The Comic's Heartbeat: Framing Affective Structures in Comics History

by

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Abstract

This thesis proposed a structure-centered method for composing a critical history of comics. It examined the development building and breaking template--a rigid grid of panels depicting a narrative arc, which then leads to a panel depicting the arc's climax that breaks with that established structure--through four moments in the history of English-language comics. Rather than attempting a comprehensive overview of the building and breaking template, the thesis was a proof of concept for the application of recent advances in structure-oriented comics theory and in theories of affect--the pre-cognitive experience of emotion-- to specific comic structures. Examining the work of Bernard Krigstein, Art Spiegelman, David Mazzucchelli and Paul Karasik, and Joshua Cotter, the thesis placed these artists within a context of conditionality, dependent both upon the material circumstances of comics production and upon the unique semiotic and affective experiences of the comic's readers.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The field of English-language comics theory has grown considerably in the last three years, with a veritable explosion of new texts exploring the way the medium works, as well as an increased interest in translating major theorists from the Franco-Belgian comics theory tradition into English. This growth of the critical side of scholarship has made it possible to consider new ways of carrying out an analysis of individual comics within a historical context, but this merging of comics criticism with comics history has, for the most part, yet to happen. Thierry Groensteen, in *Comics and Narration*, the followup to his influential text *The System of Comics*, calls for the creation of a critical history of comics that moves beyond the best seller list and incorporates a greater understanding of the semiotic and formal development of comics.[1] This thesis is one possible answer to that call, a speculative model for how a critical history might be written. In structure it takes the theoretical work of a number of scholars both inside and outside the realms of comic theory and mobilizes their analytical strategies in the context of the history of comics as a medium. The centerpiece of this narrative is one formal structure within English-language comic books: an arrangement of panels that I am calling the "building and breaking" template. This structure represents a space for experiences both of the information comics convey—their semiotic content—and of the emotional content of comics—their affective potential—and this thesis uses the building and breaking template to explore how

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1   Thierry Groensteen, *Comics and Narration*, Translated by Ann Miller, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013) 1-4

these spaces are situated within a wider history of English-language comics.

The building and breaking template is a regular grid of panels that depict some narrative arc or moment of action—the "building" of regularity paired with mounting narrative tension—and a panel or panels that deviates from that pattern at the climax of that arc—a "break" with that regularity. Figure 1.1 is prototypical of this template: it is an imagined two page spread where the left page represents "building" and the right represents "breaking". The left page is composed of square panels arranged in a 3x4 "regular" composition[2]—a composition where the panels are arranged in a grid that looks like a waffle iron.[3] The right page is one large panel, commonly called a "splash" panel; it dramatically breaks with the previously established pattern.

The narrative of this thesis follows the development of this structure specifically in English-language comic books, from the development of comic books as independent objects containing narratives that extended across multiple pages in the 1930s and 40s up to the comic books and graphic novels of the present day. I have limited the scope of this analysis so that the template can be analyzed as part of a discourse shared between comics creators that are part of a cultural tradition that encompasses production, reception, and an exchange of ideas. It also allows for a discussion of particular patterns of page creation and ways in which readers navigate the comic narrative in a specific format. This is not to say that the building and breaking template can only exist in English-

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2   Term from Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, Translated by Bart Beatty and Nick Nguyen, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009) 96.
3   Groensteen, *Comics and Narration*, 44

language comic books, or only in longer narrative works as opposed to newspaper comics. Rather, it allows for a tight focus on the particular issues of production and development that in the world of English-language longer narrative comics affected how the structure appeared, and when.

The theoretical approaches used here also deserve some discussion. I am fusing together several different approaches that are to some extent antipathetic towards the idea of a historical analysis. As described above, there is currently an explosion of semiotically-informed, structurally focused explorations of comics, and the works of these scholars heavily informs the processes being used by critics to analyze individual comics. In some cases, these texts emphasize heavily the role of the reader in interpreting comics, which implicitly introduces elements of ambiguity in analysis.[4] This invites speculative criticism that frustrates attempts to locate "virtuoso" works.[5] This is a term Groensteen uses to describe the kind of works that a critical history would examine, and as such marks my departure from what Groensteen may have intended in this call. By implication "virtuoso" seems to imply a level of individual artistry that far surpasses the average. While much of the analysis here covers works that I personally find deeply engaging and impressive, the analysis is more interested in a wider social, linguistic, economic, and audience-oriented context, rather than attempting to locate and consecrate the masters of English-language comics. While the conditions of creation are

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4   Barbara Postema, *Narrative Structure in Comics: Making Sense of Fragments*, (Rochester: RIT Press, 2013)

5   Groensteen, Thierry, *Comics and Narration*. 151. Ironically, perhaps, Groesteen himself engages in a varied reading of comics of the exact type I suggest disrupts concrete claims of virtuosity.

important to this analysis, the varied experiences of an audience to comics are equally important.

This analysis has been fused to *affect theory*, a developing field that examines the pre-cognitive experience of emotion in art and society—a field that has yet to be adopted broadly into comics theory discourse. I am adopting it because the building and breaking template is not merely a tool for communicating information to the reader but a way of communicating or enabling an emotional and even visceral, embodied response to a comic's narrative. When scholars discuss comics as having rhythmic qualities,[6] or speak of rising tension and anticipation or dread, they are in the realm of affect, and this aspect of comics demands the level of development and theoretical support that Scott McCloud's largely structuralist approach to comics has received in the two decades since its publication.[7]

Jenifer Robinson, in an overview of affect theory entitled *Deeper than Reason*, argues that affect allows readers to understand and draw conclusions about a text, functioning as a way of reasoning through a text's content.[8] If a key aspect of the building and breaking template is to incite or invite particular emotional responses, it seems imperative to examine the ways in which those emotional responses lead to certain conclusions about the meaning of a text. It is important, too, to consider the ways in which varied, even resistant responses to the text might be productive. The building and breaking template acts as a kind of

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6   Groensteen, *The System of Comics*. 45-4
7   Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1994)
8   Jenefer Robinson, *Deeper than Reason*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 154-56.

grammatical script for how comics may be composed, and this grammatical construction can be stored and recalled by a reader. The nature of the building and breaking template as a shared grammar that comic creators may draw upon for communicative ends (both semiotic and affective) enables the structure's use by creators and readers as a site of various mobilizations and acts of resistance or deviation from expectations. [9]A core part of the criticality of this history, then, is recognizing how this grammatical and affective quality reinforces the historically predicated nature of virtuosity by emphasizing the contingency of the actual readers' experiences.

As a grammatical construct, the building and breaking template is not an absolute rule. A wide range of variations appear in comics that share major features with one another without strictly adhering to a definition. For this reason, I will now expand my initial description of the template into a looser and more complex diagnostic criteria for identifying the building and breaking template.

Definitions

Before expanding on the qualities of the building and breaking template, it is worth reviewing several key terms that will be used in the definition, particularly since a number of them come from very recent comics scholarship. Previously I referred to "panels" when talking about the overall composition of comics pages, but in the rest of this thesis I will be following a distinction that Thierry Groensteen draws between *frames* and *panels.*[10] Following Groensteen, I

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9   Groensteen, *Comics and Narration*. 151.
10   Groensteen, The System of Comics

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will be using the term "frame" to refer to the box that surrounds and contains the artwork—the "panel."[11] Making this distinction means that comics can be described as functioning in different ways depending on whether the frame or the panel contents drive the composition. A page layout designed to accommodate the contents of the panels, the frames changing shape to fit the objects within them, can be described as a "rhetorical" design. In contrast, "non-rhetorical" designs privilege the design of the frames over the panel contents, editing or truncating those panel contents in order to maintain the predetermined frame structure.[12]

This term division is one tool for discussing the design of pages regardless of their contents. Groensteen provides several other terms for describing the placement of frames in a comic. A series of frames arranged in a row, like the highlighted frames in Figure 1.2, can be called a "strip."[13] The two other major terms Groensteen uses to describe frames are the m*ultiframe* and *hyperframe*. The multiframe is the collection of all the frames within an entire comic. This term is useful when referring to sequences in comics that stretch across multiple pages, and can be used to describe a frame's, or a panel's, placement within a whole comic.[14] Similarly, the hyperframe, which describes the larger implied or imagined frame that surrounds all the frames on a single page, can be used to

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11 Groensteen's distinction is somewhat more complex, and Barbara Postema devotes an entire chapter of Narrative Structure in Comics to the nature of the frame and gutter which can be referred to for greater clarification, but this more crass definition is enough to carry the theoretical work here without overly complicating matters.

12 Groensteen, *The System of Comics*. 93. Groensteen draws on Benoit Peeters in using these terms; I have simplified his four terms ("conventional," "decorative," "rhetorical," and "productive") for the sake of broader focus without confusion. See also, Groensteen, *Comics and Narration*. 46

13 Ibid. 21

14 Ibid. 28

discuss how a particular panel can be placed, say, first or last in the hyperframe.[15]
In figure 1.3, the hyperframe of each page has been marked in red; the whole
composition constitutes the sequence's multiframe.

There are several important terms that describe the panel contents, or,
more specifically, that describe the way comics panels function in a narrative—
their "visual narrative grammar."[16] This concept comes from the neuroscientist
and linguist Neil Cohn, who has done considerable research into the way visual
elements within comics communicate ideas and narratives. Cohn classifies panels
in a number of different ways based on their narrative function. The most
important of these for the purposes of this analysis are *initiators*—which mark the
start of an action; *peaks*—which mark the dramatic conclusion of that action; and
prolongers—which do not initiate or conclude an action but instead extend it.
This can be seen in figure 1.4, which begins with an initiating panel (I), continues
with a series of prolongation panels (L) and concludes with a peak (P!).[17] These
panels can be somewhat imperfectly paralleled with the narrative discourse that
Roland Barthes laid out in his semiotic system for the analysis of narratives.[18]
Peak panels in Cohn's schema are similar (though not identical) to Barthes's
cardinal functions, which represent critical points in the narrative where the
action determines the course of the story. In contrast, the panels that prolongue the
action might be analogous to either *catalyzing functions*, which are minor actions
that do not affect the course of the narrative, or even *indexes*, which do not further

15 Ibid. 30-31, 34
16 Neil Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014) 4.
17 Ibid. 70-71.
18 Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text,* Edited by Stephen Heath, (London: Fontana Press, 1978)

the action of the plot, instead acting to increase the reader's understanding of that plot, the characters, the setting, and so on by providing supplemental information.[19]

With these terms defined, we can consider the diagnostic criteria[20] of the building and breaking template more closely. Comics sequences that can be described as using building and breaking techniques often include the following:

1. A section of the hyperframe's design composed of a series of frames of equal size and shape

2. The arrangement of these frames into a "regular composition"—a rigid grid that looks like a waffle iron. This arrangement becomes an established pattern for the sequence.

3. The introduction of an action or narrative arc that is initiated and then developed, usually with many prolonger panels that draw the action out

4. A non-rhetorical structure where panel contents are truncated or composed in order to accommodate the predetermined regular grid structure

5. The introduction of a panel or series of panels that breaks with the

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19 Ibid. 91-95
20 Using a fluidly defined field is useful for several reasons. Most notably, it mirrors a useful strategy for defining comics as a whole, borrowed from Thierry Groensteen, whose *The System of Comics* might be considered a book-length attempt to lay out a similar descriptive field for comics. Groensteen in fact only introduces a definition in the sequel to this text in order to begin considering the borders at which that definition breaks down. Defining comics as a cluster of related qualities that may or may not be present effectively cuts past the endless arguing over strict terminology that seems to be a feature of every major and minor work of comics scholarship since McCloud launched the argument with his own definition in 1993, or perhaps even dating back to Will Eisner's introduction of the notion of "sequential art." It seems reasonable to use a similarly field-based explanation of Building and Breaking, as many of the examples considered would not fit comfortably within a unified definition without broadening it beyond usefulness, and yet are recognizable as serving fundamentally similar roles within the comics narrative.

established pattern of the sequence

6. The placement of a "peak" panel—the conclusion of the introduced action or arc—in this frame that breaks with the established pattern

There are, furthermore, several other qualities that commonly appear in these sequences but are of somewhat lesser importance:

7. An associated transition, as from one strip to the next in the hyperframe, the move to another adjacent hyperframe, or the active turning of a page

8. Repetition of panel contents or close compositional similarity in panel contents

9. A reduction or absence of words over the course of the sequence resulting in many "silent" panels

These qualities work together to open up spaces for the reader to respond to the text in particular ways. In one sense this structure opens a *semiotic space* by providing information that a reader might use to understand the informational content of the story. The structure provides indices and catalyzers that do not move the narrative forward but provide greater information for the reader. As a script that can be stored in a reader's memory and potentially recalled, it also serves as an established sign for the reader to pay attention to particular panel contents.[21] In many of the examples used in this thesis, the building and breaking template, and the different models that preceded it throughout the development of English-language comic books, serve a rhetorical or at times symbolic function, with the regular structures and their disruption paralleling the narrative in

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21 Groensteen, *The System of Comics*. 54

complex ways.

It also opens up an *affective space,* or a space where the reader might be emotionally affected and aroused by the narrative. Building and breaking sequences open up space for the reader to be affected, a space where the experience and appraisal of emotion can take place, through various techniques. The reader might experience, for example, the building of excitement (or dread) if a reader recognizes the structure and anticipates a dramatic climax, the proliferation of small details that a reader might react to in various ways, or the inducement of frustration as an awaited moment is delayed. While some authors analyze affect in literature (and other arts) from the perspective of a presumed intended reading, I wish to discuss affect in terms of spaces and potentials. In this I am following contemporary theorists such as Jennifer Doyle and Eve Sedgwick, who emphasize the way an affective response is based on affinities and conditions that can cause failures to connect or differences in interpretation. Therefore, rather than discussing individual comics in terms of emotions specifically invoked, this analysis will explore how this structure opens up particular spaces where readers can be affected.

Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is divided into two parts. The first part lays out the theoretical underpinnings of the thesis, which are then applied to a series of comics in the second. As the goal of the second part is to apply these theories in a practical way, the first section will use a sequence from the climax of Dave Gibbons and Alan

Moore's comic *Watchmen* as a test case. This comic represents a major use of the building and breaking template and can be used to examine the semiotic potential of the structure, the affective spaces opened up by the structure, and the way readers might respond in varied ways to the comic, all within the context of a wider history.

In the second section of the thesis, the first two chapters are concerned with the development of key components of the Building and Breaking structure. This overview consists of a series of examinations of individual artists, predominantly focusing on those comic makers who explored structures related in form to the building and breaking template. The scope of this section is therefore not a comprehensive history of English-language comic books and graphic novels, or even of this structure and all its precursors, but a limited examination of key moments in the structure's development that shed light on the ideas discussed above. Of the artists explored, individual works have been selected to serve as representatives of the general experiments being carried out in form by these artists. In this way I hope to sketch out a trajectory for this formal development without producing a mere catalog of its every instance.

The first chapter in this section examines the works of Bernard Krigstein, an artist active in the 1940s and '50s at a number of different studios, who rose to more recent scholarly notoriety in recent years in part due to Art Spiegelman's analysis of his work.[22] I use Krigstein's work to explore the ways in which prolonger and refiner panels open up particular affective space, while using his

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22   Bart Beaty, *Comics Versus Art*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012) 115

own history within the medium is used to explore the material limitations that prevented him from exploring this potential further. In contrast to this artist and his contemporaries, the alternative comix creators of the 1960s and '70s had extensive artistic freedom in both form and content but did not, for the most part, experiment with building and breaking or its predecessor forms. Nevertheless, their work is often affectively charged. The second section of this chapter explores how the greater liberty of alternative comix creators prompted an explosion of different formal strategies for exploring affective space through form as well as content, while simultaneously making it difficult for a shared semiotic vocabulary to emerge. In particular, this section will look at the early work of Art Spiegelman, the experimental artist who went on to produce the critically acclaimed graphic record of his family's experience of the Holocaust, *Maus*.

The last two chapters examine ways in which the transformation of the building and breaking template into a shared grammar makes possible experiments with the form as well as moments of tension and resistance between texts and their readers. First, Mazzucchelli and Karasik's adaptation of the Paul Auster novel *City of Glass* represents a use of the building and breaking template radically different from that explored earlier in the thesis. In their work, the template contains symbolically charged and iconic, rather than literal, images, and the use of the structure becomes a way of carrying the novel's critique of language into the comics form, as the nature of the hyperframe itself is interrogated. Finally, Joshua Cotter's experimental comic *Driven by Lemons* uses the building

and breaking structure in order to introduce discontinuities and uncomfortably ambiguous experiences, experiences where the reader both does not know what to think, and also does not *intuit* what to *feel*. This experience of productive resistance between text and reader, however, is tenuous and may lose its power to shock as a reader's expectations change.

This exploration reveals how grammatical structures may emerge within comics under particular conditions, with readers drawing various positive or negative experiences from their use. It reveals, too, that while the affective content of comics is both profoundly important to our understanding of the meaning and artistry of comics, it also eludes easy systemization. The building and breaking template may be mobilized by such diverse purposes that to associate it with any one affect is difficult if not impossible. Nevertheless, the analysis here reveals the potential for a critical history that could acknowledge the diverse applications of a structure and use the history of its development to reframe and reconsider the canon of comics as a whole.

Chapter 2: The Building and Breaking Template—A Descriptive Field

In the first part of this thesis I want to examine a short sequence from the climax of Dave Gibbons and Allan Moore's 1983 comic *Watchmen* as a way of explaining how I will be analyzing other individual sequences and works in the rest of this thesis.[23] *Watchmen* is a comic that follows a group of (mostly) retired superheroes who discover a vast and sinister conspiracy. In the background of the story, the United States and Russia teeter on the edge of nuclear war, and in each issue of the comic the infamous Doomsday Clock moves closer to midnight. Ultimately the hapless heroes of the story discover that their onetime ally, Adrian Veidt aka Ozymandias, has orchestrated events in order to launch an assault on New York City of seemingly extraterrestrial origins, believing that the perceived presence of a cosmic threat will unite the world and avert nuclear destruction.

The sequence analyzed in this chapter represents the culmination of the narrative's many plot threads, as a genetically created monster is teleported into New York City, releasing a psychic shock wave that will kill half the city. In this sequence (Figure 2.1), bystanders in New York City, several of whom have played a part in the narrative previously, react to the apocalyptic arrival of the creature.[24] Most notably, a newspaper stand owner and the boy who throughout the comic has been reading a secondary comic at his stand embrace in the face of death despite their previous hostility.[25]

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23   Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen*, (New York: DC Comics, 1986)
24   Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen*, issue 11, 26-28. The graphic novel reprint of Watchmen is only paginated according to the numbers in the original comic books, so those numbers have been used here.
25   Ibid. 28.

It is notable that even this sequence, despite its seemingly prototypical nature, problematizes a strict definition of the building and breaking template somewhat, as the final panel, the white panel which takes up the bottom strip of the page and represents the peak moment as the psychic squid monster materializes in the city might not be the true "breaking" moment in this sequence. It is possible to read the sequence as concluding, in truth, with the six full page splash panels that begin Chapter 12 (an example of which can be seen in Figure 2.2), which break not only the structure of the twelve small panels preceding this moment but the entire comic: they are the only full splash panels in the entire comic.[26] These panels, which show the magnitude and grotesque, B-movie madness of the monster's arrival in lurid detail, serve as both a dismantling of the structure that has come before and the imposition of a new structure that attempts to encompass the full horror of Ozymandias's plot. It is precisely because of this flexibility in form that I have employed a flexible diagnostic criteria in explaining this form rather than a strictly prescriptive definition.

