, and the mystery can never be solved. Nevertheless, even when readers get a general sense of what happened on the night of October 26 in Shioguni (i.e., three men pretending to be Yakuza attacked Kenji, and Tachibana is a liar), some narrative uncertainty lingers, repeatedly inviting readers to revisit the text and address secondary mysteries or details in the main mystery they may have overlooked or did not know how to accommodate them into their reading. The sheer number and variety of documents make it hard for readers to absorb the large quantity of information the documents hold. Consequently, readers are never sure whether they missed important clues that could help fill in some loose strands in the plot or subplots. The answer to one question also remains forever indeterminate: Who conducted the characters' interviews presented in black and

[118] Like W. Wolf, Gerrig and Bezdek prefer the term aesthetic illusion to that of immersion.
[119] Among other strategies, the braided images (for instance, Tachibana Junko's card) that appear in different narrative levels at different times, and the different maps and timelines created by the narrator-focalizer, help readers piece the narrative together.

white in the police file? In his comics sequence, the first interviewee, a taxi driver, asks the non-depicted interviewer, “Who are you? A cop?”, and later “A journalist?”. Since the interviewer never answers either question before *Petites Coupures* ends, only readers can formulate, in their minds, a plausible answer to the taxi driver’s question because they are the ones who picked up MB352’s file to follow up on and close the case.

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As we have seen so far, the altered reproduced documents in the true-crime comics *Torso* and the mixing of realistic-looking and overtly drawn documents in the fictional narrative *Petites Coupures* exploit the referential truth value of documents in different ways. They put pressure on the evidential status of reproduced documents to set the mood of the story, or they use the appearance of real-world documents to create storytelling artifacts that foster an interactive reading experience. In these and similar instances, the documents function as markers of focalization for the manipulative or confused mind of the narrator that draw readers into the storyworld and encourage them to writerly engage with the narrative and achieve a plausible reading of the documents and the narrative as a whole. To further explore how reproduced documents play a significant role in drawing readers into the non-fictional storyworld, the next section examines another fictional comic book, but one that disguises itself as non-fiction. Particular attention will be given to the use of visual metafictional strategies in the documents included in *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* to detail how the strategies raise doubt about the documents’ authenticity and reveal the narrator-focalizer’s ambivalence regarding the hoax it paradoxically supports and exposes. Made aware of the documents’ fabricated nature, readers are urged to re-immerse themselves into the

fictional storyworld to writerly uncover the narrative meaning that lies under its non-fictional surface.

Fake Metafictional Documents: Considering the Narrator's Ambivalence in *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*

Sonny Liew's *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* (2015)[120] is a dense, non-chronological comics that, at first sight, looks very much like an art retrospective book. Reproduced comics (some autobiographical), artworks, and other personal belongings (such as photographs) created or owned by Singaporean comics artist Charlie Chan Hock Chye that have been collected and "presented by Sonny Liew" (Liew 5) compose the bulk of the book.[121] Sonny's interviews of Chye and some of his former friends and colleagues, his biography of Chye, his summed up versions of some of Chye's long-running fictional comics, as well as some marginal comments he makes about the documents reproduced in the text appear in between the documents. Throughout *Charlie Chan*, all of Sonny's interventions are rendered in comics forms. Given this complex layering of narrative material and form, *Charlie Chan* can be productively approached as a multivoiced (i.e., Chye's and Sonny's) and multilayered comics künstlerroman that significantly relies on the mixing of different types of images to narrate Chye's life as an artist, from his birth in 1938 to becoming "Singapore's greatest comics artist" (Liew 3) amid Singapore's intense 1954-1980s socio-political history. Yet, the extensive

[120] Henceforth, *Charlie Chan*.
[121] From here onwards, I will use Liew to refer to Sonny Liew the comics artist, and Sonny to write about *Charlie Chan*'s narrator.

commingling of various images, the multiple narrative strands, and the scattering of narrative fragments, all of which demand significant attention, render it challenging for readers to make the narrative cohere. Such a complex, but necessary process may cause readers to disengage from what they are reading, putting their immersion under pressure or even hindering it altogether if they cannot piece the narrative's various components into a meaningful whole. The diagram below distinguishes the five main storytelling elements readers must consider and render coherent to make sense of *Charlie Chan*:

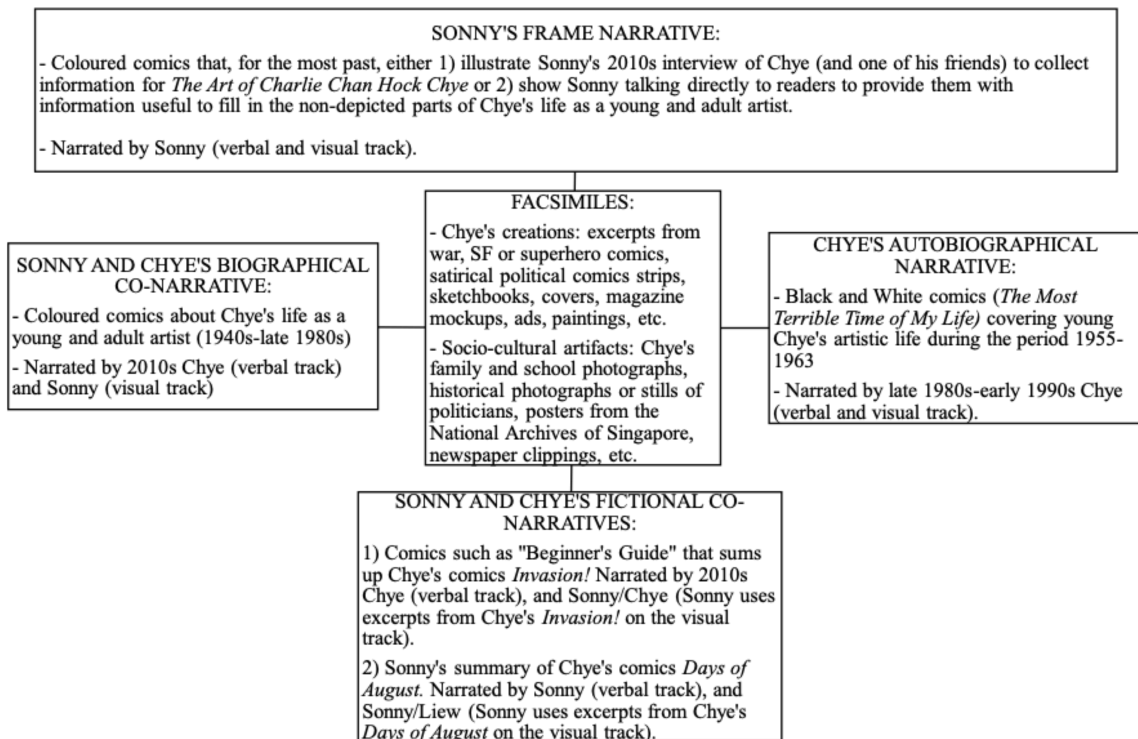

Figure 41. *Charlie Chan*'s narrative structure. Personal diagram.

