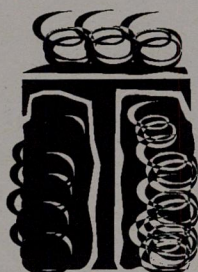


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he contemporary graphic novel artist, Dave McKean.



by

**D**avid **G**ibbons









# Introduction.













he chief aim of a comic-strip artist is to tell the story. This is an important point that is missed even by many working professional artists. All too often, creative egos get in the way, and the artwork becomes so flashy that it obscures the course of the story. The best artist is the one who communicates the story to the reader with the minimum amount of fuss, and the maximum amount of clarity. Less is very often more. "

( 1 , page 47 )

The above opinion was aired by a British comic author, Alan McKenzie, and as a guide to budding comic-creators. Indeed, for many years, comic-book art has thrived when seeming to follow the course advised here. In particular, the publications of D.C. Comics and their rivals Marvel, being the American giants of the comic industry, have continued to endorse artists who can readily maintain the visual feel of their characters.

The advent of graphic-novels, brought on by the sophistication of the comic market has brought some changes to the old edicts. Where improved formats allow comic artists to work in full painted colour, reproduced on high quality surfaces, artists who may have been drawn to other media are being tempted to experiment. This process was largely responsible for a gradual revolution in comic creation that began in the latter years of the last decade. As a result, the creators themselves were joined by the critics and public in taking the medium more seriously. This new audience allowed comic themes to grow more diverse, and break from the superhero stereotype. Contemporary interests became explored, allowing comics to assert themselves as a relevant social artform.

It was into this sifting scene that Dave McKean appeared, in early 1987. Prior to this change of interest, he had worked as a graphic artist; as writer/performer for music soundtracks for T.V. and Video; as an university lecturer; and as a session Jazz musician. Having studied design, illustration and film at Berkshire College of Art and Design for four years, he subsequently returned to teach audio-visuals and film for a year and a half. (2 ; creator biography)

Late in 1986, McKean was dragooned into an abortive attempt to launch a British anthology comic, entitled *Borderline*. Although the project was abandoned, the artist was introduced to an array of potent talents, most significantly, the author Neil Gaiman. Gaiman had long shared a friendship with Alan Moore, a British writer of some of the more cerebral and successful comics of the time. Moore's prompting saw Gaiman and McKean embark on a project of their own, being the transformation of one of Gaiman's more successful novellas into the comic medium. The resulting graphic novel, *Violent Cases* became a launching-pad for the talents of it's creators,







attracting interest from the American companies.

McKean was later to rejoin Gaiman on a three-issue prestige-format mini-series entitled *Black Orchid*. The books were publicised by D.C. comics in 1988, and their popularity resulted in the company establishing two off shoot identities, *Piranha Press* and *Vertigo Comics*, in a bid to tailor for the new and increasing market. Of the two imprint companies, the latter became greatly influenced by McKean's milieu, seeing the artist become cover illustrator for many of the more successful titles, namely *Hellblazer* and *the Sandman*.

This new-found favour with D.C. granted McKean the opportunity to push the envelope even further, by offering a collaboration with author and playwright Grant Morrison. The project was a lavish Batman novel, scheduled to spearhead a range of special Batman comic publications, tying in with the fiftieth anniversary of the character. What resulted was a ninety-six page hardback volume, with full-colour reproductions that enabled McKean to indulge in his passion for audio-visual and photo-montage techniques. *Arkham Asylum*, was to become the artists most popular work to date.

In 1991, *The Face* magazine commissioned Gaiman and McKean for the serialised ten-part story *Signal to Noise*. During its creation, the artist employed computer graphics to expand his aesthetic. Since, he has produced *Cages*, a ten-part graphic novel series which he also wrote, and illustrated *Black Cocktail*, a novel written by Jonathan Carroll.

As well as illustrating the above material, McKean has also designed the identity and layout of his works, allowing for a more complete, and consistent visual treatise. In an attempt to analyse the work of Dave McKean more specifically, three examples are to be studied. The first, being McKean's first comic work, introduces the stylistics quirks that were to be later expounded upon in the ensuing American work. *Violent Cases* will be analysed for the use of alternate page layouts; for the interjections of symbolism that can be discerned when McKean has included non-figurative material; for the validity of the photo-montage; and for the mutation of drawing/painting styles in order to stress atmosphere and character. A single page and a double page spread from the work are to be assessed for the above traits, and will be reproduced at full scale. *Violent Cases* will be followed by an in-depth look at the design and illustration of *Arkham Asylum*. Being a full-colour graphic novel, the colouration of *Arkham* is also of added interest. With the artist's cover design as subject, the employment of typography in relation to the surrounding images is to be explored. This example contains hinted subjective meaning, subtly alluding to the plight of the Batman and the patients of the institution. The functional messages given by the cover are to be dis-

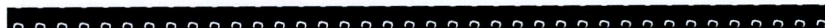






cussed, in order to ascertain McKean's objectivity. In designing the textural pages that open the tale and contain creator credits, a series of photographed compositions are used to establish tone. One such spread is to be explored for subjective content, and discussed in order to assess function. The book features instances of filmic similarity, largely borrowing from the manner of Film Noir. An almost entirely visual, 'silent' action sequence is proffered, illustrating this noir element in relation to the principles of the filmic genre. Following this, a discussion of the status of the comic medium in relation to the other media will ensue. An example from the closing pages of the book contains an interesting instance of expressionistic painting, and its meaning and purpose are to be deciphered.

*Signal to Noise* is the third subject, remarkable in many ways for its electronic flavour, and perhaps the most artistically successful of the artist's work. The artist has juxtaposed pages where highly individual and technically obscure imagery pepper a main body that is purposely structured and similar. Again, a number of illustrated examples are to be studied for stylistic, interpretative, symbolic and functional merit. This balance of objectivity and subjectivity pervades much of the artist's work, and as such is one of the larger issues of this entire discussion. In essence, McKean's status as an artist within a medium suffering from critical indifference is to be questioned. To this end, a detailed analysis of specific examples will be necessitated, to better understand the nature of McKean's milieu, and assess subjective and expressive qualities where communicative function must also be satisfied.









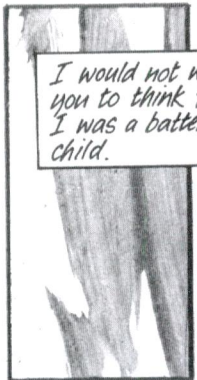


# Chapter 1: Violent Cases.









I would not want you to think that I was a battered child.



However...



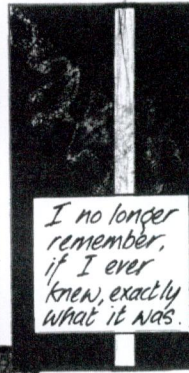
I wouldn't want to gloss over the true facts.

Without true facts, where are we?

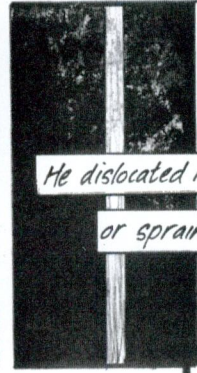
The truth is this :



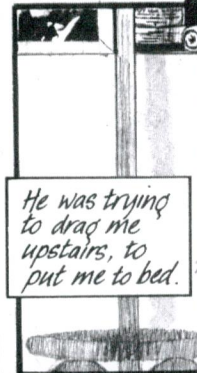
When I was four years old my father did something to my arm.



I no longer remember, if I ever knew, exactly what it was.



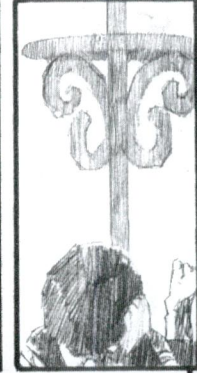
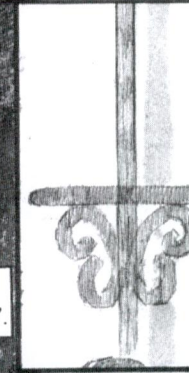
He dislocated it, or sprained it.