Nevertheless, this sequence provides a useful entry point for exploring the way the building and breaking template and related structures will be analyzed in this thesis. First, it allows us to see how the frames of comics both act as semiotic elements in themselves and can, through page design, allow for information conveyance. This part explores how the work of theorists interested in structuralism can be converted into a practical methodology for analyzing individual comics sequences. Second, it allows us to see the way comics have an

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26 Ibid. Issue 12, 1-6

affective content that invites or provokes emotion. The sequence reveals both the ways in which affect influences our understanding of a sequence and the ways in which responses might emerge in diverse ways for different readers. Finally, it sets the stage for the historical exploration that is to follow, due to its status as a work resulting from particular social and economic conditions within comics publishing, conditions which helped make the exploration here possible.

The Semiotics of Frames and Panels

The first idea critical to understanding the building and breaking template and this sequence from *Watchmen* is that *comics frames function semiotically.* This principle touches upon a longstanding debate within comics: whether or not comics as a whole can be considered a language. This thesis will not attempt to resolve or, in truth, engage with this question in any sustained way. There are a number of competing, convincing opinions that perhaps are not always arguing against one another so much as proposing different definitions of the word "language." Hannah Miodrag, for example, puts forth a convincing argument that the contents of panels cannot, themselves, constitute a language in the semiotic sense of indivisible communicative parts composed into a *langue.*[27] Whereas Cohn posits that comics are an expression of a larger visual language, using language in an expanded sense meaning ordered, learnable ways of forming utterances.[28] In order to sidestep this debate while making use of the insights of these different views, I will simply describe comics as a semiotic system where

27 Hannah Miodrag, *Comics and Language: Reimagining Critical Discourse on the Form*,
     (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013) 8-10
28   Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics*. 3-7

elements and groups of elements within comics can act as signifiers, and as grammatical patterns that can be stored and recalled by readers.[29]

The primary insights relied upon for the semiotic and narratological portion of this analysis come from the work of French scholar Thierry Groensteen, whose works *The System of Comics* and *Comics and Narration* provide a more rigorously argued theoretical structure. In particular, this study adopts many of his terms in order to describe the particular qualities of the building-and-breaking structure. Some are easily listed, and have been summarized in the introduction: his distinction of the "frame" from the contents of the "panel" are already readily apparent throughout the preceding pages, and terms like "multiframe"--the collection of all the various frames within a comic narrative's overall composition—or "the regular composition" and "waffle iron"-- for the grid of panels that constitute the rhythmic breaking motion—follow logically from this terminology.

The major insight Groensteen provides is one about the way in which readers process images. Unlike McCloud's more linear, sequential model, which places meaning-generation in the gap between adjacent panels,[30] Groensteen posits that readers process comics through braiding, a nonlinear construction of meaning where multiple panels, not necessarily adjacent but potentially from across the comic, work in unison to make meaning.[31] This process can be seen in the way the exact nature of the building and breaking template system described

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29 Compare Miodrag's use of the term "symbol system." *Comics and Language.* 11.
30 McCloud, Understanding Comics, 66-74
31 Groensteen, *The System of Comics*. 18, 146

earlier in this chapter shifts with the introduction of new panels. This model of panel reading (suggested by Groensteen and elaborated by Postema) acknowledges that all of the panels of the "hyperframe"—the block of frames collected on the visible page—are immediately at hand for the reader.[32] The reader enters the sequence from *Watchmen* aware of the block of white at the bottom of the page, and (Ozymandias having just completed his villainous monologue)[33] can probably surmise what that block of white means for the characters. The building sequence here is thus entered with foreknowledge of the break to come.

The appearance of the six tolling splash panels forces a reconsideration of this information, however, as described previously: the moment of the break becomes a moment of surprise as the anticipated break is revealed to have been a dupe. The appearance of this more dramatic break forces a resignification of the previous panels. Rather than a simple forward trajectory, comics fold temporally back upon themselves.[34] Similarly, they constantly draw the past forward, in this case via association between nuclear blast silhouette graffiti seen throughout the comic (including in one of the six splash panels), the nigh-omnipotent character Doctor Manhattan's repeated brushes with annihilation, the character Night Owl's dream of a nuclear blast destroying the world while he and Silk Specter kiss, and the shot of the news stand man and the boy embracing, their silhouettes dissolving into light.[35] Panels across the comic signify and resignify in this braid. The

32 Ibid., Postema, *Narrative Structure in Comics*, 69-76. see also Miodrag, *Comics and Language*, in the chapter "Comics as Network."
33 Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen*, issue 11, 18-27.
34 Groensteen, *The System of Comics*. 114, Miodrag, *Comics and Language, 118-22*
35   Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen*, issue 4, 8, issue 7, 18

structure of narrative building and breaking itself depends in part upon the resignification of the building panels by the breaking panel.

Groensteen, drawing upon Benoit Peeters, provides another useful term in the consideration of the rhythms of the regular composition: "rhetorical" compositions, compositions where the frames are arranged in service to the panel contents. He points out that this tailoring of frames specifically to the action portrayed means that "the beat inherent to the multiframe... is still operative, but no longer in the marked form of the cadence."[36] This is particularly useful to note because it provides a way of distinguishing between breaks in rhythm that fit into the building and breaking template and breaks that are purely rhetorical. This is necessary for understanding works like *Watchmen*, which has a highly regularized grid of nine panels per page. This grid is only seldom broken in the way considered above; more frequently it is broken to make space for characters, action, a more comprehensive shot of particular scenes, and so on. Many of *Watchmen*'s more notable formal experiments revolve not around the building and breaking of structure but the first part of that function—ongoing rigid rhythms that are not broken at dramatic moments but seem to march on relentlessly toward midnight on the bloody clock of Armageddon.[37] It is within this rigid structure that the even more aggressively apparent structure of the further subdivided grid of Chapter 11 appears, only to be shattered by the full page spreads; the preceding pages do the work of establishing the frame as a created symbol system which

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36 Groensteen, *The System of Comics*. 148
37 *Ibid*. 97

then allows the deviations of this passage to signify.[38] Distinguishing between rhetorical breaking and the building and breaking template allows us to better understand the full extent of the formal experiments Gibbons and Moore carry out.

Groensteen also notes that various frame locations on a page have importance. He usefully points out that comics are typically navigated by the turn of the page and the consideration of two pages in opposition to one another.[39] The way this hides and reveals meaning has great impact upon the interpretation of the text, because in his nonlinear model the reader experiences what is immediately in front of them as a compositional hyperframe within the multiframe, a unified block of panels that operate together. This places greater importance on the convention that the building and breaking template mechanism proper begins with a fresh page, and concludes within the same hyperframe.

Important to the notion that this form is recognizable, however, is the question of whether or not the syntax of comics panels can be stored in the same way that the syntax of, for example, poetry can be. If this structure is, in fact, a structure that can be learned rather than one that emerges obviously from the toolkit of the comic creator, interpreted instantly by the reader, there must be some ability on the part of comic readers to anticipate certain moves, store them, and become more competent or knowledgeable readers over time.

While he does not study these structures in particular, or more generally

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38 Miodrag, *Comics and Language,* 119-22
39 Groensteen, *The System of Comics*. 29

the possibility that frame structures can be stored grammatical objects, Neil

Cohn's research over the last decade provides considerable evidence for these

kind of learning processes within the reading of comics. From the perspective of

learning, he and other authors have demonstrated that comic readers become more

competent with experience, able to navigate complex pathways quickly and able

to remember greater details of the narrative despite passing through it—and even

brushing past certain panels!--at greater speed than inexperienced comic readers.[40]

This suggests that making sense of comics structures is not, in fact, an obvious

process at all but is a learned skill, a suggestion corroborated by explorations of

the early history of navigational strategies in comics.[41]

According to Cohn's work, particular structures within comics can be

stored in the minds of the reader. He analyzes this storage procedure on a number

of different levels, from emanata—the floating, nonliteral marks such as sweat

droplets or a lightbulb over a character's head used to convey an emotional state—

to the level of reading structure, as described above.[42] This language-like quality

of comics suggests that it is possible for the building and breaking template

structure to be stored and recalled. The most direct comparison Cohn provides

involves the linking of particular narrative beats within panels to utterances such

as "VERB-ing the TIME away," which can be filled with a wide range of words

while retaining this familiar form.

Interestingly, Cohn stops short of analyzing the retention of frame

40   Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics*. 134
41   Joseph Witek, "The Arrow and the Grid," in *A Comics Studies Reader*, (Jackson: University
     Press of Mississippi, 2008) Example on 8.
42   Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics*.

structures themselves. In his analysis of daily gag strips, for example, he discusses

the infamous Setup-Beat-Punchine construction, exploring the now rather stale

joke-telling mechanism as a stored form.[43] It would be productive, however, to

extend this analysis further to the frame structure absent of content. Seeing a

series of three or four panels in a single strip signals forcefully, after years of

repetition in newspaper comics, that the reader is interacting with a gag strip, and

can expect a joke conclusion. It seems significant, certainly, that so many

webcomic artists, despite the infinite canvas open to them, default to the strip

format, if they are following the daily gag format, or default (as McCloud

bemoaned over a decade ago in *Reinventing Comics*) to a vertical page format

totally unsuited for viewing on horizontal computer screens, adhering to a

structure that actively works against them.[44] This unwillingness to break with

tradition, outside of a few exceptional cases, suggests that the frame structures

themselves and the dimensions of the hyperframe themselves can be stored as, at

the very least, genre norms. It does not seem that much of a stretch to extend that

knowledge, and Cohn's work, to *frames themselves* as a vehicle for narrative. In

this way, analyzing frames as structures that can be abstracted out of the narrative

content of comics allows us to better understand the functionality of that narrative

within the abstracted structure of the multiframe.

  Key to bridging the gap between these ideas is Cohn's suggestion that

there are components within visual narrative that work as a system and which are

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43   Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics*. 61, Neil Von Flue, "Set-up, (beat), punchline," 2004,
  Hypercomics, http://www,hypercomics,net/work/setupbeat/
44   Scott McCloud, *Reinventing Comics: How Imagination and Technology Are Revolutionizing
  an Art Form,* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 220-21

obvious to readers when manipulated or removed. They center upon the

contextualization, initiation, extension, conclusion, and aftermath of actions. A

number of panels can be taken from the *Watchmen* sequence to form a simplified

diagram displaying each of these narrative functions (figure 2.3)

Panel one is an *Orienter,* which provides the larger context for the action,

in this case the city street where the squid monster is about to land. Two *refines*

that by providing a detail from the scene. Three is an *Establisher,* which shows the

various players and objects which will operate as the important features of the

action portrayed—the newspaper man and the boy. Four is the *initiator* panel,

showing the start of an action—the two characters moving to embrace. Five

prolongs the action started in Four, adding an extra beat before the whiteout panel,

the *peak* panel. And finally panel Seven, the *release*, shows the aftermath of the

arrival of the monster.[45]

For the purposes of this exploration, the most important components to be

aware of are the ones noted in the description of building and breaking in the

introduction. The building side frequently uses "prolongating" panels, which

extend a motion through adding extra frames in the cinematic scenes, and

"refining" panels, which clarify the setting or motion in some way. The panels

taken out of the *Watchmen* sequence to form the simplified version are for the

most part refiners or prolongaters. These panel functions might be usefully

compared to the indexical signs in Barthes's semiotic model of narratives. Indices,

Barthes says, are particularly semiotically based in that they provide information

45   Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics*. 70-71

that does not further the action of the plot but rather the reader's understanding of that plot, the characters, the setting, and so on.[46] This certainly describes the "refining" panels and arguably fits "prolongating" planes quite well, as in Cohn's conception they extend an action, rather than introducing new actions. The "peaks," and occasionally "releases," on the other hand, apply to the breaking moments, closing out the action at its highest point or elaborating on the aftermath. The peaks correspond to Barthes's "functions," and specifically to "cardinal functions," as they close off and complete an action of some import and tension (though we will see that they can be replaced, to baffling effect, with mere catalyzing functions).[47]

This means that the action in the building and breaking template structures is deferred, often paused or even arrested completely, until the moment of climax. These structures seem to function more like psychological novels, in Barthes's descriptions, than the fairy tales he puts in opposition to them, in that they flood the reader with information about what is happening without very much getting done. These moments can seem to slow down time as the reader passes through redundant panels that provide largely the same information, while simultaneously seeming to flash that information in a strobe fashion in cases where (as in Watchmen) those panels have been reduced. Groensteen points out that the

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46   Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, 94-95
47   Noting the similarities to Barthes is useful in that it provides another approach to understanding these moments that is centered on narrative and how that narrative is conveyed, but a full exploration of the way this approach maps onto the visual storytelling of comics is complex and outside the scope of this thesis. It should be noted, though, that it is likely that there are indices present in even peak comics panels: the backgrounds, most obviously, provide information that is not part of the primary action.

introduction of a frame around an element draws the attention of the reader to that

element, and the proliferation of frames in such sequences can incite a

hyperawareness from the reader, where each slight transition or object becomes

charged with significance. [48]And what do they signify? Simply that the climax is

coming but has not yet been reached. If a movement is expected to have a

conclusion at its "peak," or an action that gives rise to narrative instability must

have a mirror action if it is not to become, in retrospect, an index of indecision,

the reader might approach these indexical or catalyzing panels as hurdles that

stand in the way of the expected closing parenthesis.[49]

One of the difficulties that readily becomes apparent when working with

Cohn's system is the almost fractal complexity it introduces into the analysis of

comics. Information that is parsed quite rapidly by the reader maps out in ever

more complex nested frame and hyperframe relationships, and in sequences

where multiple scenes with multiple temporalities and action arcs collide, it

becomes nearly impossible to consider all the relationships simultaneously,

ironically because of the same working memory cap that Cohn himself cites

(perhaps erroneously) as a limitation of Groensteen's model![50] They face,

additionally, the same problem of ambiguity that McCloud's models of panel

transitions and panel choice types suffers from, with numerous corner cases

quickly presenting themselves. It is not entirely clear, for example, how a simple

scene of dialogue can be categorized, frame by frame, in this schema as Cohn's

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48 Groensteen, *The System of Comics*. 54
49   Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics*. 112-19, Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, 97
50   Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics*. 67-68

examples are both entirely silent and entirely physical movement based. Furthermore, it is difficult at times to make a determination between where an "action" begins for the sake of classification as an Establisher, Initial, or Prolongation panel.

Nevertheless, it is worth attempting a full explication of the Watchmen sequence in order to both elucidate the difficulties of this analysis and explore the great potential it has for providing a window into the interaction of narrative and frame. It is from this methodology, after all, that several of the components of the field of building and breaking stem—specifically, the preponderance of catalyzing functions in the building sections and the placement of a cardinal function as the breaking moment.

First we will consider each panel individually. This is not too difficult in this sequence, as there are not too many arcs overlaid atop each other (though we will see momentarily that there are overlaps). The sequence begins with an Orienter panel, a wide shot taking up three of the regular columns displaying the full street. This is obviously rhetorical—the frame shape is designed to provide room for the consideration of the full scene. This scene is then expanded upon in what I would describe as refiner panels, in a strip of six running across the top. Here we are in an emphatically nonrhetorical mode, suddenly, as the frame sizes crop the figures and break up the diegetic space of the comic. This fragmentation allows the six panels to draw closer and closer in on the characters until the shot of the paper stand owner and the comic reading boy is a dramatic, head-on close

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up. Notably, these panels do show a development in time signified by the increasingly blue and white palette as the light of the arriving psychic squid monster increases. Despite the role of these panels predominantly as refiners for the overall scene, there are still the beginnings of action depicted, which highlights how the braided nature of comics results in a slippery interaction with Cohn's seemingly straightforward categories, with panels potentially taking on multiple roles simultaneously.

The third strip shows a single motion, which corresponds fairly easily to Cohn's structure. We see an establishing panel which provides us with the position of the man and boy, and then the action plays out, as the boy turns and tries to run away from the light and the man moves around him, shielding him with his body. The action is completed in the peak panel that ends the strip, as noted before, and the white panel at the bottom, the break moment, shows the resolution of the arc, the release. Thus we have four strips, two of which serve to build the rhythmic structure by the introduction of numerous indexical panels (refiners and prolongers) and the final strip which is a single panel showing the resolution of the whole sequence, breaking the structure in the process in order to emphasize the conclusive, all-encompassing nature of that finish.

This reading is complicated, however, by the fact that this seeming conclusion is followed, in the next issue, by a sequence of six full page splash panels. This is the only time in the book where full page splashes are used, meaning that they break not only the rhythmic structure set up immediately before

them but the basic structure used throughout the narrative. The appearance of these panels prompts a re-signification. Their contents, the full destructive force and aftermath of the arrival of the giant psychic squid monster, suggests that perhaps the true overarching action is not the behavior of the people caught in the blast, but the arc of the city's destruction.

It is helpful, in this reading, to take the panels we have considered separately and group them into strips. The first strip, under this model, represents the establisher. The full second strip, taken together, can serve, as I pointed out earlier, as the beginnings of an action, the initiator of the teleportation. Strips three and four, then, combine, as a single action, into one big prolonger block, a clustered action that as a whole draws out the action of the weapon's arrival. And finally, the six tolling splash panels serve collectively as the break moment, the peak of the arc–though they, too, could be considered individually, as a peak, four refiners, and then a final release panel which connects the aftermath of the major arc with the minor arc of the man and boy, whose bodies appear in the center of the page beneath the face of the titanic monster.

It would be possible here to go to an even more generalized view of the narrative. The entire sequence, taken as a whole, might be considered a sequence-level peak to a number of actions initiated throughout the chapter, and in fact the chapter as a whole might be considered a peak in the overarching twelve-chapter narrative. I mention this primarily to emphasize that any attempt to isolate a sequence is ultimately futile, as any sequence interrelates to the other pieces

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within the comic in complex ways.

From this we can draw several conclusions about Cohn's methodology and its use in considering specific structures. First, applying these methodologies is inherently fraught because of the panel interrelationship that Groensteen points out. It does, as noted earlier, overwhelm the human working memory because of the way in which sequences intersect, overlap, and work as pieces of larger narrative sequences. This is true, of course, of Barthes's methodologies as well: the full map of a novel would be many times as long as the novel itself if it were to take account of the way chains of functions and indices combine to form larger rhetorical functions and indices.

Any application of this system must account for the choices readers make in navigating comics. Here, it is useful to refer to Barbara Postema's work, which emphasizes the way in which the gaps of the comics frame mirror larger gaps in the narrative which readers must close.[51] Postema extends the work of Groensteen in the direction of this sort of audience-centered critical methodology, and in doing so highlights the fact that these systems do not exist in the abstract but represent various navigational tools used to make sense of the various juxtapositions within comics. I would add to her useful analogy an additional notion drawing from Cohn's work on panel navigation: just as readers must close the gap between panels, and navigate the hyperframe on the page in front of them, so must they navigate the countless interrelationships and nested narrative arcs that constitute the rhetoric of comics while closing the gaps of narrative.

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51   Postema, *Narrative Structure in Comics* 106-09

Similarly, we can see that there is a readerly dimension in the determination of where the break, in truth, comes. Depending on the way the sequence is read, it might come at the end of the final page of Chapter 11, or in the six page sequence that begins Chapter 12. If this is a structure that comics readers can store and recognize, they might recognize this in either way, interpreting the final page as a the building and breaking template structure fulfilled or as one where the break has been deferred. Neither reading seems to me to be particularly "correct." For this reason, the mapping of the building and breaking template structure (or any frame structure, for that matter) onto a specific comic becomes another instance of gap-closing of the type that interests Postema.