For readers to piece together the various strands in *Charlie Chan*'s narrative and immerse themselves in it, they need to understand that the documents do more than simply function as visual evidence of Chye's art and life. Indeed, they are an integral part

of the narrative, playing a central role in the storytelling by cuing the narrator's or character's focalization through techniques similar to those seen in *Torso* and *Petites Coupures*. To begin, Chye's creative work, which appears prominently throughout the comics, reflects his state of mind—his political convictions, in particular. As Hallet argues, the presence of documents created by characters in a literary text serves to "testify to these characters as culturally productive agents who look at the world in certain ways and communicate their views and feelings via visual images. Doing so, they contribute to their identity, represent or symbolize important events or experiences in their lives, and trigger or represent their memories" ("The Multimodal Novel" 144). Character-made documents mark character focalization, granting readers indirect access to the characters' minds and, as such, they contribute to storyworld immersion.

At the same time, the documents in *Charlie Chan* also cue narratorial focalization, in that Sonny handpicked the documents to be included in the narrative. Although the taping of some of Chye's artworks onto a blank background page makes this selection process obvious (see, for instance, Liew 44-48; 128-131; 173-179), it is not always immediately clear who is focalizing the reproduced documents and, at times, there may even be two equally possible sources of focalization. Ambiguity abounds when parts of Chye's artworks and other documents are directly, but only partially, integrated into Sonny's biographical comics that Sonny draws, but that Chye verbally narrates. Ambiguity abounds too when readers are presented with Sonny's condensed comics retellings of Chye's *Invasion!* And *Days of August* that are either verbally narrated by Sonny or Chye, and visually narrated by Sonny from selected images he excerpted from the original comics drawn by Chye. No matter the actual focalization source—an issue I

will return to later in this section—the point here is that because the reproduced documents are focalized and thus provide access to the mind of a storyworld agent, they serve to immerse readers into *Charlie Chan*'s narrative (and its storyworld) about Chye's artistic life.

As in *Torso* and *Petites Coupures*, the documents also raise doubt about their authenticity, but in more complex, artful ways than those discussed above. Although at first (and on a superficial level) readers are encouraged to read the documents and their content as representative of Chye's state of mind, and their selection and organization as evoking Sonny's mind, the presence of various subtle metafictional elements in the documents alter their initial interpretations as documentary materials. Indeed, multiple visual clues in the documents cast a shadow on their authenticity that, in turn, exposes Sonny as an unreliable narrator whose duplicitous, unreliable mind is behind the creation of Chye and all the documents. The reframing in fictional terms of the documents and of the narrative as a whole asks readers to re-immerse themselves in the narrative and once again closely examine the documents to narratively—and writerly—infer what motivated Sonny to mislead them or, at the very least, to determine what is the significance of such trickery.

Contrary to their autobiographical presentation in *Charlie Chan*, Chye and his artworks do not truly exist outside of the narrative storyworld. Liew, the only real artist, fabricated both. *Charlie Chan* is thus hoax-like[122] in that, although it is pure fiction, it passes as a truthful (auto-)biography that risks making readers believe that its completely

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[122] I use 'hoax-like' instead of 'hoax' because *Charlie Chan* never pretended to be a proper (auto)biography—it simply looks like it is so that readers falsely assume it is, too.

fabricated story is historically true. As Susanna Egan explains in her study of hoaxes, "imposture presupposes posture" (150): to be duped into believing the (auto-)biographical narrative and, by extension, all the seemingly reproduced documentary evidence the text contains, readers must have first been led to believe in various proofs of existence that ultimately turn out to be false. *Charlie Chan*'s paratextual material initially tricks readers into assuming that Chye, his works, and the tokens of his life reproduced as documents throughout the story genuinely existed or exist in real life and that the comic book tells his true story. Critics concur that the paratext's function is usually to "indicate exactly what sort of book confronts us, and thus prevent misreadings that arise from misidentification" (Ruthven 43). More so than any cues in the text proper, paratextual material informs readers' reception of a text as fictional or non-fictional.[123] In *Charlie Chan,* however, the paratext and Sonny's narration temporarily deceive readers by making them believe they are reading a non-fictional text. Several paratextual cues support a non-fictional reading until a note on the last page of the book, the copyright page, reveals that *Charlie Chan* is "a work of fiction" (Liew 320).

Charlie Chan's front cover gives readers the impression that the book they are about to read contains reproductions of the art of a man called Charlie Chan Hock Chye whose creative work and life achievements have been compiled and presented by Sonny Liew. Since Liew does not take authorial credit for the material presented in the book, presenting himself as a curator or editor Chye's work, readers assume that Chye and his artworks are genuine and the text non-fictional. The illusion is further reinforced

[123] See Walsh ("Fictionality and Mimesis" 110-121).

throughout the comics, for instance across Sonny's decision to include an interview with one of Chye's friends and colleagues, Bertrand Wong, about their collaborative work (Liew 122-123). Chye's authorship and real existence is also asserted through explanatory captions, presumably written by Sonny, that are paired to facsimiles of documents and creative works, informing readers about the title of the piece, its creation date, the name of the artist, its media, or, when relevant, its means of publication, and, to finish, a short description or explanation of the work. By the same token, the endnotes (Liew 301-316) provide additional facts about the—verifiable—socio-historical context in which Chye created his artworks and responded to, which indirectly supports their realness. Indeed, as George Dawson asserts, "there is nothing, if you wish to deceive, like being accurate" (145). The detailed and unambiguous information-packed captions and endnotes cement readers' trust in the documents precisely because of their apparent preciseness and the quantity of detailed information they provide. Finally, neither the publisher summary nor the blurb from a review by the Malay Mail (i.e., a real Malaysian newspaper) on the book jacket mention that Chye is a fictional character or that Liew created a fictional comics, thus further strengthening the illusion that *Charlie Chan* is a true (auto-)biography.

In a ripple effect, the paratext, Chye's assumed existence, and Sonny's seemingly objective presentation of seemingly factual details prompt readers to misread the authentic look of the documents as an indicator of realness. The rough state and used appearance of some of the reproduced documents give the impression that they are tangible, authentic, and old, creating what K. K. Ruthven describes in *Faking Literature* as an "authenticity-effect" (74). *Charlie Chan* is an example of what Gibbons calls an "ontological hoax" in which the inclusion of reproduced images helps the book

“masquerade as something [it is not], disguising [its] fictional status” (“Multimodal Literature and Experimentation” 432). *Charlie Chan*’s passes as a genuine autobiography, combining authenticating techniques and props to deceive readers about its fabricated nature and lead them to believe the hoax. The effect is so powerful that many readers under the co-influence of the paratext and the real-looking documents misread *Charlie Chan* as an actual biographical account of Chye’s artistic life (e.g., Clemente; or Poon’s students). These readers undoubtedly missed the paratextual note and failed to detect or writerly engage with subtle visual cues that present Sonny as an unreliable narrator and reveal the hoax.

