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FACULTY of DESIGN
DEPARTMENT of VISUAL COMMUNICATIONS

DESIGNING THE COMIC-BOOK
FROM STRIP TO NOVEL

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A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

The Forbidden Planet, Dublin, for their patience and generosity.

The Forbidden Planet, Manchester, for continued help in my research.

Nick Purser, Comic Collector, for giving me the chance to see otherwise unobtainable material.

C O N T E N T S

L I S T O F P L A T E S

18. "*Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*", Frank Miller, 1986.

19. "*Watchmen*", Alan Moore/Dave Gibbons, 1986-87.

20. "*Watchmen*", Alan Moore/Dave Gibbons, 1986-87.

I N T R O D U C T I O N

The stereotypical image that many of us have been brought up on is that comic books are disposable and somewhat lowbrow. They have long been regarded as insignificant, suitable only for pre-adolescent children and their immature fantasies. They are certainly not to be taken seriously by those of us equipped with refined sensibilities who read books, go to museums and study art or Graphic Design, in other words, people like you or me. I am one of those pre-adolescent children who have grown up to discover the comic book as a medium once again. And in case it hasn't been noticed, some comics are Art and they are Books and they are Graphic Design. In converting an already unique form of verbal and visual communication, the comic strip, into book form, comics created their own graphic design vocabulary with symbols, styles and structures born of that form: page turning, sequential graphic storytelling. Although it is true to say that much of what has been produced in the name of comics can be dismissed as sleazy news print thrillers it is because of these that many good old comics have been ignored or overlooked. And unfortunately much of what is good in today's comic books haven't received the attention they rightly deserve. In mainland Europe people who read books often read comics too and they are

reviewed seriously in newspapers; even as far as Japan, comic books account for at least a third of all publishing.

Unfortunately here in Ireland we are too dismissive of the comic-book as a serious medium, probably as a result of our distinguished literary history. This combined with our geographical position on the edge of Europe has denied us access to the comic-books of France, Spain and Italy. As a result we have been influenced by whatever America, by virtue of its language, has had to offer us. The comic-book has lain beneath our noses for too long, so that it has almost become too familiar, too dismissable. Designers in particular ought to take a fresh look at an art form that has so much to offer, In particular, to different artists innovations in subject matter and graphic technique, or to interesting concepts in lay-out, typography, colour and pacing. It is my intention to do this. I have split my chronology into three distinct classes of comic and era's of time. During the course of my discussion, I will be referring to the comic in three ways; the first is the "comic-strip" which dates from the mid-nineteenth century to the early nineteen thirties. Next came the "comic-book" dating from nineteen-thirty-three and surviving almost to the present day. And finally in an attempt to lend the comic respect, came the "Graphic-novel", the birth of this renaissance would appear to be as recent as the

early eighties. Unfortunately, the word "comic" itself brings to mind the notion that this medium should be funny, it should be noted, however, that humour is not an intrinsic component in any comic.

And so the next three chapters will hopefully re-define any pre-conceived ideas of how a comic should look. Each chapter will go hand in hand with a chronology, description of work and my commentary on them. I then intend to take several artists whom I think are of particular importance in the comics world, namely; Will Eisner, Frank Miller and the team of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, and study their primary works in detail.

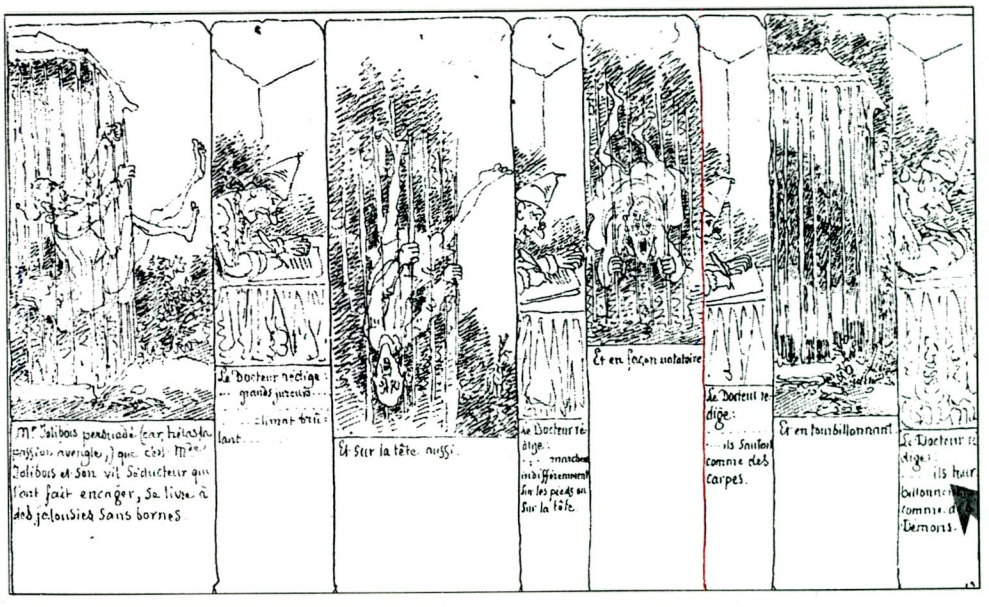
C H A P T E R 1

Rodolphe Topffer is considered by many to be the patron saint of comics and is credited with inventing the first true comic-strips. And this is how he describes his new invention:

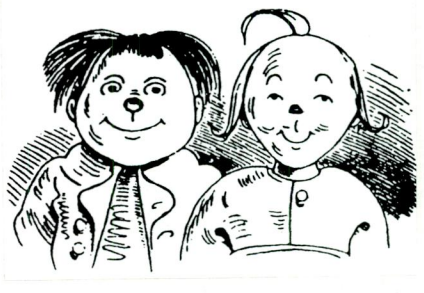
> The drawings without their text would have only a vague meaning; the text without the drawings would have no meaning at all. This combination makes up a kind of novel -- all the more unique in that it is no more like a novel than it is like anything else.
>
> (Print 1988 XLII;VI p 61)

Topffer was born in Switzerland in seventeen ninety-nine and in his forty-seven years of life he was to investigate many new ways of story-telling. He invented "cinematic" story-telling techniques a half century before there was such a thing as cinema. One fine example of this is in an eighteen forty strip called "*Monsieur Pencil*". In this comic-strip a scientist has trapped our hero, M. Jolibois, in a cage believing him to be an alien creature from another planet.
M. Jolibois is enraged thinking this is a plot by his wife's lover. The story is told by cross-cutting between the angry M. Jolibois and the scientist in his study busy writing down his observations about the supposed "alien".

Topffers books as well as being entertaining were extremely experimental in their format and went on to directly inspire another generation of picture-story



1. "*Monsieur Pencil*" Topffer invented 'cinematic' storytelling techniques a half century before there was such a thing as cinema.



2. "*Max and Moritz*" by Busch.

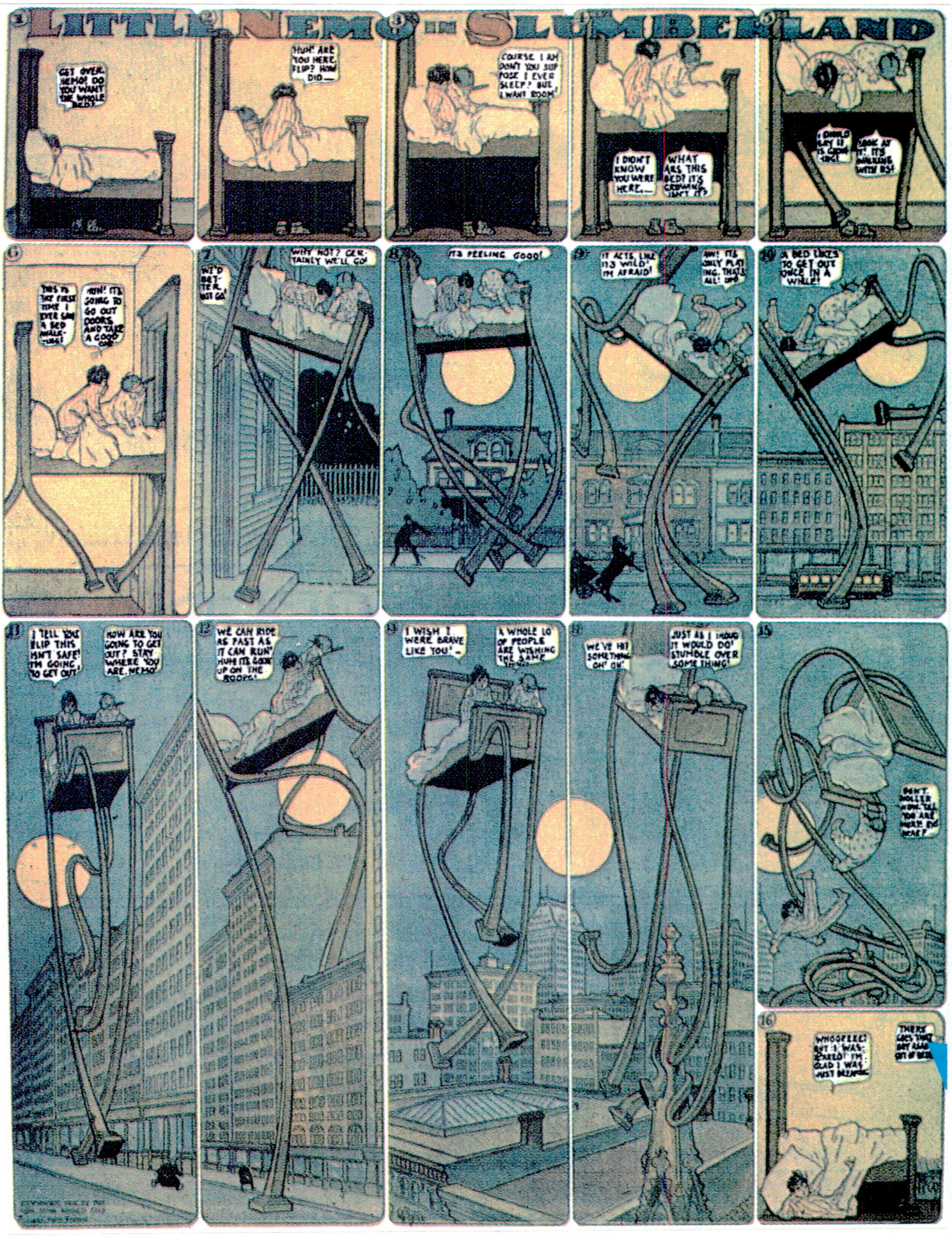
artists, including Gustave Dore, Caran D'Ache and Wilhelm Busch.