The consideration of where the "peak" of this sequence comes is influenced, too, by the materiality of the comic, as we've discussed earlier with respect to Groensteen's notes on the narrative contents of frames in certain locations within the hyperframe.[52] The turning of two pages to reveal the first apocalyptic panel of Chapter 12 potentially prompts a re-signification of the final panel of Chapter 11, demoting it from a peak to another prolonger leading up to the true conclusion of the motion, represented by the arrival of the giant psychic squid monster. The interaction between reader, artist, comic, and stored structure, then, is characterized by indeterminacy, irresolution, and contingency as new information prompts resignification, while dangerously threatening to defuse the

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52 Groensteen, *The System of Comics*. 35-39

structure by deviating too far from it.[53] The application of the methodologies of

Cohn and Groensteen in unison make this contingency more apparent and might

make more visible the "invisible" and largely unconscious processes that the

reader makes use of to draw meaning from this structure.

Finally, it allows us to consider what is gained and lost by the introduction

of this structure, which will be important later as the history of this structure's

solidification is considered. From the standpoint of action, this is a highly costly

structure, as its use of indices and catalyzers, its use of prolongers and refiners,

eats up page room that in print media is inherently limited, while delaying the

resolution of action. As we will see, this is not something that early superhero

comics, in particular, were willing to accommodate. The tradeoff is that it

provides a strong pointer toward dramatic peaks within the narrative, highlighting

important moments, and encourages a consideration of individual elements of an

action or scene through the attention-drawing nature of the comics frame.

Affect

Inherent in discussions of the regular grid and its uses is the question of

affect. Groensteen, for example, describes the regular layout as having particular

rhythms to it, and notes that page layouts can be designed to achieve particular

emotional ends.[54] This is the realm of affect, the realm of sensation and the

visceral emotional response to the comics medium, conceived of frequently as

occurring prior to the linguistic, semiotic function.

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53 Groensteen, *The System of Comics*. 114
54 Groensteen, *The System of Comics*. 45-46, 48-50

Affect and comics are linked together by a shared history of disdain and denial in critical theory. Jared Gardner, for example, places emotion (and thus, inherently, affective response) as of particular importance in the relegation of comics to the status of "gutter art."[55] Comics landed in the gutter, Gardner asserts, alongside other serial works such as the early film serials and emotionally charged serial novels, each written off via different methods—the early film serials abandoned as not properly "novelistic" unlike the constructions of the later studio system, and serial novels defined as maudlin and, importantly, gendered feminine, and summarily discarded. Comics, he points out, faced some of their greatest existential challenges as a medium at the very moment when the art and literary worlds turned resolutely away from emotion and affect, towards the dispassionate observations of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried in art and New Criticism in literature. It was not simply the content of comics that was so objectionable, but the potential for comics to "seduce the innocent," as Frederic Wertham's famous book memorably put it, through its emotional qualities, and through the way in which the reader was invited to complete the narrative of the comic themselves. Unlike the literature the New Critics loved, "the comic... was necessarily intertextual and inevitably incomplete, requiring the reader to insert his [sic] feelings and interpretations actively into the text itself."[56]

Bart Beaty, too, notes the antagonistic relationship between the art world and comics, via the reception of pop art in general, and Roy Lichtenstein's traced

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55 Jared Gardner, *Projections: Comics and the History of 21st Century Storytelling*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012). The chapter "Serial Histories" is particularly instructive for this narrative.

56   Ibid. 81.

comics panels in particular. Beaty notes that Lichtenstein's work was dismissed due to its association with the popular form and its affective content—its aggressive reliance upon affect, in fact, as with the famous traced romance comic images which he reproduced at giant scale.[57] The critics of the day were quite open in their dismissal of this medium with which they had no familiarity and which they treated as an undifferentiated lump. Hovering beneath the surface of much of this dismissal is the understanding that the emotional content of comics made it unsuitable for true artistic consideration.

It is perhaps understandable, then, that in the attempt to elevate comics out of the gutter, many scholars have relied upon semiotics or formalism—theories largely devoid of affective charge. Nevertheless, as theories of affect slowly emerge within broader media discourse, completing the work of poststructuralism in dismantling the aloof observer of midcentury criticism, it seems worthwhile to address the tendency toward affective readings of comics explicitly, and to draw out, in a more formally rigorous way, the workings of affect within comics.

Affect, as it is increasingly used in contemporary theory and philosophy, is not simply emotion but rather encompasses a more complex understanding of visceral and embodied reactions that exists in a sense prior to the cognitive processing of emotion.[58] Affect has, in fact, been frequently placed in opposition to a semiotic or linguistic model of textual and cultural analysis, challenging what Brian Massumi describes as a totalizing, anthropocentric conception of all reality

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57   Beaty, *Comics Versus Art*. 64.
58   Robinson, *Deeper than Reason*. 41-43

resulting purely from the workings of the human mind and its linguistic faculty.[59]

Massumi's work, in fact, is particularly useful at this stage firstly because he describes fairly clearly the way in which language—or, we might say more broadly in keeping with Miodrag, symbol systems—interact with affect, mediating what is initially unmediated, and secondly because his notion of affect depends in part upon points of rupture, key moments of indecision, that play into the reading-order games discussed earlier.[60] Alongside Massumi, I will be making use of Jenifer Robinson's recent comprehensive overview of affect as both a school of psychological science and school of criticism, which provides a strong generalized foundation from which to build a comics-specific approach toward affect.

Affect, in Massumi's work, is intensity, undifferentiated and indivisible. It is a visceral bodily response preceding culture and language, unmediated by the qualities that interest the structuralists and poststructuralists. Affect, for Massumi, is less a matter of feeling a particular thing, than it is a matter of differentiating and/or suppressing the flood of affect.[61] Robinson's theory of affect, drawing from a tradition developed first by the psychologist Silvan Tomkins and adapted in philosophy by writers like Eve Sedgwick[62] and in psychology by theorists like Paul Ekman (who Scott McCloud uses to build his theory of expressions in *Making Comics*)[63], places similar emphasis on the precognitive nature of affect.

59   Brian Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect," *Cultural Critique* 31 (1995): 99-100
60   Ibid. 86, 102-04
61   Ibid. 86-87
62   Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003)
63   Scott McCloud, *Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga, and Graphic Novels*,

For Robinson and the Tomkins tradition, though, these initial embodied responses can be divided into several prime affects (the number of these primordial emotion types vary) which are then, as in Massumi's model, cognitively processed in various ways, interpreted, reframed, and mediated.[64]

This aspect of affect is important to understanding the process whereby readers interpret a text. Robinson particularly emphasizes the way that a reader's emotional experience of a narrative shapes that reader's understanding of the narrative's ideas by providing emotional weight to events and provoking sympathies or antipathies between the reader and the characters.[65] For Robinson, it is not enough to dissect a text intellectually and arrive at conclusions through pure reason, because affect operates, as her title suggests, deeper than reason, and ultimately contributes to understanding in important ways. This means that to bridge the gap between the mere communicative qualities of comics and the second-order signification, the deeper level of meaning, affect is not only a useful but in fact a crucial tool. In *Watchmen*, for example, the central dilemma of the comic's conclusion—whether Ozymandias should be exposed and punished for his crimes at the risk of re-igniting an imminent nuclear war—is experienced as a dilemma in part because of those six semiotically excessive panels showing the destruction of New York.[66] They do not increase the reader's understanding of what has happened at the level of literal events so much as they increase the understanding of the magnitude of the crime, on a visceral and affective level.

(New York: HarperCollins, 2006) 82-86

64   Robinson, *Deeper than Reason*. 89-90

65   Ibid. 113-17

66   Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen*, issue 12, 20-22

The specific interaction between the grammar of the multiframe and affect is worth exploring as well. Language, for Massumi, is primarily interesting for its limiting or supplementing function, dulling affect and reducing its power or working with it to enhance its power.[67] Affect precedes language, but language can act as a suppressing or multiplying force upon it, just as language might help to differentiate affect. While Massumi does not extend this notion beyond verbal language, and while I will be relying more closely on Robinson's understanding of affect as possibly emerging from an interaction with language, I want to suggest the possibility that Massumi's insights can be extended to other symbol systems as well, such as the multiframe in comics. The multiframe, in this understanding, would serve not simply as a way of indicating importance through its signification but would serve to amplify or reduce the affective content of the comics panel, the images mediated by the structure of the work itself, or the two working in concert to produce meaning. Additionally, it seems reasonable to suggest that the ability to store and recall the building and breaking template as a grammatical structure should allow it to be stored in memory as an affective structure as well: i.e. familiarity with the structure means that seeing something that looks like the structure might provoke a response based on the expectation of an experience like that which has come before.

*Watchmen'*s affective qualities come from use of the building and breaking template both in ways that are inherent to the structure itself, and in ways that emerge from the reader's ability to store and recall the structure. For the moment I

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67   Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect." 86

will put aside the second usage and consider the structure in isolation here, as though there are no other instances of it, in order to examine the qualities of this sequence only in themselves (inasmuch as that is possible). As described earlier, the indexical and catalyzing panels of building sections draw focus and create a kind of semiotic overload, as details which would be considered en masse are given discrete attention. This can mirror an affective overload as well where the presence of an abundance of images that a reader might react to adds to an experience of overwhelming emotion.

Consider the third strip of the sequence. The subdivision of the action depicted here makes each discrete movement far more apparent. In considering these motions in the context of an orienter panel which provides an overview of the whole diegetic space (i.e. the space of the imagined world of the comic)[68], and the second strip which provides information about the direction of the blast, we can see, looking closely, that as the boy runs towards the viewer, away from the blast center, the man actually moves *back* slightly, *toward* the blast, very actively shielding the boy with his own body. This, paired with a heightened awareness of the space, makes it apparent that the huddled bodies in front of the monster in the final splash panel are the bodies of the boy and man.

The semiotic overload in these panels, the heightened attention to every detail, is paralleled, in my reading of the comic, with an overload of sadness and horror, as the proliferation of details, these instances of nonaction, build to a

68   Pascal Lefevre, "The Construction of Space in Comics," in *A Comics Studies Reader,* (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 158-59.

hyperawareness of the selflessness and hopelessness of the actions of these characters. Approaching this collection of twelve panels, I enter the sequence aware of the final panel, the pure white, and experience distraught helplessness. The coda of the sequence, the six tolls of ruinous carnage, overwhelm in part because they are preceded by an action of such minute importance, the attempt by one man to shield one boy, an attempt that I already know is doomed to fail yet which is drawn out over six interminable panels. Inherent in the structure is this deferral of the final moment, and the affects the structure generated are linked to this deferral, overlaid with a familiar anticipation as the comic winds itself up to deliver a final blow.

In a sense, the arrival of the destruction in all its lurid, pulp horror detail is a release of that tension, a release from the agonizing deferral, and that relief lasts until the final panel, where the intricately mapped and highlighted diegetic space of the comic reveals what I already know: the act of compassion failed; man and boy are both dead, dead and insignificant before an entity almost comically absurd in its B-movie strangeness. This is the final twist of the knife that Moore and Gibbons provide, and which the structure makes possible.

It is important to note the language used above: the structure makes this response possible, rather than inevitable. Rather than discussing affect in terms of definitive provoked responses that can be universalized and described as correct or incorrect, I will be analyzing this structure as a particular kind of space within comics where readers might be led to experience particular affective responses,

without assuming that a reader will be coerced by the text into a particular experience. In this understanding of affect, it is possible to come to multiple valid conclusions about a text based on the affective experiences of the reader. This destabilizes the lingering New Critical influence on comics theory by proposing a plurality of experiences and readings that is anathema to questions of inarguable quality.[69] Considering the building and breaking template, and other structures within comics, from the perspective of affective and semiotic spaces allows us to better understand them not as progressively more and more advanced technologies that can be used to operate upon the machinery of the reader's mind to generate predetermined responses, but rather as formal discourses that make certain experiences possible while removing other possibilities.[70] The building and breaking template, most notably, makes affective experiences possible at the cost of page space. This tradeoff may be worthwhile in some circumstances but in others is unwelcome or even impossible, and a core part of the construction of a critical history of comics must involve the assessment of the tradeoffs inherent in both individual formal decisions and developments in formal language as a whole.

A core principle of this thesis, then, is the examination of the building and breaking template, and formal structures in comics more generally, through the lens of possible reader responses. When hypothetical experiences, or even my own directly confessed experiences, are conveyed, they will be paired with alternate possibilities, other ways of interpreting and responding that open up

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69 Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art,* (London: Duke University Press, 2013)

70 This opposes a progressive, "evolutionist," or "teleological" interpretation or fallacy, which Groensteen derides in *Comics and Narration* in relation to digital comics and hypercomics. 69

other possibilities in meaning.[71] In this way I hope to encompass the complexity

of affective experience without compressing the reader into an ideal type. In this I

am following the lead of Eve Sedgwick's work with affect and the writings of

Silvan Tomkins. Sedgwick emphasizes the conditional nature of affect, describing

it as a correspondence or possible disjunction between two entities. She makes

particular note of the long lists present in Silvan Tomkins's writings, lists of ways

in which two people might connect emotionally or might fail to connect.[72] This

possibility of failure in particular is of interest in the examination of a common

symbol system like the building and breaking template because it opens the

possibility that the formal structures may be used in order to present barriers to

understanding not meant to be overcome. The final part of this exploration, in

fact, will deal with works that use building and breaking templates in a way that is

difficult to categorize and assimilate, exploring the possibility of works that are

difficult not (or not solely) in their reading order, or the reconstruction of the

narrative, but which challenge the intuition of feeling in the reader, that are

situated against the reader. It will examine, too, the possibility of the breakdown

of these difficult affects, the way they can become deflated or deflected, the way

that readers can and do rebel emotionally in their communion with the text, and

the way this difficulty is a tenuous thing, contingent upon certain positions and

expectations.

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71 We might draw parallels with a parenthetical offered by Groensteen in *The System of Comics:*
     "It is evident that [the apparatus of the hyperframe and its parts] operates on the model of the
     invitation and that it has no coercive power. Similarly, nothing is able to oblige anyone to read
     anything."28
72 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling.* 92-95

This is all predicated on the understanding, described earlier, that the building and breaking template represents both a conventional system for conveying information and a conventional system for arousing affective experiences. Outside of the realm of comics, one obvious example of this kind of convention-breaking might be seen in the famous the sword fighter scene from the film *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. This scene maps quite well onto the building and breaking template, as it shares many of the same structures, but it represents a subversion of those structures in its replacement of the expected extension of the scene with an abrupt conclusion. In the scene, the hero Indiana Jones, in hot pursuit of the villains, arrives in front of a crowd, which parts to make a corridor between the hero and a man in black carrying a large sword. If we were to apply Cohn's narrative beats here (keeping in mind the somewhat difficult translation to a medium of moving images) it is clear that this scene is "costly" in the same way that the building and breaking template is: we are presented with an establishing shot and then we see a back and forth buildup of refiner (or possibly prolonger) shots. The music swells. By genre convention (which is also something we can learn and become familiar with), and by the costliness of the buildup, it seems obvious that a great battle is coming. We almost certainly do not, at this point, think, "Ah, there is a buildup of costly shots and the music is increasing, therefore I should get excited." Instead, we become excited, reading the signifiers automatically. They are learned, but this does not mean the response is under our control.

And then Indy pulls out his gun and shoots the swordsman, and the scene ends.

This represents a subversion of the assumptions the audience may have made. In isolation alone the costliness of the shots which lead up to a climax with never appears enable a sense of surprise. Beyond the formal qualities however are conventionalized responses to knowledge of the field. Knowledge of action movies might suggest that a large fight scene is about to take place. This constitutes a knowledge of genre convention. A viewer might also be aware of the actor Harrison Ford's career, and thus aware of the infamous moment in Star Wars when the character Han Solo shoots a bounty hunter threatening him. Knowledge of specific creative individuals thus also can impact expectation and response, here perhaps signaling to savvy viewers that genre conventions are about to be subverted. Affect, then, is in part a response to acquired knowledge.

It is worth keeping these ideas of convention in mind when considering a comic like Watchmen, which to a large extent made its name through subversion of conventions of the superhero genre. In the panels before the sequence I examine here, the villain Ozymandias relays his plan to the heroes. When the character Nightowl vows to stop him, Ozymandias famously replies, "Dan, I'm not a *Republic Serial* villain. Do you seriously think I'd explain my *masterstroke* if there remained the slightest chance of you affecting its *outcome*? I did it thirty-five minutes ago."[73] It seems reasonable to suggest that much of the lasting impact of the comic comes from the emotional shock of this moment, where the

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73   Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen*, issue 11, 27

villainous monologue, rather than giving the heroes the chance to defeat their enemy, simply highlights their powerlessness.

Considering the audience of comics as capable of retaining and responding to convention allows for an examination of the diverse responses that stem from such subversive moments. The sequence from *Raiders of the Lost Ark* can, again, provoke many responses, though generally it seems safe to say that the sudden release of tension in such an unexpected and anti-climactic way prompts an affect of shocked and delighted good humor. By the same token, however, we might envision an alternate readership disappointed by the unfulfilled promise of a dramatic fight scene, and perhaps that alternate readership finds this a moment of alienation from a hero who fails to honorably engage a skilled opponent.[74] Similarly, we might envision a reader of Alan Moore comics who, familiar with his work and familiar with the comics that followed Watchmen, responds to Ozymandias's speech not with shock and awe but with satisfaction at Moore's convention-breaking writing style, or even with exasperation or irritation upon seeing a trick that no longer feels unique or disruptive. What I am proposing is that a critical account of the building and breaking template both must account for the way in which the development of a grammatical structure within comics or any medium allows it to be manipulated and subverted in creative ways and the ways in which any implementation of that structure may be met with a multitude of responses.

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74 The existence of a short film entitled "Uncle Matin's Sword Trick," which dramatically reframes the original scene's narrative, is perhaps evidence of this readership, and the film itself is of course subject to its own range of responses.

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This application of affect theory to comics invites a new conception of what readers of comics should primarily be engaged in doing when reading. Jennifer Doyle, in her recent examination of contemporary art with difficult emotional content or subject matter, points out that academic conceptions of difficulty often revolve around a problem of understanding, and are preoccupied with the seeking of mastery over a text's meaning.[75] This seems like a timely critique in comics theory, given the rising stars of the field, many of whom approach the comic as a thing to be decoded, and the reading process of one primarily characterized by the discernment of what literally is taking place. This is most exemplified by Cohn, who seems to take an almost shockingly hard stance in favor of the assembly of clear reading structures, implicitly and sometimes explicitly privileging narrative coherency as the primary aim of explorations of the medium.[76] Doyle points out that there are a multitude of reasons for reading, some of which have little to do with the puzzling-out of action or message conveyed and much to do with experience, even experience that is upsetting, horrifying, disturbing, or difficult to assimilate. [77]

For Doyle and for Sedgewick, then, a core part of affect involves the recognition that there are multiple readerships capable of multiple potential responses, or complex experiences that go against the perhaps sanctioned or expected response. It is worth noting that just as the large splash panels of Watchmen overwhelm in their lurid violence and in their conclusion to the tragic

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75 Doyle, *Hold It against Me*.
76 Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics*. 144-47.
77 Doyle, *Hold It against Me*.

scenes earlier in the comic, so too do they make small details more easy to do. This can be a site of disruption, as extraneous materials intrude upon the composed scene. There are, to be sure, an almost ridiculous number of visual puns and sly ironies in the scene: the fluttering newspapers reading "War?," a film marque advertising *The Day the Earth Stood Still,* a concert poster advertising "Pale Horse" and "Krystalnacht," and perhaps most ridiculously of all, on the final page of the sequence, an advertisement for a bodybuilding regimen reading, "THE VEIDT METHOD: I WILL GIVE YOU BODIES BEYOND YOUR WILDEST IMAGINING."[78] Just as the sequence threatens, in its references and connections, to overwhelm working memory, it threatens to overwhelm credulity.