In *Charlie Chan*, the reproduced documents play a double function whereby on the surface they support the hoax, while at the same time, but only upon closer inspection, they unravel it. As Julia Round writes, in comics, “purportedly extratextual material (letters, extracts from historical documents or manuscripts) are frequently used to raise the question of authenticity” (*Gothic in Comics and Graphic Novels* 56). Likewise, despite their authentic look, the facsimiles and other reproduced images throughout *Charlie Chan* also contain visual cues that actually undermine the authenticating narrative strategies used throughout the book, and thus encourage readers to detect the hoax. Indeed, as discussed below, as a hoax meant to be discovered by readers, *Charlie Chan* exhibits some “ludic,” interactive or writerly qualities, playfully calling on readers to unearth “the secret, the mystery of which the text is supposedly bearing” and that “must be discovered sooner or later” for an accurate reading – one that reflects *all* of the narrative information presented to readers – to be reached. In this sense, hoaxes “demand from the reader an active participation” to be noticed (Jendillou 15; my translation).

Charlie Chan's playfulness shines through as soon as readers, in writerly engaging with the various documents, start picking up on clues pointing to their fabricated nature, and begin to question Sonny's ambivalence as a double-faced narrator whose interventions paradoxically support and dismantle the hoax. Once they begin to do so, readers enter a writerly game whereby they set out to prove the fictional status of Charlie Chan and infer the significance of such dupery, even if only to themselves.

In Christopher Miller's words, "a hoax is a metafiction, a fiction about fiction. It is designed not merely to tell a story, but to weave a lie around that story: a lie about the status of the story, its origins, its authenticity, and mostly, its authorship" (*Impostors* 1-2). While Sonny's frame narrative exposes the process behind the creation of *Charlie Chan* and thus exhibits obvious metafictional qualities, some of Chye's comics, which Sonny decided to include, also subtly do so. Excerpts from Chye's autobiography, *The Most Terrible Time of My Life*, focus on his growth as an artist, but also narrate the complex process behind creating some of Chye's fictional comics that Sonny incorporated into *Charlie Chan*. Many facsimiles of these comics are unfinished, presenting as excerpts from sketchbooks, pencilled comics pages, or mock-ups of pages for comics magazines (e.g., Figure 42). The documents' incomplete state of development suggests to readers that they will have to finish the narrative on their own by drawing attention not to the finished product (e.g., the published comics or the final character design), but rather to the process, practice, and artifice needed to get to that finished product. Thus, in incorporating documents that emphasize the work behind the creation of comics and laying bare their artificiality, Sonny positions *Charlie Chan* as a metafictional text. Whether its metafictional aspects reveal the hoax or whether the awareness of the hoax

sheds light on the metafiction, *Charlie Chan* cannot be read only as Chye's biographical künstlerroman (even a fictional one). It is, after all, primarily a metafiction.

Figure 42. Excerpts from Chye's sketchbooks, mock-ups and penciled comics foreground *Charlie Chan* as a metafiction. Sonny Liew, *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* (Pantheon, 2015), pp. 126; 229. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

Metafictional strategies such as visual intertextuality, or "interpictoriality" (Rose 1) as it is sometimes called, are used to raise doubt about Chye's artistic ability and authenticity, and therefore problematize his artistic production and his status as "Singapore's greatest comic artist" (Liew 3). Sometimes, Sonny's paratextual captions and marginal comments make clear that Chye relied on other artists' work to create his own. For instance, readers discover that Chye was inspired by the work of American cartoonist "Winsor McCay" or that Chye's *Dragon* was "modeled after *Eagle Magazine*

from the UK" (Liew 109-110). Also, Chye's—ironic, in retrospect—mention in his autobiographical comics that Marvel must have "stolen [the] idea" (Liew 168) behind his very own superhero in *Roachman* to create *Spiderman* brings readers to consider intertextually linking Chye's comics to the popular comics that actually exists in the real world. Most of the time, though, Chye's sources of inspiration are not overtly acknowledged, and readers need to know a bit about comics history to notice that Chye heavily relies on, or even copies, other artists' styles. For instance, in his comics, Chye imitates the style of and sometimes even borrows characters created by mangaka Osama Tezuka[124] (Liew 8-11; 31-38; 50-52), bande dessinée artist Hergé (Liew 270-272), or Disney cartoonist Carl Barks (Liew 298-299), thus blending styles from different comics traditions and artists without acknowledging their work. At times, Chye's copying is harder to notice and demands readers who are quite familiar with the imagery used by specific comic artists, such as when Chye's *Force 136 No.6: Soldier's Tale* evokes Art Spiegelman's *Maus* in its title and in its use of animal metaphors to represent human characters with different nationalities (Liew 88).[125] The "swiped" panels—images that are copied from other comics but redrawn into the copying artist's own style (Crucifix, "Cut-Up and Redrawn" 310)—from *Maus* that can be found in *Force 136* forcefully bring readers to question Chye's integrity as an artist. For instance, the top panel on the first page of *Force 136 No. 4: Sook Ching* (Liew 87), which depicts dead bodies piled on top

[124] Chye still tells readers that he loves Osama Tezuka's *Astro Boy* (64).
[125] Interestingly, *Maus* was published decades after *Force 136* supposedly came out which suggests that Spiegelman got inspired by *Force 136* to create *Maus*, which, of course, is not the case (as readers know for sure when they realize *Charlie Chan* and everything it is a hoax). In his autobiographical comics, Chye explains that he decided to draw "the locals as cats, the Japanese as dogs, and the British as monkeys!" (78).

of one another, is reminiscent of the very same arresting imagery used in *Maus* when Art reflects on the guilt he feels regarding the success of the first volume (Spiegelman 201-202). Likewise, the style, panel content, and layout of some pages from Chye's autobiographical comics *Days of August* (Liew 274-278) are directly borrowed from Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns.* That Chye relies so heavily on the skills of other, more renowned artists to create his own comics triggers readers' suspicion about Chye's artistic practice and talent, as Sonny Liew explains in an interview for *The Beat*: "the fact that [Chye], in a way, copied a lot of styles, to me, was a hint that he wasn't as original as he thought he was. . . it adds to the complexity of things if you raise doubts about the quality of his work" (Clemente).

Imitating an artist's style or swiping their work also "conflicts with the *auteur* model associated with the graphic novel" (Crucifix, "Cut-Up and Redrawn" 317; emphasis in original) that posits that the comic artist's style is their recognizable signature.[126] Style indirectly helps readers identify the artist behind the work and authenticates or legitimizes the comics creator and artwork. In drawing attention to the comics creator's signature visual style, Sonny thus at once paradoxically supports the hoax by identifying Chye's imitations of other artists' styles as deliberate, while also raising doubt in readers about Chye as a real comic artist because that would presume he has his own, distinctive style. That most of the comics attributed to Chye reproduce other artists' styles or copy images from other comics puts pressure on his ability as an artist, and by extension, his authenticity and that of his artwork in particular when Sonny does

[126] Exceptions include 'house styles' that comics publishers such as Marvel expected comics artists to adopt.

not justify the imitations. Stylistic imitation thus begins to dismantle *Charlie Chan*'s hoax.