It is Busch who was to transform these experiments into true comic-strip art and to provide a generation of American cartoonists with a tangible medium to develop. At the turn of the century William Randolpe Hearst, who had as a child delighted in the story of "*Max and Moritz*" by Busch, commissioned an American artist to create a comic strip for his newspaper based on Busch's book; "*The Katzenjammer Kids*". And so the comic-strip was born in an attempt to boost the sales of newspapers and also led to the welcome development of colour lithography (the process used to print the Sunday strips). At about the same time as Hearst's experiments with comic features one artist took visual story-telling to new and truly dizzying heights. Windsor Mc Cay, a sideshow billboard painter, turned the comic-strip into a format which was to dictate the form of comics which is still adhered to today. For its time Mc Cay's "*Little Nemo in Slumberland*" was truly sophisticated. In my opinion his work has only seen its match in the graphic novels of the seventies and onwards. Mc Cay brought the circus artists flair for splendour and spectacle in colour to the full page format and "*Little Nemo in Slumberland*" was a show case for Mc Cay's outstanding ability as a draughtsman and an illustrator. Nemo was a remarkably convincing storytelling of a young boys journey through

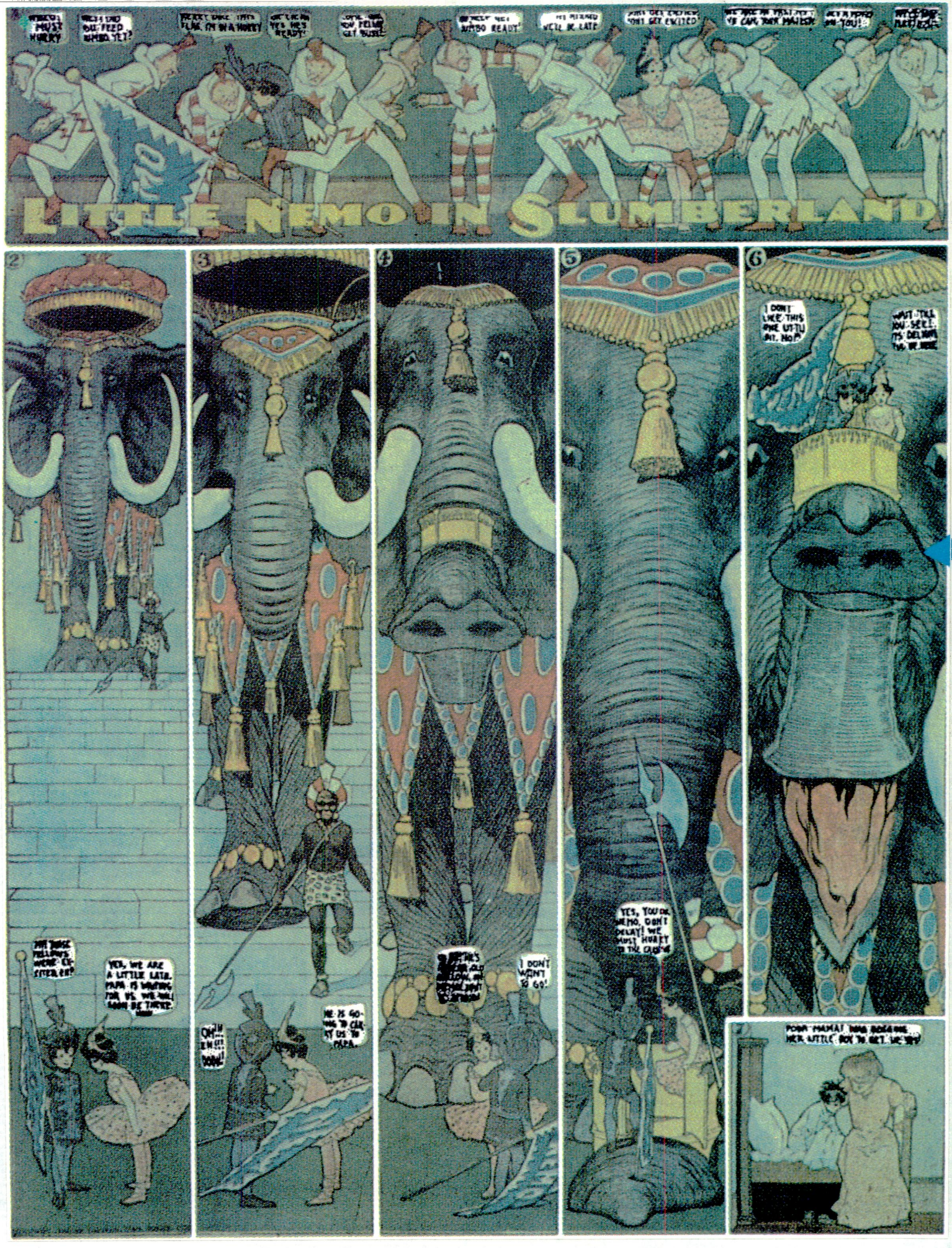
his own dreams. It portrayed the dreamscape with "majestic perspective drawings and a post-surrealistic sense of scale" (Spiegelman *Print* XLII:VI Pg 64).

His drawings hark back to Topffers use of, a cinematic sense of progression which has been a major selling point for all his descendants. The very real idea that a comic-strip has to be designed is well documented in Mc Cay's comic-strips.

Mc Cay understood the storytelling possibilities of the comic-strips unique formal elements. There is considerable significance given to the design of a panels size and shape and how these individual panels combine to form a convincing visual whole, throughout Windsor Mc Cay's work. In one example, drawn in nineteen eight, upon falling asleep Little Nemo's bed grows enormous legs which then begin to travel across the city. The panels cunningly stretch to accommodate the ever growing legs. The moon also seems to dance in rhythm to the beds sinuous, awkward movements, finally stumbling over a church steeple, toppling Little Nemo to fall, as always into his bedroom. In another example Little Nemo converses with the Princess of Slumberland in the fourth quarter of a series of narrow panels while behind them an elephant approaches from a distance squeezing his enormous form, emphasized by the verticals, throughout the panels. It ends in Nemos bedroom where the Princess



3. "*Little Nemo in Slumberland*", Windsor Mc Cay 1908.



4. "*Little Nemo in Slumberland*", Windsor Mc Cay, 1906

is replaced by Little Nemo's mother. Another important contemporary of Mc Cay's was Lyonel Feininger, probably more celebrated for his Cubist and Bauhaus paintings. Through his comic-strip "*Kin-der-Kids*", Feininger brought an almost poetical style of drawing to the comics world which in many ways rivalled Mc Cay's own style of storytelling.

It also helped to bring a higher standard of illustration to the comic-strip by convincing some so called "fine-artists" to dabble in this medium. Feiningers pages offered its readers a subtle painterly style composed into highly structured pages. The best way to illustrate this is to describe one of his strips. In one of his last Sunday strips Feininger follows a young boy called "*Wee-Willie-Winkie*" in his observation of a surreal sunset. Watching from a hill Willie observes the sun as it stretches its rays, arm-like to draw a blanket of cloud over him as he yawns into his descent, and the windows of a house nearby yawn before pulling their blinds. All of this is surrounded by an abstract border of stars and cats.

It was during this period in the history of the comic-strip that many great ambassadors for the medium began their careers. Not least among these and considered by many its "poet laureate", was George Herriman. Herriman

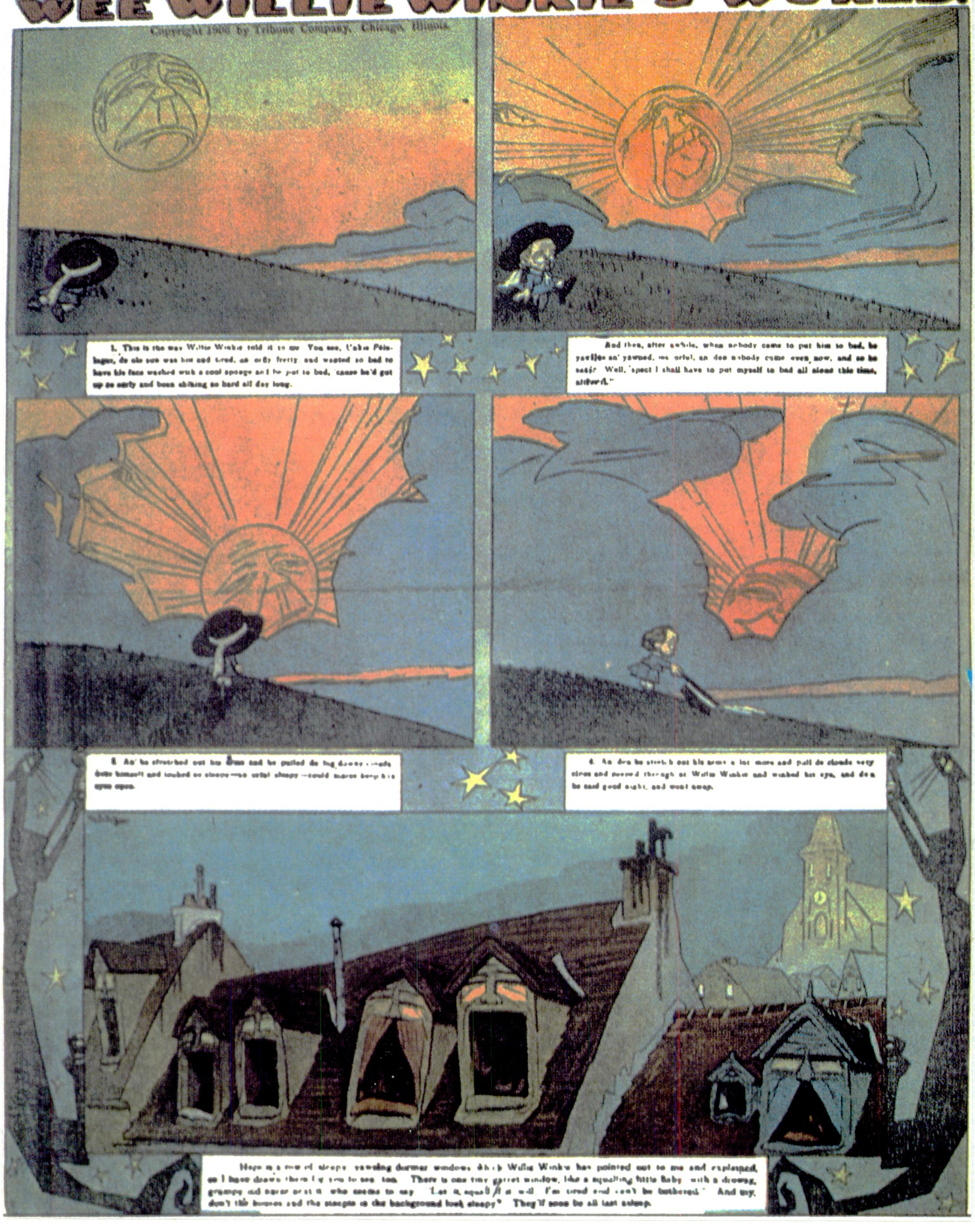
PART FOUR COMIC

The Chicago Sunday Tribune.

