ILLUSTRATIVE TEXT:

TRANSFORMED WORDS AND THE LANGUAGE OF COMICS

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INTRODUCTION

The art of story-telling is as old as mankind. Our cultures are defined by the stories we are told by our elders and the stories we pass on to our children. These stories serve as indoctrination into the system of our culture, allowing us from an early age to understand morality: right and wrong, virtue and vice, good and evil, from the perspective of our respective culture.¹

In the era of human history predating literacy, oral traditions took on the task of engendering these concepts within a given populace. Writing, which originates in pictography², allowed a further scope of indoctrination. With the evolution of writing from pictograph, which is essentially an image of a word, to abstract symbols meant to represent sounds, the speed of writing and thus distribution was increased. The creation of the alphabet allowed for a myriad of cultural advances including the ability to document history and record previously oral-only traditions.³

The idea of story-telling is not restricted to literature alone, but runs the gamut of the arts. Even the vernacular remains the same; it is asked of a painting, “What is the artist trying to say?”, “what is the narrative in this painting?”, and “what does it mean?” Both writing and imagery function under the umbrella of language, employing a variety of signs and symbols to express the narrative that they wish to relay.

¹ Marcel Danesi. *Understanding Media Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2002), 55-57. Danesi cites the concepts of both Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung that examined this phenomenon of cultural teaching through story-telling. The latter of which is credited for the idea of ‘archetypes’, figures which appear again and again throughout the evolving stories of a culture.

² Ibid. 57.

³ Ibid. 58-59.
However, regardless of their similar forms of communication and the fact that both rely upon a framework of language, both writing and imagery utilize completely different and seemingly opposed methods of conveyance. Simon Morely describes the differences between the two⁴: writing tells, imagery shows; writing presents, imagery represents; writing creates time, imagery creates space. Even our perceptions of the two widely differ. Reading is a left-brain specific action, employing our use of logic and analysis. Seeing is a right-brain specific action, utilizing our imaginations and our ability to free-associate. Although the use of sign is constant, the sign that is a letter, which makes up a word such as ‘mountain’ is read, where as the sign that is an image of a mountain is perceived.

In the modern era, many attempts at combining these two methods of delivery have been made. From the Symbolist poets, such as Malarme (Fig. 1), who manipulated the layout of his words to create a more perceived sense of poetry, to Cubist painters, such as Picasso (Fig. 2), who interjected words into his paintings to endow them with a sense of time. However, the one and only medium where this synergy is complete and most fully serves the art of story-telling, is the modern comic book.

In this paper I will be discussing the structure and Language of comics as well as the way in which comic artists and letterers use fonts to manipulate a variety of narrative factors including: mood, character, and sound effects. In scrutinizing these uses of fonts, in conjunction with current comic theory and linguistic theory, I hope to assert that

comics are a medium unto themselves with a single, unified language, rather than, as
Scott McCloud once said, “the ‘bastard child’ of words and pictures.”

The field of comics ranges from the strip cartoons found in the daily newspaper to
on-line web comics and has a place in both Western and Eastern cultures. The aesthetic,

and therefore narrative, structures of both daily strip cartoons and on-line web comics are
unique unto themselves and barely resemble those of the comic book, trade paperback
(which collect a series of comic books) and graphic novel. Eastern, specifically Japanese
comics called manga, differ not only in their reading direction (top to bottom, right to
left) but in their iconic systems and expansive variety of written languages employed. I

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1994), 47. “A single unified language deserves a single, unified vocabulary. Without it, comics will
continue to limp along as the “bastard child” of words and pictures”. While McCloud goes on to analyze
the vocabulary of the images of comics and the structure of comics, he does not specifically address the
function of word forms and how they merge into the system of comics language.
will be looking specifically at Western comics in the form of comic books, trade paperbacks and graphic novels.