Is this proliferation of details profound, or ridiculous, and what is the proper affective response? Is it appropriate to first feel dread and then to laugh, or perhaps to become angry at Gibbons and Moore for not taking their own work seriously? Doyle suggests that there is perhaps value in avoiding a definitive conclusion here—that the experience of discomfort and confusion is, itself, potentially valuable.[79] Speaking on poetry, James Longenbach describes his medium of study as driven by such irresolutions and indeterminacies.[80] Comics, as a medium driven by gaps and absences, similarly might be most productive when it evades the reader. Even as the semiotic and affective structures in comics develop and become language-like formulations capable of being stored and recalled, applied and subverted, there is room for alternatives. This would extend

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78   Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen*, issue 12, 1-6
79   Ibid.
80   James Longenbach, *The Resistance to Poetry,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004)

the work of Postema, particularly the interest she expresses in areas of comics

where the gap of meaning is integral to the text and actively reflected upon, into

the realm of affect, closing the fissure between semiotics and affect in comics

theory by way of opening fissures between the reader and that which is read.[81]

There is one last conception of affect worth noting in this context of

spaces, responses, and difficulties. Deleuze and Guattari in *What Is Philosophy?*

seem to agree with the conception of affect as something unassailable, but their

affect and the affect of Robinson, Sedgwick, or even Massumi are perhaps not the

same thing.[82] Deleuze and Guattari speak of art opening a rent into a kind of

primordial chaos, slicing open a hole in the umbrella dome that is convention and

forcing an audience accustomed to the cliché of opinion to confront that chaos.

They speak constantly of artists forming new affects, affects outside of the

boundaries of conventionalized feeling (opinion). And, in agreement with

Massumi, they suggest that discourse around art flattens affect, pasting over the

rents in the fabric, restoring order from chaos, and reducing affect to opinion,

cliché, the material of repetition. This would place the formal structures I am

examining here well outside the realm of affect. It should be obvious that to

discuss these structures as affective structures would, from the perspective of *On

Philosophy*, be a contradiction in terms, except in those cases when the structure

is subverted.

For this reason, I will be drawing a distinction between Deleuzian affect

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81   Postema, *Narrative Structure in Comics* 123-25
82   Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?,* Trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and
      Graham Burchell, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992) 203-06

and the affect of more contemporary scholars, and focusing upon the latter. However, it is worth considering, as I will in the final analysis chapter, the Deleuzian conception of affect in unison with the question of difficult affective structures, affect stemming from the familiarity with a form which is then not only broken but shattered, affect that balloons out from the wreckage of familiar structure and resists attempts to easily classify and accommodate its vastness or strangeness. Here, the presence of a structure that can be recognized, stored, and recalled, with associated affects of anticipation, excitement, or dread, provides a place where these rents can be produced by subverting the structure, misapplying it, or drawing it out interminably. One of the objectives of a critical history might be to explore those works which take the grammar of comics and use them to make possible these disruptive experiences.[83]

A Critical History

There are several reasons why the history of the building and breaking template is worth spending some time exploring, but the primary one lies with the increasingly insistent call by a number of scholars for a critical history of comics. The answer this thesis provides in model form sidesteps questions of canonization, popularity, and even objective artistic quality, exploring instead how one particular compositional strategy develops in comics. Additionally, this is a critical history that attempts to consider a diverse potential audience without assuming an ideal "correct" reaction to the building and breaking template. This

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83 Though it is worth noting that, according to Deleuze and Guattari, this action inevitably works to repair the rent and destroy the experience. See Chapter 5 for an expansion of this idea.

account allows for some generalizations of what formal structures make possible, and why they might be useful, while also acknowledging the way formal structures suggest rather than dictate particular semiotic and affective conclusions.

This analysis spans from the early decades of the development of English-language comic books to the 1980s, when I argue the building and breaking template came into wider use. It frames the analysis of building and breaking structures in individual works later in the thesis by uncovering the reasons why the potential of these structures may not be obvious to comic makers, why comic makers may be attracted to them once the structures are made apparent, what they do for the reader's experience of a text, and how choices of their inclusion, exclusion, and mediation represent the manipulation of a conventionalized system.[84] Recognizing the broader history of a formal element provides the necessary foundation for constructing one model for a critical history of comics. This history and methodology links together an a-historical, semiotically-grounded model of comics scholarship with both a model of the comics audience as capable of diverse affective experiences, and the cultural and material history of comics that interests theorists like Bart Beaty and R.C. Harvey.[85]

All of this is ultimately predicated on a reading of the history of formal development in comics concerned with material causes and the question of why it takes so many decades for the regular composition, use of prolongers and refiners, and disruptive peak panels to be used widely in English-language comic books

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84 Cohn, 137-38.
85 Bart Beaty, *Unpopular Culture: The Transformation of the European Comic Book in the 1990s*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), Robert C. Harvey, *The Art of the Comic Book*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996)

and graphic novels. In drawing upon material histories of comics, I will argue that the dependency upon particular fields of production, work conditions, and even printing technologies affect the ability of comic makers to explore particular formal techniques, or particular affective spaces. This contextualizes the analysis of individual works later in the thesis by explaining how a template can be conventionalized enough that it can be manipulated and subverted by comics creators, and how that conventionalization is made possible through material conditions. In this way, I hope to lay the foundations for a critical history that avoids auteurist notions of formal progress as dependent upon individual genius shining through adversity.

In attempting to chart this developmental history, I have necessarily avoided a number of issues that, in a longer treatment, would certainly be relevant to the analysis here. This analysis is largely limited to longer, multi-page narrative works, which provide the space for the building and breaking template to be used to its fullest extent. As such, this analysis ignores newspaper strips in favor of a closer focus on comic books and graphic novels. This does not imply that structures like the building and breaking template could not, or did not, appear in newspaper comics, particularly the large comics of the early 20th century. The focus on longer works simply allows for a somewhat more coherent narrative in the context of a shorter treatment of what could be a much larger history. Similarly, the influence upon comics by other media, and the influence on English-language comics of other comics traditions (the Franco-Belgian tradition

from Europe, and the Manga tradition from Japan most notably) is not analyzed here, for much the same reasons.

This historical analysis also does not attempt to grapple with the long debate over where comics as a medium, and individual comics or comics creators, are situated in relation to concepts of "high" and "low" art. Such debates are often central to analysis of comics, in part due to the origins of English-language comics theory with Scott McCloud's book length attempt to justify the artistic validity of the medium.[86] Bart Beatty, in particular, has done much in recent years to explore the ways in which the cultural identity of comics in relation to other media was formed, and his analysis is valuable for understanding the forces that constructed particular ideas of high and low comics and comics-influenced art.[87] Nevertheless, while Beatty's work will be used in order to explore some of the ways in which comics creators in various periods either successfully explored more experimental structures within comics or were stymied in their attempts, the wider question of comics' place in culture is outside the scope of this thesis.

That said, it is worth addressing the works examined in this project and the rationale behind their still relatively wide-ranging origins. The history-oriented chapters of this thesis analyze both "popular" comic books and comic creators as well as more avant-garde works, examining the way that the building and breaking template appears and is utilized in different ways across genres. This strategy of analyzing the structure across the wider field of English-language

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86 Understanding Comics
87 Beatty, *Unpopular Culture, Comics vs Art*

comic books makes sense for several reasons. To look at structure within comics,

and to look beyond structure to the way in which readers might respond to

particular structures and the narratives they carry, demands a view of comics that

can encompass both the creations of commercial artists and auteurs working in the

avant-garde, a wide scope that theorists interested more in the structural workings

of comics than the history of the medium have used successfully to demonstrate

shared structures across the medium. It is tempting to divide comics into two

disparate fields of production, as Pierre Bourdieu and Richard Nice divide the

worlds of high art and publishing, placing one under the domain of traditional

capital and the other under the domain of symbolic capital.[88] Under this model,

popular publishers attempt to make a profit on work immediately, translating the

labor of the producer of a text as well as the editors, printers, and so on into

capital, while publishers involved in the world of the avant-garde accumulate

symbolic capital as their products are canonized or "consecrated" over time,

allowing them to convert symbolic, cultural capital into true capital at a later

date.[89] Making this distinction can be historically useful—Bart Beaty, for

example, makes good use of it in order to argue that the comics market in Europe

in the 1990s underwent a fundamental transition from a commercial to a non-

commercial field of production.[90] It might even be true that English-language

comics have been hampered in their quest for legitimacy due to a

misidentification of these fields of production that results in critics expending vast

88 Pierre Bourdieu and Richard Nice, "The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of
     Symbolic Goods," *Media, Culture & Society* 2, no, 3 (1980): 261–93,
89 Ibid.
90 Beaty, *Unpopular Culture*

efforts to consecrate, as art, comics that exist comfortably in the commercial field

of production, to little obvious effect.[91] However, shifting attention away from this

distinction allows for a more accurate history of formal development within

comics. It is impossible to confine the discovery of particular formal techniques to

either avant-garde figures or to commercial artists—formal experimenters, as well

as creators disinterested in the formal properties of comics, appear in both fields.

Furthermore, many of the artists discussed here straddle the line between fields of

production, wavering back and forth between them, using their experience in one

genre of work to inform their formal development in another genre, and moving

from studio to studio based on the relative freedom their work environment

afforded them in exploring the comics medium.[92]

Similarly, it seems artificial to divide readership and the reader's response

to comics structures between readers of avant-garde materials and readers of

commercial materials. Scholars interested in the structural qualities of comics

have traditionally ignored such distinctions in their attempts to make general

statements about the medium as a whole.[93] While it may seem somewhat circular

to justify continuing an established strategy in comics scholarship simply by

virtue of its widespread use, it seems useful to remember that comics scholars are

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91 Though it could also be argued that the mechanisms Bourdieu and Nice describe have
    consecrated and supplied the capital value not of individual comics but of such artifacts as
    increasingly valuable original art, or the numerous ultimate collections or artists editions
    which have come out recently and made possible, through their proliferation, analysis such as
    this thesis.

92 This can be seen in the nomadic histories of Bernard Krigstein, Jack Kirby, and Alan Moore,
    who all moved from studio to studio as they became frustrated with restrictions placed upon
    their work. Moore and Krigstein both notably sought out ways of establishing for themselves
    a more symbolically-founded field of production.

93 These scholars are too numerous to list here but they include key figures like Scott McCloud,
    Will Eisner, Thierry Groensteen, and the many theorists they in turn influenced.

themselves comics readers. The fact that so much of the research on comics, dating back to Eisner and McCloud, draws on both commercial and noncommercial (in Bourdieu and Nice's sense)[94] texts, suggests that comics scholars *as comics readers* already blur the lines between these fields of production.

This seems to be mirrored in the wider field of comics fandom. Dedicated comics stores generally devote some space to independently produced comics alongside the more dominant commercial works. While independently published works, often experimental in form or content, receive far less attention from the comics-focused press online, these sources of news and reviews do include discussion of independent work.[95] And, of course, there is a long tradition of experimental artists such as Art Spiegelman, Chris Ware, and Kim Deitch, among others, drawing upon the styles, characters, tropes, and narratives of commercial work, revealing the cross-pollination of ideas between the different fields. This makes it plausible that the Building and Breaking template could be explored and transmitted as a construction—a set of "abstract patterns larger than words"[96] that can be stored and recalled—across genres and fields of production, as well as recognized and understood by readers across these fields.

All of this supports the notion that dividing the comics world neatly into "the best-seller list" and works of higher literary quality is a crisp distinction that maps quite awkwardly onto a muddy reality, particularly from the standpoint of

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94 Bourdieu and Nice
95 See websites Bleeding Cool, Comics Alliance, and Comic Book Resources.
96 Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics*. 59-60.

formal qualities and readerships. To highlight certain instances of the building and

breaking structure as being artistically extraordinary—instances that facilitate

particularly interesting affective experiences or that manipulate form in a unique

way—without an understanding of this complex history of development is to limit

the ability to engage with these works as an informed reader. It ignores both the

way in which readers approach the material based on their level of familiarity

with particular structures, and the way creators grapple with a formal tradition.

Just as, in Deleuze and Guattari's conception of affect in art, an artist must do the

work of erasing the cliches that crowd the metaphorical canvas, so critical

historians of comics must be able to recognize the development of a form in order

to recognize its subversion or manipulation.[97] This thesis therefore is concerned

with the way material and historical pressures make structures more or less likely

to appear and be utilized extensively, and make possible the development of

certain wider visual vocabularies that can be manipulated or subverted.

Looking at the history of the building and breaking template reveals that

it, and more broadly the "waffle iron" grid of the regular composition that we see

throughout *Watchmen*, is not an obvious structure or a "default" which artists fall

back upon when incapable of inventing more interesting structures.[98] To the

contrary, the regular composition is not "regularly" used at all in early English-

language comic books, let alone accompanied by the prolongers and refiners seen

in building and breaking. This suggests that the form itself is actually the result of

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97 Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy*? 203-06
98 Groensteen, *The System of Comics*. 95

material processes within comics that requires certain conditions to allow artists

to explore its potential, both as a semiotic and an affective tool, in detail. In

examining these potentials, I do not meant to suggest that earlier comics lacked an

affective component or emotional or narrative power. Rather, I mean that the

spaces opened by this structure were difficult to explore, given the material

conditions of comic book production for many decades. I want to resist, in

making this point, a progressive narrative of the development of comics that

privileges particular forms as being more inherently ideal or reflective, in a

medium-specific sense, of the comics form. Exploring the history of this form and

the stuttering, halting path to its development, as well as the places where it

forked into other forms, disrupts a narrative of developments leading to particular

works that are an apotheosis of formal structure—a superior form of storytelling

in comics that cannot be surpassed—affirming instead the possibility that varied

formal techniques can open up particular affective capabilities across comics

history.

Chapter 3: Krigstein and the Disciplining of the Artist

For many decades, arguably from their introduction in the late 1930s as a particular type of independent object (rather than the precursors that consisted of reprints of comic strips repackaged in a comic book format)[99] spanning to the time period in the 1970s and '80s when the building and breaking template starts to appear with greater regularity, the multiframe was governed by the rhetoric of the panel contents. This means that for the majority of the history of comic books and graphic novels frames—the overall boundary lines (literal or metaphorical) that bound the contents of individual comics panels[100]—seldom imposed their design upon panel contents by truncating what could be shown within panels. In rhetorical structures, as described in chapter 1, the hyperframe—the collection of frames on the comics page—takes its form from what is shown in each panel.[101] This rhetorical structure governed the hyperframe, and the panel contents themselves were governed by a logic based on the length of the comic book—its pagecount—and the cardinal functions, or the key narrative moments,[102] within each scripted story. The default structure within comics during this period was therefore not the regular composition but, in fact, a highly irregular one derived from panel contents decided upon in advance in the distribution of a script's text into these limited boundaries.

In this section I will examine the work of one artist, Bernard Krigstein, using his work, which deviated from the period's common structure, and his

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99 Gardner, *Projections*. 64-65.
100 Groensteen, *The System of Comics*.
101 Ibid.
102 Barthes, *Image-Music-Text,* 90

career, which exemplifies some of the pressures of the period on comics creators, as a case study for a broader argument about comics production and the development of particular grammatical structures. The set of conventions described above were generated by the needs of publishers and editors, which disciplined comic makers into particular patterns and tools of composition, which made it difficult for an artist like Krigstein to work in a different mode. While that disciplining could involve specific instructions or demands by editors that artists conform to particular standards, and as we shall see inherently included economic considerations, it also involved the creation of particular tools that made the rhetorical form of comics a dominant default creation strategy. These tools made certain structures within comics possible while limiting others.

Before delving into Krigstein's work in particular it is worth talking about these generalized tools that were common in his period. One such tool was the development of pre-printed guides that artists or composing editors could use to break down the space of the hyperframe, guides which were used across the history of comics, dating back at least to the 1940s.[103] These guides can be seen in copies of the original art boards used by artists during this period and even up the present day, or facsimiles of the original art. The grids typically provide guides to break pages into halves and thirds, and some grids, such as EC's in-house boards, also contained lines that acted as guides for text.

This guide operates as a tool for articulating particular understandings of

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[103] See the facsimile collection *The Best of EC*, for example, as well as the guides that are printed on the title pages of *Feldstein: The Mad Life and Fantastic Art of Al Feldstein!*.

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comics narrative and composition, i.e. for making the users of the tool sensitive to particular different forms or categories of composition.[104] While the template can be used to create a regular 2x2 or 3x3 composition, the guidelines are, inherently, analogue in nature rather than binary: there are a multitude of possible regular and irregular compositions implied by the structure, rather than a simple binary present/absent structure.[105] Looking at the early decades of the comic book, it is easy to see that artists responded predominantly to this analogue structure by alternating between common composition types: typically, the height of the strips was adhered to while the strips themselves were broken into two or three regular panels, though these horizontal widths were subject to adjustment based on the panel contents (Figure 3.1).[106] Krigstein's own work from the late 1940s to his time at EC comics in the mid 1950s largely follows this format[107], and the format can be seen in the works of other major figures from the era and much later such as Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko.[108]

The grid was also a tool of visualization that allowed artists and editors to become aware of possible deviations from the form.[109] In EC comics for example

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104 Bruno Latour, "How to Talk About the Body? The Normative Dimension of Science Studies," *Body & Society* 10, no, 2-3 (2004) : 205–29,

105 Sedgewick, *Touching Feeling.*

106 See primarily *The Best of EC*, but this can also be seen in a variety of early DC and Marvel comics, including comics from before the companies had those names.

107 B. Krigstein. The story "More Blessed to Give," discussed below, is the first story I have located to use the multiple small, silent panels that characterized Krigstein's later work, although there are some moments of notable experimentation earlier, such as the 1954 story "Pipe Dream," which featured several pages lacking frame borders.

108 Kirby's work from Captain America to the Fourth World series to lesser known creations such as Kamandi remains remarkably consistent in its use of such structures. Ditko's Spider-man stories are similarly regular, although he begins to experiment more in works such as The Creep

109 Latour, "How to Talk," Bruno Latour, "Visualization and Cognition: Drawing Things Together," *Knowledge and Society: Studies in the Sociology of Culture Past and Present* 6 (1986): 1–40, While Latour is interested in the study of science, it seems reasonable to apply

there are examples of artists toying with the width of the gutter itself, shifting and subdividing content beyond the existing grid structure, and occasionally spreading out panels not horizontally, as is more common, but vertically (though, again, frequently the thirds or halves strip design remained dominant). Occasionally artists experimented in the other direction—towards greater rigidity. In this perhaps artists were influenced by the regular rhythms of newspaper comic strips —a medium that many of them sought to enter to escape the lower-paid work of comic book illustration.[110]

The kind of regularity that draws upon repetition, lengthening of action, and accumulation of detail, however, does not appear until much later, due to a number of additional material constraints placed upon the artists. Most pressing was the constraint of pagecount; the number of pages allotted to a story was fixed and limited.[111] This, in unison with the multiple-choice system of the pre-rendered grid worked to make certain storytelling techniques dominant, and perhaps even made them possible: these early comics have a remarkable economy of storytelling, relying heavily on short sequences with frequent peaks. These peaks are not necessarily peaks in the sense of a dramatic moment of affective arousal, but they represent an action that is initiated and completed in the span of only a few panels, often with the initiation of an action not being illustrated at all but summarized in the omnipresent explanatory narration boxes. These stories may, at their best, be described as "comfortable" stories, where the reader's pleasure

his insights about the way visual technologies make certain advances possible to the study of this developing medium.

110 Harvey, *The Art of the Comic Book*
111 B. Krigstein, 228-29

comes not from shock or the build of tension but from the even walk forward

toward a conclusion that is frequently apparent from the start—even if it is

nominally a "twist."

In this environment, it is not difficult to see why building and breaking

templates and their precursors did not develop. Bernard Krigstein is therefore an

interesting and illustrative exception that can help us better understand the

constraints that were placed upon artists interested in innovating in this direction.