He was trying to drag me upstairs, to put me to bed.



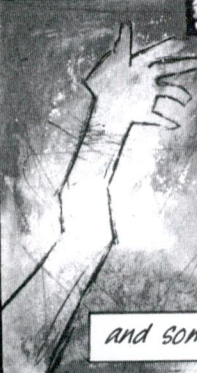
I was trying to go downstairs.



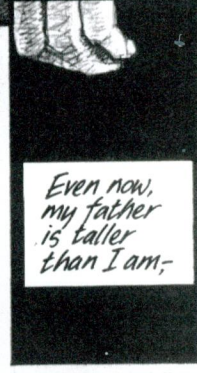
I pulled -



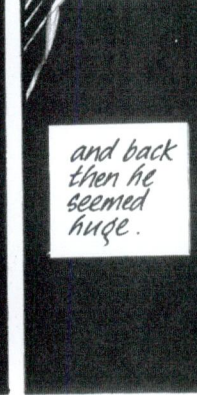
he tugged -



and something gave.



Even now, my father is taller than I am,



and back then he seemed huge.







McKean spent over five months illustrating and designing *Violent Cases*, which evolved into a seventy-two page, large-format graphic novel. Executed entirely in shades of grey and black, the techniques McKean have used are quite diverse. Flavours of contemporary painting pervade the work, side by side with collage and caricature. McKean's style is lucid, and has been compared to the work of Bill Sienkiewicz, an illustrator and graphic novel artist. (3, p.4)

A variety of media are at work here, ranging from the conventional- graphite; pastel; pencil; ink and wash- to the more obscure- photographic images; collage; montage; and real objects that have been attached to the surface of the page. The power of this flexibility lies in the manipulation of the viewer's mood. By this weaving of visual textures, instances of sometimes subtle transformation, (and oftentimes jarring contrast), the atmospheres hinted at in the script are fused with, and well realised.

The story centres around an unnamed man in an interviewee role, who struggles to recall the torrid days of his childhood. Slipping hazily in and out of the England of the sixties, and the Chicago of the twenties, the narrator's encounter with Al Capone's osteopath is slowly retold. To meet the challenge of portraying Gaiman's affecting script, McKean adopts a filmic visual narrative, through use of tone, pace and symbolism. To examine this approach more closely, one must study the techniques, and their discernable motives at first hand.

In **Illustration one** on the facing page, the opening page of the graphic novel has been reproduced at full-scale. Immediately, a strong and potent visual voice is brought to bear. The central character is introduced to the reader in a frontal, relaxed position. McKean employs a soft-edged drafting technique, charging the figure with an honest, inviting camaraderie. These straightforward panels are interspersed with fluid-like swathes of tone, symbolising the mental jolt of painful motion. These images serve to marry the action of the man lighting his cigarette to the scenes of remembered violence. The abstracted tones contain echoes of flame; of spontaneity, and the rapidity of mental/visual association. By vignetting the shapes upon a light ground, their suitability in addressing the issue of child-beating could also be inferred.

Further down the page, the artist uses recurring images of a hatstand. Its use is given over to the father of the character, and its form has been inserted into the background of the child's presence. This image coding hints at the dominance of a father over his son during the formative years of development. Throughout the page, the stand looms heavily over the boy, until his form is almost eclipsed by that of the father's foot. Together with the powerful hand, and the fact that the father figure never fits entirely into a single frame, the artist gives the reader a far more insightful





portrait of the father's personality. When one sees the father in the last panel, his nonchalant features are imbued with an authority and realism that the verbal script can only partially evince of.

The format and layout of the panels is also quite unusual in its design. Whereas most contemporary and tradition page layouts favour six to twelve panels of equal size, forming a grid structure that is consistently adhered to, McKean uses some thirty-five frames of alternate proportion. The effect lends the images a flickering appeal, and enables the artist to meter the pace of the narrative. The cinematic influence is felt in the cropping and editing of the figures and sequences. Some frames are dropped behind dissimilar scenes, and are partly hidden. The elements on the page assume an arrangement that is almost tectonic, their placement suggesting a rate of image absorption, and delineating the hidden, unsavoury subplot of the child's injury.

On the following two pages, in *Illustration two*, McKean employs a hoard of quirks that challenge the subjective. The frivolous renderings of the wine gums describe nicely the intrinsic absurdity of the sweets. Using a perpendicular viewpoint to evoke a child's horizontal perspective, an image that could realistically leap from a character's memory of an incident long past, (if only for its oddity), is presented. The manner in which the artist describes the old osteopath seems more implicative of mentality, when compared to that used for the boy. The aged man's anatomy and expression has been heightened to perhaps suggest his life and work. His fingers are drawn as spatulas, calloused and distended over a long span of years. A brash, yet spidery use of line is used to define the contours of the man's benign face. The even, horizontal lines that shadow his face on the left defy the directions of the planes they define. When played against the more scratchy vertical strokes, and surmounted by cumulus thinning hair, a jigsaw of an identity is created.

These techniques are seldom used in comic book art. Expression and stance are mainly used to hint at character, and pacing is ordinarily the province of the scriptwriter. McKean is more subjective in his approach. Were the image of the osteopath leaning on the side of the couch to be given in a conventional movie, the viewer would have to garner words, expressions and actions to assess personality. The physical appearance of the man could not be altered, subverted almost, to reveal his essence. McKean is free though, to borrow the principles of caricature, and express his own interpretation, as fuelled by the narration as by his own experience.

When the osteopath remembers back to his own youth and apprenticeship, an intricate gauze of imagery is fused. The result is a beautifully realised mental pan, as the man shuffles the prominent and subliminal thoughts in a bid to recollect. The images themselves, can be digested on many levels. Their presence could be purely the artist













I was six before I discovered that port were the dark red wine gums -

CLARET

BURGUNDY

PORT

(yellow were sherry, light red were burgundy, white were claret, while black, a little improbably, were champagne) -

-and resolved not to chew any in case I got gout, which I must by then have established was some kind of disease.

At the time, I was just pleased that he was laughing. Then he made me lie on a red couch, while he soyezzed my shoulder and hurt it.

After a while I asked him what an osteopath was.

A BONE DOCTOR. I PUSH THE BONES BACK TO WHERE THEY SHOULD BE. DOES THAT HURT?

I told him no, then OW, yes, it did. Had he been an osteopath for a long time?

"SINCE THE YEAR AMERICA ENTERED THE GREAT WAR. YOU KNOW WHEN THAT WAS?"

I shook my head.

1917, IT WAS. I WAS EIGHTEEN. IN CHICAGO. THAT'S IN AMERICA. HOW OLD ARE YOU?"

Four.

I was four. Was he American?

"FOR MANY YEARS I WAS AMERICAN. FIRST I CAME FROM..."

I do not remember the name of the town. Lodz, or Grodz, perhaps. Or maybe I am confusing memories of the name of my grandfather's home town. Or just somewhere I heard. I'm sorry, but I'm just trying to give you the facts.

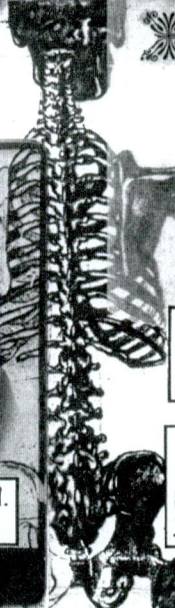
...THEN I WENT TO AMERICA, TO ELLIS ISLAND, WITH MY FATHER.

"MY FATHER WAS A SORT OF OSTEOPATH. HE WAS A GOOD MAN.

AND WHEN I WAS EIGHTEEN MY FATHER APPRENTICED ME TO AN OSTEOPATH, -

AND WHEN I WAS TWENTY HE TOLD ME I KNEW EVERYTHING HE DID, AND I SHOULD GO AWAY.