THE STRUCTURE OF COMICS

First, it is important to understand the semiotic structure of comics. Anne Magnussen uses the concept of the Peircean sign to explain the act of communication in comics. She states that the signs within, for example, a panel, are not considered autonomously, but in context of each other. This interaction creates the over-all sign that is the panel. The continued interactions of ever-increasing signs within the comics medium creates a hierarchy, culminating in the the largest sign: the comic book itself (Fig. 3).

![Fig. 3. Comic Hierarchy Pyramid](image)

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Beneath the comic as a whole there is the two page spread and the autonomous single page. Beneath that level there is the single page. The page consists of panels, which in their varying size and location dictate the reader’s progress. These panels behave as picture planes through which the reader views the action of the story and must serve not only themselves as the vehicles of narration, but must create a gestalt for the entire page. The panels, with their varying shapes and sizes convey space and time. Scott McCloud argues that a longer panel insinuates a longer amount of time than a short one (Fig. 4) and that a bleed expresses a sense of timelessness (Fig. 5). 

On this topic Will Eisner writes:

The act of paneling or boxing the action not only defines its perimeters but establishes the position of the reader in relation to the scene and indicates the

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7 David Chelsea. *Perspective for Comic Book Artists* (New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 1997), 32. Chelsea defines the picture plane as an “imaginary window through which we view a scene”.

8 S. McCloud, 100-103.
duration of the event. Indeed, it “tells” time. The magnitude of time elapsed is not expressed by the panel per se, as an examination of blank boxes in a series quickly reveals. The imposition of the imagery within the frame of the panels acts as a catalyst. The fusing of symbols, images and balloons makes the statement. Indeed, in some applications of frame, the outline of the box is eliminated entirely with equal effect. The act of framing separates the scenes and acts as a punctuator. Once established and set in sequence the box or panel becomes the criterion by which to judge the illusion of time.⁹

The timelessness achieved by eradicating the structure of the panel altogether is due to the loss of the border and space between panels, which comic artists call the gutter (Fig. 6).¹⁰ The gutter seems simplistic at first glance, but it is, in fact, the most complex and elusive of all comic elements.

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¹⁰ Although I cannot clarify where this term originated, it is present in all critical research in this field.
This is where the reader must use his imagination to bind one panel to the next. Unlike cinema, which presents the complete progression of action, comics demand that the reader take part. This action of mentally filling the blank space is labeled by McCloud as closure.\textsuperscript{11} Closure is, in a way, the continuation of sign recognition. The signs perceived and understood within one panel are carried over by the reader to apply to the next set of signs, which are found in the next panel. Thus a sense of continuity is achieved.

However, the gutter is not merely an empty, dead space which must be bypassed in order to reach the next panel. This space is filled by the reader’s act of closure, not only applying the signs of one panel to the next, but applying them to the space of the gutter itself. Mila Bongco writes, “In sequential art, although nothing is provided either textually or graphically, experience tells us as readers that something must be there and so we make the leap ourselves from one panel to the other. We provide the intervening actions and do this no matter how long or large the interval is between one panel and the next.”\textsuperscript{12}

This interaction of panel and gutter is what makes the narrative and grammatical structure of comics so unique. In traditional literature, such as a novel, the story is told to the viewer word by word. Comics, on the other hand, allow the reader to participate in the creation of the story. Structurally, the smaller the gutter, the less the reader contributes; the larger the gutter the further the reader’s mind is allowed to wander and imagine, resulting in a much larger contribution on the reader’s part to the story itself.

\textsuperscript{11} S. McCloud, 63.

The transitions from panel to panel and through the gutter fall into six categories and require differing amounts of closure, regardless of the size of the gutter. These categories are organized by McCloud as: moment-to-moment, action-to-action, subject-to-subject, scene-to-scene, aspect-to-aspect, and non-sequitur (Fig. 7, 8, and 9).\footnote{13} Moment-to-moment requires very little closure, illustrating the span of only a few seconds of one subject. Action-to-action, the most used transition type in Western comics,\footnote{14} features a single subject engaged in an action, such as swinging a bat. Subject-to-subject transitions require a high amount of closure and feature a transition from two separate subjects within a single scene or idea. Scene-to-scene transitions carry us across significant amounts of time and space and require some deductive reasoning as to the way in which the two images tie into one another. Aspect-to-aspect behaves like a wandering eye, moving the reader around a scene but not through time. Non-sequitur is a transition which seemingly makes no sense, such as an image of a fish underwater and then an image of a parade.