PART FOUR COMIC

SEPTEMBER 16, 1906

WEE WILLIE WINKIE'S WORLD.



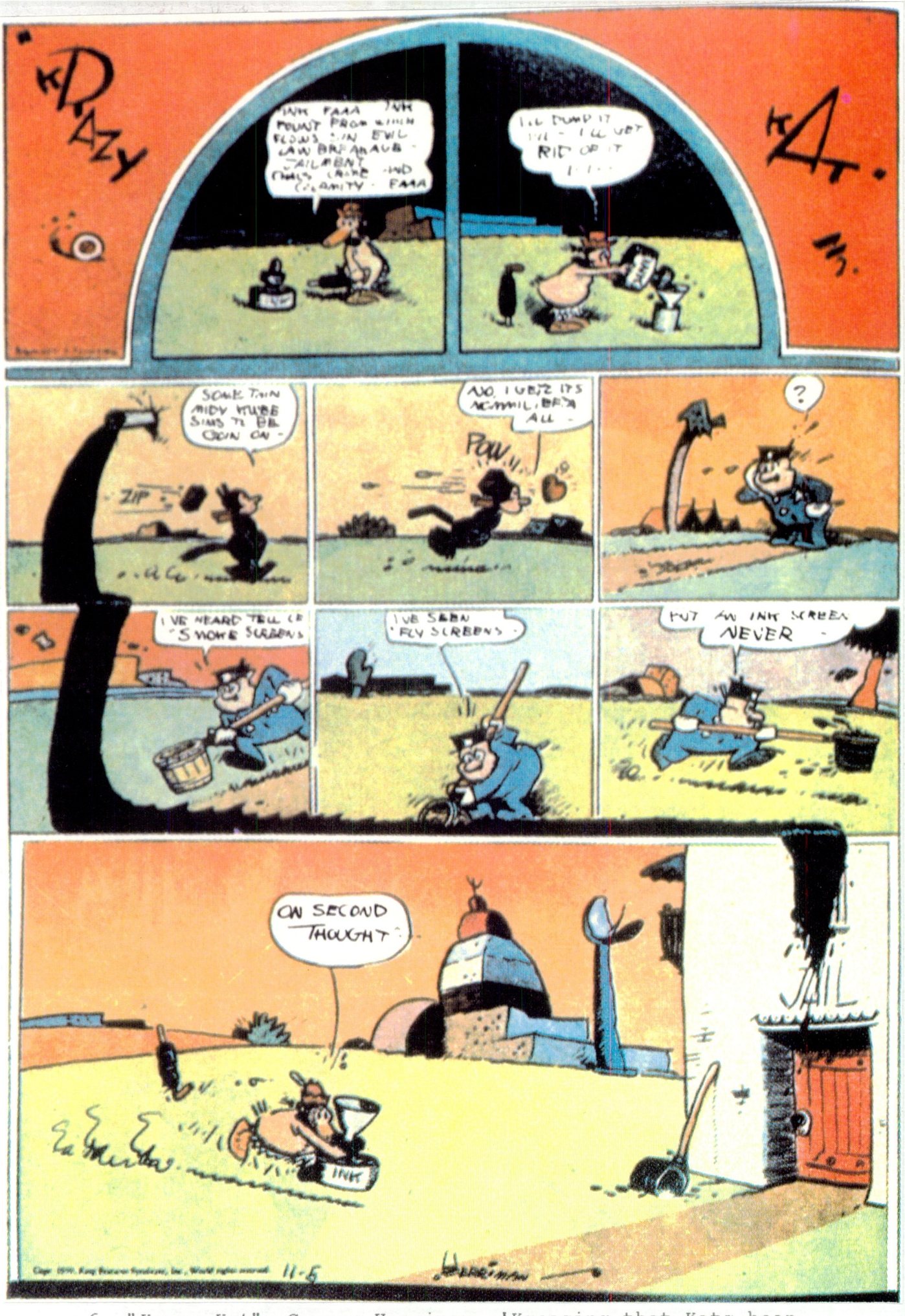
5. "*Wee Willie Winkie*", Lyonel Feininger.

brought a freshness to the art world as a whole through his comic-strip "*Krazy Kat*", it inspired a ballet by John Carpenter, a novel by Jay Cantor and essays by E. E. Cummings and Umberto Eco amongst others. Herriman and Feininger before him brought what can only be called a poetry of sorts to the comic-strip. I see this as a tool to create a greater sense of fluidity in the strip making it easier to understand and therefore to read. What Windsor Mc Cay did with panel size and shape, Feininger and Herriman substituted with poetry of line and narrative to achieve the same visual flow.

Herriman worked on the same theme for over thirty years, it was simply this: Krazy Kat is in love with Ignatz Mouse who loving no one but himself, finds no greater pleasure than in "Kreasing that Kats bean with a brick". Krazy Kat receives the brick as a sign of love. Offissa Pupp is in love with Krazy and hates Ignatz whom he regularly throws in a jail made of, what else, but bricks.

It is remarkable that the story of a cat getting hit with a brick could evoke such discussion as those that surround "*Krazy Kat*" and is a credit to Herrimans genius which "allowed him to give his theme the weight of a poetic symbol" (Spiegelman *Print* 1988 XLII:VI Pg 67).

A little later than George Herriman came Chester Gould and "*Dick Tracy*". Gould transformed the comic-strip with



6. "*Krazy Kat*", George Herriman, 'Kreasing that Kats bean with a brick'.

his direct almost brutal form of storytelling. Gould was a true disciple of Topffer and he seemed to understand the significance of Topffers work very well, in that comic-strip drawing isn't really drawing at all but rather a kind of diagramming, a mixture of text and image. Chester Gould composed stunning black and white panels, which became more and more abstract over the years. The scale of objets to people changes from image to image, seemingly obeying no natural laws.

Nowhere is the importance of design realised more than in Goulds "*Dick Tracy*", each panel is considered in its relation to another each one flowing into the next, and although experiments in typography were as yet unknown, the first steps toward creating an acceptable comic book had been taken and indeed mastered by some.

7. "*Dick Treacy*", Chester Gould, 'A kind of diagramming'.

C H A P T E R 2

The modern American comic-book was invented in nineteen-thirty-three by a printing salesman trying to find expanded uses for the presses that printed many of the colour newspaper comic supplements. The salesman was Max C Gaines and he started E C Comics. Gaines' pocket book consisted of reprints of newspaper comic-strips, no great advances here, until he began to run out of original work. Soon comic-strips were being newly commissioned for inclusion in Gaines comic-books. The publics appetite was so great that competitors soon emerged. The comic-strip medium took an evolutionary step forward by moving closer to its picture-story beginnings.

During these first days of comic-book glory many of the most significant icons of popular culture were created. The superhero was set to dominate the world of comic-books right up to and including the present day. "*Superman*" created by Jerry Sieger and Joe Shuster made his first appearance in Action Comics in June of nineteen-thirty-eight and was soon followed by Bob Kanes "*Batman*" the very next year. The third archetypal superhero "*Captain America*", created by writer Joe Simon and artist Jack Kirby was first published under Timely Comics (later Marvel) in 1939. These three characters embodied the American patriotism which led the United States and its superheroes into the war, backed up by sales in the millions.

Happening parallel to these events, was the work of Will Eisner. Eisner was commissioned by Hearst in nineteen-thirty-nine to produce work for a supplement to a Sunday newspaper, the first "funny pages" if you like. What actually transpired was far more serious. Will Eisner brought major innovations and insights to comic-book storytelling and design. It has been said of Eisner "that he was influenced by German Expressionist set design and Hollywood movie films", (Deadline No 7, May 1989 p 49) certainly his "*Spirit*" stories had a stylish moodiness. The "*Spirit*" logos were often incorporated into the decor; panels could be designed to look literally like postage stamps, film frames complete with sprocket holes, or like a series of posters on a brick wall. His innovations in the area of "Splash pages" (a comic-books title page) were very sophisticated, laid out to look like book jackets, parodies of other comics, wanted posters, front pages of newspapers, advertisements and even American I.R.S forms. His experiments and discoveries, however, went far beyond the visual tricks of his opening pages.

In nineteen-forty-two just two years after his first "*Spirit*" strip, Eisners story was subtly drifting apart from his costumed contemporaries. But for all his genius the comic-book industry was too rigid to permit many of Eisners lessons to be put into practice. His innovations in panel size and fluidity I will be examining in more detail later.

8. "*The Spirit*", Will Eisner,'to look like a series of posters on a brick wall'.

At enourmous loss to the comics industry, the "*Spirit*" was last published in nineteen-fifty-two. His influence, I feel, is felt mostly by artists and writers who began working in the late seventies and are working now in the nineties. Indeed the two giants of modern graphic storytelling have this to say of him; Alan Moore (of "*The Watchmen*") says: he is the single most person responsible for giving comics its brains" (Deadline No 7 May 1989 p 51). And for Frank Miller ("*Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*"), "he is comics most accomplished creator" (Deadline No 7, May 1989 p 51).

Eisner himself is still a part of the industry since his return to comic-books in nineteen-seventy-eight with "*A contract with God*", and later in nineteen-eighty-seven with a true graphic-novel length story called "*The Dreamer*".

During the post-war years, superheroes fell out of favour with the American public. Comic-book audiences turned to other genres; romance, crime and horror. However, U S Senate hearings in the mid fifties linked crime and horror comics to juvenile delinquency and this sounded the death-bell for those genres. These unfortunate circumstances, however, led to a superhero revival. Retired heroes were updated to fit newly developing science-fiction and "pseudo-futuristic storylines".

Superheroes have always been the staple diet of the comic-book medium, but since the late sixties they have taken on new fresher characteristics, this coupled with the new stables of superheroes must have been a welcome sight.