HE WAS DRUNK."





I knew drunk.

Drunk was sticker,

tipsy,

hic

when you drank a whole glass of Grandma's blackberry wine, -

and you became a source of amusement for the rest of the family.

"I HAD BEEN WITH HIS WIFE.

I WOULD HAVE STAYED WITH HIM, HE KNEW SO MANY THINGS, BUT HE MADE ME GO AWAY.

THEN I WENT TO CHICAGO, THEN I WENT TO CALIFORNIA, THEN, LATER, AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR, I CAME HERE, TO PORTSMOUTH.

SHE IS A BEAUTIFUL TOWN, AND I HAVE FRIENDS HERE.

OLD MEN, LIKE ME.

It is decided then- its

OLD, OLD FRIENDS :

THEY CAME HERE AS TAILORS, FOR THE SAILORS."

10 for 6d

This made me laugh.

I started to repeat it to myself, singing -

"Tailors for sailors and sailors for tailors and tailors for sailors..."

until the old man pushed something with his thumb that clicked, -

the Tobacco that

and I bit my lower lip to keep from crying out.









responding to the requirements of the narration. By the virtue of illustration, the fact that the scene has been expressed visually, what occurs is a process that codifys an abstraction into a sequence. The thought processes of remembrance become the linear sequence for our intake. There is nothing terribly new about this semantic- in a televisual society, the whole process has become somewhat commonplace. Within this context, McKean's response to his brief is extremely likely- at the least, acceptable. McKean uses images of the lens, but then , it is also fair to surmise that the osteopath, a product of and into the era of the lens, would do likewise.

The manner in which the images overlap and layer creates a pleasing nuance of the old man in his maudlin state. His thoughts amble methodically to Portsmouth, the imagery miming the hierarchy of the accompanying caption:

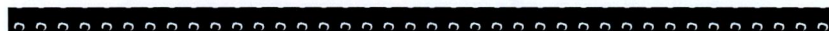
"After the Second World-War, I come here, to Portsmouth.  
She is a beautiful town,  
and I have friends here"

The town itself, and then its people are described in turn, a hazy section of an old map, imposed with scenes of quiet society and a falstaffian inhabitant, complete with nautical seasoning. The misty fusion of rendered osteopath and photo-montage occurs where the character's spectacle lens dissolves, as his mind's eye sees what his own cannot.

Alan Moore pens the introduction to the book, and in this extract, sums up McKean's achievement:

"The texture and subtleties of meaning that the artwork brings forth, make this a work of rich complexity that rewards repeated examination, and elicits responses that a short story in its unillustrated form would clearly be incapable of. This is something new. Its stylistic nuances defy classification, as easily as does its genre. Part childhood memory, part reconstruction of a violent past, part comment on the magic to be gleaned from remembered events, Violent Cases evokes unfamiliar feelings in an unfamiliar way"

(5, p. 4)











## Chapter 2: Arkham Asylum.









In the facing page, McKean's cover design for *Arkham Asylum* has been reproduced (Illustration 3). The artist demonstrates his graphic design capabilities here, as a nicely balanced, and thematically suitable solution is proffered. Combining computer generated and modified typography with a spartan assortment of painterly images, McKean establishes the tone of the tale.

In his treatment of letterforms, the artist displays a similar knack for mood that his illustration possesses. The basic marriage of opposites is at work here, juxtaposing serif and sans-serif; upright with italicised; slender with heavy; capital letters with lowercase; and horizontal with vertical orientation. A recurrent theme is the placement of serif characters at the start of words, evident in the title and creator credits. These are followed with tall, unadorned san-serif characters, creating a subtle ambiguity. Peculiarities like these act in absence of a definitive logo, lending the feel of the cover an individual appearance. Indeed, the whole typographic layout, with all its odd traits, combine to give the design a rather overworked, overtly stylish countenance.

However, in the wake of a floodtide of badly designed, harmony-snubbing comic covers, the opposite example is somewhat dissimilar. The impositions of the medium itself, prevalent most in the need for extensive sales, favour the commercial over the sublime. In this light, McKean's treatment is something of a paradox. Like the contrasting letterforms of the title, the whole cover fuses loud with the whisper, commercial with the subtle. Where large type has been used, dominance has been quelled by narrowing letter widths, and slimming stroke weight. In addition, the heavier forms of the lowercase **a**'s have been reduced in scale in comparison with the remaining title words, and a three-quarter moon icon has been used to soften the blow. This symbol is one of a number of devices the artist has employed to give type and image a semblance of relation.

The subtitle, running perpendicular to the title, and from top to bottom, also houses some outlandish touches. The word *serious*, iterated later in the line, has been emphasised by way of insertion into rectangles of tone. Whereas the other words consist of sans-serif capital letters, horizontally scaled to read slowly, the housed words command attention. A disquieting feature of this relationship lies in the distortion of x-height. The term applies to the distance between the baseline and crown of lowercase characters. Given that this invariably lies beneath that of corresponding capitals, the harmonies of the line become doubly mysterious. The capital letters has been extended, so much so that they drop beneath the overall height of the lowercase characters. In opposition, the word *serious* is in italics, and its component have been condensed and heightened. This is where the relationship grows complex. The principles of let-





batman

A  
S  
E  
R  
I  
O  
U  
S  
H  
O  
U  
S  
E  
O  
N  
S  
E  
R  
I  
O  
U  
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A  
R  
T  
H

# ARKHAM ASYLUM

W R I T T E N   b y  
**g**RANT **m**ORRISON

i L L U S T R A T E D   b y  
**d**AVE **m**CKEAN

I  
l  
l  
u  
s  
t  
r  
a  
t  
i  
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n  
  
3











terform height have been subverted, by insinuating an x-height for the capitals, and ascribing capital status to the lowercase forms. In doing so, an ethereal danger, or shades of lunacy are suggested.

The placement of the typographic elements interlocks with their painted counterparts, creating two main areas of emphasis. Both instances of the entombed serious coincide with the nocturnal images of the moon and the bat, underlining their significance. Together with the iterated moon icon, this is one of three attempts to marry type and image, the third being the most vestigial. No more than a hybrid thread, a form can be discerned beneath the title of the book. The ghosted image of a letter-form, McKean's delineation of the lowercase **a** has been rotated from the vertical axis. Its form has been roughened and obscured with grid-like parameters. The addition of the curving compass lines begs association with antique architectural drafts, and the overall impression is one of hand crafted genesis. The outlines of the character are scratchy and abrasive, giving heat to the atmosphere of dereliction the images carry.

These images are relatively straightforward. The pink moon perhaps, is McKean's tip of the hat to Nick Drake's song of the same title, who, along with Lou Reed, is cited as among the artist's musical inspiration. (5, p. 1) The song welcomes the ensuing pink moon, which is hinted to bring apocalyptic times:

"So it's written and so it's said,  
That the pink moon is on its way.  
None of you stand so tall,  
That the pink moon won't get you all...."

*(Pink Moon, Nick Drake, 1972 Island Records)*

The moon's nature is chalky and faint, as though seen through a veil, but the spontaneity of execution adds a sense of urgency to its presence. The second moon, hedged between the letters of the title, appears to be waxing as the other wanes, most likely alluding to the two main subplots of the script. One sees Batman struggle to retain conviction in his already tenuous, and morally vague vocation. The other concerns the life of the founder of the institution, Amadeus Arkham, who achieves fulfilment in his dissolution into insanity. That the fading moon bears association with the bat, by sharing its mode of expression, and that the other forms an integral part of the name of the institution, seems to bear out this theory.

The bat clearly symbolises Batman, flitting through a labyrinth of dismal corridors and truncated pipes. The mouth of the creature is accented sharply with white, almost as a light source in an otherwise charcoal environment. Its teeth bared in defence, the character's fear and rage are represented. Despise its cowed posture, McKean has





depicted the motion of its flight as emergence, though in an oblique manner. This notion is carries by the imposition of the bat upon those elements that allude to its prison.