\footnote{13} S. McCloud, 70-74.  
\footnote{14} Ibid., 75.
The next level down in the hierarchy, from the panels and the gutters, is the images within the panels. There are numerous sign systems within the majority of comic panels. These are: figurative, iconic, and textual. The figurative is comprised of the characters themselves and expresses in their actions, facial expressions, and gestures what they are doing and what they are feeling. In his exploration of the work of Philippe Marion, Jan Baetens discusses the way in which the drawing style of the characters, or what Marion termed the ‘trace’ affects the viewer. The ‘graphiation’, or lingering trace of the creator, in the lines that make up the characters is interpreted by the viewer. This
interpretation renders the viewer as “virtual graphiateur’, a participant in the in the actions and feelings of the character.\textsuperscript{15}

The iconic includes word bubbles, thought bubbles, and narration boxes. These icons inform the reader which words are being thought, said, or narrated. In addition, the shapes of these icons can be altered to infer nuance to the words found within. For example, a word bubble with icicles implies a harsh, or cold, tone of voice; a spiky word bubble implies desperation or near hysteria. (Figs. 10 and 11)

Finally, we come to the textual: the text found within the word bubbles, thought bubbles and narration boxes, as well as the representation of sound which is usually unbounded. Text itself is a sign system, made up of syntactic signs (letters) which form words. Words become pieces of sentences, and sentences form paragraphs, and paragraphs constitute the body of a text.

The words found in comics appear to be a language within a language, as the structure of comics displays the necessary characteristics to be considered a language itself. Comics are built on a generative grammar, which is the organization of syntactic, interpretive, phonological, and semantic components that allow a natural reading of the medium.16 These grammatical elements are made up of the written words, the figural imagery, the in-panel icons, the panels themselves, and even the page design. Although the terms regarding grammar are associated with the study of linguistics, Noam Chomsky argues that they may be used to describe the Language of any system.17

Gene Kannenberg Jr. notes that the Symbolist “visual diagram”, such as is found in the work of Malarme, has a not-so-distant cousin in the comics page (Figs. 12 and 13) and asserts that understanding the structure of comics as an arrangement of signifiers, both textual and figural, is the best way to comprehend comics as a medium.18 In addition to Kannenberg Jr.’s assertions, I believe it is important to go even further and attempt to understand the structure of the Language of comics, not only as an arrangement of signifiers, but as a system built on a legitimate grammar.

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The study of linguistics can give some insight into the structure of the Language of comics. Linguistics analyzes grammar in levels. These levels create a hierarchy that in structure resembles that of the hierarchy of comics, which I have described. The lowest levels of the linguist hierarchy are comprised of syntactics. Syntactic structures are those smallest parts of the Language which generate strings of syntactically functioning elements19, which within the English language join together to create words. A step up the hierarchy, there are phonemes20 and morphemes21. These are the parts of words and words created by the underlying syntactic structures. Semantic meaning is interpreted through relation to these abstract structures. There are two types of interpretation, one

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20 The definition of a phoneme is: The smallest phonetic unit in a language that is capable of conveying a distinction in meaning, as the m of *mat* and the b of *bat* in English.