Stylistic imitation also sometimes hints at Chye's fictional existence through metalepsis, "the transgression of the boundaries of the fictional world," which occurs, for instance, "when an author enters or addresses the fictional world he or she created, and when characters leave their fictional world or address their author and their readers" (Kukkonen, "Metalepsis in Popular Culture" 4; 1). Chye's autobiographical comics "The King of Comics" (Liew 270-272) contains a style-based metalepsis, adopting a colour palette reminiscent of Hergé's *Tintin* series and casting some of Hergé's most well-known fictional characters, such as Tintin, Captain Haddock, Professor Calculus, as well as Thomson and Thompson (Figure 43). Although subtle, a metalepsis occurs because Chye, who is presented as a real artist in *Charlie Chan,* draws himself in "The King of Comics" as belonging to the same storyworld as Hergé's fictional characters: all of them are attending comic-con and interacting with each other. Even if the comics as a whole may be interpreted as Chye's fictionalized personal rendition of his dreams or hopes before the event (Liew 270),[127] and his ultimate frustrations once there (Liew 271-272), within the autobiographical context of "The Kings of Comics," Sonny's decision to include a comics where Chye pictures himself on the same narrative level and in the same storyworld as recognizable fictional comics characters creates a metalepsis that raises doubt in readers' mind about Chye's actual existence.

[127] The reference to Winsor McCay's *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend* in the last panel of page 270 suggests the dream-like nature of this autobiographical comics—a fictional comics that may very well be read as truthful when it comes to communicating Chye's feelings.

Figure 43. In this comics, Chye draws himself alongside fictional characters such as Tintin and Captain Haddock. In including comics that blur the lines between the (supposed) facts and fiction, Sonny hints at Chye's fictional status. Sonny Liew, *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* (Pantheon, 2015), p. 270. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

Figure 44. Sonny (bottom right), the narrator, inserts himself and his commentary directly inside the facsimiles of Chye's artwork—a strategy that helps undermine the evidentiary value of the documents. Sonny Liew, *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* (Pantheon, 2015), p. 86. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

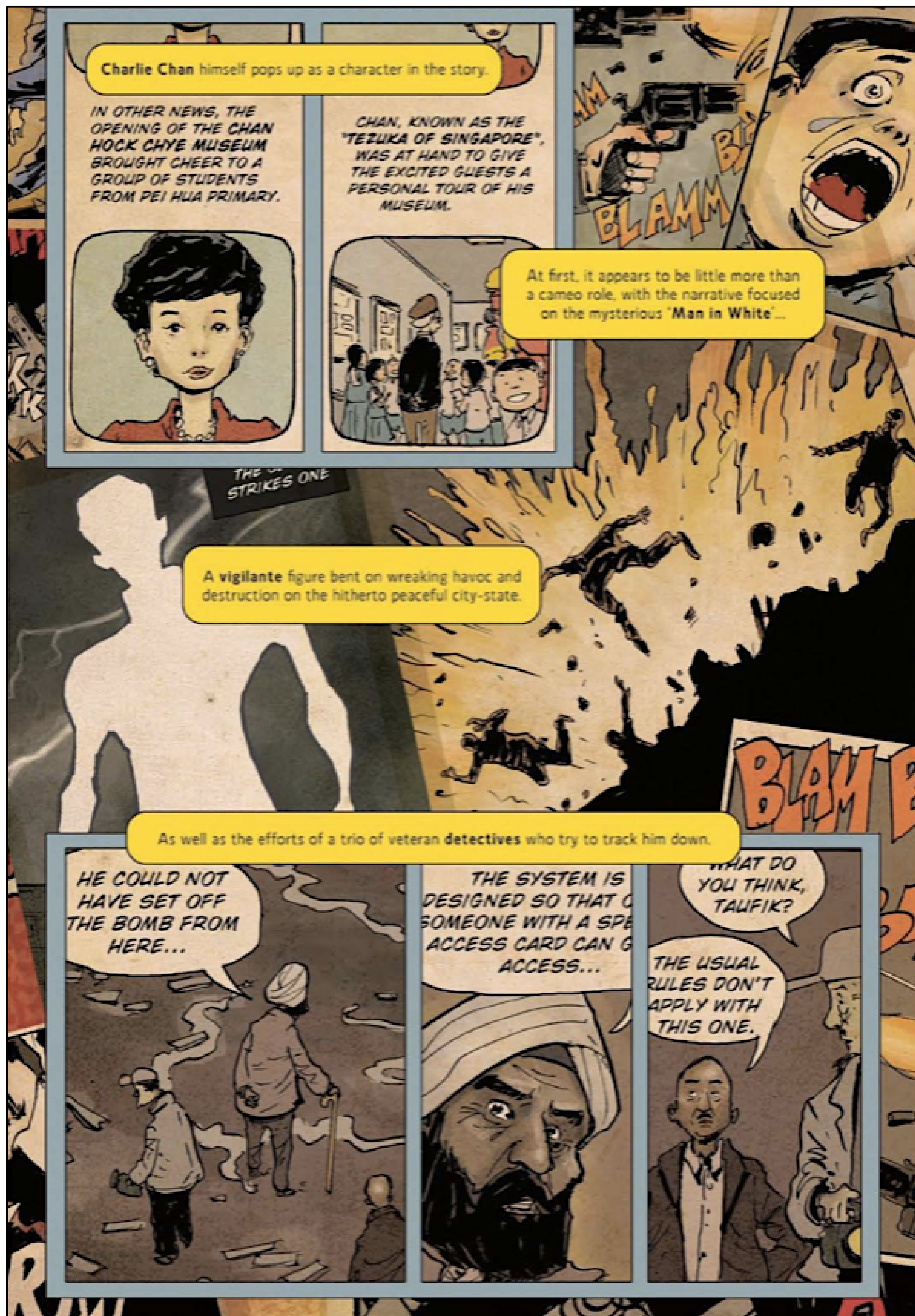

Figure 45. Sonny's and Chye's narrative voices intertwine as Sonny sums up (in yellow narrative text boxes) Chye's comics by using excerpts from the 'original' comics. This implies that Sonny and Chye are one and the same. Sonny Liew, *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* (Pantheon, 2015), p. 280. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

Sonny's insertion of himself as a reader of the facsimiles of Chye's comics is another type of visual metalepsis that blends storyworlds to further highlight that Chye is a scam-artist. In one instance, the facsimile comics page is comprised of three long panels separated by a brown gutter and margins; the top two panels are from Chye's *Force 136*, but surprisingly, the third panel is not (Figure 44). Instead, the bottom panel depicts the drawn covers of two issues of Harvey Kurtzman's *Two-Fisted Tales* and one of *Frontline Combat* in the background, as well as Sonny's avatar looking at the covers and telling readers that Kurtzman's war comics inspired *Force 136*. In metaleptically inserting himself into where the third panel of *Force 136* should have been to show Chye's influences and comment on how he "and Wong would come to realise that they wanted to tell stories that showed the harsher realities of armed conflict … just as Harvey Kurtzman had done with his war titles at EC Comics" (Liew 86), Sonny suggests that something is amiss. Since *Charlie Chan* is supposed to be a retrospective book featuring Chye's (and not Sonny's) comics, Sonny's decision to replace a portion of the facsimile with the covers of three Kurtzman's war titles and his own commentary suggests that in *Charlie Chan* readers need to be informed more about how Chye is indebted to other artists, than about Chye's artwork. The metalepsis thus prompts readers to writerly infer that Chye did not author the comics that are attributed to him throughout *Charlie Chan*.