On the bottom right of the composition, root-like fibres are shaped. Their forms are serpentine, almost intestinal, as they writhe in an insufferable tangle. Here and there, small tendril offshoots dog their dilemma. It is very likely that the artist has used the forms to symbolise the patients of the asylum. Being a shelter for the violently deranged, the majority of its occupants (many of whom are Batman's sometime adversaries) owe their incarceration to the Dark Knight. As the tubers are eclipsed by the blur of the bat's clawed feet, their aspect changes. They emerge from the encounter as leaden pipes, seen later in the asylum as continuous conduits, presence of which is visible in many scenes. The pipes are used by the patients to channel their cries, and to amplify tattoos of frustrated rhythm.

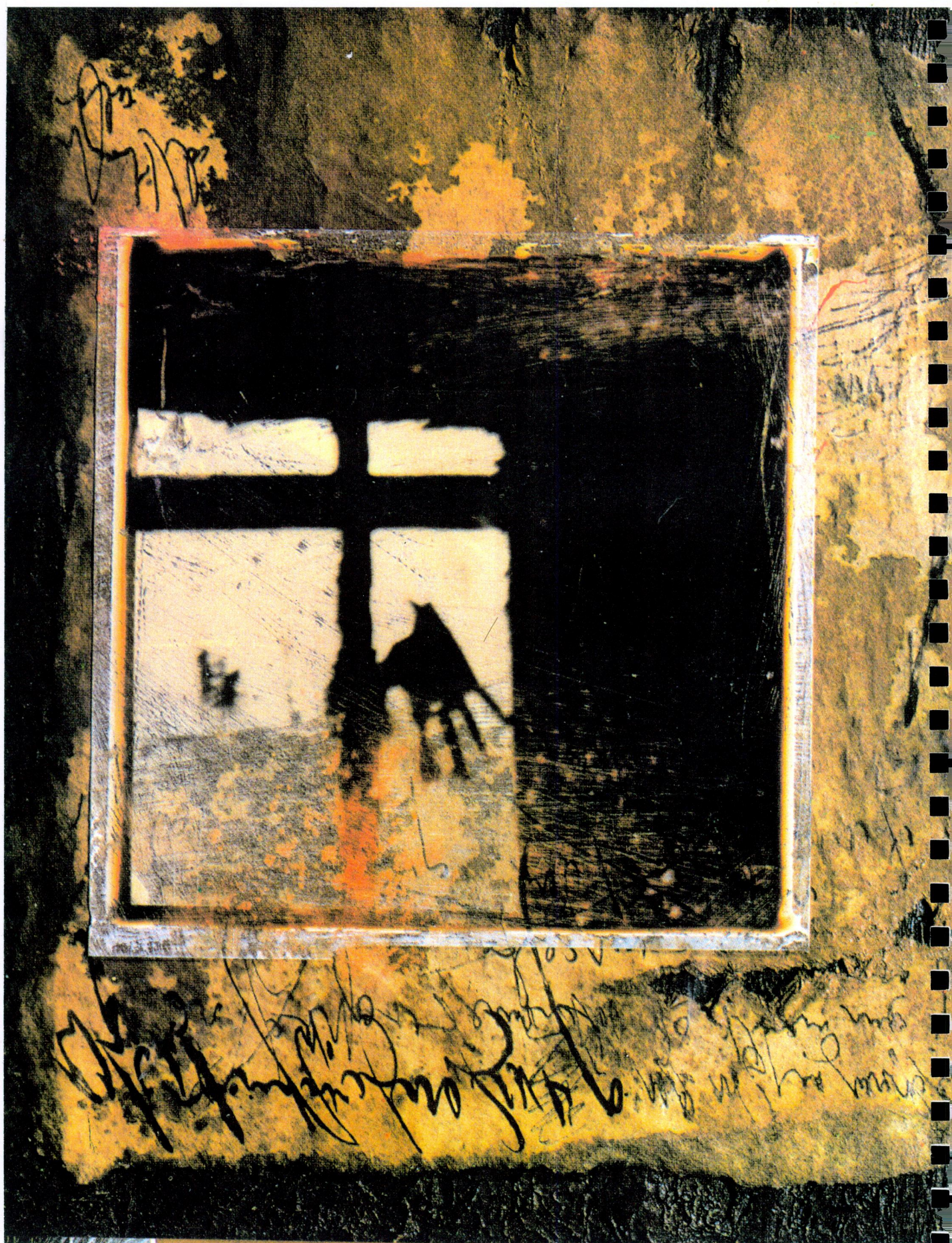
The appearance of the cover manages to successfully say Batman to the potential customer. As if in echo of this, where the hero's name does appear, it is moderate in scale, and its angle and position attaches little prominence to its message. The composition is tight and sinister, colouration- bloody and dim. Success is achieved by retaining the pocket-darkness of the hero's domain, the noir mythos the world of Gotham has always enjoyed.

Were one to leaf through the ten introductory pages of *Arkham Asylum*, a feeling of bewilderment could be forgiven. In keeping with the lavish, coffee-table status the package earns, McKean has been granted ample space to indulge his passion for obscure subject matter. Armed with a garrison of nails, decaying wood, scorched paper, fragments of dissected watches, and other denizens of the garden shed, an array of photographed dyspepsia ensues. The oddball gallery betrays the sort of aspiring taste that the publishers of the book, D.C.Comics, likely insisted upon. Perhaps this broaches the dangerous turf of speculation, but from a company hoping to find a niche market, its hardly preposterous. In this light, however pretty, these images are reduced to mere visual rhetoric, scornable attempts to claim inheritance of *arty* lineage. Conversely, theories of conspiracy are not easily proved, and in the absence of such, suspicion must reside with the suspicious. The eclecticism of the motley gallery is well within McKean's milieu, this from a man who framed several cover paintings for the comic *Sandman* with six-inch-high shelving, its compartments filled with all manner of collected paraphernalia.

Illustration four, overleaf, depicts the third in this series of five double-page spreads. Atmosphere resides here in abundance, and the execution beggars attempt to classify its genre. A stew of oil and wax has been liberally applied to a ground that





















appears to be wooden. This coat has been hacked and enscribed, its beration touching dementia. Overlaid on this surface, a scrap of frittered parchment bears in turn a burnished photographic image. Assuming that one has just arrived upon this scene, and without foreknowledge of the plot, the violence and ambiguity of its purpose breeds unease. Failing that, a taste of the contagion suffered by the asylum and its unwitting parasites, is hinted at.

Later, the reader learns that the founder of the asylum is reduced to scratching a spell of binding into the floor of his own cell, with his fingernails acting as stylus. The inclusion of the distorted hand, its fingers splayed, identifies the glyph maker. The scrawls that cover the page run in reverse, starting on the left side of the paper. Their course carries them onto the pock-marked surface, denied legibility by the dark ground. The fact that the medium is ink, speaks not only of the tortuous fingernail episode, but rather the character's entire span. Throughout the book, Amadeus Arkham narrates in the form of a personal journal, with hand lettered script used to fill the captions, the style similar. At its origin, the script is bold and free, the ink freshly refueled. As it traverses the parchment, and then wall or floor, its forms waver and lose their imperative. The denial of the x shapes, is followed by this break in surface. The enigma of the entire panorama, is solvable only after consideration of the story. The fact that the text is backwards suggests that Arkham was always insane, that his descent, when it came, was merely a relapse. The entire introduction then, could be interpreted as the artist's version of a filmic introduction, relayed as the credits are displayed. The rest of the series contains similar snatches of the story, serving to warm up the reader to the impending tale, peppering the usually drab title pages with atmosphere. McKean's film background becomes easier to discern.