21 The definition of a morpheme is: A meaningful linguistic unit consisting of a word, such as *man*, or a word element, such as *-ed* in *walked*, that cannot be divided into smaller meaningful parts.
that applies understanding to the phonetic structure of the underlying syntactics (which is
to say: recognition of the structure is understood, i.e. the letters h, a, and t in linear
progression create the word ‘hat’) and another that applies meaning to them (which is
more abstract: recognizing what the words signify, i.e. the letters h, a, and t bring to mind
the image of a hat).²²

Unlike the English language however, the lowest level of Language in comics is
not linear, it is spatial. The figures, icons, and texts are arranged in a representation of
three dimensional space and are both immediately perceived by the reader and eventually
‘read’. Both concrete and abstract interpretations of these structures must be made by the
reader in order to understand the phonemic and morphemic groups created. The panel
frame itself is included in this process of interpretation, as the frame alters the meaning of
the images within it. Both space and time are taken into account in applying meaning to
this set. The phonemic and morphemic groupings of a panel system are added together to
create a phrase, or general statement about what is happening within that panel system.

For example, let’s look at panel from Jeff Smith’s trade paperback, Out From
Boneville (Fig. 14.):

Not only do we read the words, “Just locusts. Pretty neat, huh?” we also ‘read’ that there are three characters, standing on what appears to be a cliff. We ‘read’ that the speaker seems pleased with the discovery of a hoard of locusts, which we see and ‘hear’ (due to the sound effect ‘z’’s) approaching. We also ‘read’ that the other two characters are surprised and ill-at-ease with this on-coming hoard. The panel structure’s length gives us a sense of the timing: the hoard of locusts is rushing towards the characters but there is a suspension, a sense that it will take at least a few more seconds before they are reached.

The phrase created here will differ from reader to reader, but it will follow the same general idea: three characters alone on a cliff are about to assaulted by a hoard of locusts. More perceptive readers will note the characters’ dress, the color of the sky and cliff, and will hear the noise of the locusts. This general phrase will then be carried over to the next panel, through the gutter. Through the act of closure, another phrase is created in the space of the gutter, though it will be less specific and will be entirely unique to
each specific reader. The phrase of the gutter is dependent upon which type of transition is occurring and the size of the gutter.

These two types of phrases, engendered by the panel systems and the gutters create a linear series, read in the same fashion as we read ordinary words on paper. That is, left to right and top to bottom (in the case of Western comics). These phrases must create a distinct statement within a two-page spread or within a single, autonomous page. Thus, a paragraph of sorts is created. These paragraphs constitute the structure of the comic as a whole. Although it stands to reason that not all comic creators are capable of creating a distinct paragraph within these spatial limitations, I believe that all successful ventures in this medium are a result of accomplishing just that.

In addition to the linguistic structure expressed by the organization of the syntactic structures of the panels and the gutters, this organization results in a means for understanding the narrative style of a given comic. The variations of panel size and quantity, in relation to the size and quantity of the gutters creates a cadence (Fig.15.) This cadence, or rhythm, therefore defines the entirety of the narration, culminating in the completed comic book itself. Will Eisner’s writing on the ‘framing of time’ supports my theory of linguistic structure and cadence. He writes:

The number and size of the panels also contribute to the story rhythm and passage of time. For example, when there is a need to compress time, a greater number of panels are used. The action then becomes more segmented, unlike the action that occurs in the larger, more conventional panels. By placing the panels closer together, we deal with the ‘rate’ of elapsed time in the narrowest sense.

The shapes of the panels are also a factor. On a page where the need is to display a ‘deliberate’ meter of action, the boxes are shaped as perfect squares. Where the ringing of the telephone needs time (as well as space) to evoke a sense of suspense and threat, the entire tier is given over to the action of the ringing preceded by a compression of smaller (narrower) panels.23

23 W. Eisner, 30.
Regardless of our ‘reading’ the variety of signifiers within the panel and in the context of the panel design, and regardless of the creation of phrases due to this reading of both the panel systems and the act of closure within the gutters, it is impossible to ignore what is most naturally read: the words. How do we reconcile the micro-system of written words into the macro-system of the comic itself? The large majority of comic analysis declares that there can be no reconciliation and proceeds to analyze the two systems of writing and imagery within the comics structure as separate. Only Philippe Marion’s theory of ‘graphiation’, which Jan Baetens describes as applying to both text...
and image\textsuperscript{24}, attempts to merge the two. However, I believe the unification of text and image lies within Joanna Drucker’s concepts of materiality and markedness, as well as the manipulation of the text.\textsuperscript{25} In a novel, for example, the text is unmarked. That is to say, it is invisible. We see through the text and see only the story that it tells. In a comic, these same words are transformed into marked text; it is rendered highly visible. Not only do we see the story, but the text takes on a graphic element… merging into the graphic language of the comic.