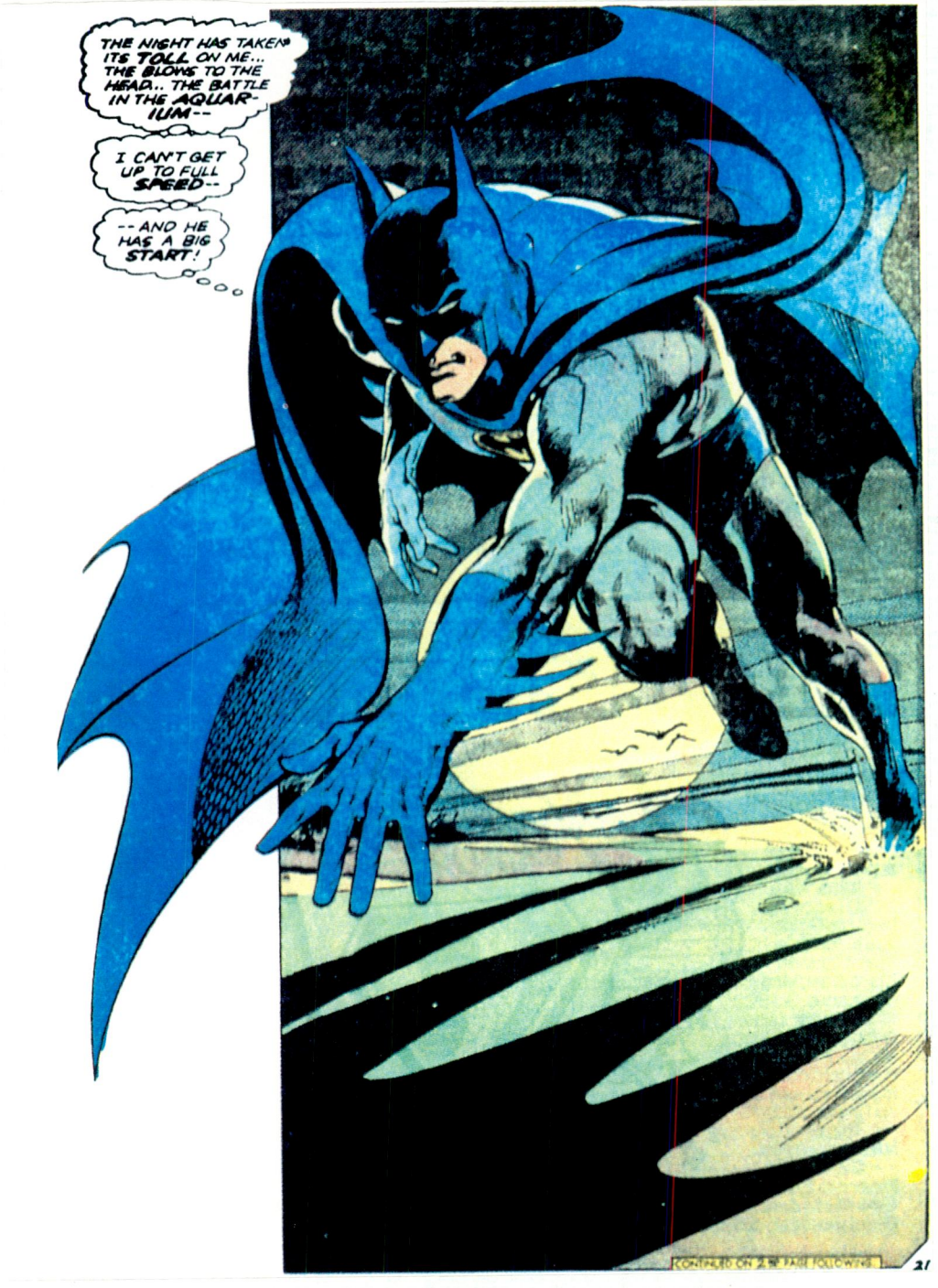
The pre-pubescent dreams had matured into adult dramas, more real and believable. "*The Fantastic Four*" and "*Spiderman*" who debuted in nineteen-sixty-two were the epitomes of this approach. Providing a counterbalance to the pseudo-realism of Stan Lees writing, was the dynamic artwork of Jack Kirby. Kirby and Lee went on to create the base stable of Marvel Comics heroes, characters such as Thor and Hercules. And it was said of Kirbys work that his universe "exploded with concepts and characters that appear to leap off the page"(Print XLII;VI November/December 1988 p 116).

If Kirbys approach to anatomy was the ultimate larger than life "dynamic exaggeration", Neal Adams style is the opposite. His pen and brush techniques when applied to the fantasy world of superheroes served to make them visually believable in ways that comic-book characters had never been before. He endowed his characters with a full range of facial expressions and emotions, his command of perspective combined with a respect for accurate anatomy allowed his heroes to leap and fly in smooth flowing movements. Adams once remarked that if

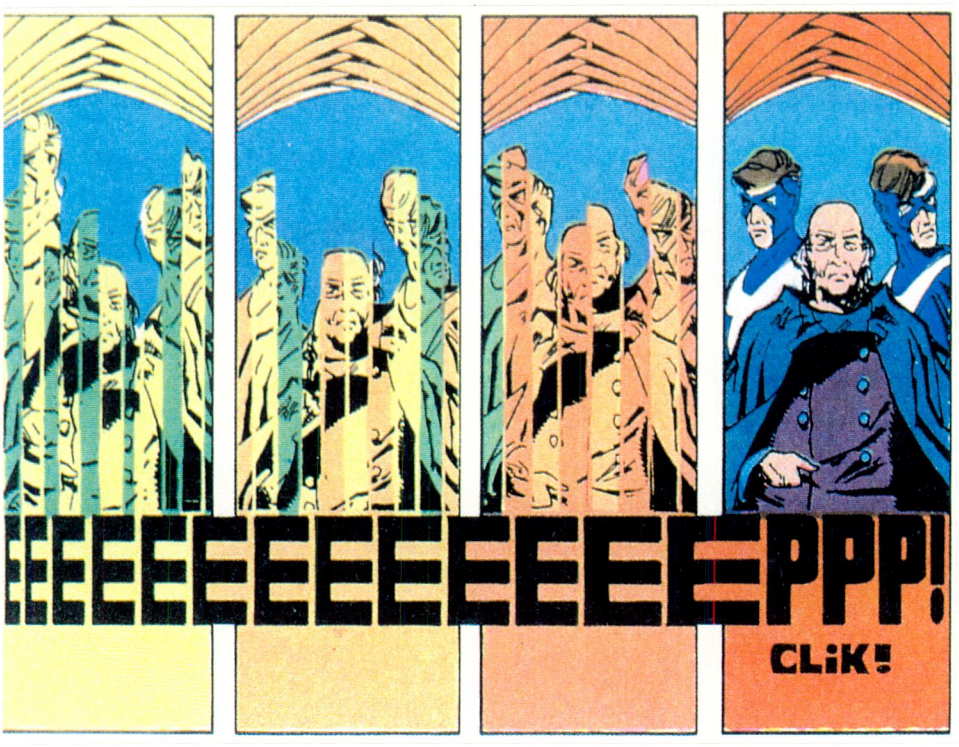
superheroes really existed they would look like the ones he drew.

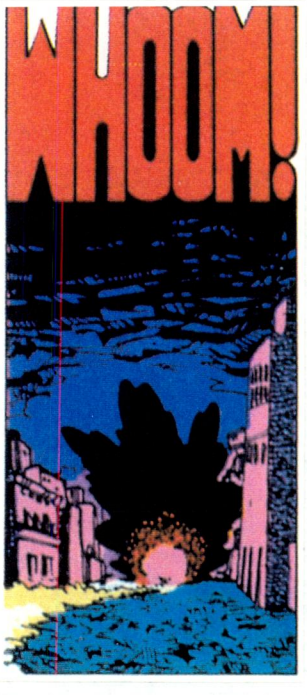
Although Adams applied his unique style to many D. C. heroes, his greatest achievement was in single-handedly rescuing "*Batman*" from the fallout of the campy television version of the strip and returning him to the original "shadow-like creature of the night". By the early nineteen-seventies Adams style had became the role model for younger artists seeking to break into the comics field.

Walt Simonson was one of the first artists to introduce an unorthodox drawing style to mainstream superhero comics in nineteen-seventy-three with "*Manhunter*", a backup feature in "*Batmans*" Detective Comics. A graduate of Rhode Island School of Design with a degree in illustration, Simonson couldn't help but be influenced by his academic background. His line was looser, sketchier more graphic. His lettering of sound-effects had a strong typographic feel to them and they were carefully designed into his panel compositions, unlike the customary, outsized pows and zaps of previous comic-book heroes. I believe that Simonsons influence on the world of comics was broad and far reaching, and his liberating effect was not lost on many of the biggest names of the eighties and nineties.



9. "*Batman*", Neal Adams, 'if superheroes really existed they would look like the ones he drew'.





10. "*Manhunter*", Walt Simonson, 'his lettering of sound effects had a strong typographic feel to them'.

C H A P T E R 3

In the past fifteen years, every facet of the structure of comic books has undergone intensive re-evaluation. Outdated formulaic cover design, such as placing the title at the top of the book so it could be readily identified in a rack of comics, or the necessary inclusion of the title character has been abandoned. Today abstract designs, painted illustrations, typeset logotypes, and even occasional embossing or other printing effects have made comic-book covers resemble mainstream book covers more than ever.

The unique styles of Neal Adams and Walt Simonson were not lost on more recent artists such as Bill Sienkiewicz and Howard Chaykin, who voiced preferences for distancing themselves from previous comic-book influences. My point being that like Adams and Simonson, Sienkiewicz and Chaykin wanted to go forward by inventing new styles which had little to do with anything that had happened in the last seventy years of comic-book history.

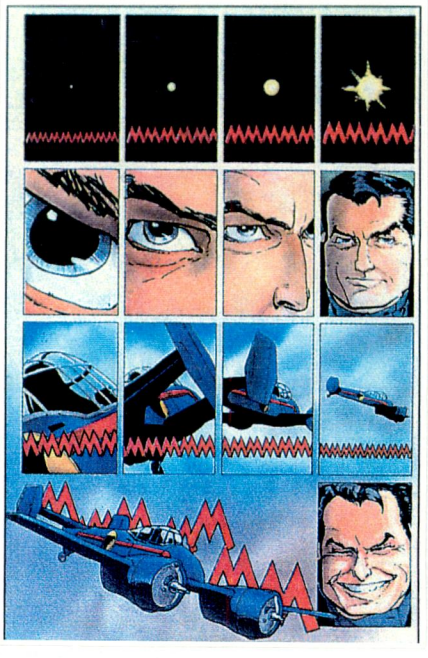
Chaykin was to become the first artist to experiment with the fully painted graphic novel. One such project was an adaption of a novel by science-fiction writer Michael Moorcock "*The Swords of Heaven, The Flowers of Hell*" in seventy-nine.