Krigstein worked at a number of publishers throughout his unfortunately short

career, bouncing from publisher to publisher based on the level of artistic freedom

that he was afforded in interpreting the scripts he was given, and the pagerate he

received.[112] His greatest work was produced at the moment of the medium's first

great existential crisis: the congressional hearings on comics and the creation of

the Comics Code Authority. It is this late work that is particularly worth exploring

from the standpoint of the non-rhetorical structures that developed into Building

and Breaking. His art in this period is densely inked, often depicting characters

with distorted features and clouding the panels with layers of dots from

mechanically produced tone sheets.[113] Krigstein made use of thin slivers of panels,

transitioning from the eight or nine panels that might, at highest density, appear in

the pages of another artist to pages filled with fifteen or more small panels.[114]

Here, in Krigstein's work, is the first appearance of the dedicated prolonger and

refiner panels that appeared much later.

112 Greg Sadowski, *B. Krigstein*, (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2003) 221-30
113 229
114 ibid

The development of this strategy, and its origins, can be seen in the short story "More Blessed to Give," reprinted in the form of its original art boards in the Best of EC: Artist's Edition collection.[115] (Figure 3.2) The short story features a married couple hell-bent on murdering each other to escape a tedious and miserable married life. The central conceit involves each discovering the other's plot and reversing it, ultimately resulting in both going to their deaths thinking that they have bested the other. This story, like many EC stories, is not remarkable for its twist, which does not alter a finale (each character meeting a grisly fate) that is almost always a foregone conclusion in EC horror and crime comics. Rather, the pleasure of the twist comes from the variation in the basic, simply-related narrative of the story.

This basic format makes Krigstein's innovations more readily apparent. Krigstein, it is important to note, was not able to produce layouts purely his own while working at EC. Layouts were produced at EC by editors—typically Al Feldstein—who produced basic frame designs and broke down the narration for the stories based on the scripts that writers produced.[116] Bernard Krigstein seems to have been frequently at odds with his editors (even editors beyond EC, as we will see). He chaffed at the structural limitations imposed upon him by the production line model used at EC, and the limited number of panels he was provided in order to visually convey the story.[117]

His response was to subdivide the allotted space continuously down, and

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115 Bernard Krigstein, "More Blessed to Give," in *Best of EC, Artist's Edition*, (San Diego: IDW Publishing, 2013), 34-40
116 Krigstein 228-29
117 Ibid.

to petition Al Feldstein repeatedly for more pages in which to expand his stories. While the basic layout could not be altered, the number of frames present within each predetermined larger frame apparently was something Feldstein could begrudgingly accept as variable.[118] Krigstein's compositions from this period therefore are full of clustered frames within frames, made more visible by the fact that the narrative text spans these smaller frames, having been written to correspond to the predrawn layout. The narration in the climax of "More Blessed to Give" reveals the trace of an original two-page, 2x3 grid, a regular composition subdivided further into smaller frames that extend each action further.

Krigstein had realized that part of the dramatic potential of comics came from the affective space opened up by the proliferation of minor actions, these catalyzing functions, and he derided the inability of publishers to see the need for this drawing out of action as destined to render the form "infantile" perpetually.[119] This affective space can be seen in the climax, as the pair set out to undo the discovered plot of the other and set in motion a new scheme. Two strips of six small frames are broken into four three-frame clusters, showing the action first of the husband and wife each individually sneaking out of their rooms and then sneaking back, each in order to sabotage the murder plot of the other. This merry-go-round of action paired with the repetition of the motions across these constrained panels achieves some of the same anticipation-building work as building and breaking does later. The mirroring of the grid structure parallels the

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118 Ibid. Geissman 306-07
119 Ibid. 299

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mirrored plot, and the breakdown of the larger frames into subframes makes the repetition of the action more apparent. Krigstein has taken the constant back and forth motion provided by his editor and manipulated it, producing not a series of rhyming couplets but a lengthier stanza composed of multiple rhyming elements distanced from each other. The reader enters this page aware of this structure, so the extension of each action does not provide new information but a development of information the reader already has.

This mirroring serves on the next page to push the reader towards the conclusion that is obvious: the second-to-last large frame shows the husband blowing himself up with the wife's bomb, secretly planted in the whiskey that he thinks has been poisoned. The final frame is in fact composed of three small frames as the wife picks up the pieces of the cake, the bomb inside safely defused. This sequence, like the Building and Breaking sequences, is costly from the standpoint of space and narrative momentum:[120] there are extra motions here for what could be conveyed with one shot. This staggering of motion serves to delay an inevitable moment predicted both by the conventions of EC books, and predicted based on the formal mirroring at play: the right side signifies the actions of the husband, and he acts from beyond the grave to seek his revenge. By drawing out this action, Krigstein opens up an affective space: he provides excess material within the comic that does not provide new information but instead invites the reader to linger over the actions, savoring it as the hapless wife savors

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[120] Though not, it should be noted, from the standpoint of the literal printing costs that concerned Feldstein and EC!

her poisoned cake.

Ironically, the constraints put upon Krigstein helped generate the characteristic proliferation of small panels that make his work seem to vibrate with tension.[121] While it could be easily argued that this editorial oversight suppressed innovations in panel forms and helped hobble artists interested in expanding the medium, it is possible that the particular strategies Krigstein developed would never have seen the light of day had his pleas for more page space been met. It is difficult to imagine the climactic scene of his most critically acclaimed story, "Master Race," without this experimentation, for example.[122] The story describes a confrontation between the viewpoint character (referred to as "you" in the text) and another man on a subway, a confrontation which triggers a flashback to the viewpoint character's role in the Holocaust during the Second World War. In the climax, it is revealed that the viewpoint character was, in fact, the head of a concentration camp, and the man who now pursues him a prisoner seeking vengeance. Krigstein illustrates the climax of this Feldstein-edited[123] story with a dramatic series of four thin panels, in which the fleeing main character trips and slowly falls onto the subway tracks, the repeated image of the body suspended in the air juxtaposed with a panel of the subway car speeding past, the figures inside multiplied in a simulation of strobing motion. It is a moment that Art Spiegelman, writing with John Benson and David Kasakove in 1975,

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121 Sadowski, *B Krigstein*, 229
122 Bernard Krigstein, "Master Race," reprinted in *A Comics Studies Reader*, (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2008) 290
123 John Benson, David Kasakove, and Art Spiegelman, "An Examination of 'Master Race'," reprinted in *A Comics Studies Reader*, (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2008) 288.

described as having "built up" a "rhythm" leading to the climax of the viewpoint character's death.[124] This scene is notable because on this particular story Krigstein successfully petitioned his editors for two additional pages beyond the norm, yet he still made use compositionally of these narrow and repeated panels.[125] This seems to indicate that Krigstein, even when free to expand his storytelling, was intrigued by the possibilities of these sorts of narrow, clustered prolongators. While it is not as dramatic in subject or as critically acclaimed, in the case of "More Blessed to Give," the existing structure was already sufficiently sophisticated formally, in its mirrored design, to accommodate Krigstein's experiments, and the result is a delightfully macabre story that still stands out as formally inventive, even if the writing today seems overwrought.

While this is not Building and Breaking, these structures share many of the qualities of that structure and makes use of the same costly panels and structure of built anticipation over time. It is an excellent example of the comics storytelling McCloud, Miodrag, and Harvey all privilege—storytelling where the words and pictures depend upon each other for their meaning. The words serve, in the final cluster, as confirmation of what the reader already suspects, while the images serve to provide room for the reader to delay that revelation, to revel in the pleasure of the inevitable eating of the cake. In that sense, it might serve as a precursor, or evidence of the way in which comic artists were exploring these structures, even in the early days.

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124 Ibid. 304.
125 Krigstein, "Master Race."

It also suggests that a history of comics positing the natural development of particular formal techniques, and a progression from less to more sophisticated, is not tenable. There seems little to make this structure of "rhyming" panels divided by space but still able to signify together across that distance due to the iconic solidarity of the multiframe, or collection of all the frames that make up a narrative,[126] more or less apparent or more or less heavily used than Building and Breaking structures, and in fact Cohn devotes some space in his treatise to a simplified form of this structure, which he describes as "cross-cutting."[127] It is easy to conceive of a parallel development of English language comics where the sustained, multi-page mirror structure is adopted more heavily by comics artists, resulting in a somewhat different visual vocabulary of constructions.

It is difficult, however, to imagine an alternate comics history where this or any other similarly costly structure emerged into greater prominence at an earlier point in time, simply because these structures were costly not only from a narrative standpoint but from an economic standpoint, requiring dedicated study over a matter of years by comics creators, production cycles capable of accommodating the number of panels introduced in these structures, pagerates that artists could survive on, and flexibility in the number of pages granted to an artist. Al Feldstein himself later conceded that Krigstein, in his stubbornness, "was right and we were wrong" in experimenting with the format of the EC stories, but noted that "from a point of view of trying to get the thing out in a

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126 Groensteen, *The System of Comics*.
127 Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics*. 60-61.

standardized position" this kind of experimentation was a wrench in the works of comics production.[128]

Harvey has written convincingly that the comic book industry was hampered for decades by an inability to attract a large number of skilled artists, and an inability to retain those artists long enough for them to become conversant in the unique structures of comics.[129] Krigstein's frustrations thus are part of a larger trend that recurs with other experimental artists spanning the first four decades of comic book production. While a history of such artists has, in large part, yet to be written, some, like Jim Steranko, are legendary among comics fans for their formal experimentation. Steranko, in particular, is notable for one run in with Marvel editor Stan Lee over a four page continuous splash panel published in *Nick Fury: Agent of SHIELD*. This sequence is a remarkable example of the greater power Steranko was able to leverage in the 1970s for such costly experiments, but his short career and conflicts with Lee represent, too, the continued difficulty of such experimentation.[130] Others are only recently being rediscovered by comic fans and other comic artists, such as the artist Lily Renee whose complex, irregular, and ostentatious page breakdowns in the late 1940s introduced many elements (most notably large panels showing the full bodies of characters, decreasing by necessity the size of action panels that in a typical comic of the period would be given equal or greater weight on the page). Renee, too, had a short career marked by frustration of a different sort: frustration with a male-

128 Geissman 306-07.
129 Harvey, *The Art of the Comic Book*. 24-26
130 Jason Strykowski, "SDCC: Steranko Discusses Working with Stan Lee, Slapping Bob Kane."
    Comic Book Resources, August 6, 2014.

dominated and sexist comics industry.[131] A lengthier review of such artists, while

unfortunately outside the scope of this thesis, would help greatly to contextualize

early comics and their structural qualities.

After the imposition of the Comics Code Authority and the destruction of

EC, Krigstein worked briefly with other publishers again but was hampered by

plummeting pagerates, brought down by the collapse of so many publishers and a

resultant glut of artists desperate for work, and the continued limitations placed

upon him by editors.[132] Krigstein complained of the injustice of having to cram an

excess of panels into a limited number of pages, pointing out that by doing so he

was effectively drastically increasing the story content despite being paid the

same rate as an artist using perhaps only six or nine panels on a page.[133] The final

straw came when Krigstein, having produced pencils for a comic that contained

silent panels, was told by Stan Lee, editor of Atlas Comics, that his silent panels

would have text added to them. Krigstein threatened a lawsuit and his work went

to the printers untouched, but he never worked for any of the comic book

publishers again. Unable to persuade major literary publishers to back a planned

series of adaptations of literary classics—i.e. unable to construct for himself the

kind of symbolic capital-based field of production necessary to support his work

—Krigstein left comics to pursue a career in education and studio art.

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131 Trina Robbins, "Introduction." in *Women at War: the Golden Age Comics of Lily Renee*.
     http://www.trinarobbins.com/Women_at_War.pdf
132 Sadowski, *B. Krigstein,* 228-30
133 Ibid.

Chapter 4: Alternative Comics and the Plurality of Forms

Much of the discussion thus far has emphasized the way the traditional

mode of production, paired with the material constraints of the production and

print technologies of comics, made it unlikely that the prototypes of building and

breaking templates would emerge in the early history of English-language comics.

This might suggest that the rise of alternative comics in the aftermath of the

Comics Code and the dawn of the psychedelic age of the hippies, and its

associated move towards a production cycle based more on traditional symbolic

capital models, would see a corresponding rise in the kind of structural techniques

that would lead to the building and breaking template's development. It is

certainly true that this movement shared many of the features of Bourdieu's

artistic production cycle:[134] artists like R. Crumb and Art Spiegelman began

making a concerted effort to elevate particular comics as either independent of

bourgeois social norms (Crumb) or as particularly worthy of intellectual

examination (Spiegelman).[135] Spiegelman's lengthy close reading of Bernard

Krigstein's classic story "Master Race" has already been cited here and represents

a significant pattern of transformation in fan culture that itself laid the stage for

Spiegelman's own canonization as an artist.[136] Crumb's refusal to join with other

alternative comix creators in the short-lived attempt by Stan Lee to create an adult

comix collection at Marvel is an almost excessively obvious example of the need

for the avant garde artist to disavow his place in the mechanisms of capital, as

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134 Bourdieu, "The Production of Belief"
135 Denis Kitchen, "Introduction," in *The Best of Comix,* (Milwaukee: Dark Horse, 2013).
136 Beaty, Comics versus Art, 113-122

Bourdieu and Nice explain them, and certainly Crumb has accumulated a substantial amount of symbolic (and real) capital through the positioning of his work outside of the mainstream publishing world.[137]

Nevertheless, despite this transition few of the alternative comix creators seemed interested in pushing the boundaries of formal structure as a primary end. Many of them utilized the same sort of irregular layouts saddled with wordy narrating text, and relied on narrative structures characterized by a large number of peaks. The kind of lengthened sequences and regularized, sometimes "silent" compositions seen in Krigstein's work appear very little in the work from this period.

The explanation for this absence stems from the point I have repeatedly emphasized about this structure: it is not a logical formal endpoint for comics that comes as the result of a progressive development in sophistication. Instead, it is one particular tool for opening up affective and semiotic spaces within comics, one that can—not "will"—emerge when certain material conditions enable artists to experiment with it and utilize it. It is important to remember that the freedom of the alt comix producers to manipulate layouts, page counts, and production processes was matched by a liberation from the Comics Code and a move towards content that went far beyond even the relatively moralistic and, by today's standards, fairly benign materials printed by EC.[138] There was, too, a stylistic revolution, as artists experimented with a wide variety of drawing styles, narration

137 Kitchen, "Introduction," Bourdieu, "The Production of Belief."
138 Gardener, *Projections*

styles, mark making techniques, and compositions. It is not surprising, given this

plethora of possible avenues to explore, that the opening of affective space in

comics by way of the regular composition and a multiplication of actions did not

feature as a core part of the alt comix revolution. There were other avenues to

affect now available and many of the best artists explored a variety of techniques.

Spiegelman's famous "Prisoner on the Hell Planet," (Figure 4.1) for

example, is drawn with a ragged expressionism, and the raw energy of

Spiegelman's mark-making is a major vehicle for the anguish and horror of the

story.[139] It is difficult to imagine this comic utilizing a building and breaking

strategy, or even utilizing the kind of prolongers and refiners in Krigstein's works,

because part of the comic's aggressive power comes from the headlong pitch

forward from one ragged image to the next—the heavy use of peak panels here

extends the strategies of early short story comics narration to an extreme

conclusion.

There is, nevertheless, a moment worth noting where the actions are

slowed down dramatically: the sequence of Spiegelman struggling to shed a

single tear, which consists of four thin panels tracing the teardrop down his cheek,

broken in the center by a square panel with the grotesque doctor and his cousin

mockingly informing him of his mother's suicide.[140] Perhaps here Spiegelman is

making use of insights drawn from Krigstein in the use of these narrow panels,

composed into one overarching frame made apparent by narrating text. The

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139 Art Spiegelman, "Prisoner on the Hell Planet," in *Breakdowns: Portrait of the Artist as a
     Young %@&*! (*New York: Pantheon Books, 2008)
140 Ibid.

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proliferation of panels dragging out the passage of the tear seems almost excessively affective, overwrought in its sorrow. I find in looking at it that it is impossible to ignore the center panel—the five panels are inextricable, and my experience of the sequence as a whole is one of nightmarish horror. By reproducing the tear four times over in the context of his statement that "I didn't exactly feel like crying. but I figured I should!...." Spiegelman emphasizes the artificiality of his own affective response, prompting a disconnect between himself and a reader inclined to feel an empathetic sadness. This alienation of affect heightens the surreal horror of the sequence overall. In this work, then, it is possible to perceive an echo of formal techniques that would become more heavily codified later by artists such as Jack Kirby in the 1970s and Alan Moore and Frank Miller in the 1980s, but they are tied inextricably to a whole body of other experimental techniques that Spiegelman mobilizes in the comic.

Cohn posits that visual languages require a level of commonality to function properly. This claim results in an analysis—arguably even a condemnation—of English-language comics as being driven by individual aesthetics to the extent that the visual language of comics will begin to break down or become less capable of articulation.[141] There are numerous reasons why this analysis might be taken as somewhat alarmist: Hannah Miodrag's analysis of the way readers become conversant in each artist's individual semiotic system seems to provide the most obvious and useful counter, for example. She claims that as the reader becomes familiar with a particular comic, that reader can come

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141 Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics*.

to associate certain elements within the comic to certain concepts, allowing the reader, author, and text to construct a semiotic framework together.[142] It seems reasonable to extend this to the realm of affect, as well, in accordance with Jenifer Robinson's description of the way affective responses can become associated with familiar patterns or stimuli.[143] The breakdowns that Cohn fears are not present, ironically enough, even in a body of work as radically diverse as Spiegelman's collection of early comics, *Breakdowns*.[144] In these works, despite the wide variety of styles employed, layouts utilized, and narratives explored, it is usually possible, with some thought, to construct a semiotic system, and even to arrive at an affective response, albeit sometimes a confused or difficult one, one that resists easy categorization or assimilation.

Nevertheless, one of the pleasures of building and breaking templates, as we will see, is the audience's ability to store, recognize, recall, and predict outcomes based on the formal qualities of the structure. In a time period when the rules of the visual language of comics were radically in flux, and individuality was becoming highly valued, the transmission and wider implementation of any particular formal structure was impossible to achieve. This is true not only for creators of comics but for the wider audience of comics as well: some of the more complex experiments by Spiegelman, for example, demand new strategies of reading even from experienced readers.[145]

There is one legacy of this period that ultimately will be crucial in the

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142 Miodrag, *Comics and Language*.
143 Robinson, *Deeper than Reason*.
144 Spiegelman, *Breakdowns: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young #&@%*.
145 Ibid.

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development of the structure later, however, and that is the rise of artists like Spiegelman to fame as auteurs and the rise of comics as a medium to a greater place of artistic prominence and freedom. As noted above, Spiegelman and other fan-creator-scholars contributed consciously to this development through the elevation of previous creators to a higher status and the creation of the beginnings of a critical tradition. In doing so, the fan-creator-scholars of this period set the stage for their own elevation.[146] This rise of individual creators was paralleled in the commercial world by explicit attempts by Stan Lee to get Marvel fans invested in the company and its individual artists.[147] Comic creators were thus mobilized in this era as a source of brand loyalty—in other words, cultural capital.[148]

For the first time in the history of English-language comic books, creators were staying in the field for extended periods of time and honing their craft in the way that syndicated newspaper cartoonists had earlier in the century. Increasingly in this period we see artists like veteran Jack Kirby being given the power to explore radically ambitious concepts, and while they were not always supported to the full extent that one might expect from an art market investing in the avant-garde, the fact that a project as ambitious as Kirby's four-series cycle of stories called the Fourth World Saga was even attempted at all is remarkable.[149] By the 1980s, after the original Fourth World books had been canceled, Kirby was called

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146 Beatty, *Comics vs Art*,
147 Gardner, *Projections,* 112-13
148 Bourdieu
149 Mark Evanier, "Afterward." in *Jack Kirby's Fourth World Omnibus,* Vol. 4. (New York: DC Comics, 2008)

back to DC to produce a graphic novel conclusion to the storyline, demonstrating the increasing willingness of publishing houses to support larger, more complex projects.[150] With these artists that remained in the field of comics developing their skills and reacting to one another as never before, the development of complex structures such a the building and breaking template became much more viable. In this way, the rise of unique voices in the 1960s and '70s that made the development of a shared vocabulary impossible ultimately provided creators with the clout to experiment outside of the models that had been tried before, alongside a growing conviction that comics could aspire to cultural credibility on par with other media.