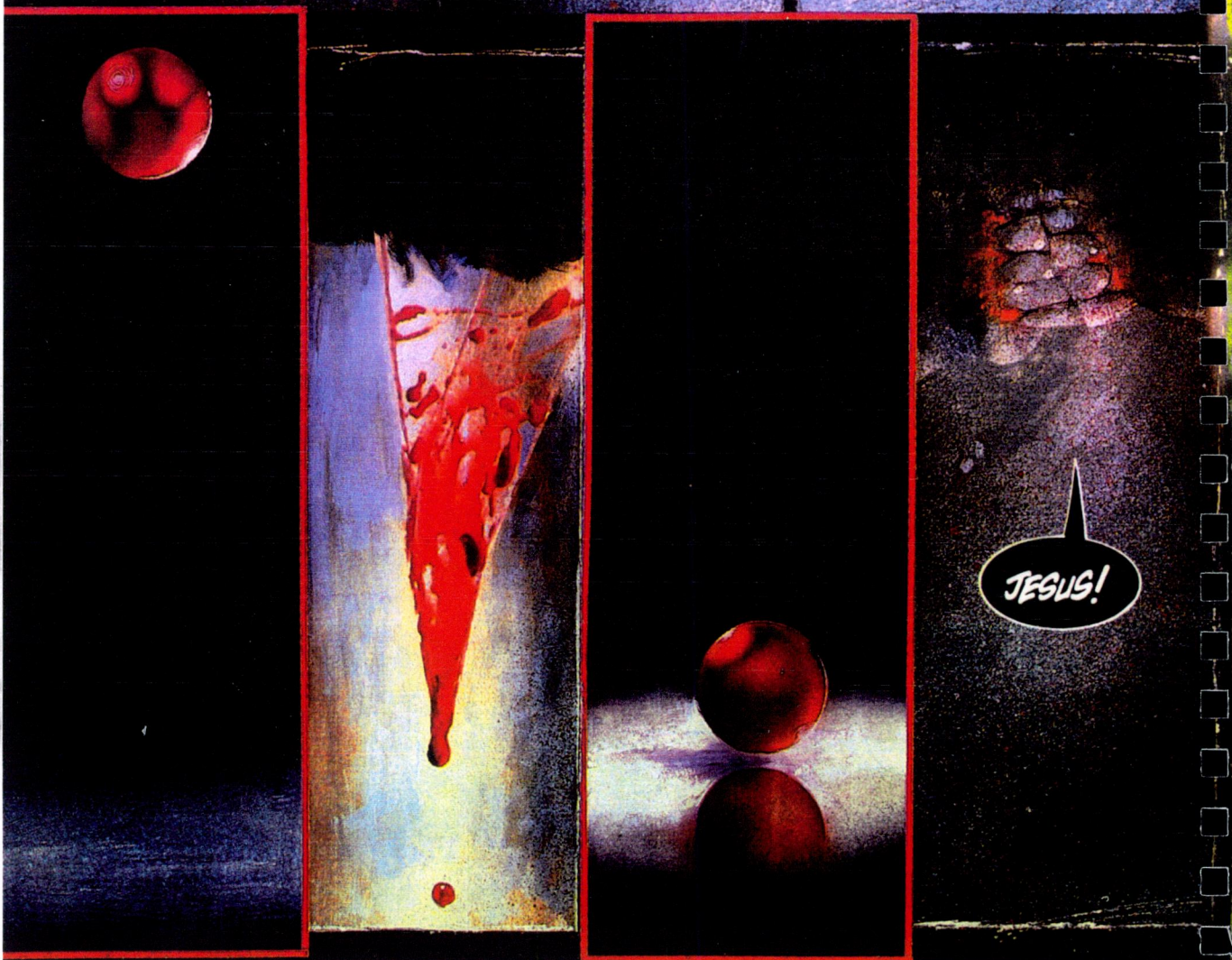
The following two pages give an example from the main body of the volume (Illustration five). The Batman finds himself embroiled in a maze as soul-consuming as his psychosis. The very air in the asylum distills despair from unease, and the character becomes cocooned in a destructive self-absorption. At this point in the narrative, the vigilante mutilates himself, desperate to break the loop of violent episode he is forced to reenact. The murder of his parents, witnessed as a helpless child, is the oft-repeated origin of this character. Now however, the retelling has grown more jarring, and with this in mind, the artist is required to express the angst of the Batman in all its drama and detail.

What results is a sequence of taut pacing that would hold less impact in any other medium. Televisually, the progression would seem stilted by the intrusive qualities of slow-motion photography. The technique would govern the rate of absorption. In novel format, the wounding of the character's hand would demand perhaps several

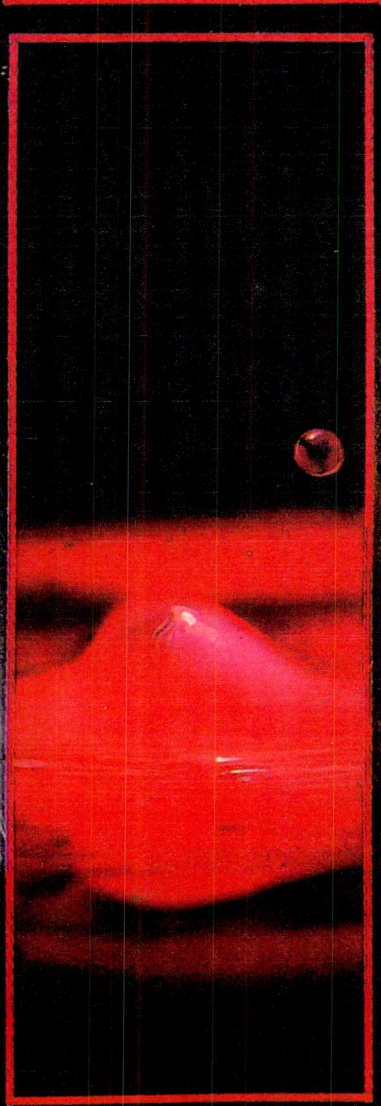
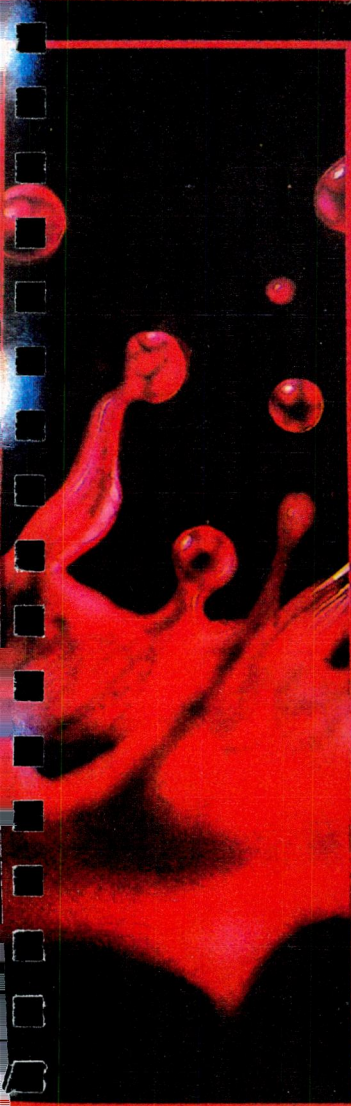
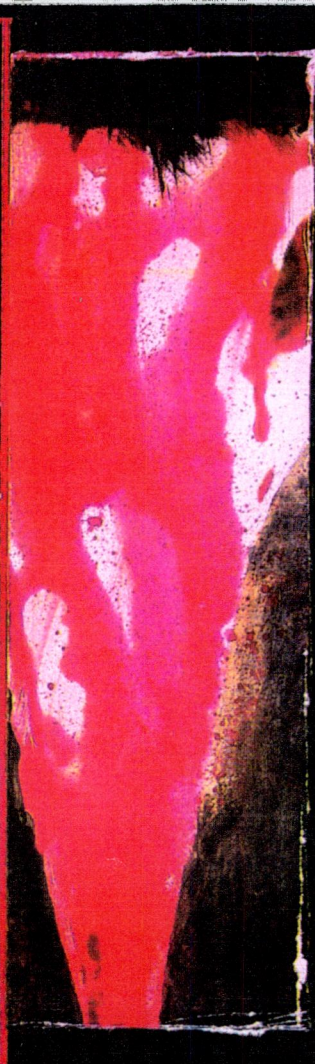
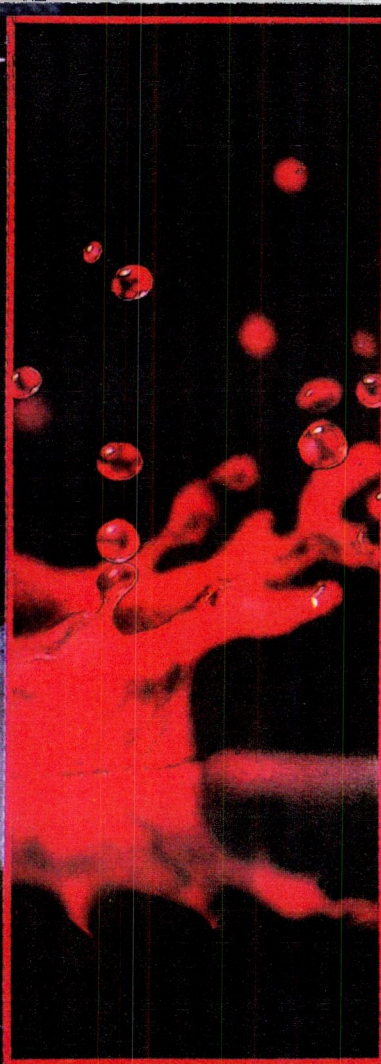
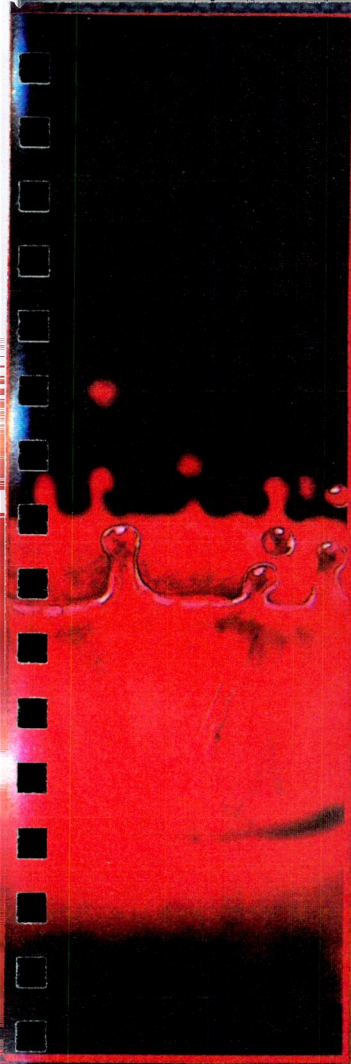






