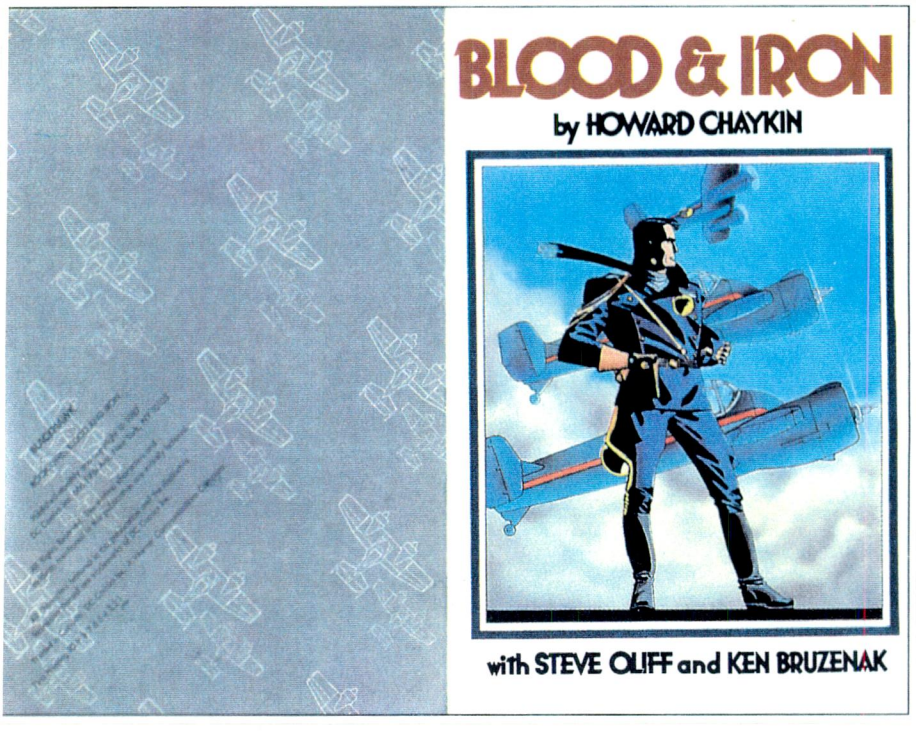
Years later in an introduction to a collection of Chaykins other works Moorcock recalled Chaykins having

> Benefitted from the discipline of the standard comic-book format the way some of us benefitted from learning our trade as magazine or newspaper writers and others gained like the Beatles, say, from the 'tyranny' of the old two and a half minute single.
>
> ("Blackhawk, Book One: Blood and Iron" 1987 DC Comics, Inc.)

Chaykins work from this period displayed his enthusiasm for pushing pen and ink based comics into mixed media. Chaykins compositions spread across bindings, overlapped captions and panels with purely graphic design orientated backgrounds and often used typeset type instead of hand lettered word balloons. Chaykins eventually abandoned the medium to devote most of his time to advertising and illustration thankfully returning with fresh inspiration in nineteen-eighty-three. But his trailblazing work "*Empire*" and "*The Stars My Destination*", had left their mark.

Following Chaykins example Bill Sienkienwiez loosened up his drawing and began experimenting with a more painterly style, or to be more correct "styles". In probably his best works to date (both created in collaboration with writer/artist Frank Miller) "*Daredevil: Love and War*" and "*Elektra Assassin*", Sienkiewicz interprets the narrative by furiously juggling a variety of styles, often on the same page, inventing the mixed media form of comic.





11. "*Blood and Iron*", Howard Chaykin, 'Chaykins' compositions spread across bindings, overlapped captions and panels with purely graphic design orientated backgrounds'.

Frank Miller observed that Sienkiewicz was

> In a struggle with mixed media, developing a way to use all the illustration techniques at his disposal, to lend them all to the purpose of cartooning, that is, to express emotion and story content, using an orchestra of technique.
>
> (The Comics Journal, August 1985 Fantagraphics, pp 77-78)

To best illustrate this "orchestra" of illustrators who inspire Sienkiewicz he quotes "Ralph Steadman, Gerald Scharfe, Bob Peake, Egon Shiele and Francis Bacon, and animators Tex Avery and Chuck Jones" (The Face April 1990, pp 94-96). Bill Sienkiewicz truly embodies the modern comic-book designer for me changing styles to suit the writer, the story and the reader. As he was quoted in an ad for Eclipse Comics in 1988,

> I try not to have a style, I want to have what I'm working on to be designed with all the elements that will get the idea across, so my pieces are sometimes cartoonier, sometimes darker, grimier, sometimes slick, it depends on what the piece really calls for.
>
> (Eclipse Comics September 1988 Pg 45)

The past ten years really have seen a change in the overall design of the comic-book. More work has been done in furthering the comic-books acceptability in the last decade that in the preceding thirty years. Not since Will Eisners "*The Spirit*" has so much work been done in upgrading comics from the cover all the way through to the end papers (once the domain of body

12. "*The Shadow*", Bill Sienkiewicz, 'use of a Ralph Steadman pen and ink technique'.

building apparatus and x-ray specs). The comic-book has a new word in its vocabulary, design that is.

Nowhere are the hard learnt innovations I have just covered more apparent than in the two giants of contemporary superhero adventure, Frank Miller "*Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*" and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons "*The Watchmen*".

To fully realise what these three designers have done to the comic book one must first examine the works of a man from whom all three draw inspiration, the "Comics Master", Will Eisner.

C H A P T E R 4

CASE STUDY NO 1: WILL EISNER

Will Eisner was born in New York in nineteen-seventeen, the son of a Jewish immigrant from Austria. His father, a great influence on his life, was a set painter. Eisner describes him thus "My father started life as a painter, and was an artist of sorts, and as a result I grew up very interested in art despite my mothers opposition". (Comics and Sequential Art, 1985 p 14). This interest led Eisner at one point to consider stage design. After high school, he worked in the advertising department of the "*New York American*" and he began free-lancing as a commercial artist. His first comic stories were published in "*Wow*", an early comic book led by the publisher John Herle. In nineteen-thirty-six, when Eisner first started to work in this medium, most comic books were made up of reprinted newspaper strips but "*Wow*" also ran original material, by Eisner and other of his contemporaries including Bob Kane (later the creator of "*Batman*"). Indeed Eisner was one of the first comic artists to write and draw original material.

Will Eisners work in the thirties was, it has to be said, by no means exceptional although he was quite prolific turing out dozens of features. His work still looks polished when compared with most other comic stories of the period however.

In nineteen-thirty-nine Eisner joined "*Quality Comics*" and was finally given the "chance to reach our for this adult, older audience that I was looking for". Before this all comic books were peddling pre-pubescent fantasies, catering to again in Eisners words "the ten-year-old cretin kid" (Deadline May 1989 p 51). It was his dissatisfaction with writing and drawing such stories that led Eisner to a deal with a newspaper syndicate led by Hearst, who wanted to create a weekly comic-book section in Sunday newspapers. One feature in this book would be written and drawn by Eisner and would feature the adventures of a masked crime-fighter, "*The Spirit*". The first section was published on June 2nd, nineteen-forty and with it was born on of the most dazzling and original comic-book features ever published.

The "*Spirit*" lived in Central City, which was, like "*Batmans' Gotham*" and "*Supermans' Metropolis*", a sort of alter ego to New York. The "*Spirit*" followed the same pattern as his costumed contemporaries in that he was a vigilante with a secret identity; in this case Denny Colt, a criminologist operating from an underground sanctuary in the citys main cemetery. This is as far as the similarities go however.

Eisner didn't want any kind of costume on the "*Spirit*", but the syndicate backing the comic-book did, and so the mask he wears was a compromise. Even when the mask was

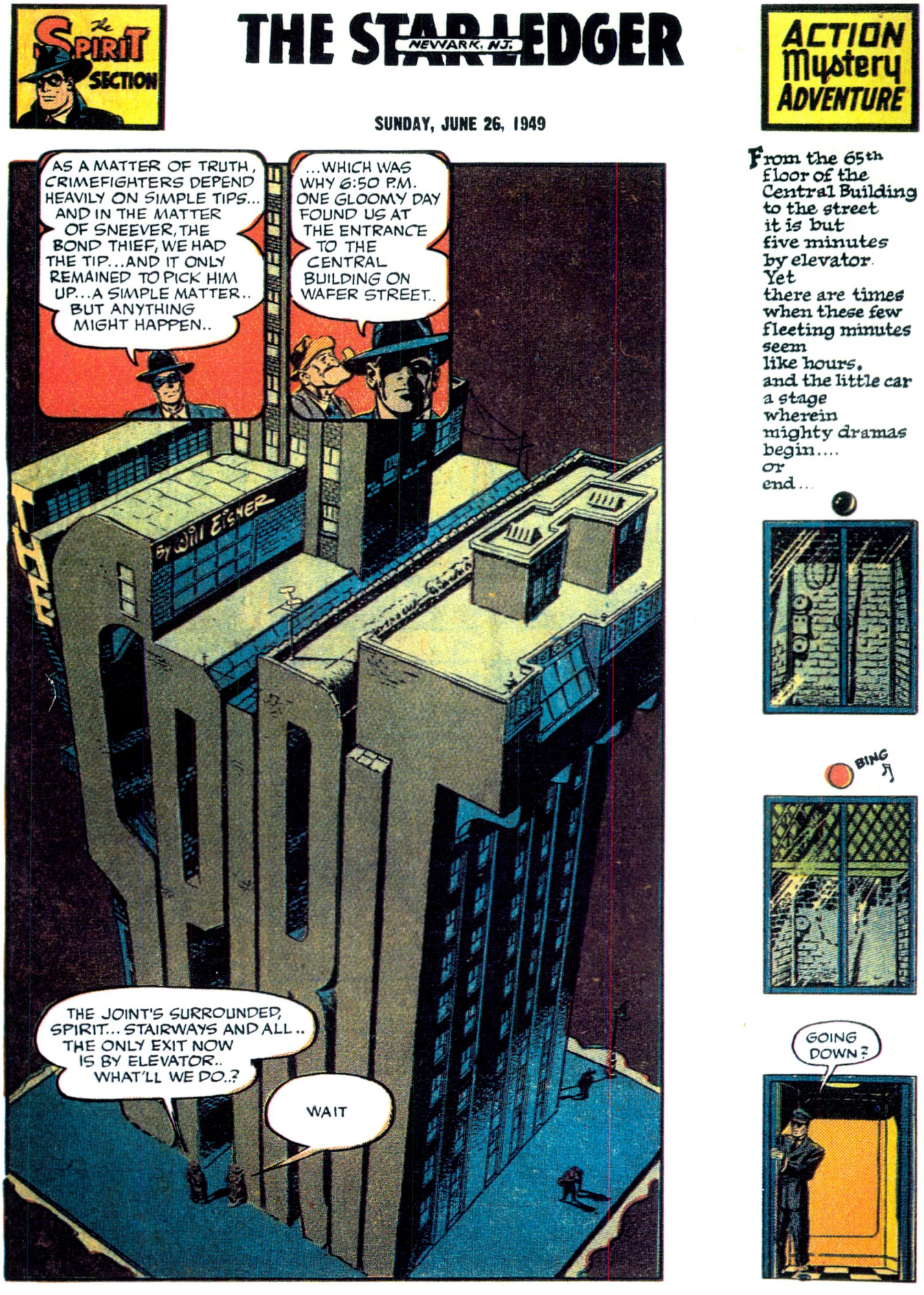
on "*The Spirits*" face, though, his eyes were always visible through it. This can't be said of most other masked comic-book heros. In the slits in the "*Batmans*" mask where his eyes should be, there is only white slits, a trick which tries to really conceal the vigilantes' identity even to those who have known the undisguised man for years and who would undoubtedly recognise the eyes. In such stories, the mask and the heroes identity are so important that there can be no tolerating the fact that the mask might not be an effective disguise.

Thus, Eisner, by showing "*The Spirits*" eyes through his mask, declared that his hero was different from the competition. In the two years of "*The Spirits*" infancy "*The Spirits*" stories were becoming subtly different too, more daring graphically and with a sharper edge in the writing. But then Eisner was drafted and had to leave his character in others hands while he served his tour as a chief warrant officer in the Pentagon.