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150 Ibid.

Chapter 5: *City of Glass* and the Template's Uses

By the mid-1980s, and for two decades after, the Building and Breaking template was in wide use among superhero comic book artists and writers. It can be seen, for example, in works such as *Watchmen* (as examined in the first chapter), *From Hell*, and *The Killing Joke*, all written by Alan Moore in collaboration with, respectively, Dave Gibbons, Eddie Campbell, and Brian Bolland;[151] Jim Starlin, George Perez, and Ron Lim's *The Infinity Gauntlet*,[152] and recent works such as Mark Waid and Alex Ross's *Kingdom Come*.[153] While some of these works, primarily the books produced by Alan Moore and his collaborators, utilize a striking regularity of form, many others introduce regularity much in the way that Krigstein did: strategically, sporadically, where it can be used for particular dramatic, semiotic, or emotive effects.

While much of the conversation thus far has centered upon horror and discomfort, and this focus will continue in the next two chapters, it is worth pointing out that the building and breaking template is not limited to these negative affects. In many of the comics listed above, the dominant affect is one of excitement and awe, particularly in *The Infinity Gauntlet*, which features a universe-spanning conflict between nearly omnipotent opponents.[154] The structure is here used to depict the battles fought by the antagonist, the mad titan Thanos, against a variety of superheroic opponents, and stands as a good example of the

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151 Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell, *From Hell*. (Marietta: Top Shelf, 2004), Alan Moore and Brian Bolland, *The Killing Joke*, (New York: DC Comics, 2008)
152 Jim Starlin, George Perez, and Ron Lim, *The Infinity Gauntlet*, (Marvel Comics: 2006)
153 Mark Waid and Alex Ross, *Kingdom Come*, (New York: DC Comics, 2006)
154 Starlin, Perez, and Lim, *The Infinity Gauntlet.*

use of the structure in action comics. It is worth noting, however, the use of the template, and even minor uses of extra lengthener panels, in the interactions between Thanos and the character Death, a being that Thanos has fallen hopelessly in love with and who he attempts to woo through greater and greater destructive acts. The comic is fascinating in part because it spends so much time exploring the romantic aspirations of this omnicidal being, leaving quite a bit of ambiguity in how the reader is to respond—with sympathy, with ironic levity at the absurdity of the conceit, or with revulsion. During this period, then, we can already see creators playing with the structure to open up a variety of affective experiences, and it is within this context that the next two chapters will explore particular uses of the structure.

This system makes an appearance, as well, in the alternative comics scene. Art Spiegelman's Maus, for example, is notably regular, perhaps influenced by Krigstein, whose work Spiegelman greatly admired.[155] Earlier I noted that during the alternate comics boom in the 1960s the pieces of the building and breaking template did not form for a whole host of reasons. Now, however, we start to see the form emerge in alternative comics as works became longer and publishing models could accommodate costly structures.

In 1994 David Mazzucchelli and Paul Karasik began work on what might be the exemplary work of this trend. *City of Glass*, the comic they produced, follows the story of a struggling author of detective stories, Daniel Quinn, who is drawn by a wrong phone number into a case of his own. He is hired as a private

155 Spiegelman, Art, *Maus*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980)

investigator by Peter Stillman, a man whose linguist father subjected him to a cruel experiment meant to uncover a primordial language that preceded the fall of the Tower of Babel. The elder Stillman has been released from prison, and Quinn is tasked with discovering what dark intentions Stillman may still have for his son. The story, ostensibly a detective novel, shifts from genre convention to postmodern self-reference and back again, ultimately collapsing, itself, into a kind of babel, with the ultimate fates of Quinn and the two Stillmans left ambiguous.

The story is told in the form of an almost constant 3x3 grid of rectangular frames. The comic is in greyscale, with a clean, iconic quality to the line that occasionally shifts into more abstract, sign-derived iconography. There are occasional breaks in the 3x3 grid, typically for rhetorical reasons, and always in the form of fused frames, where two frame spaces are combined into one continuous frame.[156] The presence of an external narrator makes it possible for Karasik and Mazzucchelli to introduce sequences of many catalyzing actions, as Quinn wanders New York City considering the case that frequently confounds him. The result is a comic that feels carefully paced and highly rhythmic in nature, except for those moments when this pacing is broken by the introduction of a climax through the building and breaking template.

City of Glass is in fact an adaptation of a short novel by Paul Auster. Auster was persuaded to allow the adaptation of his postmodern mystery story into a comic by none other than Art Spiegelman (who had provided the cover

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156 Paul Auster, Paul Karasik, and David Mazzucchelli, *City of Glass,* (Picador, 2004) 8

illustration for the novel).[157] I point this out not in order to introduce a discussion

of the development of *City of Glass* from novel to comic, but to comment on

Spiegelman's role in the development of this work, and the contrast between the

development of *City of Glass* and the earlier comics considered here. Remember

that decades earlier Bernard Krigstein was unable to sell publishers on his plan to

translate works of consecrated classic literature into the comics medium.[158] Here,

in contrast, we see Art Spiegelman using a difficult and postmodern text as the

first title of a proposed series of comic adaptations. Karasik, in a 2004 interview

with Indy Magazine, describes the adaptation as a kind of "litmus test:" "You

know, if you could do *City of Glass* you could do anything, the idea being that

City of Glass would be just about impossible to do."[159] This is interesting in light

of Spiegelman's work elsewhere to elevate the comics form (as described in the

last chapter). Decades earlier, a high quality adaptation of a literary text was

inconceivable; now, it was to be attempted on a difficult and experimental text.

It is interesting to consider Karasik's position as a former student of

Spiegelman's, when Spiegleman (as well as Harvey Kurtzman and Will Eisner)

taught at SVU.[160] At this point in the history of the development of English-

language comic books, it is now possible for creators who had worked in the field

for decades to pass on their knowledge of the field directly in an academic

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157 Bill Kartalopoulos, "Coffee with Paul Karasik," *Indy Magazine,* Spring, 2004,
    https://web,archive,org/web/20040825101038/http://www,indyworld,com/indy/spring_2004/k
    arasik_interview/index,html,
158 Sadowsky, *B. Krigstein*. 230.
159 Kartalopoulos, "Coffee with Paul Karasik,"
160 Ibid.

environment.[161] Furthermore, older artists were able, as Spiegelman did here, to invest culturally in younger, experimental artists. The social field of production for comics was dramatically different from the one that Krigstein or Spiegelman himself initially faced.

The means of publishing are also notably different. *City of Glass* was constructed and conceived of as a "graphic novel", a work complete in and of itself rather than a short story or an ongoing serialized narrative developing through its production.[162] This allows Karasik and Mazzucchelli to develop ideas across several pages while little happens from the perspective of the narrative itself. The first example we will consider momentarily is the most egregious case of this in the story: a ten page sequence consisting of Peter Stillman's disjointed and disturbing monologue recounting his life and abuse, the speech bubbles of the monologue issuing from a variety of objects and entities.[163] It is difficult to imagine editors such as Al Feldstein or Stan Lee signing off on such a sequence in one of their comics, but the costliness of the sequence is here absorbed by the fact that readers are reading the comic not in serial form but in the form of a complete volume.

There is one final adaptation perhaps worth noting, and that is the means by which Karasik and Mazzucchelli blocked out their comic. Karasik first conceived of the comic, serendipitously, several years before Spiegelman independently conceived of a comic adaptation of Auster's novel. The early draft

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161 Contrast Harvey, *The Art of the Comic Book*,24-26
162 Ibid.
163 Auster, Karasik, and Mazzucchelli, *City of Glass,* 15-24.

is drawn on gridded paper, but it is simple yellow lined notepaper, not the multimodal grid used in comics publishing houses (Figure 5.1). The later sketches of Mazzucchelli similarly are on blank paper and block the comic out immediately in the rigid 3x3 pattern that persists throughout the comic, aside from minor rhetorical shifts when what is depicted must be shown in a two-panel space. Here the grid is conceived of from the outset as a rigid object unto itself as well as a particular semiotic object that, just like language, the mark of letters on the page, and icons, the authors interrogate over the course of the comic.

One of the key vehicles for this interrogation is the sequence referenced above where Peter's monologue is accompanied by a surreal selection of images. The sequence proper follows nine pages from the moment Peter begins his monologue, arguably encompassing eleven pages including the page long sequence of Peter awkwardly taking his seat and the panels after the end of the monologue where Peter and Quinn sit in silence.[164] From the outset the action is delayed and drawn out, with Peter's dramatic entrance followed by the three panels of his laborous effort to sit (Figure 5.2). The first page of the monologue begins as a frontal portrait of Peter, the tail of the speech bubble issuing eerily from inside his throat. Over the course of the nine panels each successive image moves closer to Peter, ultimately following the tail of the speech bubble down his throat. Here, then, the tail acts as a kind of arrow pointing towards the source of the sound, which is never shown but instead is constantly deferred during the passage into successive vessels. The next two page spread depicts the words

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164 Ibid. 14-24

issuing from water, from whence emerges Charon, in a boat. Once again, over the course now of eighteen images, the view draws closer to Charon and passes into his mouth. The next sequence depicts the famous bird headed man and bison from the caves of Lascaux, France, with the words issuing from the enigmatic bird headed figure. Here, the image persists for nine panels. The next page consists of three strips of three panels, depicting, respectively, a sewer grate, a sink drain, and a Victrola horn. The reader encounters new objects more and more rapidly now. The next page contains four two-panel clusters with a panel empty but for the speech bubble, and the last building page reduces the content to one panel per object.

The break comes in the form of two paired pages that both break the structure by presenting full page splash pages (Figure 5.3). The first page depicts the bars of a prison—two vertical and two horizontal, implying the regular 3x3 structure of the previous pages while still disrupting it. Finally, the last panel of the sequence breaks fully with the structure, closing Peter's monologue with a lengthy passage issuing from the mouth of a marionette of Peter Stillman. The next few panels after the end of the monologue are silent and irregular, providing a necessary relief from the rigidity of the preceding sequence, and show Peter and Quinn sitting in darkness, until Virginia Stillman turns on a lamp.

This sequence is interesting for the way it resists an obvious visual narrative. The action, if you can call it an action, consists solely of the continuous inward motion as Stillman monologues. The exact timeframe of each image is

unclear. In a film it would be possible to map image to sound in the sense that the inward motion must happen at a speed allowing all of Stillman's speech to be said, but the actual amount of text present in each panel can vary considerably.[165] By the end of the sequence, the reader confronts individual images. While it might be possible to conjecture that the same inward movement is taking place, albeit more quickly, in these panels, I suspect that the action is actually experienced as a revelation of each object: the action taking place in these panels is the presentation of the panels themselves. Unlike in cinema, there is no demand that we think of these objects and their appearances in a perfectly fused temporal sense.

The action taking place here, then, is of secondary concern. More important is the way this opens up a semiotic and affective space that moves beyond the literal into the figurative. On the level of the comic's discourse, this sequence provides a way of suggesting various correspondences between what Stillman is saying and the objects and entities presented.[166] But these juxtapositions are sometimes strange, uncertain, seemingly irrelevant, or symbolically seductive. It might be temping, for example, to take the last building page and consider the hyperframe as a whole. In the absence of an actual sequence to mirror those found in the previous pages, this might be a logical reading strategy. If a reader does so, one of the immediate correspondences visually, obvious even before the page is read, is between the alcohol bottle and

165 Miodrag, *Comics and Language*
166 Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, 114

the ink bottle. Both occupy the centers of their strips, both are dark, both are vessels specifically for liquids, and yet this potentially promising association between panels is not mirrored elsewhere on the page. The tic-tac-toe board suggests the larger nine frame grid, but to what end?

There are, then, several things going on here structurally. There is an acceleration towards a breaking point expressed through the way the number of different objects shown on each page increases while conversely the number of panels devoted to each object decreases. There is a proliferation of apparent symbols that seem charged with meaning but simultaneously elusive (a recurrent idea in the story). All of this is paired with a disjointed narrative discussing, sometimes in explicit detail. sometimes in veiled poetic abstraction, horrific child abuse and its results. I am less interested here in the meaning of any particular object than I am in the way this fully realized version of the building and breaking template opens up a space where the visual narrative is suspended and these symbolic objects can proliferate.

This acceleration and proliferation make it possible for the reader to experience Peter's narrative in an affective way, placing them, potentially, in a position of association with Quinn, with Peter, or with both characters. A reader engaged with the objects presented as potential sources of symbolism may find the elusive nature of the symbols at turns or at once alluring and compelling, frustrating and disorienting, or disturbing and alien, as each new panel provides new puzzles. Cohn describes how a reading heuristic that attempts to associate all

panels together "threatens to overwhelm human working memory,"[167] and while

he introduces this point in order to advocate for a finer understanding of how and

why readers associate certain panels, his description fits this sequence remarkably

well: the objects and their panels are all potentially associated—braided—with

each other and with Peter's fragmentary story. [168]A reader attempting to make all

the necessary connections at once may find themselves cognitively overwhelmed.

An emotional response to this, frustration perhaps, or disquiet, or even anxiety

and fear in the face of this strange material, parallels the emotional response of

Quinn, made explicit through narration later,[169] which leads him to take on this

case for which he is unqualified, selected by an inexplicable error. The building

elements here are used in part then to draw the reader into association with

Quinn.[170] It is possible that it similarly acts to associate the reader emotionally

with Peter. It is possible that presenting Peter's story in the form of a more

naturalistic series of images would be disturbing through the confrontation of

visual content, but it is also possible that media consumers accustomed to graphic

visual content would respond passively to this sort of rendering. The far less

familiar and predictable series of disjunctions here, accompanied by abrupt and

violent shifts in Peter's narrative not signaled beforehand by panel contents, may

serve to arouse a sense of horror in the reader that is harder to assimilate or place,

a horror perhaps even of the multimodal language of the narrative itself.

It is this sense of horror at the fused image and text that provides the key

167 Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics*. 67.
168 Groensteen, *System*, 145-47.
169 Auster, Karasik, and Mazzucchelli, *City of Glass*, 32-33
170 Robinson, *Deeper than Reason*. 113-17.

to the use of the building and breaking template here. The climax of the sequence, as described above, is two full page splashes, the first the bars of a prison, the second an abandoned marionette of Peter. Why is this prison bar treated as a climactic moment in the sequence? A semiotic reading can lead us to consider the way the bars of the prison echo the regular grid, and conclude that the text is here suggesting that its very structure is a kind of prison for Peter and perhaps even Quinn, an edifice from which there is no escape. Peter's dialogue here is notable: "I see hope everywhere, even in the dark, and when I die I will perhaps become god."[171] Peter speaks here of escape, transfiguration, and ascendency, in the context of an image of entrapment and darkness that associates the very structure of the comic with a dark prison. The meaning of the juxtaposition here is somewhat ambiguous, and might be read as either a tragic irony (assuming that Peter's hopes are futile) or a transcendent one (after all, Peter speaks of hope "even in the dark," and it is possible that what the reader perceives is a veil that Peter sees through). This ambiguity is carried through to the final image, the broken Peter marionette, with his dialogue even more forcefully juxtaposing the inevitability of death and the return to the room with his illuminated state.

But moving to the realm of affect helps us consider this as something more than a visual pun and an intellectual puzzle. If the reader has experienced the sequence with mounting horror and dread as the objects appear more and more rapidly and Peter's narrative becomes more disturbing in its implications, the break acts as a climax for this horror, and the revealing—the revelation—of

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171 Auster, Karasik, and Mazzucchelli, *City of Glass,* 22.

the prison bars demands, through its emotional weight, a reassessment of all that has come before. The problem of the ambiguity of the passage's meaning is brought to the fore through a parallel affective ambiguity: if the reader's feelings have been aroused by the acceleration towards this breaking point, this ambiguity demands a cognitive assessment of what is experienced.[172] Part of the pleasure of the text is in the way the postmodern features of the text, far from being a dry intellectual formal exercise, feed back into the process of experiencing affective arousal, an automatic response of fear, which then may transform as the reader undergoes the cognitive assessment process into wonder at Peter's own hypothesized transformation, and more elevated fear as the very nature of the world is called into question. Far from providing a clear understanding of Peter's speech, Mazzucchelli and Karasik have introduced a gap in the text which the reader fills through a process that fuses the semiotic and the affective, arriving at possible intellectual and emotional conclusions, different between readers and perhaps even different between readings. The abstract is made resonant through the necessary intervention of the reader.

City of Glass represents a striking new order in English-language comics production, but it depends on the developments that came before it, both in the case of individual comics and the case of the field of production as a whole. This sequence in *City of Glass* is part of a wider use of a formal template shared during this period by other comics from a variety of genres. At the same time, it uses that structure as a space to open up a remarkably ambiguous experience, one which

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172 Robinson, *Deeper than Reason,*

invites reassessment and a variety of responses from readers. Similarly, it is heir

to a long process that allowed Karasik and Mazzucchelli, with the help of Art

Spiegelman, to create a long form comic that could accommodate a sequence as

costly, from the standpoint of narrative progression and page count, as Peter's

monologue. It is remarkable for its ambition but ultimately a part of the same

progression that made the six pages of splash panels in Watchmen, discussed in

part one, possible for Moore and Gibbons. Finally, a reader familiar with the

building and breaking template may experience a heightened anticipation as the

sequence reaches its conclusion, recognizing, perhaps not even consciously, the

oncoming break. While Karasik and Mazzucchelli adapt the form from a concrete

action to a more abstract buildup, this recognition and anticipation is possible

because of a wider environment that allowed for the development of shared

templates and techniques among experienced comic creators, a development that

was far more difficult in the early decades of English-language comic book

history.

This last point is worth exploring further, given the themes of the

breakdown and construction of language and other semiotic systems within the

comic's narrative. In Peter's monologue there is one interrogation of the structure

of the comic itself, its system of symbols. At that point, the rigid grid of the comic

is interrogated as a prison before being broken completely with the vision of the

Peter marionette. Another interrogation and breakdown of the comic structure

comes in the end of the narrative, as Quinn sinks into mania and the very nature

of his quest comes into question.[173]

The nature of the rhetorical structure is important here. As described before, the three-square grid is broken for rhetorical and occasionally symbolic purpose, but only in a spreading out across multiple smaller panels, doubling or tripling the space occupied, always preserving the fidelity of the strip, albeit occasionally doubling the height of the strip and thus reducing the number of strips in a given hyperframe. There are moments throughout the comic where the grid, even when seemingly disrupted, ultimately is reasserted. The regular composition is thus constantly present as a unit of measure, and its manipulations serve only to make it more apparent due to the structured way in which breaks occur.