passages, if anything of the detail of the scene were to be evinced of. By this process, the essential suddenness of the sequence, and its pacing would be drowned in a sea of type. Morrison uses minimal dialogue here, allowing the reader to pan through the frames on an empathic level, realising that the potency of McKean's treatment, coupled with an individual response to what's shown, gives the viewer a task of inscape.

The first three panels demand rapid ingestion, the motion of the act carried through as the broken palm is honed in upon. The detail of the renditions, which become photorealistic as the bloodletting starts, further charges the panels with the appearance of movie frames. From this point, the meter is slowed, the visual narrative dividing into three subplots- the descending globule of blood; the bloodied glass protruding from the front of the hand; and the knitted teeth of Batman, indicative of the pain of the act. Horror is generated by the sharp editing. The aesthetic of Eisenstein, with his development of rapid-fire montage editing, is present here in all its abrasion. The style of illustration in its grim sharpness, and macabre colouration, hints also towards film noir. The obscure attention to the incidental sphere of blood, suffuses the scenes with a heightened drama. This noir element is not alien to Batman's world:

"This noir menace is the glue that holds the whole of the Batman oeuvre together. Noir is the element that transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary- or nightmarish"

(6,p. 146)

In the following commentary, writer Foster Hirsch describes the essential elements of film noir. It just as easily describes McKean's response to his scripted directive for the events in *Illustration five*:

"Dramas of people in crisis, noir illuminated the night world of the other self that bedevils us all....In the verve and colloquial tanginess of its dialogue, in its range of provocative themes, in its gallery of taut performances, its studied compositions in light and shadow, its creation of sustained suspense....film noir seizes and penetrates a universal heart of darkness."

(7,p. 209)

Material like *Arkham Asylum*, belonging, as it does to the comic medium, is unprecedented. The drama McKean has breathed into this sample was apparently not to be found in comics beforehand:

"Comic art as a medium has distinct disadvantages compared to film and television. True drama does not translate well to the comics medium. Whether this is because of limitations inherent in comics par-se, or more due to limitations in any audience span, is difficult to tell. Perhaps it is a little of both."

(8, p. 50- 51)







Whereas McKean has obviously borrowed from his educative study of film narrative, it is then plausible to expect the artistic sensibilities of modern comic readers to do likewise. That is, to bring to their interpretation of the graphic novel all that makes for the power of the film medium. The closeness of the artist's imagery to filmic narrative begs the premise of dramatic effect enjoyed by the latter. By willing the viewer to assume a less passive role than offered by the terraced seat, not only McKean, but all good comic artists increase drama by no small measure. The reader is called upon to command the silent pages to cry out their depicted woes and triumphs; to smell the blood and sweat and tears; to feel the emotions shared on a personal, one to one level.

The allegorical chain sequence of the blood droplet falling and splashing, falling and splashing, is a nice example of the artist, as in the pages of *Illustration four*, subjectively responding to his task. A globule of blood strikes the floor in a holocaustic impact, its symmetry breached. The microscopic reaction births repetition, as smaller globules still are thrown up in tinier microcosm. When this subplot is abandoned, in the second-last frame, the act is played over again. The soup-like viscosity of the bloodied surface is broiling with motion, and about to acquiesce to gravity, when another orb begins its fall. Over and over. When run between flashes of the Batman's plight, his suffering gains depth. This event transpires soon after the character's descent into the asylum, and the emphasis it is given serves a purpose. Like the blood, the Batman has reached a crisis point in his self-confrontation. When the moment passes, as with the blood droplet, the hero is doomed to reenact his dissolution in an ever tightening manner.

*Illustration six* shows another double-page spread. This extract comes from later in the work, and is concerned with the journal of Amadeus Arkham. His drama is enfolded in tandem with that of the Batman, and is set sixty years before. Parallel with the angst of the vigilante, the tragic psychologist returns to madness when confronted with the slaughter of his wife and child. The techniques of the first two frames are reminiscent of McKean's tenure on *Violent Cases*. Painting over real material, the artist uses its actuality to enhance reader-association. This device is carried through to the next scene, disdaining the need to copiously study what can be better described by presence. The figure is cast against an enormous window, its illumination studied with an Impressionistic fervour.

The third image, is perhaps more worth of attention. An Expressionistic inscape is proffered, pure subjective rendering of an emotive subject. The physiognomy of this character bears no resemblance to the bearded relic kneeling in the morning sun. Rather, the figure affects humane dislocation in general. Bold, searing colour serves








Slowly, methodically,  
I put on my mother's  
wedding dress and I  
kneel down.  
I kneel down in  
that nursery  
spatial.

It all seems  
perfectly  
rational.

Perfectly, perfectly  
rational.



A large, expressive painting of a man in a dark suit against a bright red background. The man's face is partially obscured by shadows and the texture of the paint. The background is a vibrant, almost abstract red with some darker, swirling patterns. The overall mood is intense and dramatic.

Later, I find myself  
sobbing, choking,  
retching into the  
lavatory bowl.



Is this what it all  
comes down to--all  
our dreams and hopes  
and aspirations?