Eisner returned to "*The Spirit*" in nineteen-forty-five a more mature draughtsman, he had worked drawing instructional manuals for the army. He overcame the mask problem (which still bothered him) by working in a more exaggerated style. "*The Spirits'*" eyes often spoke so eloquently that the mask hardly seemed to be there at all, making him all the more believable.

Eisner was, however, at his most impressive on the opening or "splash", page of each of his stories. That page might be taken up by one large panel or by a large panel and a few very small ones. One particular example opens with two small introductory panels perched atop a building which is seen from an aerial perspective. It is so large that it takes up almost two-thirds of the page. The building is comprised of six sections, each ten to twelve floors high, each a section of the alphabet and each a full block deep, I am reliably informed. Everything from a fire escape through television aerials, windows and a penthouse are in place on this preposterous but very solid-looking building. The letters spell out "*The Spirit*" and on top of one window is a banner proclaiming: "By Will Eisner". Eisner always introduced his characters stories through such arresting means. By not relying on a standard logo Eisner most conspicuously transformed comic-book practice. "*The Spirits*" name and Eisners byline might turn up anywhere on the page and in almost any form, for example in a newspaper headline, or on a doctors eye chart as in another strip from nineteen-forty-seven when after failing an eye test the "*Spirits*" name and Eisners byline appear on the chart in the last of three panels. At a comics convention in nineteen-eighty-three Eisner said that,

> The Syndicate and the newspapers that carried "*The Spirit*" were on my back constantly over the fact that I kept changing the logo.
>
> (*Print* 1988 XLII:VI Pg 92)



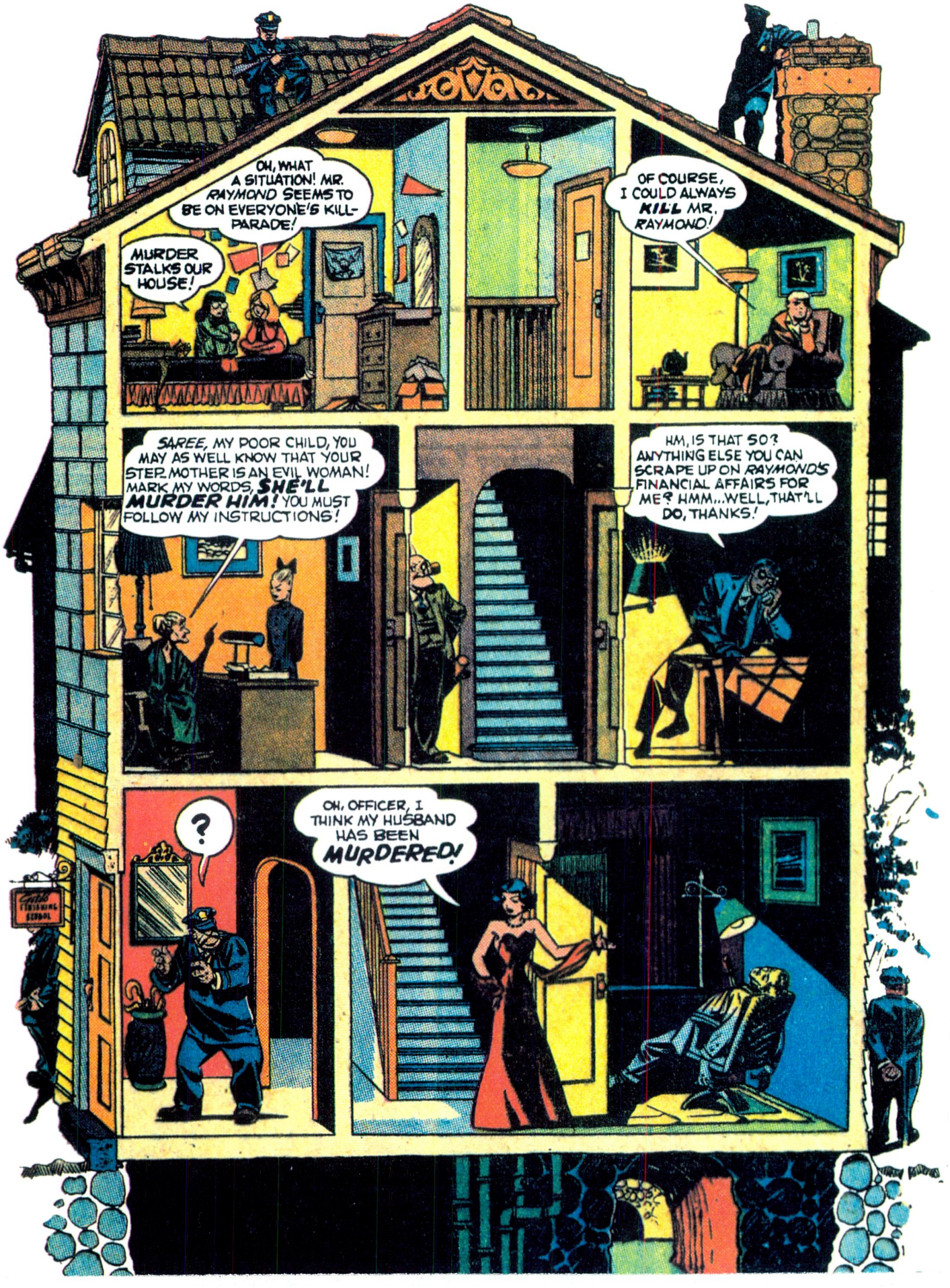
13. "*The Spirit*", Will Eisner, 'the opening or splash page'.

14. "*The Spirit*", Will Eisner, 'The "*Spirits*" name and Eisners' byline appear on the chart'.

This was probably because they could not use a standard logo to promote the feature.

Though most of Eisners ingenuity took place in the splash, the following pages were by no means unimpressive. Most of Eisners panels were small, they had to be if he was to tell a story of any complexity in seven pages. There were, typically, eight or nine panels to a page, two or three to a row, so that the emphasis was on the vertical, not horizontal like a cinema screen. Eisner achieved quite striking results by squeezing as much as possible out of this format. For instance in one nineteen-forty-seven story, the panels become rooms in a cutaway of a large house. The action in all the rooms, or panels, takes place simultaneously, but it leads up to a climatic murder at the bottom of the page.

Because Eisner often used heavy black and striking camera angles in his post-war stories, some people invoke "film noir" in describing them, and it is widely taken for granted, in writings about Eisner, that his stories are the comic-book equivalent of movies. Eisner himself has spoken of seeing lots of movies in the thirties and forties but then didn't everybody? Eisner it seems understood probably better than any other comic-book creator ever has, until recently that is, how different comics and film really are, and in particular how they handle time.



15. "*The Spirit*", Will Eisner, 'the panels become rooms in a cutaway of a large house'.

Traditional fine-art paintings most often show us a moment in time, an action may be suggested by a pose, but what we see represents an instant or very little more than that.

By contrast to this film is usually a continuous flow of time within each scene and from scene to scene. Comics fall, delightfully in between. A panel can represent only a moment or, and this seems to be most often the case, it can represent a considerably longer time span. Dialogue must be read and if in a single panel we see one character reacting to what another character is doing in the same panel enough time for both actions to have taken place must be represented. Eisner understood this very well and seemed to maintain a musical rhythm which when operated in tandem with his extraordinary use of time resulted in spectacular storytelling. A page of panels in a regular rhythm will suddenly be interrupted by a burst of panels each of which seems to take only a second and not always as we expect to see that period of time. In one example "*The Spirit*" comes upon a briefcase washed up on a beach. Our view point is straight-forward; the rhythm is regular. In the next five panels, "*The Spirit*" is only catching glimpses of his attackers, and the surf, we see from the same perspective thus speeding up the flow. When you compare this scene with the one in the cutaway house Eisners adaptability becomes clear. Far from confusing the reader these techniques are used to

16. "*The Spirit*", Will Eisner, 'his extraordinary use of time resulted in spectacular storytelling'.

draw the eye forward in varying speeds or to stop it dead, to consider, investigate and enjoy. With such an imaginative approach to time each panel lends itself to inventive design.

It is undoubtable that the nineteen-forties "*Spirit*" strip crackled with energy, Eisner seemed to be consumed with the excitement of his ideas. He echoed the same poetry of form in his story, eagerly making films on paper. He brought the technology of the moving picture to his drawings, involving complex camera positions and the ability to almost bring a soundtrack to the page. By this I meant that his stories remind me of Windsor McCays dancing moon in the earlier example of "*Little Nemo in Slumberland*". These coupled with the often spectacular use of creative typography are a credit to Eisners ability as a draughtsman and a designer.

C H A P T E R 5

CASE STUDY NO 2: FRANK MILLER

Writer/artist Frank Miller entered the comics field in the late seventies working as a penciller. Miller was given the task of reworking a little known superhero called the "*Daredevil*" by Marvel Comics. he proceeded to turn the whole comics field on its ear through his treatment of "*Daredevil*". He managed to capture the same "moodiness" and "film noir" feel that Eisner began in "*The Spirit*" and combined this with the realism of Neal Adams "*Batman*". But not only did "*Daredevil*" look good it read good too. Miller added a new emotional quality to his character which took the best of what Eisner attempted with "*The Spirit*" and succeeded in adding the depth that was needed to project the comic book to novel status.