Text usage falls under one of three typical categories in comics: narration and mood creation, words and thoughts of the characters themselves, and sound. To better illustrate the way in which the text found in comics is capable of transforming itself into image and therefore merging into the Language of comics, I will examine three artists’ manipulations of text in these three categories.

**TEXTUAL ATMOSPHERE: Narration and Mood Creation**

The mood, or metanarrative aspect, of text in comics was pioneered and mastered by Will Eisner, who is not only one of the fathers of the serial newspaper comic, but also the originator of both the fictive and autobiographical graphic novel. Eisner’s manipulation of text in titles and story elements, such as newspapers and billboards, serves to encompass the story within a specific mood.

\textsuperscript{24} J. Baetens, 147.

The title page of *A Contract With God* immediately sets the mood for what we are about to read. Even without the figure at the bottom of the page, and even without the imagery of the stone, with text alone we are able to deduce the timbre of the story (Figs. 16, 17, and 18).

![Fig. 16. Will Eisner](A Contract With God 1996)

![Fig. 17. Will Eisner](A Contract With God 1996)

![Fig. 18. Will Eisner](A Contract With God 1996)
The text itself is designed to look like stone, with the words “A contract with” appearing to protrude and the word “God” to appear as though it were carved into stone. The severity of the meaning of a contract with god is evident as well as a somber tone. The word “God” is rendered in a quasi-Hebrew script which denotes both the sacred nature of such a contract and the fact that this is a Jewish perspective on God.

The following page (Fig. 19) begins the narration of the story. Unlike the severity of the previous lettering, these letters are soft and dripping, visually describing what they literally spell out. The lower font shifts to a more regular comic font, escaping from the visual description of the rain to describe the rising and overflowing waters on the street. The upper font falls down onto the lower, just as the rain falls onto the standing water.

Fig. 19. Will Eisner from *A Contract With God* 1996
Similarly, the text of a following page uses two distinct fonts (Fig. 20). The upper font resembles the font used to describe the falling rain… however this time it is darkened. Its severity is increased in accordance with the message held within the words. The darkness of the letters, intermingled with their message, also brings to mind the color of blood. The second, lower font behaves almost as an aside, a separate voice reminding the reader that although this is indeed a very dramatic story, it is not a unique one.

Not so unusual, a father brings up a child with care and love only to lose her... plucked, as it were, from his arms by an unseen hand - the hand of God. It happens to lots of people every day.
On the final page of *A Contract With God* (Fig. 21), there is an example of Eisner’s use of newspapers as a tool for expression and mood. The fact of the character’s death is not written by narration, but rather by the image of a newspaper blown by the wind of a storm. We read the text of the newspaper both in relation to the story and to the narrative aspect of the newspaper itself.

On Dropsie avenue the old tenements seemed to tremble in the storm. It reminded the tenants of that day years ago when Primme Hersh argued with God and terminated their contract.

Fig. 21. Will Eisner from *A Contract With God* 1996
CHARACTERIZATION THROUGH THE TEXT OF WORD BUBBLES

To examine the use of fonts to define character, we will look at Gaspar Saladino’s work in *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*, written by Grant Morrison and illustrated by Dave McKean. The most psychological of all the many Batman books, *Arkham Asylum* abandons the typical Batman narrative about fighting crime in Gotham City to explore the passions and horrors that reside within the character of the Batman as echoed by those that live within the walls of Arkham Asylum, the holding pen for Gotham’s criminally insane. Nearly every character of the bat-universe is present in the book, and Saladino’s technique of endowing each with his own unique font for speech allows the reader, at a glance, to recognize who is represented.