The metaleptic merging of Sonny's and Chye's comics in the page of *Force 136* also implies that the creativity of one artist ties to that of the other. By essentially melding their artistic creation, Sonny hints that his and Chye's comics are one and the same. The brown margins and gutter unite the first two panels supposedly drawn by Chye and the panel at the bottom drawn by Sonny so that the three panels, although drawn by different

artists, feature as part of the same reproduced comics page. In other instances, Sonny adopts Chye's presumed style or their narrative voices merge creating a strong link between the two comics artists. In Sonny's summaries of Chye's fictional (e.g., Figure 45, and Liew 114-118) and autobiographical comics (e.g., Liew 280-284), Sonny appropriates and re-presents panels from Chye's original comics to create his own comics summary. On the verbal track, Sonny inserts narrative boxes that convey either his or Chye's summaries of the comics. The verbal and visual commingling of Sonny's and Chye's narrative voices results in a joint comics where it is impossible to know with certainty who is narrating. This complex narration encourages readers to weave together the two characters's telling, ultimately binding them together. These clues, taken together and in light of Chye's questionable existence, subtly suggest to readers that Chye and his comics are the result of Sonny's creative mind.

Although metafictional techniques have been said to distance readers, scholars such as Klimek, Limoges, or Lutas have established that depending on the context of reception, the narrative genre, and other text-specific features, metafictional strategies can actually immerse readers into the narrative and its storyworld. Comics scholar Denis Mellier concurs, noting that comics readers have grown accustomed to highly reflexive metafictional devices, to the point that "far from [being] a repelling device, [the] exposure of narrativity and fictionality . . . represents a strong appeal for readers" (307).[128] In *Charlie Chan*, the metafictional techniques appeal to readers and contribute to their immersion through the skepticism they trigger, especially by raising doubt about the

[128] See also Kukkonen ("Metalepsis in Comics and Graphic Novels") for a similar idea.

actual existence of Chye and the facsimiles, and by presenting Sonny as an unreliable narrator "whose rendering of the story and/or commentary on it the reader has reasons to suspect" (Rimmon-Kenan 103). Apart from setting up a game of truths and lies for readers to disentangle, *Charlie Chan* also fundamentally alters and guides their writerly storyworld-building process.

As David Herman explains, sometimes "the teller of a story cannot be taken at his or her word," which "compel[s] the audience 'to read between the lines'—that is, to scan the text for clues about how the storyworld really (or probably) is, as opposed to how the narrator says it is" (*Basic Elements of Narrative* 107). Despite the final paratextual note that gives away the hoax, Sonny's unreliability alone should entice readers to read *Charlie Chan* as a fictionalized biography. His unreliability induces an act of "denarration" whereby "a narrator denies significant aspect of her narratives that had earlier been presented as given," and readers witness "the world being created and recreated anew" (Richardson, "Denarration in Fiction" 168; 170). [129] As readers start to pick up on hints that point to the non-existence of Chye and Sonny's unreliability, they uncover the hoax and eventually replace the original real-life storyworld that Sonny's unreliable narration initially led them to conceive with a fictional one.

The metafictional strategies throughout *Charlie Chan* ask readers to re-envision what they had taken, or seen, as truthful and ask what assumptions brought those truths into being. The revised storyworld that results from this writerly process is purely the

[129] As Richardson makes clear in his essay, there are different degrees of denarration. While Liew's denial of his narration (or denarration) is not as upfront as some examples given by Richardson in his coinage of the concept, I argue that Liew gives enough clues for readers to see him as an unreliable "duplicitous narrator" ("Denarration in Fiction" 173).

creation of readers. The mental work readers go through as they shift *Charlie Chan* from a non-fictional to a fictional narrative fully involves them in the world-building process and also makes them aware that they are engaging in that process. Indeed, as Linda Hutcheon writes, metafictional texts challenge readers' "expectations, [their] desire for verisimilitude, and forces [them] to an awareness of [their] own role in creating the universe of the fiction" (*Narcissistic Narrative* 139). It is by taking note of Sonny's unreliability and acknowledging that the text and its characters are actually fictional creations that readers come to realize that they have an essential role to play in their re-construction of and that they need to re-immerse themselves in the narrative's fictional storyworld.

The fabricated documents that are unreliably presented by Sonny as real also encourage readers to read them in a new light. For Seymour Chatman, unreliable narration is "an ironic form" (*Story and Discourse* 233) whose power lies in the complex balance between the narrated and the unnarrated, between what remains truthful and what remains disproven. In *Charlie Chan*, the ironical unreliable narration comes through in the fabricated documents—in particular, those that borrow the style of other real comic artists to create intertextual visual pastiches, or what Hutcheon describes in another context as intertextual "ironic quotations" (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 93). The latent irony in "[a]ppreciative commentaries, parodies, translation, adaptations, and imitations that a particular text has given rise to," Birgit Neumann and Martin Zierold specify, leads to "intermedial dynamics of worldmaking" (109). Such a process is at work in *Charlie Chan*, in which readers' input, or writerly participation, occupies a central position as readers must link together the fabricated documents to their original sources, which in

turn enables them to ironically perceive the fictional nature of the text. Irony, Hutcheon further adds, is a "semantically complex process of relating, differentiating, and combining said and unsaid meanings—and doing so with an evaluative edge" (*Irony's Edge* 89). In *Charlie Chan*, the altering of the truth and the play on reader expectations are "manipulative," as Chye explains, but "that's how you tell stories" (53). Readers recognize and evaluate the irony to uncover the play between what is said and what is unsaid, what is shown and what is not shown, and make sense of what the narrative implies. The blurring of fact and fiction in metafictional texts, brings readers to "see more and see differently" by accentuating their narrative, inferential input (Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative* 59). Readers thus engage in a writerly process based on suspicion that deepens their immersion into the narrative storyworld.

As a hoax comics that does not overtly expose its metafictional nature, *Charlie Chan* generates a complex narrative meaning-making process. Indeed, to make sense of it, readers must take into consideration Sonny's ambivalent narration as both supporting the hoax and exposing it. Sonny's decision thus creates some interpretive friction or tension in readers as they reconcile his seemingly paradoxical intentions. As they do so, readers come to realize that Sonny's interventions lead them to immerse themselves into a storyworld and invest in characters they believe to exist in real-life, before pulling the rug from under their feet as visual metafictional cues nudge them to confront the reality: Charlie Chan does not exist, and Singapore does not have a so-called "greatest comics artist" (Liew 3). 'What if?' thus becomes a central question of *Charlie Chan*'s meaning-making and interpretative processes (e.g., "What if Charlie Chan Hock Chye had truly existed?" or "What would have happened if Chye's politically charged comics had

actually been real?"). *Charlie Chan* may be best described as a "counterfactual historical fiction," that is, "not [...] history at all, but a work of fiction in which history as we know it is changed for dramatic and often ironic effect" (Duncan, "Alternate History" 209).