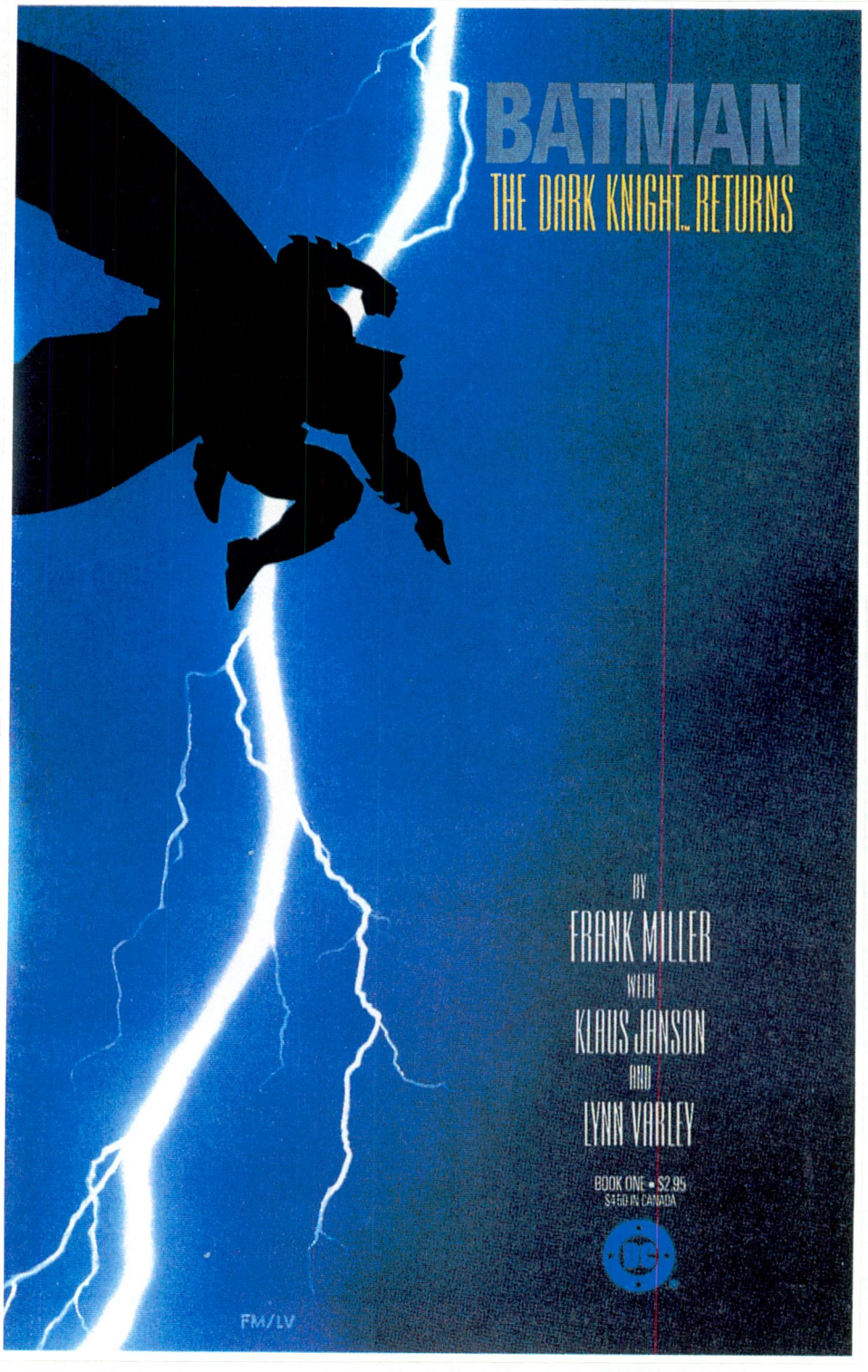
The success of Millers revamped "*Daredevil*" won him much praise and he was given "carte-blanche" to toy with other, more prestigious Marvel characters. it also encouraged the publisher to increase the budged for further productions. And so Miller, never one to back away from any project, chose "*Batman*" on which to experiment. The rest as they say is history. "*Batman: The Dark knight Returns*", has succeeded in reaching a bigger audience than any other comic since the days of the Sunday strips in the earlier half of the century.

Why I even know of many non-comic reading people who if they haven't read "*The Dark Knight Returns*", have nevertheless heard of it.

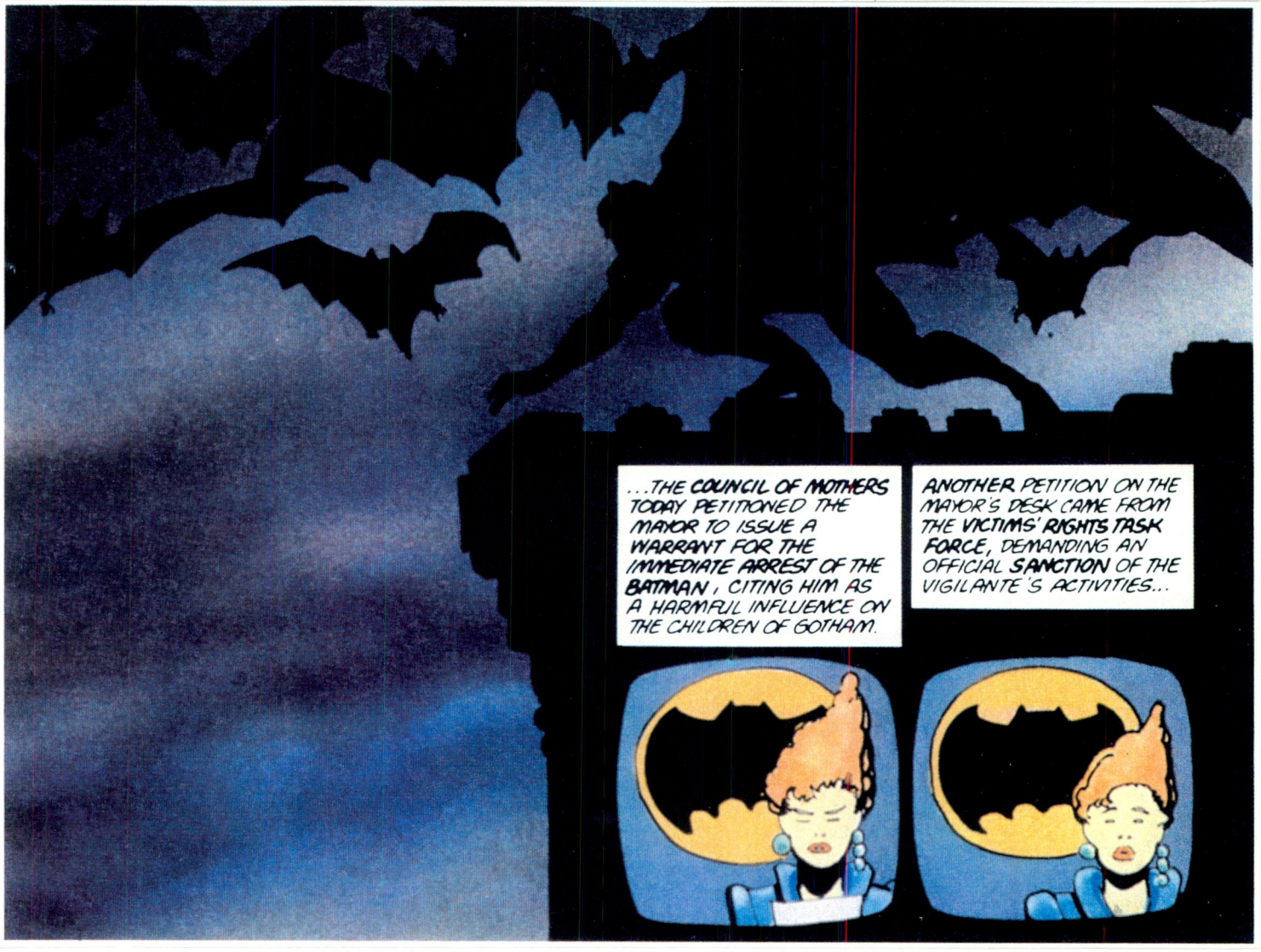
"*The Dark Knight Returns*", was published in 1986 in a four part, serialised, graphic-novel. It revolves around a fifty-year-old, near alcoholic Bruce Wayne who comes out of retirement to save a Gotham City ravaged by street crime. Bruce Wayne emerges as a darker, outlawed, murderous vigilante at odds with the law, other superheroes (namely "*Superman*") and himself. The result is a character emotionally deeper, and more believable than any superhero before him. Miller says of it,

> '*Dark Knight*' is a serious effort to make a contribution to the whole idea of the superhero, to keep all of the history but at the same time move it all into the present.
>
> (The Great Comic Artist File Magazine, Volume 1. 1986, Pg 53)

In "*Dark Knight*" Miller demonstrates great illustrative technique combining with Lynn Varleys colouring and the typography of Richard Bruning to form a rich, lustrous story of a visual and narrative quality which makes for compelling reading. Millers panels seem to follow no particular rhythm, "*Dark Knight*" contains lengthy narrative interspersed with full-page illustrations, television screens appear at random set into buildings of gothic proportions, for example. There always seems to



17. "*Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*", Frank Miller, cover of first volume, 1986 DC Comics, Inc.'



18. "*Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*", Frank Miller, 'television screens appear at random set into buildings of gothic proportions'.

be so much going on in each page. Far from being confusing, however, this seems to suit Millers method of story telling.

The reader switches from reading to observation as the story calls for it. When Miller wants you to concentrate on the storyline his illustrations are sparse, his panel design simple, and when the emphasis is on action, the speech of the story dictates whether the panels flash by in a blur or halt you in mid-read. Outside "*Dark Knight*" was perfectly bound and covered with heavy stock, the four volumes were printed in four colour process on quality paper and has become known as the "prestige format". On completion of the series, the sperate volumes were collected in hard-cover and later paperback editions in a successful attempt at penetrating mainstream bookshops.

This is where Frank Millers work has really mattered, okay so his page layouts may not be as experimental as Will Eisners nor are his illustration techniques as radical as Howard Chaykin or Bill Sienkiewicz. But it is a wonderful blend of all that is good in comic book design, a fact borne out by how much money and thought went into its overall design. It's success as a graphic-novel is evident from its position on the bookshelf.

C H A P T E R 6

CASE STUDY NO 3: ALAN MOORE AND DAVE GIBBONS

At the same time that Frank Miller was remaking "*Batman*", back on our side of the Atlantic, writer Alan Moore and artist Dave Gibbons,(two Englishmen), were working along the same lines. Not only are the themes in the story similar, "*Watchmen*", follows the lives of several aging superheroes outlawed as vigilantes, but the design process also follows similar lines.

Alan Moore delves deep into the psyche of his main characters and portrays each so well that every one is entirely believable, made more so by the fact that only one character "*Dr Manhattan*", is in possession of any superpowers. Indeed Moore seems to be investigating how the superhero might actually operate in the real world. Some are no more than good detectives, some inventors, and some are just hardened bullies. "*Dr Manhattan*" helps America win the Vietnam war with his extraordinary powers whereas Moores main character "*The Comedian*" becomes a callous murderer. The story has everything a good crime novel needs, murder, mystery, adventure and plenty of surprises. Earlier on I drew a comparison between "*Watchmen*" and "*The Dark Knight*", and the link between them is I feel quite and important one.