It is important to note that unlike Eisner and Dave Sim (whom I will be discussing next) Saladino is part of a team. Both Eisner and Sim\(^{26}\) write, illustrate, and letter their comics, allowing for a much easier accomplishment of gestalt. Kannnenberg Jr. writes, “It takes a rare combination of hand-letterer and cartoonist to create a page as well integrated and harmonious as a single cartoonist can create. When artists hire others to do their lettering, either by hand or by computer, they delegate part of their storytelling duty.”\(^{27}\) However, Saladino’s lettering manages to accurately represent Morrison’s script while working in harmony with McKean’s incredibly unique illustrative style. His positive contribution to the storytelling is undeniable.

\(^{26}\) Dave Sim does not work completely alone, but has a background artist: Gerhard. However, Gerhard’s work is limited to the background and he takes no part in the design or layout of the comics. All aspects of design are controlled by Sim.

\(^{27}\) G. Kannenberg Jr., 190.
The two most notable fonts are those used for Batman and the Joker (Fig. 22), the two key players of the story. Arch-enemies, Batman and the Joker are carefully constructed, diametrically opposed opposites with defined characteristics that consistently conform to their original canon. Batman is dark, powerful, and morally just. His uniform has remained basically unchanged since his creation in 1939\textsuperscript{28}: a dark cape and cowl, dark clothing, and the bat logo. The Joker is vibrant, playful, and psychotic. He is defined, visually, by green hair, a whitened face, and bright red lips permanently frozen into a smile.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Fig.\,22.\,Gaspar\,Saladino\,(lettering)\,from\,\textit{Arkham\,Asylum}\,2004}
\caption{Gaspar Saladino (lettering) from \textit{Arkham Asylum} 2004}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{28} Bill Boichel. “Batman: Commodity as Myth.” In \textit{The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and his Media}. Ed. Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio, 4-17 (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1991), 4. Batman was created by Bob Kane and introduced in \textit{Detective Comics} #27, a year after the enormous success of Superman in the comic \textit{Action Comics}. Incidentally, the initials DC, the publisher of both Batman and Superman comics, stands for Detective Comics.
Regardless of Morrison’s unique psychological take on the Batman mythos, he and McKean maintain these characteristics. Saladino’s lettering takes them one step further by applying them to his fonts for each character.

Batman’s word bubbles are round and stable. His actual words are written in a clear, standard uppercase comic font, colored white on a black background (Fig. 23). This is not only a reference to Batman’s demeanor, but also to his common alias: The Dark Knight.

The Joker, on the other hand, has no word bubbles at all, as to imply that there is no containment for his outbursts. His words are written in a red, abrasive uppercase that
changes size and proportion constantly. Occasionally the letters burst at their ends. His speech is represented as uncontrollable, explosive, and painful to listen to (Fig. 24).

Not only does the appearance of these letters reflect the personalities of the characters: Batman is dark, serious, and relatively stable; the Joker is uncontrollable, hysterical, and demented; they also reflect the physical appearance of the characters: Batman dresses in all black, the Joker wears scarlet lipstick.

It is also interesting to note the common color associations in Western culture. Black is seen as representing evil, impurity, vice, and immorality. Red represents blood, passion, sexuality, and anger. While at first it would seem contradictory to assign such color meaning to the character of Batman, Marcel Danesi notes in his book,

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29 M. Danesi, 41.
Understanding Media Semiotics, that linking connotations of darkness to heroes implies that they fight Evil on its own terms.\textsuperscript{30} Nothing could be more true of Batman. More than any other superhero, in the DC or Marvel universe, Batman is denoted as the most similar to what he seeks to destroy. And that idea, that Batman at his core is the same as the villains he seeks to punish, is at the heart of *Arkham Asylum*.

Likewise, the associations linked to the color red, and thus to the Joker’s speech, may appear to be hit or miss. The connotations of blood and anger are obvious, but what of the passion and sexuality? There are many theories, examining the earliest Batman comics, on the sexual relationship between the Joker and Batman.\textsuperscript{31} Scenes of sexual tension are common in the Batman mythos (Fig. 25).