As a counterfactual historical narrative, *Charlie Chan* prompts readers to contrast what they are reading in the comics with what they know to be true in their current life when critically engaging with the material presented. In this process, several questions are raised: If Chye did exist and his comics were true, how would Singapore and Comics History be like now? Why did *Charlie Chan* have to be a hoax? What does it mean for reading that *Charlie Chan* is not about the real life of a Singaporean comics artist? *Charlie Chan* does not provide any direct answers to these and similar questions. Instead, through the commingling of different types of images, the text invites readers to infer a possible narrative and reach a personal conclusion about its significance by immersing themselves into a narrative storyworld that now presents as drastically revised through the recognition of its fictionality. For instance, readers of *Charlie Chan* may argue that the point of this narrative is not to inform them about Chye, but rather to criticize Singapore's political history and the official telling of its history through irony (e.g., Holden 510-523). Or, readers may propose that *Charlie Chan* comments upon the place of Singapore's comics industry in the history of the medium (e.g., Silvio 139-147). Indeed, "what exactly is the story being told" (Liew 55) remains indeterminate because it depends entirely on the events or facts that are reported, what account among the conflicting accounts readers side with, who readers are, what they know, and so forth. What does remain certain is that upon identifying Sonny as unreliable and re-reading *Charlie Chan* as fiction, readers

realize that the narrative reads differently not because the text has actually changed, but because they have been made to approach the narrative in a completely new light.

Conclusion

Although the commingling of different types of images in comics has been deemed to trigger a reflexivity in readers that disrupts their immersion into the narrative and its storyworld, this chapter argued that under certain conditions, such mixing can actually preserve reader immersion or even accentuate it. Through the careful analysis of three comics, *Torso*, *Petites Coupures*, and *Charlie Chan*, I determined that the documents included in them function as cues of focalization that raise doubt in readers about the narrators' minds. This ambiguity, in turn, triggers the readers' writerly engagement with the documents and thus facilitates their narrative immersion.

Specifically, I proposed that the technique of mixing different types of images in comics can 1) create tension between seeing and not seeing that stimulates the curiosity of readers and affects their response to the narrative's mood and themes (as in *Torso*); 2) alert readers that the narrative they are reading is incomplete and interactive, and that they thus need to engage with the documents in order to reach narrative closure (as in *Petites Coupures*); or 3) encourage readers to read the text not for what it appears to be, but for what the documents, and the comics narrative as a whole, hint at but do not overtly state (as in *Charlie Chan*). In all three cases, the introduction of different types of images in the cartoon universe of the comics trigger some form of narrative indeterminacy. The tentative resolution of such puzzlement lies within the interaction between what the images themselves show and do not show and the meaning readers writerly attribute to

them to render the text coherent and reach narrative meaning. The writerly process of readers not only retains or facilitates their immersion into the storyworld and the narrative, but renders them essential players in the narrative's creation.

As a whole, this chapter invited comics scholars to reconsider the (mostly) unquestioned theory that the use of photographs and other reproduced documents in comics serves as a distancing strategy. Thus, it opens up a new and broader avenue for research into the mixing of different types of images in comics and how it can prompt different types of engagement and responses from readers. Given that the technique is common in all comics genres, future research may consider focusing on its manifestation in fiction, uncovering, for instance, even more ways in which the mixing of different types of images can turn comics into a kind of interactive narrative experience. A comparative study that engages with theories about multimodal literature may also be worth pursuing to get a more thorough and accurate understanding of the workings of different types of images in comics.

Conclusion

No End in Sight: Some Final Words on Visual Writerly Strategies and Reader Engagement

This thesis, *Mend the Gap: Visual Writerly Strategies, the Missing Piece of Reader Engagement in Comics*, focused on reader engagement in comics, and challenged the current models of reader engagement based on the gap theory. As stated in the introduction, theorizations of the gap, which draw from Iser's foundational work in literary studies, advance that the gutter or the absence of images function as blank, visually empty spaces that ask readers to fill in missing storyworld information. In comics studies, the gap is often posited as *the* central visual strategy or device that invites the input of readers, triggering and solidifying their narrative investment. While I do not altogether reject the theory of the gap, this thesis does put pressure on it. The introduction addresses two central flaws that underpin current iterations of the gap theory and that have not been acknowledged or fully addressed by comics theorists. First, I highlighted that the gap theory emphasizes the narrative role of visually empty space. In so doing, it suggests that the primary function of the images that are present in comics is to help readers determine how to fill in visual, empty gaps and achieve narrative coherency. I proved that the emphasis on visual absence overlooks or, at the very least, severely downplays how the indeterminacy of images functions as a type of gap that triggers the input of readers in the meaning-making process. Second, I demonstrated that although the visual gap is currently theorized as an *absence of visual representation*, in examining

reader engagement, it is best envisioned as the *visual representation of an absence*: it is a *visible* absence.

Taking as a foundation that the gap is one of the many configurations an image can have, I set out to demonstrate that it is the image in general and its inherent indeterminacy, rather than the gap as absence, that draws readers into the narrative. Specifically, in the introduction, I proposed an alternative theoretical model of comics reading that encompasses but also revises the current gap model to accentuate the gap's visual function as an image and account for how different types of images in comics give rise to various degrees of narrative uncertainty, which is crucial for narrative engagement. The model I proposed and used throughout this thesis draws from Roland Barthes's distinction between readerly texts and writerly texts to delineate two different modes of readers engagement with (more or less) indeterminate images. I argued that, most of the time, readers rely on their knowledge of the normative language of comics and the conventions established by the text to decipher the meaning of codified (but nonetheless indeterminate) images, resolve their visually-based narrative uncertainties, and make the narrative cohere. I referred to this type of reading engagement as a readerly one, since it requires readers to decode familiar comics conventions to reach meaning. However, some images, such as the ones examined in this thesis, are not (for now!) conventional and cause readers to struggle towards comprehension. Faced with these unconventional images, readers must engage with the visual indeterminacy by adopting visual writerly strategies, a writerly engagement practice that relies heavily on the readers' imagination for the images to signify and for narrative coherence to be achieved. These images ask readers to engage in a two-part complex reading process. First, readers must draw on their

personal reading experiences to piece together visual clues they have identified throughout the comics and deem meaningful, but whose significance remains indeterminate. Second, readers must creatively draw from and engage with the visual information provided to interpret the indeterminate images, essentially co-writing the comics as they (tentatively) resolve their uncertainties. Because of the highly indeterminate quality of what they show, these images thus present as enticing puzzles that trigger an immersive reading experience in readers, investing them in the narrative's meaning-making process, and welcoming revisions to their interpretations. Overall, the model I proposed focuses on how readers engage with images of all kinds, rather than the gap-as-absence only, and thus contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how the visual component of comics narration activates reader engagement.