Nothing but VOMIT?

Oh God, I'm AFRAID.

I'm so afraid.



I think I may  
be ill.







to give volume to the nullity of the robe that shrouds the being. The background is apocalyptic in intensity, its flatness similar to stage scenery. The fiery strings of ochres and yellows contain shades of the tonal splashes found in the second and third frames of *Illustration 1*. Again, the anger that radiates from their application can be felt. In this instance, the inferno-like colour scheme is better able to convey mood, the strength of the neighbouring red area adding to the impact. Their presence casts the figure forwards, to the extent that he appears to be falling.

McKean anchors his subject to his environment by coarsely implying that its escape is prevented by three devices of binding. The most expressive, and disturbing of these instances, is the filament of blue-black tone that pierces the eyes and skull of the victim. As in the case of the osteopath in *Illustration 2*, whose memories seem to pour from his eyes, the artist attaches emphasis to the sense of sight. This may owe fealty to the old adage that the eyes are the windows to the soul, the portals through which the nature of one's predicament is interpreted strongest. This belief is responsible for the plate-like eyes that Japanese comic characters possess. In echo of the traits of Disney animation in the fifties, the comic artists of Japan have retained this feature, the mimic becoming the established. (9, p. 13)

The second and third symbols of chastity are vaguely suggested. They concern the wire-like bonds that encirce the figure's torso, and the placement of the arms in a similarly compromised position. The nature of the latter is difficult to ascertain, as McKean has drawn a series of scouring parallel black lines across the figure's chest. When these strokes reach the reclining shoulder on the right of the man's form, they become circuitous loops, wrapping around their prisoner, but lacking substance where their orbit is resumed. This perhaps betokens an imminent release, or the self-infliction of man's woes. The wire-like forms bear association with the work of Anslem Kieffer, whose studied victims of Nazi oppression suffered similar tortuous abasement, their forms frequently beset with barbed-wire.

The last three panels of the page, running in sequence from top to bottom, hark back to the filmic nature of some of the artist's produce. Realistic in a hazy kind of way, the cropping of the images, and the flow of their continuity suggest stills from a movie. The tight cropping also serves to narrow the perspective of the viewer to one of keyhole proportion. One feels almost voyeuristic intruding upon the suffering of the tragic character.











# Chapter 3: Signal to Noise.









*Signal to Noise* is the most recent of McKean's colour graphic novel work, preceding the largely monotone *Cages* maxi-series. Originally serialised in *The Face* magazine in 1990, the work has been collected into a graphic novel package by VG Graphics. The title of the book is misleading- vision is the key word here. The emphasis on noise is a contradiction in terms, as today one is surrounded with so much noise that it is virtually impossible to detect any signals whatsoever in it. If it were somehow possible to distil meaning from this maelstrom, it is hardly likely that one would know how to respond.

Illustration 7 gives a double page arrangement from the third chapter of the story. Viewed as a whole, the artist clearly marks the division of the pages, and their depicted scenarios with an abrupt contrast of media. The first page is somewhat new territory, an entire sequence being described in photo-montage. By its nature, the facing page seems rigorously structured, a more traditional symmetry in operation. The plot concerns itself with the thoughts of a middle-aged film director, who, upon learning he has but a few months to live, relays his ideas for his proposed movie to the viewer. At this juncture, the character has recently learned of his fatal condition, and has just informed a close friend.

Some twenty-two photographs have been melded and overlaid, conveying no less than sixteen perspectives. Textural hints in the upper and lower right hand side of the page, imply that McKean has transferred the images onto a surface capable of allowing underlying material to ghost strongly through. To all appearances, greaseproof paper, or some relative (tracing paper perhaps) has been used. This process can be achieved by soaking the photographs in a bath of spirits, and laying the dampened subjects face-down on the desired surface. Certainly, the blurred aspect of the photos here, and the softened manner of their surface belies a dampened treatment.

Taking cues from the caption given, McKean assumes a subjective stance. The substitution of recorded reality for the illustrated illusion thereof, is jarring, when its authenticity is challenged by the non-linear structure. Instead of the smooth sequence of screened images- similar to those used here- the aimlessness of arrangement defies passivity. Or more clearly, without an order imposed on information, the viewer is challenged with a jigsaw-type clutter. All of this ascribes the reader's puzzlement and alarm to the nausea of the filmmaker at having to conduct himself in a normal, socially defined manner. The obscurity of the artist's presentation, serves then to express the rejection of the commonplace, when faced with a vastly larger, and inescapable truth.

Contrasting sharply with the former, the second page is an offering of typical McKean. The majority of the graphic novel is executed in this way, making the man's







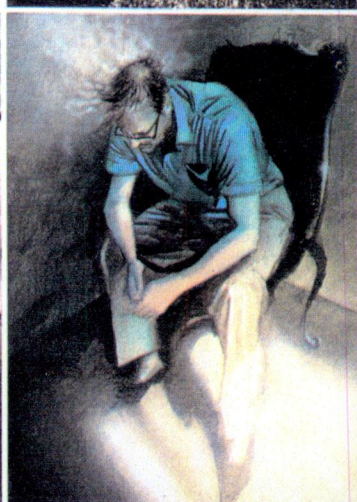
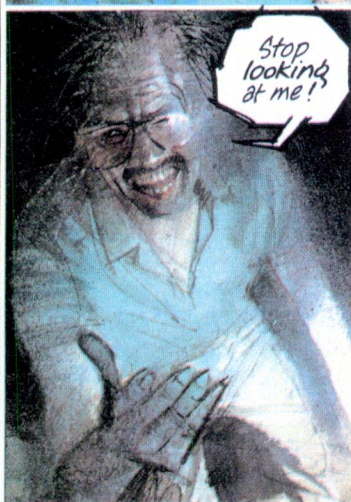
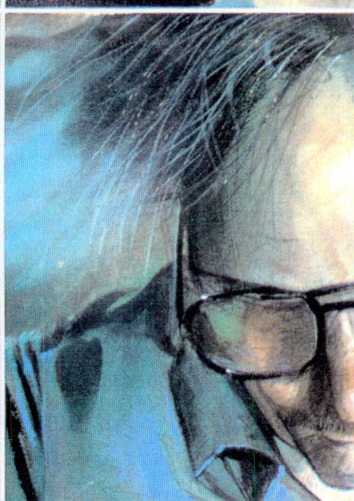
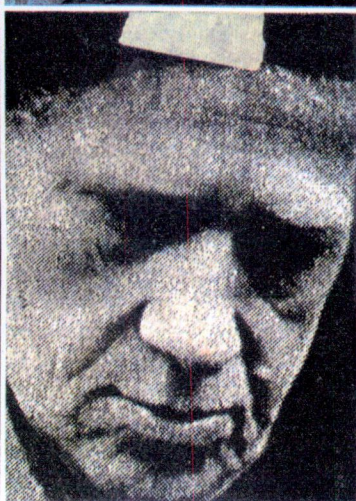
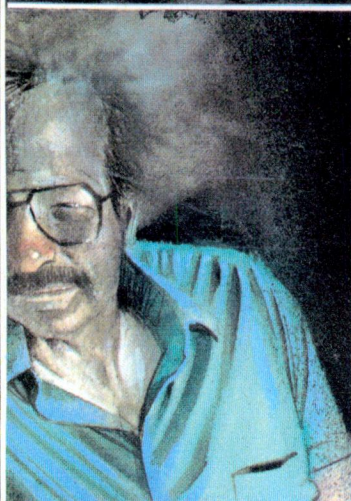
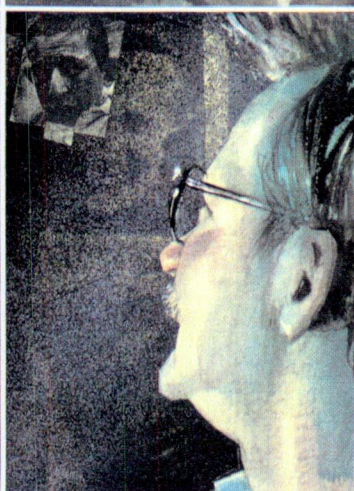
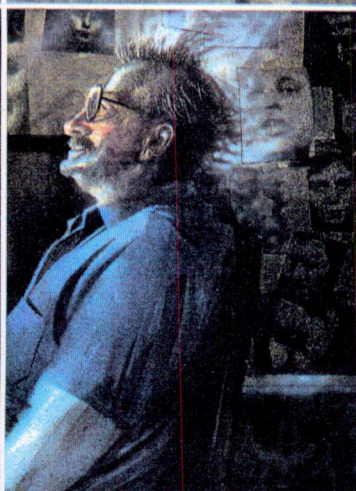
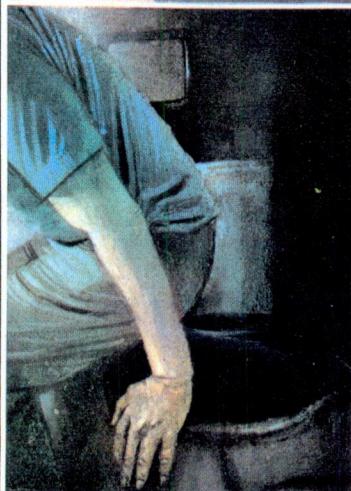
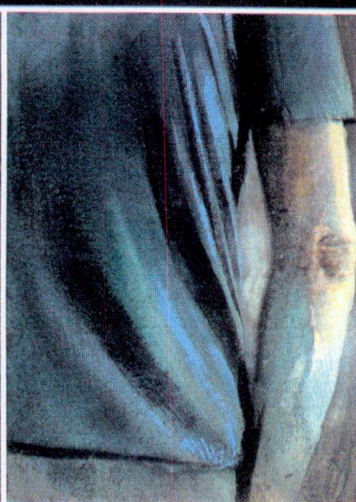