This makes the final structural breakdown of the comic far more unsettling. In the final moments of the narrative, Quinn's psychological collapse is mirrored by the grid dissolving completely. As the contents of the panels dissolve, and the frames themselves become papers floating across a black abyss, the narration becomes more abstract, discussing the content of Quinn's writing and his hopes that he might abandon written language altogether and inscribe his words upon the closing darkness.[174] Here, it is not the presence of the grid that leads to a break but the absence: the dissolving of the grid into abstraction leads ultimately to the two-page spread that concludes this section with a fatal, terrifying note. Turning the page reveals a dominant image of a notebook,

173 Auster, Karasik, and Mazzucchelli, *City of Glass*, 127-35.
174 Auster, Karasik, and Mazzucchelli, *City of Glass,* 130-33

catching fire and burning, with the words "What will happen when there are no more pages in the notebook?"[175] inscribed upon it. This sudden return to a material object amidst the dissolution of the grid, paired with the sudden imposition of the present tense, is fascinating and terrifying, a moment of horror within the narrative. It demands attention through its physicality, through its domination of the page, while repelling as well, its apocalyptic implications spilling out beyond the confines of the pages. The question ultimately goes unanswered, and the rigid grid does not reappear. The order of the comic has been lost.

In this way, Mazzucchelli and Karasik take the visual language developed during this period and, just as the English language is pushed to the breaking point within the text, they dismantle this visual system that they have inherited.

175 Ibid. 134

Chapter Six: *Driven by Lemons* and Affective Difficulty

In closing this analysis, I want to discuss the possibilities suggested by the use of affect theory for a kind of analysis dependent upon a contentious relationship between reader and text. Such a relationship would not be only intellectually difficult but affectively difficult as well. I have already touched upon this topic with the work of Art Spiegelman but this chapter will specifically focus on the way the conventionalization of the building and breaking template makes particular experiences of disjunction possible.

In order to explore this idea, I will be examining the comic *Driven by Lemons*. *Driven by Lemons* is a small comic, drawn in a journal and printed to reproduce the sephia-toned paper on which the artist, Joshua Cotter, has scribbled dense, surreal, sometimes completely abstract images. The main character is a hollow-eyed rabbit person afflicted with a mental illness that spills out of his mind and into reality repeatedly over the course of the narrative. This narrative, difficult at first to discern, seems to follow a series of attempts by this character to free himself of this affliction.

How apparent this might be to a casual reader is rather unclear. Cotter has been quite explicit about the ways the comic represents an abstract dramatization of his own cyclical breakdown experiences.[176] However, the text itself is remarkably obscure, although there are elements on the page that help point toward the reading that Cotter endorses—the lengthy sequence in a hospital ward,

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176 Tim O'Shea, "Talking Comics with Tim: Joshua Cotter," *Comic Book Resources*, May 3 (2010), http://robot6,comicbookresources,com/2010/05/talking-comics-with-tim-joshua-cotter-2/

text mentioning treatment and recovery, and so on.[177] Analyzing the possible

responses to the text is therefore already difficult due to the varied ways in which

readers might first come into contact with it.

Driven by Lemons could be described as a comic driven by omissions.

These omissions serve not as mere absences in the information conveyance of the

text, or normal narrative gaps which the reader must fill, but the means by which

the repressed asserts itself.[178] The comic confronts the reader—and perhaps even

the artist—at every turn with absences, disjunctions, derailments, and failures of

meaning. The title, for example, is one such failure. The inner covers of the book

are covered by a colorful repetition of the title, for example. Each "L" in

"Lemons" has been ripped from other paper and pasted over whatever the original

word was. The opening quote comes from William Faulkner, "An artist is a

creature driven by..." but stumbles into confusion: "driven by... um... by...,

resulting in a 3x3 grid on the next page where abstract color images accompany

attempts to complete the sentence.[179] Finally a goofy looking lemon is settled on

as a suitable enough replacement word. This opening serves as a good

introduction to the rest of the comic's contents, and any reader-oriented analysis

of *Driven by Lemons* must account for the difficulty of the text and the work it

demands in the form of rereading, puzzling out meaning, choosing or discarding

signs as meaningful or meaningless, and so on.

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177 Joshua Cotter, *Driven by Lemons*, (Richmond: Adhouse Books, 2009) 51-61, possibly. Note
     that there is no pagination within the comic, so page numbers must be reconstructed from the
     table of contents. This is another way in which the text frustrates analysis.
178 Longenbach, *The Resistance to Poetry*. 93-94
179 Cotter, *Driven by Lemons*, 1-2

Much has been written on the interaction of image and text in comics, with many theorists placing the conjunction of the two in a privileged place as essential to the workings of comics in general, and "good" comics in particular.[180] This analysis tends to prize the creation of new meaning from the conjunction of image and text—implicitly, the leading of the reader to a new particular understanding through these linked semiotic systems. Much of the power of *Driven by Lemons*, however, comes not from the conjunction of these elements but their disjunction, and the ways in which meaning is occluded or rendered inaccessible.

The purpose of this resistance is not to set up a puzzle for the reader to solve, an intellectual game that will provide the reader the pleasures of grappling with the unknown. Instead, it seems to plunge the reader into an affective confusion. Here, I will divert somewhat from the previous neurological conceptions of affect that I have relied upon previously to discuss affect as Deleuze and Guattari conceive it, as their conception seems particularly useful for discussing the experience of reading Cotter's story. For Deleuze and Guattari, affect represents a sensation that precedes affection—the interpretation of emotion in the popular imagination (or pop psychology as Robinson would have it).[181] Affect represents a rent into chaos, something that forces the reader to confront emotion that cannot be encapsulated by language.[182]

This is a far cry from the affect of Silvan Tomkins and his followers—like Eve Sedgwick and the later neuropsychologists that inform Robinson's work—

180 Harvey, *The Art of the Comic Book*, 3-15
181 Robinson, *Deeper than Reason*. 79.
182 Deleuze and Guattari, *On Philosophy*, 205-06

and the fusion of the two different usages of the word "affect" seems difficult at best. Nevertheless, Deleuze and Guattari's model is worth considering in the context of works like *Driven by Lemons* for the way that it does seem to describe the experience of coming into contact with a range of affective responses that cannot be easily described or assimilated.

I find when grappling with *Driven by Lemons* that my response is characterized not merely by intellectual bewilderment as I struggle, over the course of many readings, to understand the narrative content of the story or the possible meaning of the many sequences of near or total abstraction, but of affective bewilderment as well, a riot of emotional responses. It seems reasonable to term this experience "chaos", even if this usage of the term does not have the same philosophical weight Deleuze and Guattari ascribe to it.[183] Here, the building and breaking template, as well as other uses of repetition and regularity that we've discussed previously, is used to open up a space where the reader might find themself at a loss as to how to react, or whether to react at all. Here, the ability of readers to store and recall particular formal patterns within comics' semiotic system comes into play, as the appearance of building sequences is met with a seemingly non-sequitorial breaking sequence, the reader's anticipation being aroused and then thwarted. This can cause not just a breaking of the cliche of the formal structure of English-language comic books but a breaking of cliched sentiments or affections.

I wish to suggest that one of the fullest of the possible affective readings

183 Deleuze and Guattari, *On Philosophy,* 203-04

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of *Driven by Lemons* depends on this confrontation with chaotic affect that breaks with the cliches of affection, because it is through this confrontation that the reader might come to understand an experience of depression that resists broader, often "inspirational," media narratives about the illness. In this, I am working strongly from Jenifer Robinson's work on the way affect influences a reader's understanding of a text's message. Robinson argues, using largely realist novels, that the message of some works is contingent upon the affective response of the reader—the reader's ability to respond empathetically to the plight of characters such as Anna Karenina, for example. For Robinson, to be affected by these works is to learn from them.[184] While I do not wish to suggest that *Driven By Lemons* is primarily a work meant to instruct the reader, or that the work will only be accessible experientially to those who can store and recognize the building and breaking template, or who react to it in this prescribed fashion, I do want to explore the possibility that this interaction with the text can make certain ideas more tangible.

Furthermore, this text serves as an excellent example of how tenuous the experience of the work's resistance, the confrontation with chaos, truly is.

Repeatedly, in describing the resistance of a text to a reader and the fertility of that resistance, theorists and critics note that the powerful experience of confronting artistic content that seems to be impossible to assimilate is a tenuous experience, one susceptible to interference and disruption. Here is James Longenbach, for example, on poetry: "[W]hile a poem might speak vividly in one

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184 Robinson, *Deeper than Reason*. 108-11

circumstance, it may never speak again. … The power of a poem inheres in the realization that we cannot count on it Its ephemeral consolation depends precisely on its being ephemeral, open to the vicissitudes of self doubt."[185] Longenbach privileges the inherent power of that, but it is worth noting the inherent weakness in such an arrangement. The experience of the avant-garde can come to be clouded by expectation, the canvas re-marked with the work of conversations between readers and critics.[186] In the case of *Driven by Lemons*, the expectation of an avant-garde, disruptive experience can dull the affective response, making the work more assailable but perhaps less powerful.

The comic seems to come to a dramatic climax in the final section, entitled "You Got the Power."[187] The rabbit character, having gone through the surreal process of therapy, now seems recovered, or at least he claims to be recovered. He is still drawn in Cotter's crosshatched and wobbly style, however, and his eyes are still glowing points of light deeply hooded by moody shadows. The page composition is a 3x3 waffle iron that stretches across four pages as the rabbit talks to someone on the phone about his discovery, only to be alerted, by way of a honking car horn, to the fact that the phone isn't connected to anything (Figure 6.1). This moment of disjunction is the first indicator that Cotter is subverting the narrative of recovery. Interestingly, the moment is not emphasized compositionally—instead, the whole sequence marches forward, with many panels devoted to the rabbit making his way downstairs to the waiting car.

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185   Longenbach, *The Resistance to Poetry.* 108
186 Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy*?
187 Cotter, *Driven by Lemons*, 91-97

The break comes when Dionysus[188] appears, bursting forth from a cloud of H.R. Giger-esque mechanical confusion, and sporting a prominent erection, to shout "Hey kid! Yeah, you!!! You got the touch!"[189] The final words are large, in bold, issuing from a half body shot of Dionysus grinning, winking, and pointing knowingly at the protagonist. The final panel of the preceding page, a long shot of Dionysus, takes up the whole bottom strip, and his dramatic close-up takes up two strips of the waffle iron on the next page. Here, the presence of the bottom strip acts as a small break in the format that indicates something larger is coming, underscored not only by the stored pattern of how this particular template works but also by the conversation template that suggests something should, logically, come after Dionysus's attempt to claim the rabbit's attention.

Structurally this moment seems to be designed to act as a revelatory moment of recovery. The chapter as a whole, from the promising title "You've Got the Power" to the opening moments of conversation, mirrors this sense. Nevertheless, this promise of healing seems constantly undercut and distressingly manipulated, with the promising text redacted in black pen, the opening image of the chapter showing a graph paper void where the protagonist should be. The sequence seems poised to elicit not so much an affect of happiness but the *expectation* of happiness, happiness that will be aroused upon conclusion of the building and breaking template. These strange disjunctive elements pull in a different direction, inviting unease and distrust as the reader navigates the

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188 As can be inferred by the initial picture in the book, captioned "Dionysus Driven by Lemons"
189 Ibid. 97.

multiple prolonger panels.

It is interesting to note, too, that while the template here structurally remains consistent, the actual actions depicted do not lead, narratively, in a straight line from the rabbit's actions to the climactic breaking panel. Instead, Dionysus intrudes into the scene and interrupts the action in progress. Immediately following the large break panel, the rabbit simply, across a three panel strip, gets into the car and is driven off. The action that began previously is concluded with little fuss and seemingly no impact from the climactic moment. An entire page is taken up, then, with a moment that seemingly has no effect, no meaning, and no connection narratively to anything else, even if it has some symbolic connections.

This opens up a space for affect in a way that we have not seen before outside perhaps of Spiegelman's experiment in "Prisoner on the Hell Planet." Instead of suggesting a particular range of responses that work in concert, here the moment of pre-cognitive arousal seems directly contradicted by the cognitive reassessment of the text as the expectation of profundity is undercut sharply by the narrative pointlessness of the moment. The reader might also recognize the chapter title and line Dionysus shouts as coming from the theme from a 1980s Transformer's film.[190] The introduction of 1980s arena rock into the moment amplifies this sense of disjunction if the reader finds that the triumphal opening of the song plays in their head over top of the sequence of the protagonist driving off wordlessly. What exactly is being evoked here? Humor, distress, joy, frustration?

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190 O'Shea, "Joshua Cotter"

This is the rent into chaos that eschews mere affections for pure affects.[191] In this moment, if the reader is sensitive to these contradictions, the response may be one of not just semiotic or narratological bewilderment but affective bewilderment as well. This bewilderment helps point towards a possible reading of the text as revealing the ways in which depression resists treatment, resists easy narratives of recovery and restoration, resists compression into coherent semiotic symbols such as written language or the semiotic system of comics, and ultimately resists the reader as well, even a reader potentially familiar with the experience of depression. Even for someone well acquainted with the condition on a personal level, the unique semiotic system Cotter builds over the course of his comic combined with the disparate elements fused together here places a barrier to understanding that cannot be merely navigated by experiential familiarity.

The value of recognizing the structure Cotter uses here as part of a larger system is that it allows us to see how familiarity and an ability to recall formal templates can be turned against the reader and used as a *barrier* to understanding rather than a facilitator of narrative and emotional knowledge. The opening up of a complex affective experience depends upon the ability to recognize ways in which Cotter is both formally referencing and alluding to a wider body of popular culture. Knowing these other systems of communication becomes just as essential to understanding the text as knowing how to read images and words, and understanding the history in which Cotter is situated helps to clarify how his use

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191 Deleuze and Guattari, *On Philosophy*

of the formal technique of building and breaking differs from other uses.

This understanding might also point to ways in which the sequence might fail, not due to a lack of formal vocabulary but due to an excess of it. The difficulty comes when the reader, noting other avant garde elements of the text, comes to *expect* a subversion of convention in this sequence. Here, the expectation of a disruption potentially dulls the surprise or dulls the sense of disjunction. While Robinson does not discuss such moments directly, she does detail ways in which an intellectual understanding of something as "sad" or "funny" fails to translate to an affective and emotional understanding.[192] It seems reasonable to suggest that such an intellectual understanding of a moment within a comic as disruptive and avant garde, and the eliciting, perhaps, of uncomplicated pleasure at the meeting of this expectation, does not translate to an emotional understanding of the sequence. If the experience of the comic serves to open up space to appreciate the disjunctive nature of mental illness, as I have suggested, the intellectualization of that experience seems logically to forefend a deeper interaction with the text outside of narrow questions of aesthetic experimentation and intellectually challenging semiotic content.

This is a risk that difficult art seems inherently to run. Doyle describes this as occurring with respect to disturbing or difficult performance art, for example, and notes the discourse around such provocative art as being drawn away from the experience of the pieces themselves, or even a close working with their

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192 Robinson, D*eeper than Reason*.

content, in favor of broader free speech debates.[193] Comics theorists would do well to take note of this: it would be easy to imagine a critique of *Driven by Lemons* that ignores the content of the text entirely in favor of instrumentalizing it in the ongoing quest for artistic legitimacy of comics, just as it is easy to imagine it being overlooked as merely another "sad Indie comic," as Cotter himself puts it,[194] due to an inability to engage the work on the level at which it is the most difficult, frustrating, disturbing, and rewarding.

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193 Doyle, H*old it Against Me.*
194 O'Shea, "Joshua Cotter"

Chapter 7: Conclusion

In leaving my examination with works that subvert or collapse in the face of expectations I do not want to suggest that *Driven by Lemons* is a logical endpoint for the building and breaking template. Just because a structure can be subverted or can fail does not indicate that it must be abandoned completely, and in fact we might point to numerous examples published after one or both of these works that make excellent use of the building and breaking structure. Scott McCloud repeatedly points out in *Understanding Comics* that this is a medium driven as much by omission as inclusion. This is the case with this historical narrative as well. While I have tried to give a sense of the overall trajectory of this structure's development, there are numerous works that are broadly in agreement with the ideas presented here about the role grammatical convention and the material conditions of production play in the development of structures in comics, but that also represent different complex data points that this account, by necessity, smooths over.

It is worth taking a moment to sketch out some other possibilities offered by the building and breaking template, and analysis that might emerge from considering its affective dimensions. One recent example, initially published as a webcomic and then printed in graphic novel format, is Warren Ellis and Paul Duffield's *Freakangels,* a comic about twelve young adults gifted with remarkable powers trying to survive in a post-apocalyptic world that they accidentally caused. In this story, the building and breaking template is used to depict moments of

drama but also is frequently manipulated and undercut in various ways. One

memorable, and extremely lengthy, sequence involves an extended monologue by

a character thought to be dead, carried out with the 2x2 grid of the comic

periodically broken by dramatic full splashes.[195] The sequence is notable for how

the rising action is periodically interrupted by other characters interjecting with

bemused criticism of the monologue, highlighting and emphasizing the

immaturity of the series' heroes. One of the most dramatic moments in the comic,

then, with a number of profound revelations about the Freakangels, swerves

wildly between awe, horror, and humor, born of the juxtaposition of highly

dramatic events with a band of highly dysfunctional characters. The final climax

of the sequence comes in the form of a full page splash depicting another

character hitting the speaker over the head with a chair, ending the monologue

abruptly.[196]

This sort of experimentation with moments of climax as expressed through

structure abound in contemporary comics, and the affective content of those

moments is widely varied. Increasingly, as with Stjepan Šejić's erotic comic

Sunstone, these experiments blur the already somewhat arbitrary boundaries of

"English-language comics."[197] *Sunstone* uses the building and breaking structure

in the context of a comic released in variable page dimensions online, in English

on the predominantly English-language website Deviantart, by a Croatian artist.

The use of the structure in a romantic context in a hypercomic format, paired with

195 Warren Ellis and Paul Duffield, *Freakangels*, (Rantoul: Avatar Press, 2008-2011)
     www.freakangels.com
196 Ibid. Episode 98, 1-Episode 100, 3
197 Stjepan Šejić, *Sunstone*. (2011-present) http://shiniez.deviantart.com/gallery/

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the conditions of its creation, suggests a striking range of possibilities for the

future development of the structure. Similarly, the appearance of books like Katie

Green's graphic memoir *Lighter Than My Shadow,* which in many ways parallels

Driven by Lemons in its exploration of psychological trauma (in this case abuse

and eating disorders) through the use of surreal imagery and regularized page

structures, suggests a continued interest in the way form and content in comics

can be unified to express difficult experiences.[198]

It seems clear that rather than a teleological progression towards more and

more advanced forms, the building and breaking structure is a tool that allows for

a variety of lines of flight. The new model for comics scholarship presented here

might simiarly be thought of as analogous to the affective spaces opened by the

building and breaking template in the sense that it is more rhizomatic than

definitive, more concerned with laying out frameworks for exploration that

coming to definitive conclusions about what the building and breaking template is

and does. More broadly, by avoiding debates over what the boundaries of comics

definitively are and avoiding the over-reliance on medium specificity that

characterized a first wave of comics scholarship preoccupied with locating for

comics unique qualities that elevated the medium to a greater critical worth, it is

possible to construct a theoretical approach that accounts for historical contexts

and can perhaps even begin to suggest a methodology that does not attempt to be

complete in and of itself, accounting for the most important aspects of history or

revealing the fundamental workings of comics-as-language, but implies

198 Katie Green, *Lighter than my Shadow,* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2013)

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alternatives and points of departure within itself.

The approach used here allows us to approach new works with an understanding of the development of the form, and a way of discussing and analyzing the multiplicity of possible responses to particular works. It allows us to talk about comics as using their position in time and discourse to open up and explore potential experiences and ways of responding and interacting. This is a critical history not only in the sense that it critically engages with works in a historical context, but in the sense that it critiques the way in which comics history is performed. The methods used here consider comics and their creators not in isolation but in communication with their real and potential audiences. Furthermore, this history challenges the reliance of traditional comics histories and interpretation on older literary models privileging individual genius and the clear communication of ideas. Instead, this is a model which privileges diverse experiences, the contextualization of individual works within larger stylistic trends, and the celebration of difficult or even contentious dynamics between creator, text, and reader.