Because several theorists have already extensively examined how comics guide readers to readerly decode their conventional visual language (e.g., Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics*; McCloud; Saraceni), I have focused exclusively on images that require readers to adopt writerly reading strategies to be meaningful within the narrative. Surprisingly, the types of visual writerly strategies readers adopt when faced with indeterminate images have not been closely investigated despite an increasing number of noteworthy contemporary comics whose storytelling practices make extensive use of visual ambiguity and indeterminacy. This thesis, which traced how indeterminate images demand the writerly engagement of readers for the narrative to cohere at all, is a response to this critical oversight.

Accordingly, this thesis uncovered and critically addressed the under-examined, yet increasingly common use of indeterminate images, highlighting how such images

prompt readers to adopt writerly reading strategies that render them co-creators of the narrative's meaning. Three main questions guided this research project: 1) How do indeterminate images put pressure on narrative coherence?; 2) How do their visual clues prompt readers to engage even more closely with the image to 'solve visual puzzles' through writerly inference?; and 3) How does this writerly process foster reader engagement with the comics' narrative? As I showed, indeterminate images activate a demanding, expansive writerly process in readers that can be so taxing that it even runs the risk of being off-putting. If adopted, however, visual writerly strategies deeply invest readers, simultaneously asking them to co-write important aspects of the story through their interpretive acts, while also revising their interpretation as they read or re-read the narrative.

To test my model and address questions of reader engagement with indeterminate images, I performed close readings of nine contemporary comics: *Black Hole*, *Trillium*, *Bodyworld, Equinoxes*, "Terror," *House, Torso*, *Petites Coupures à Shioguni*, and *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*. These comics have received little or no attention from comics scholars despite having been generally praised by critics and readers alike. The lack of critical attention devoted to these (and similar comics) may be attributable to an absence of formalist tools that aid scholars who wish to examine and assess their rich and complex visual storytelling practices.

Although the comics chosen for this study abide by the contemporary tendency towards ambiguity and indeterminacy in comics, and although their extensive use of

indeterminate images renders them unconventional, they are not experimental *per se*.[130] Each text is relatively accessible to most readers who are familiar with comics narratives and each makes use of storytelling practices that are becoming more popular. Indeed, as I compiled a list of comics to analyse in this thesis, I was able to identify several commonalities in the type of indeterminate images used by comics authors. Although I did not wish to propose a typology of indeterminate images (it would become obsolete quickly given how rapidly comics narrative is developing!), I divided my corpus into groups and focused on one type of indeterminate image in each chapter, asking how it addresses questions of mind across a number of comics. Moreover, the comics I examined can be categorized according to different genres (e.g., science fiction, horror, slice-of-life, true crime, memoir) and comics traditions (i.e., North American, Franco-Belgian, South American, and Southeast Asian), which enabled me to test and ultimately prove the overall applicability of my theory across a wide range of comics, including silent ones. Consequently, my findings extend across genres and traditions, but also forms of comics; they are thus relevant for the study of comics as a whole.

This thesis examined exclusively visual writerly strategies that readers adopt in response to the increasingly indeterminate visual representations of characters' or narrators' minds. A guiding assumption is behind this choice: readers enter stories primarily through the thoughts and feelings of storyworld agents. Following an introductory theoretical chapter, Chapter One examined the doubling, joining, or blending of indeterminate images that render the minds of characters in *Black Hole*, *Trillium*, and

[130] "Terror" may be considered a possible exception.

Bodyworld. I argued that the visual complexity of intricately related indeterminate images troubles access to crucial information about the character's thoughts, feelings, and motivations, thus putting pressure on the coherence of the narrative. In each comics, several subtle visual cues, however, encourage readers to interpret the images as depicting what I call intra-intermental thinking. In each of the comics examined in Chapter One, indeterminate images are intrinsically connected to simultaneously represent individual and collective thinking. From them, readers can writerly infer the characters' minds and their development, to then better follow the plot progression and comprehend the book's themes, but also to make the narrative cohere.

I continued my study of characters' minds in Chapter Two by proving that when faced with characters with unreadable minds, including unusual seemingly mindless characters, such as dots or a house, readers can identify and characterize them thanks to indeterminate spatial cues. Through close readings of *Equinoxes*, "Terror," and *House*, I demonstrated how the storyworld space as form and as content enables readers to writerly infer the possible thoughts and feelings of unreadable characters. As I showed, spatial cues –details in the setting, the presentation of the storyworld and characters within space, the layout of the comics, or the structuring of the narrative– are of central importance in *Equinoxes*, "Terror," and *House.* I proved that when a comics narrative is populated with unusually unreadable characters, markers of space cue mind, asking readers to engage in a symbolic reading of the space in which characters find themselves or of the types of experiences a character is having in a particular space. In these comics, space acts upon or is acted upon by narratives agents and often comes to be associated with character types. Such a highly indirect (and ultimately indeterminate) form of characterization invests

readers in the unusual and ambivalent characters to which they attribute thoughts, feelings, and motivations. This process of mind attribution impacts the narrative's theme, meaning, and mood.

The final chapter focused on the inclusion of visual documents in an otherwise drawn comics universe as cues of focalization that offer crucial insight into the minds of narrators. Specifically, through my analyses of *Torso*, *Petites Coupures à Shioguni*, and *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*, I demonstrated that the uncertainty caused by the visual alterations of the documents brings to light the manipulative, confused, or ambivalent minds of narrators. In raising doubt in readers about the narrative content and their comprehension of it, these indeterminate documents do not disrupt reader immersion, as is often argued, but rather enhance it. Indeed, through the writerly engagement these images trigger, readers co-create the story's mood and atmosphere, playfully piecing together the narrative puzzle, or bringing to light the document's unreliability and irony. These writerly reading processes urge a reformulation of previous understandings of the narrative.

In detailing how readers engage in visual writerly strategies when faced with indeterminate images that speak to the minds of characters or narrators, this thesis revised the theorization of comics reader engagement in two important ways. First, it argued that through the uncertainty they raise, images (including the gap as an image), and not the absence of visual information (as the current gap theory has it), invite either the readerly or the writerly input of readers and cement their narrative engagement. Second, it proposed that readers of comics are often prompted by highly indeterminate and

unconventional images to creatively, that is, writerly interpret what they see to render the narrative coherent, but also to engage in narrative meaning-making.

Consequently, the findings of this thesis support and disseminate the recent criticism of the gap by renowned Franco-Belgian comics scholars, such as Baetens, Groensteen, and Roberts, who lament the lack of attention given to the workings of images and "not gutter-related" gaps in comics (Baetens, "Gap or Gag" 214). By proposing an alternative to the theory of the gap that is grounded in visual indeterminacy, this thesis has addressed the pressing need for a comics reader reception theory based not so much in a visual language of comics that recognizes the gap as its basic unit, but in images and their use in a comics storyworld. Moreover, this thesis also adds to the growing trend of scholarship focused on the visual aspect of comics (e.g., Kukkonen, Lefèvre, Mikkonen, Pedri). In particular, it shows how some of the visually-based devices of openness that Ahmed identified in her foundational *Openness of Comics: Generating Meaning within Flexible Structures* demand that scholars revise their theorization of reader engagement in comics to account for the visual writerly strategies readers adopt to creatively interpret the highly indeterminate visuals often used in comics. *Mend the Gap*'s findings are thus meant to encourage and assist comics scholars as they question and contest the established theory of the gap, while also urging them to more closely examine the workings of images in comics and ask not only how images activate the interpretive activities of readers, but also what characterizes those interpretive activities.