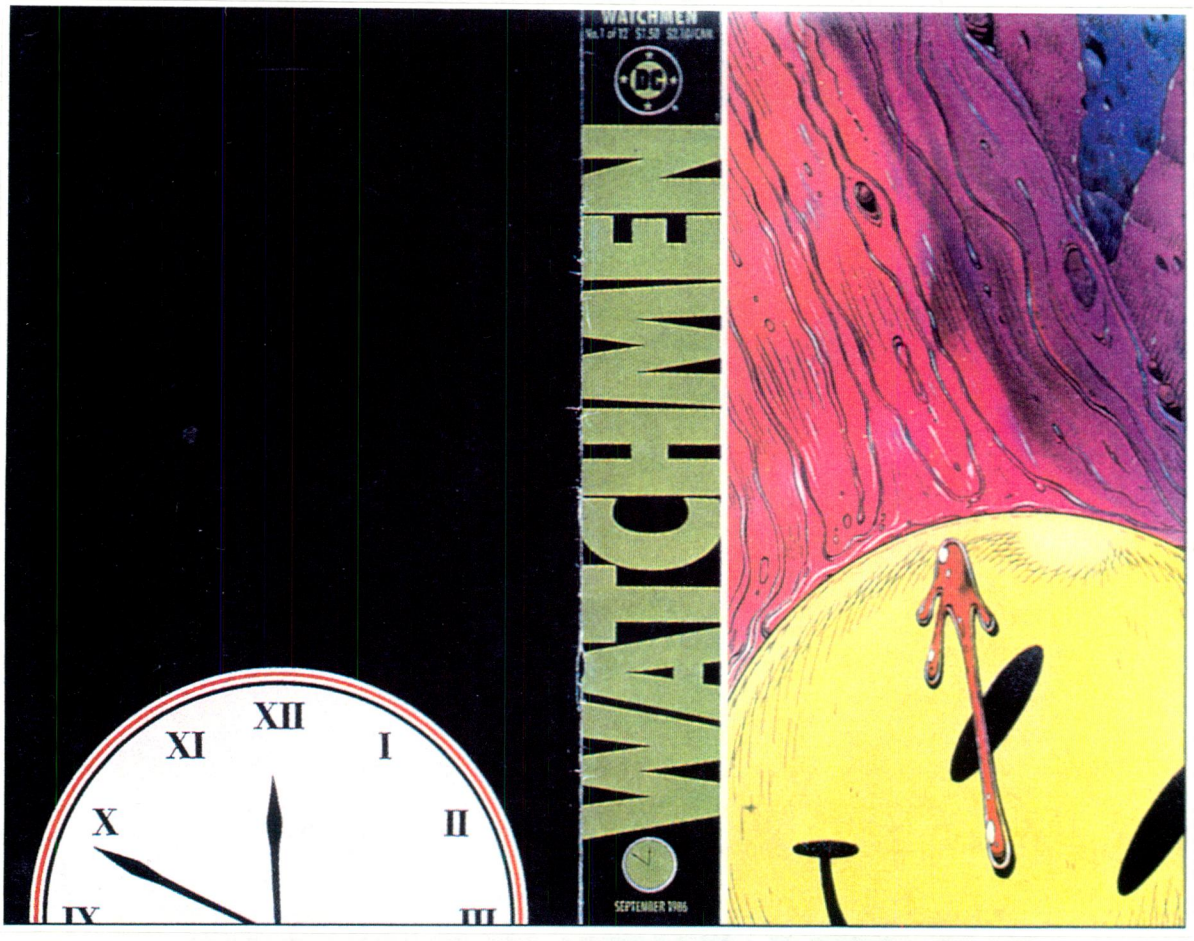
Both stories involve a deeper emotional depth and both

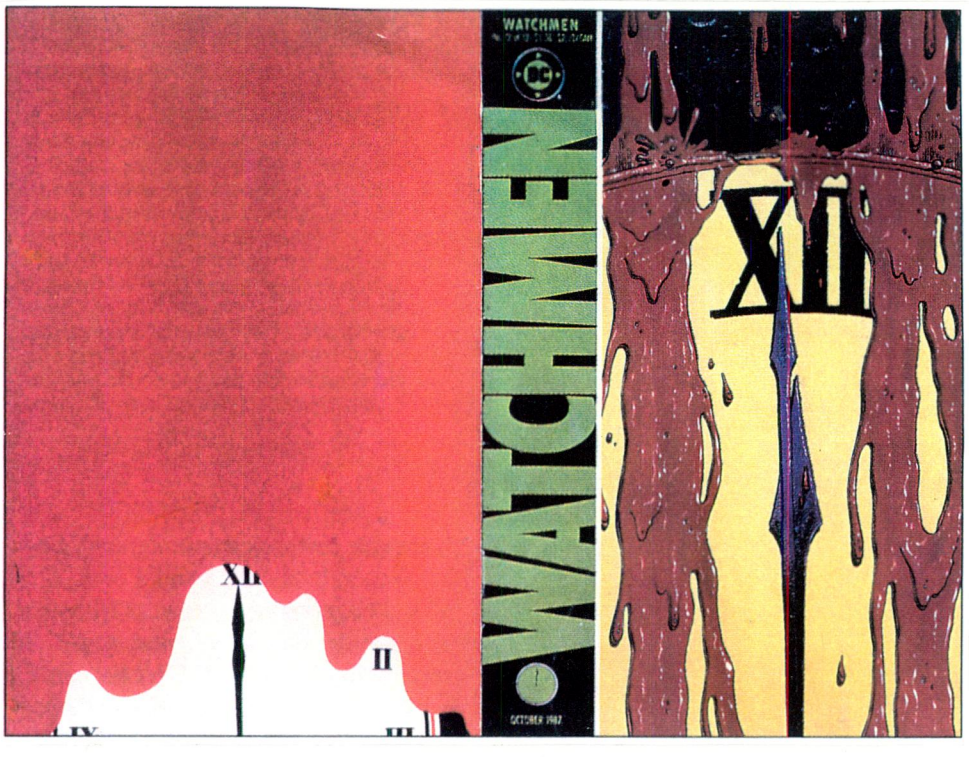
are made infinitely more believable by placing our fictional superheroes in real life situations. How would they adjust to these new environments? How would society react to them? And how would history reflect the involvement of these superheroes? Moore answers all these questions in "*Watchmen*". In "*Dark Knight*", Frank Miller asks these questions also but his answers are different mainly because his superheroes already have real histories, fifty years or so of different writers and artists handling.

As regards the actual design of "*Watchmen*", Moore and Gibbons really did put a lot of thought into the whole process. The Logo Gibbons chose for "*Watchmen*" was the "have a nice day" smiley face badge. To this circular face they added a drop of blood, spattered in the shape of a watch hand. This mirrored the nuclear clock ticking away the last twelve seconds before a nuclear war, an end narrowly avoided at the climax of the novel. The "*Watchmen*" came out in twelve parts, the front cover featured a close up of the smiley badge and the back carried the nuclear clock with each tick corresponding to the issue number. And if you line up all twelve endpapers (the pages usually left for the credits) end to end, they spell out the "*Watchmen*" logotype.

Moore had this to say about "*Watchmen*",

> What we did when we approached '*Watchmen*' was to design it as a novel, we knew what was in each of





19. "*Watchmen*", Alan Moore/Dave Gibbons, back and front covers of "*Watchmen*", No 1 and "*Watchmen*", No 12, 1986-87, DC Comics, Inc.

20. "*Watchmen*", Alan Moore/Dave Gibbons, end papers from "*Watchmen*", No 1 and "*Watchmen*", No 12 reproduce beginning and end of "*Watchmen*", logotype.

> the twelve chapters. We knew the various design elements, so that we could work on it as a coherent whole. One of the things that we've done with "*Watchmen*" is to try and come up with a work of comic art that has effects in it which no other medium could successfully duplicate.
>
> (Comics Interview Magazine, No 48 pp 87-88)

When approaching the design of the interior pages and panel size it is immediately noticeable that all the panels follow the same format, that is, each panel is the same size and shape with very little deviation to this self imposed rule. Dave Gibbons explains.

> What we wanted to do with '*Watchmen*' was to make the story the paramount thing, and it seemed to me that if all the pictures were the same size, you'd get the same effect that you'd get in the theatre or at the cinema or even watching t.v. Because the frame or the proscenium arch is always the same, you block it out, and get sucked into the picture that much more quickly.
>
> (The Comics Journal July 1987 Page 100)

That this approach works can be judged by the fact that I was hardly aware that I was turning the pages, and the need to finish "*Watchmen*" in one sitting was very compelling.

Gibbons' collaboration with Moore exemplifies the relationship between the written word and image in comic-book art.

They work much like an agency team, with Moore as a

copywriter and Gibbons as the art director (it is interesting to note that Moore is also an artist with his own comic-strip in England called "*Maxwell the Cat*"). This further demonstrates the easy rapport that the Moore/Gibbons team evidently possess.

C O N C L U S I O N

The development of the comic from its beginnings as a strip to its present novel form has been a long one. It is apparent through my research that the comic itself has often been its own worst enemy. It would seem that the work of Windsor Mc Cay and Lionel Feininger were the epitome of illustration and design, they may have taken the comic strip as far as it could go, for that period. For the next thirty years or so the comic took contradictory steps backwards and forwards. For example no one could doubt that the invention of the comic book was a huge step forward for the comic strip as regards book publication, but much of what was produced under its name, being mass produced under factory-like conditions, set the development back uncountable years. The artists I have mentioned, such as Chester Gould, George Herriman and Will Eisner were seminal in taking the comic book out of the rut it was beginning to follow. Once again these three took the comic book to new heights as regards illustration, design, and narrative, bringing the comic book as far as it could go, or so it seemed.

The comic book, however, was only beginning to mature, getting closer and closer to its goal, true book publication. It wasn't until the seventies, however, that it really began to grow. The number of skilled artists, writers and designers working at this time was

indicative of the new interest and respect that the publishing world was beginning to show.

These artists developed many of the areas hitherto untouched; typography, painted illustrations and cover design. And once again a few artists, Jack Kirby, Neal Adams, Walt Simonson, Howard Chaykin and Bill Sienkiewicz to name but a few advanced the position of the comic book in the publics' eyes.

The title of "Graphic Novel", is not lightly given, the comic-book has become a true piece of graphic design and through thoughtful and provocative storylines they can at last be elevated to novel status. Under the hands of this new breed of creators of which Miller, Gibbons and Moore are the forerunners the comic-book has taken all that is best from its history and incorporated them into a stylish, well designed, well written and well presented end product. Finally the graphic novel can take its place on the bookshelf (and not under the bed) alongside its not so distant cousins in the publishing world: novels, periodicals and books for the coffee-table.

I hope I have demonstrated how, by combining all aspects of design, story and illustration in a graphic novel, they have made a significant contribution to the art of book publication design. By this I mean that the often stylish and sumptuous cover designs of the graphic-novel will provide interesting competition for the more

conventional novel or book. The modern graphic novel has indeed become a hybrid of creators; writer/artist, artist/designer, designer/illustrator, draughtsman and painters. This new breed are tearing down previous notions of what comic book art should look like, how comic-books should tell stories and the signs and symbols it uses to tell them. It is obvious, I think, that all of the qualities above have become necessary to produce a truly satisfying graphic novel both in terms of words and pictures. If these are just words it is a conventional story-book, with just pictures they become purely art. The successful blend is what the best comic-book creators strive to achieve. As Frank Miller remarked about one of his own collaborations with Bill Sienkiewicz,

> The illustrations are not really illustrations of whats going on. The narration isn't really describing what's going on either. There's a gap there and somewhere in that gap is reality.
>
> (Amazing Heroes Magazine July 1986 pp 37-38)

It appears to me that, that gap is the subtle play between word and image, that is the reason, and the challenge of comics. And it is this challenge which defines the new graphics of comic-book art and design.

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