Fig. 25. Gaspar Saladino (lettering) from *Arkham Asylum* 2004

\textsuperscript{30} M. Danesi, 39. It is interesting to note that Danesi specifically cites Zorro in his examination of linking connotations of darkness to heroes and the character of Zorro was a strong influence in Bob Kane’s construction of Batman.

The Joker routinely calls Batman pet names such as ‘honey pie’ and ‘darling’. Morrison has blatantly highlighted this sexual relationship and made it a key factor in the narrative of *Arkham Asylum* and Saladino’s lettering follows suit.

**THE DYNAMICS OF SOUND IN TEXT**

More than any other type of text in comics, sound effects merge readable text with perceivable imagery. The inherent silence of the medium is tackled by using onomomatopoeic spelling to represent sounds, while the design of the lettering attempts to mimic volume and tonality. In addition, sound effects must remain separate from other textual representations within the medium, never appearing to stand in as speech or narration. To meet all of these requirements, the lettering of sound effects must be the most highly designed text in the medium.

An excellent example of dynamic sound effects is the work of Dave Sim, the creator of the series Cerebus. We will be examining his approach to sound effects in a scene from *Cerebus Vol. 9: Reads*, in which the destruction of a throne-room is narrated entirely by sound effects and the silent actions of the two characters, Cerebus and Cirin.

The first scene is a two-page spread of the word “BANG” (Fig. 26). Within the word we can see Cerebus and Cirin on the right-hand side, poised in mid-action before the throne. The throne itself is cracking and breaking at its edges.
The word serves a double purpose. Not only does it denote sound, it also acts as a panel. Sim has accomplished three things in one action: the text obviously represents an onomnipoeic sound, the size of the text signifies the overwhelming volume of the sound, and taking the textual representation of sound out of the background of the image and transforming it into the literal panel we understand the location of the sound: it is everywhere. Also, the standard hierarchy of characters over sound is inverted. Whereas sound and its textual representation are usually subordinate to characters and merged into the design of the background, here the characters are subordinate, being held within the frame of the sound’s text. The meaning is obvious: the characters are at the mercy of the cause of the sound and the sound itself.

On the following page Sim uses the lettering of the sound effect as a panel once again. Only this time, there are four panels encompassed within the falling word ROARR (Fig. 27).
The signification of the text is three-fold. First, it represents a singular roaring sound. Second, it differentiates between which action causes which portion of the noise: the R, with its vibrating lines represents a deep shuddering noise, the O, with its explosive edges imitates the breaking away of stones, and the subsequent A and final two R’s the sound of the stones plummeting into a deep pit. Third, the letters behave as
panels, which are to be read in a descending fashion. The stones pictured in the lower panels are not the same stones, but a whole series of stones, falling at different rates and represented at different levels of the pit. In this way Sim has accomplished the implication of time. The roar is not singular like the previous bang, it is an evolving sound which explodes at the top of the page and then descends, both visually and aurally.

In addition to the enhancement of narrative, Sim’s sound-effect-panels alter the way in which the reader participates in the reading. The conventional frame of the picture plane is non-obtrusive, usually going completely unnoticed. It merely acts as a window through which the reader observes the action as an outsider. The altered frame, rather than keeping the reader at bay, invites the reader into the action.32

CONCLUSION

The manipulation of the text, transforming it from the unmarked text typically found in common literature to a highly marked text ensures that written language does not compete with the imagery of comics, but becomes a part of that imagery. These transformed words are forms which have returned to their origins: the pictograph, and are as much a part of the imagery of comics as the drawings. They complete the compositions, contribute to narrative, and aid in the construction of characters; they do these things not only by telling, but by showing. In becoming a visual part of a visual narrative structure, these transfigured words ensure that comics are not a “‘bastard child’ of words and pictures”, but rather a unified medium with a single, unified Language.

32 W. Eisner, 46.
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