This thesis also adds to the field of post-classical narratology by refining its existing theoretical and formalist tools. Its chapter layout addressed three categories usually overlooked by traditional, literary-based narratology and listed by Mikkonen who

notes that the narratological study of comics reintroduces "certain aspects of story analysis, such as worldmaking, space, and characterisation, which have been neglected by the dominant formalist methodologies of narrative analysis" (*The Narratology of Comic Art* 8). In Chapter One, my analysis of *Black Hole*, *Trillium*, and *Bodyworld*, which is the first study to thoroughly consider the representation of intermental and intramental thinking in comics, led me to prove that the indeterminate visual doubling, joining, or blending enable at once the depiction of the individual and collective thinking of characters. Such visual doubling, joining, or blending visibly conveys commonality in the overall thinking while also accommodating some diversity, or subjectivity, in the details of that thinking. This finding challenges a common criticism narratologists make against the representation of communal thinking as the erasure of a character's individual thinking. Chapter Two examined other understudied narrative element, character and space (as content/setting or as form/layout), which, as my close readings of *Equinoxes*, "Terror," and *House* led me to conclude, are linked. Specifically, I demonstrated that when faced with characters with unreadable minds, readers rely on spatial cues to writerly get a sense of the type of character they are presented with and attribute possible personality traits, thoughts, feelings, and motivations to characters. Space informs character and their characterization, and yet it is something that narratologists have considered only in a cursory fashion. Lastly, by considering the use of different types of images in an otherwise drawn comics storyworld, I nuanced claims made by narratologists such as Ryan and several comics scholars who argue that media transparency (i.e., the experience of readers forgetting that their reading experience is mediated) is a prerequisite to narrative immersion. For them, formal devices that draw

attention to themselves, such as the mixing of different types of images in comics, prevent such transparency and, in doing so, distance readers from the narrative and break their immersion into the storyworld. My readings of *Torso*, *Petites Coupures à Shioguni*, and *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* nuance the common narratological understanding of immersion and distancing as they pertain to the mixing of different types of images in comics. It proved that contrary to what is commonly believed, such mixing can deepen reader immersion into the narrative and its storyworld activating their writerly engagement and ultimately rendering them active agents in the narrative's worldmaking. In all these ways, my study also addressed some generally neglected areas of narratology.

Furthermore, this thesis's examination of indeterminate images and the visual writerly strategies readers adopt to engage with them is timely because it resonates with the growing narratological interest in narrative complexity. As narratologists Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki, who edited a foundational volume entitled *Narrative Complexity: Cognition, Embodiment, Evolution* (2019), explain, "with open-ended dynamics and resistance to closure, modern conceptualizations of complexity include such features as information richness or density, openness, and a multiplicity of interpretations provoked by the work of art" ("Introduction" 3). For them, "the number of formal units, their interrelatedness, and the size of the work of art do not prove to be of primary importance in defining complexity" (Grishakova and Poulaki 3). Rather, "what matters is density and richness of information stemming from the interplay of predictability and indeterminacy" (Grishakova and Poulaki 3). As my examination of indeterminate images shows, narrative complexity abounds in comics and is at the heart of a rich and open ended writerly engagement on the part of readers.

This thesis is only a first foray into the narrative complexity of comics and its impact on reader engagement. Further research may uncover how comics readers writerly engage with other indeterminate images this thesis did not analyse. Possible lines of inquiry include the examination of comics that present characters that do not look the same throughout the narrative universe (e.g., Brecht Evens's *Panther*), comics in which characters, settings, and layout essentially function as one another (e.g., Sergio Toppi's *Sharaz-De: Tales from the Arabian Nights*), comics that not only mix different types of images but also adopt different visual styles from one panel to the next (e.g., Bill Sienkiewicz's *Stray Toasters*), or texts sold as comics that do not make use of familiar comics page layouts that rely on gutters, but rather mix conventions of comic books, picture books, and scrapbooks (e.g., Jesse Reklaw's *LOVF: An Illustrated History Of A Man Losing His Mind*). In these and other cases of comics that rely heavily on indeterminate images, the visuals create a highly immersive –because puzzling– reading experience for readers that facilitates their writerly engagement with the narrative as a whole.

As a result of my study, researchers trained in empirical sciences may test the validity of my findings by evaluating the response of flesh-and-blood readers through lab results or personal interviews that focus on the interpretive strategies readers adopt when faced with indeterminate images. Such empirical studies would account for concrete ways background knowledge and comics reading experience impact the writerly reading process I propose. Such an approach may factor into a cultural studies perspective that considers how issues of gender, race, disability, class, and other markers of identity factor into reader responses to indeterminate images and the visual writerly strategies they elicit.

The thesis's detailed analysis of indeterminate images and how they implicate readers by drawing them into the narrative also has ramification outside of academia. For instance, its findings may be of interest to comics creators and comics editors alike who may wish to incorporate some of its theoretical insights into their own creative practice. Comics readers, too, may find this thesis helpful as they strive to get a better sense of how they writerly engage with indeterminate visuals. Understanding how indeterminate images present and function in a wide range of comics may give them a deeper appreciation for and understanding of the medium, which often engages in narrative practices that are more subtle and complex than what it is credited for.

Lastly, although considerations of the indeterminate structuring of narrative infiltrate this thesis through discussions of non-linear storytelling, for instance, and although such a structuring certainly impacts the writerly activity of readers, it is not something I thoroughly discussed. Despite it falling outside of the scope of this thesis, considering how readers engage with indeterminate structures is an area of research to which the findings presented above can contribute. For instance, Noam Knoller's current research on what he calls userly texts could draw on my observations about the writerly engagement of comics readers to inform the study of how narrative structuring and the visual presentation of a storyworld in comics may require a new form of reader engagement. According to Knoller, "a userly text is not merely navigated by the body, as one might flip the page of a codex or look around 'within' a recorded 360-degree video. Action and perception are combined here into an authorially structured, proceduralized process of *userly performance*, in which the perception of the content and point of the text is premised on the simultaneous reflexive perception of the user's (embodied) activity"

(107). Although Knoller's research does not focus on comics, his scholarship could illuminate aspects of indeterminate structures to answer how these trigger the userly activity of readers in comics as diverse as Ruppert and Mulot's *Un Cadeau*, Jason Shiga's *Meanwhile*, or Chris Ware's *Building Stories*, as well as in interactive digital comics such as *Tell Me Your Secrets* by the BBC, *Florence* by Mountains Studio, or *L'Immeuble* by Vidu. As these examples and those given in the thesis suggest, more research on reader engagement is needed as more and more comics accentuate, indeed, require the creative (and physical) writerly input of readers.

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