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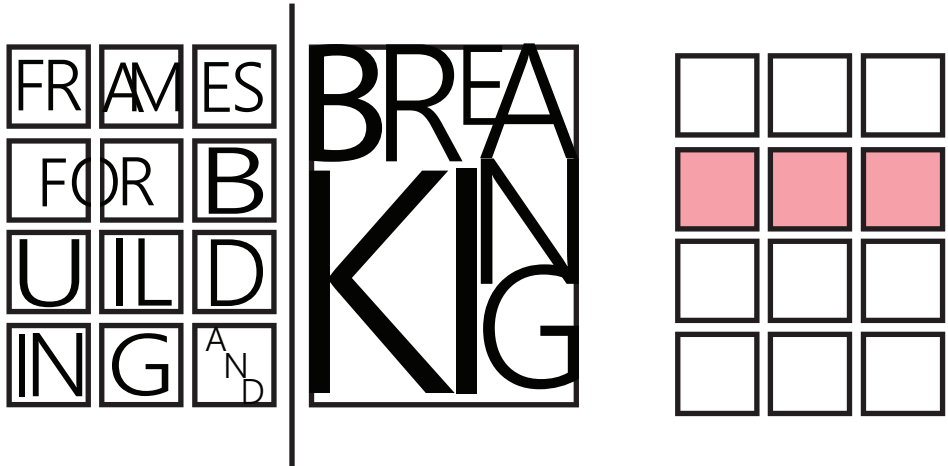
Figure 1.1: Building and Breaking

Figure 1.2: Strip
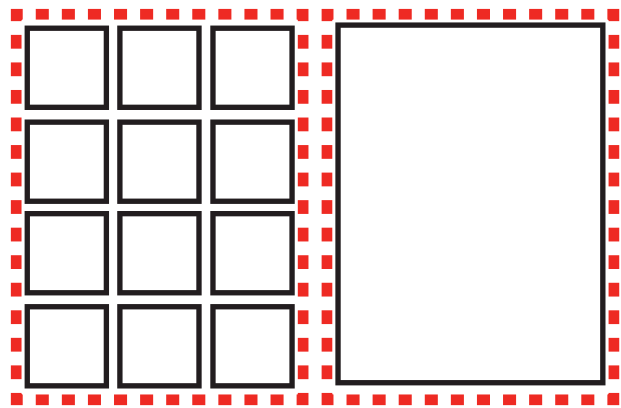
Figure 1.3: The Metaframe
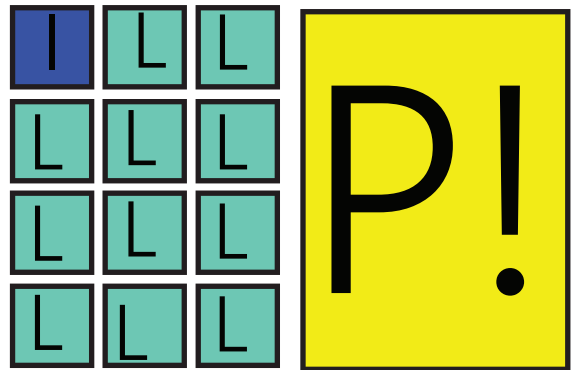
Figure 1.4: Initiator, Prolonger, and Peak panels

Figure 2.1: Moore and Gibbons, Watchmen, issue 11, 27-28.
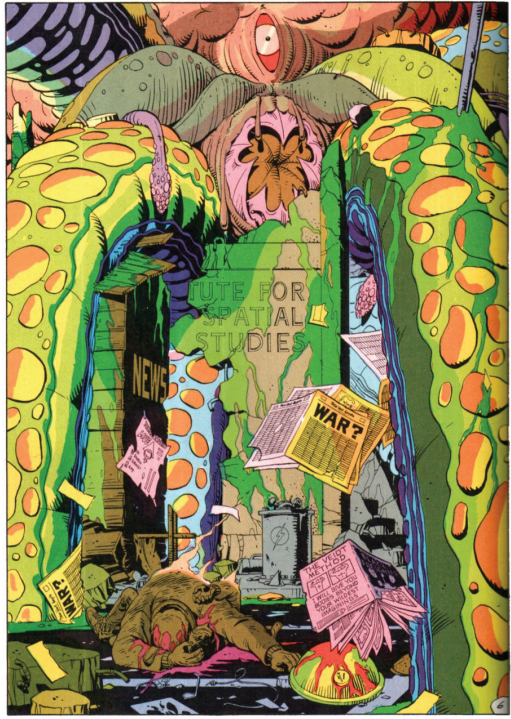
Figure 2.2 Moore and Gibbons, Watchmen, issue 12, 6

A STRONGER LOVING WORLD
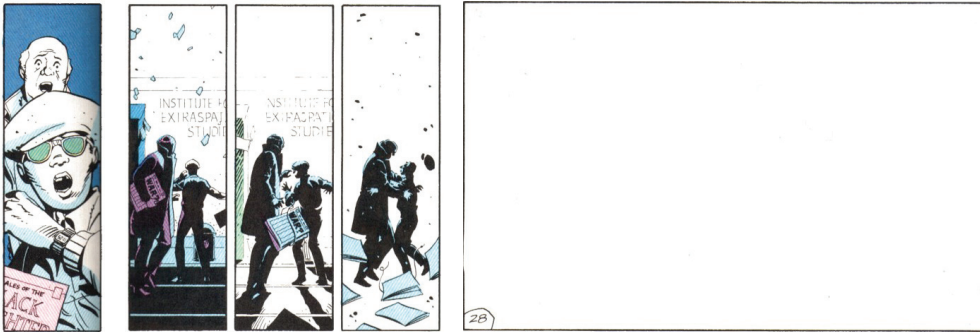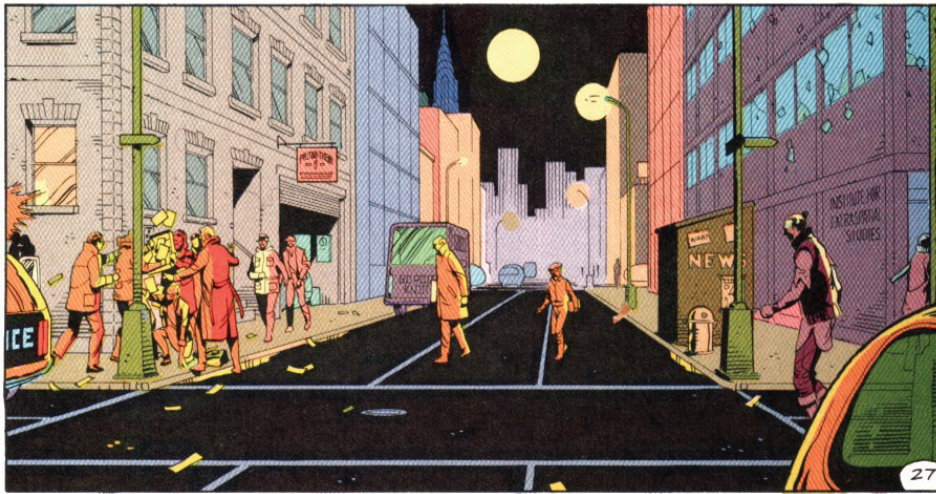
Figure 2.3 Moore and Gibbons, Watchmen, issue 11, 27-28, Elements

Figure 3.1 Harvey Kurtzman, "Henry and His...
Goon Child," in Weird Fantasy 3, 1950

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Fig. 3,2: Bernard Krigstein, "More Blessed to Give," in Best of EC, Artist's Edition, (San Diego: IDW Publishing, 2013), 39-40

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MOLLY UNWRAPPED THE CAKE GINGERLY...

IT'S *VERY NICE!* THANKS!

YOU'RE WELCOME!

STANLEY UNWRAPPED THE WHISKEY...

JUST WHAT I *WANTED!* THANKS!

YOU'RE WELCOME!

MOLL EXCUSED HERSELF AND CARRIED THE CAKE INTO THE BEDROOM. CAREFULLY... OH, SO CAREFULLY... SHE CUT AWAY THE CAKE...REMOVED ITS LETHAL CONTENTS... AND DROPPED IT INTO THE PAIL OF WAITING WATER,...

HEH, HEH! *THERE! THAT TAKES CARE OF THAT!*

STANLEY HURRIED INTO THE KITCHEN...STRODE TO THE SINK. THERE WAS NO USE LEAVING THE POISONED CONTENTS OF THE BOTTLE AROUND ANY LONGER THAN NECESSARY...

I'LL JUST *SPILL IT OUT*...LIKE THIS...

THE EXPLOSION ROCKED THE HOUSE...

IN THE BEDROOM, MOLLY SMILED. SHE ABSENTLY BEGAN TO BREAK OFF PIECES OF HER ANNIVERSARY CAKE GIFT AND POP THEM INTO HER MOUTH...

MMMM... *VERY GOOD!*

MOLLY'D BEEN *CLEVER.* SHE *KNEW* STANLEY'D *SEEN* HER *POISON* THE WHISKEY...SO THAT MORNING, SHE'D *WIRED* A *BOMB* INTO THE BOTTLE...

BUT *STANLEY'D* BEEN *CLEVER, TOO.* HE *KNEW* MOLLY'D *SEEN* HIM PLACE THE *BOMB* IN THE CAKE... SO THAT MORNING HE'D *POISONED* IT...BUT GOOD!

—THE END—

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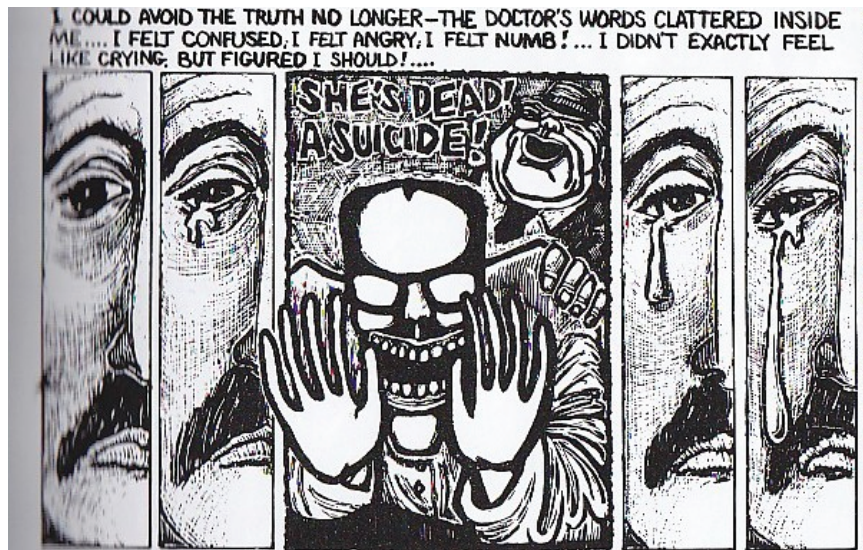
Figure 4.1. Art Spiegelman. "Prisoner on the Hell Planet. Reprinted in *Breakdowns: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young #&$* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2008)*
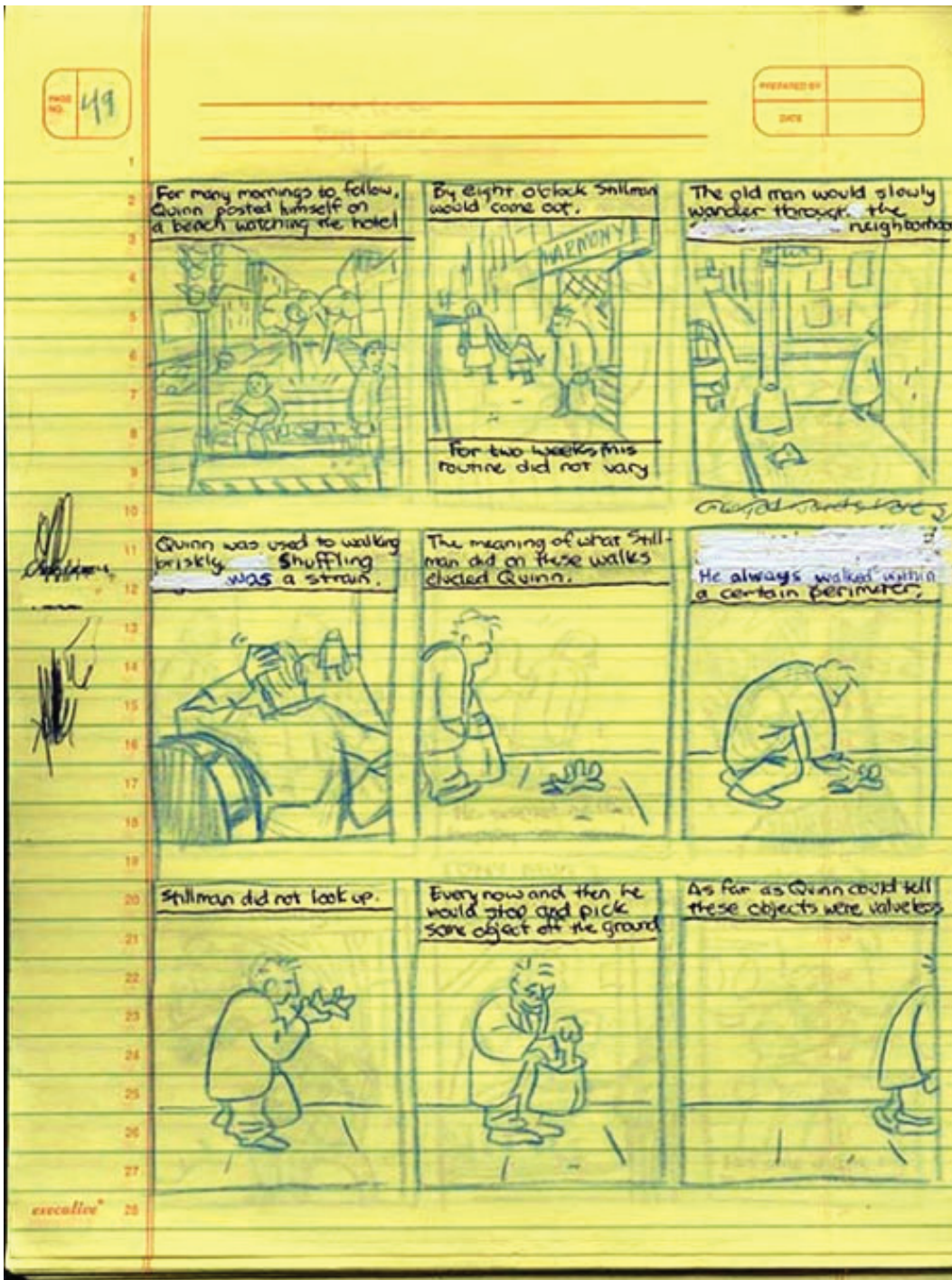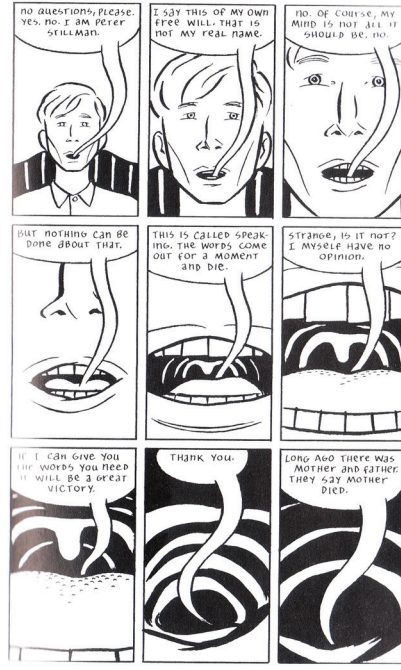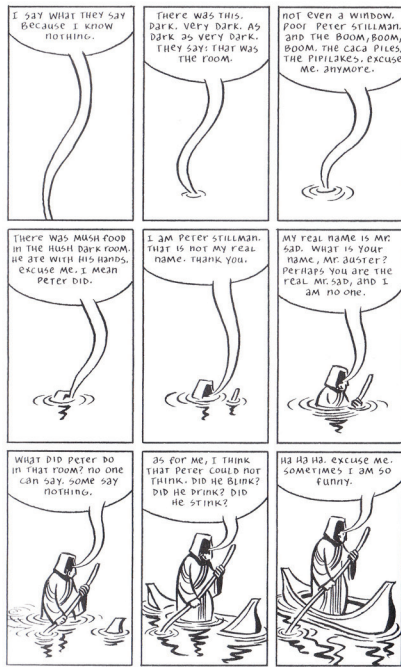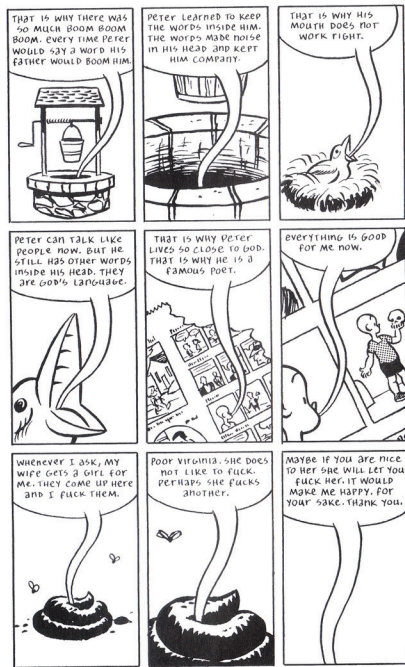
Figure 5.1. Paul Karasik. "Sketches for City of Glass"

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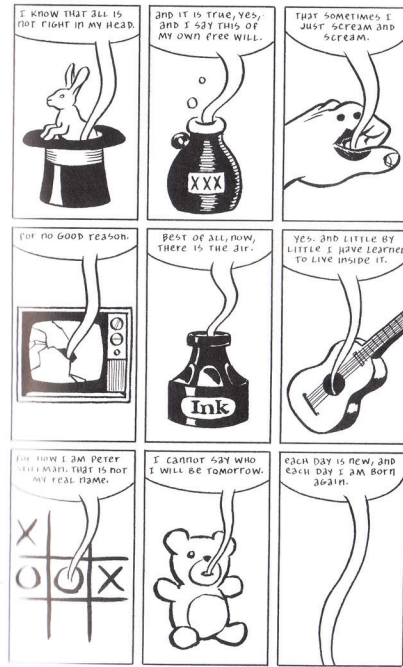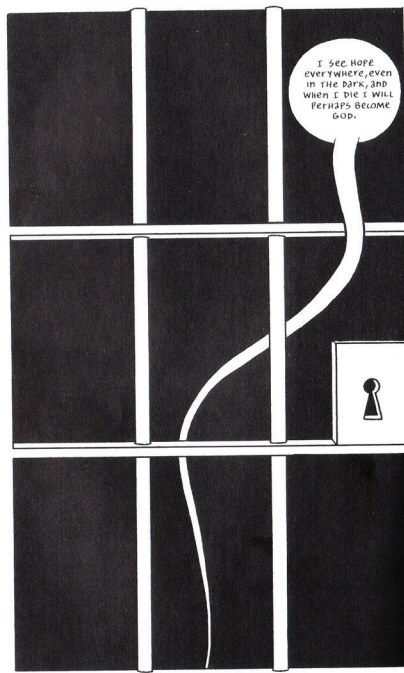
Figure 5.2. Paul Karasik and David Mazzucchelli, City of Glass

Figure 5.3. Paul Karasik and David Mazzucchelli, City of Glass

Figure 6.1. Joshua Cotter, Driven by Lemons