Inanna talking, saying things, she's sorry,  
doctors make mistakes, she's so sorry, new  
treatments every day, if there's anything  
she can do, so very sorry, on and on,  
saying nothing at all.

Just noise.











irascible doom all the more prevalent. Again, by contrasting these instances with those of an altogether different, and fiercely individual nature, their underlining is guaranteed. Here, the juxtaposition implies that a period of time has elapsed between first and second pages. When the man retires to the sanctity of his studio, it is with the resigned, or somewhat disjointed air of a soul beginning to comprehend (or maybe even accept) his circumstance.

The study of the character closing, and then turning from the door is wince-making in its starkness. His arm is drawn as an immobile extension of his torso, blighted with raw patches of abraded skin. At the elbows, McKean employs a hatching series of subtle red strokes, indicative of added hurt. The snail-slow meter of the action, (man stoops to sit; man reclines in seat; man looks up- sees image- shifts attention- sees other image- glances elsewhere- sees third image; man reacts - and so on) suffuse the sequence with an addled, if leaden atmosphere. When he can no longer bear the unbroken visages of his silhouetted clippings, when one has the pertinence to stare back, the rendering grows blurred in its rapidity, reflected in the busyness of its execution. McKean returns to the technique of allowing real images to threaten the existence of the painted. The coarsely printed newspaper photographs have been darkened, and made more gritty, their indifferent expressions tantamount to those of conscripted pall-bearers. The image of the laughing woman is brightly lit, intensifying the surrounding gloom by its illumination. In the next panel, the artist has shaded his subject's face into near extinction, making the previous image seem iridescent. The whole page is a study in manipulation, with the artist the dominant player. At his disposal are a range of methodical techniques, honed on earlier projects, and enriched by the incorporation of new media.

Throughout the book each chapter is hemmed by two spreads, all of which are remarkably different, all of which are electronically generated. *Illustration 8*, over-leaf, bridges chapters two and three. According to the artist, this intertextual material was created with the assistance of a colour laser-copier, and a text-sampling program. (10, p. 68) The accompanying text in these pages is hodge-podge, the penned mindvomit of the central character's attempts to brainstorm for the movie he will never make. Consequently, McKean is bereft of any specific directive, and as such, free to flavour these words with gusto. *Illustration 8* offers a smattering of antique science, the repeated details of an archaic clock or astronomical instrument. The artist has picked up on the content of the first line of the copy text- "Introduction to bits." The effect is one of heavy forms, weighted with bruising colours. What results is a sort of surreal trifle, hierarchies of Baroque ferris-wheel forms layering to the point of suffocation. The ambiguous nature of the heavily adorned forms, reminiscent of

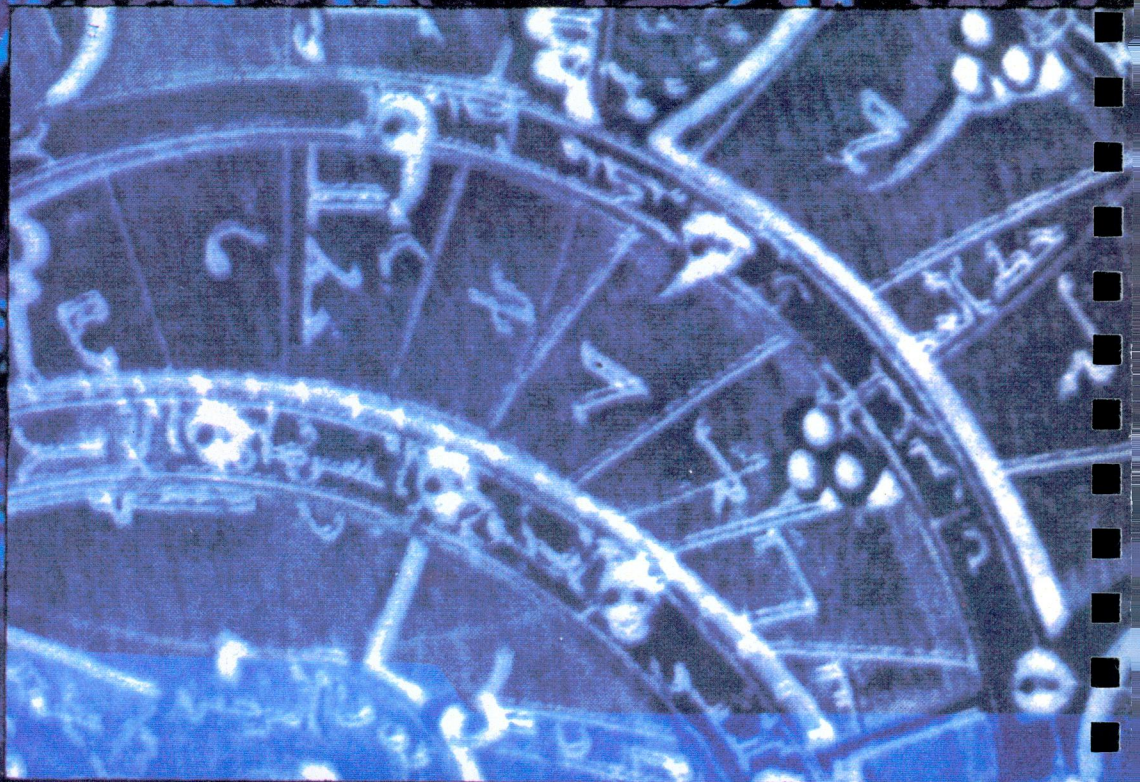












Introduction to bits. Things are going up on the kerb, every few months. Maybe.

Bottle of the inside of the lines on the landing, not as we can set of brightness. But the houses get repayed, man. Anywhere. There's nowhere else to be late at a number of me? But it's visible from the house. It's early evening, but it crackles and perhaps they own.

It means that the result of bubbly waiting for a few moments I have to flinch at the forthcoming disaster strikes.

Nathan: He travels.

While most of the hoarded seconds of the moon given flesh.

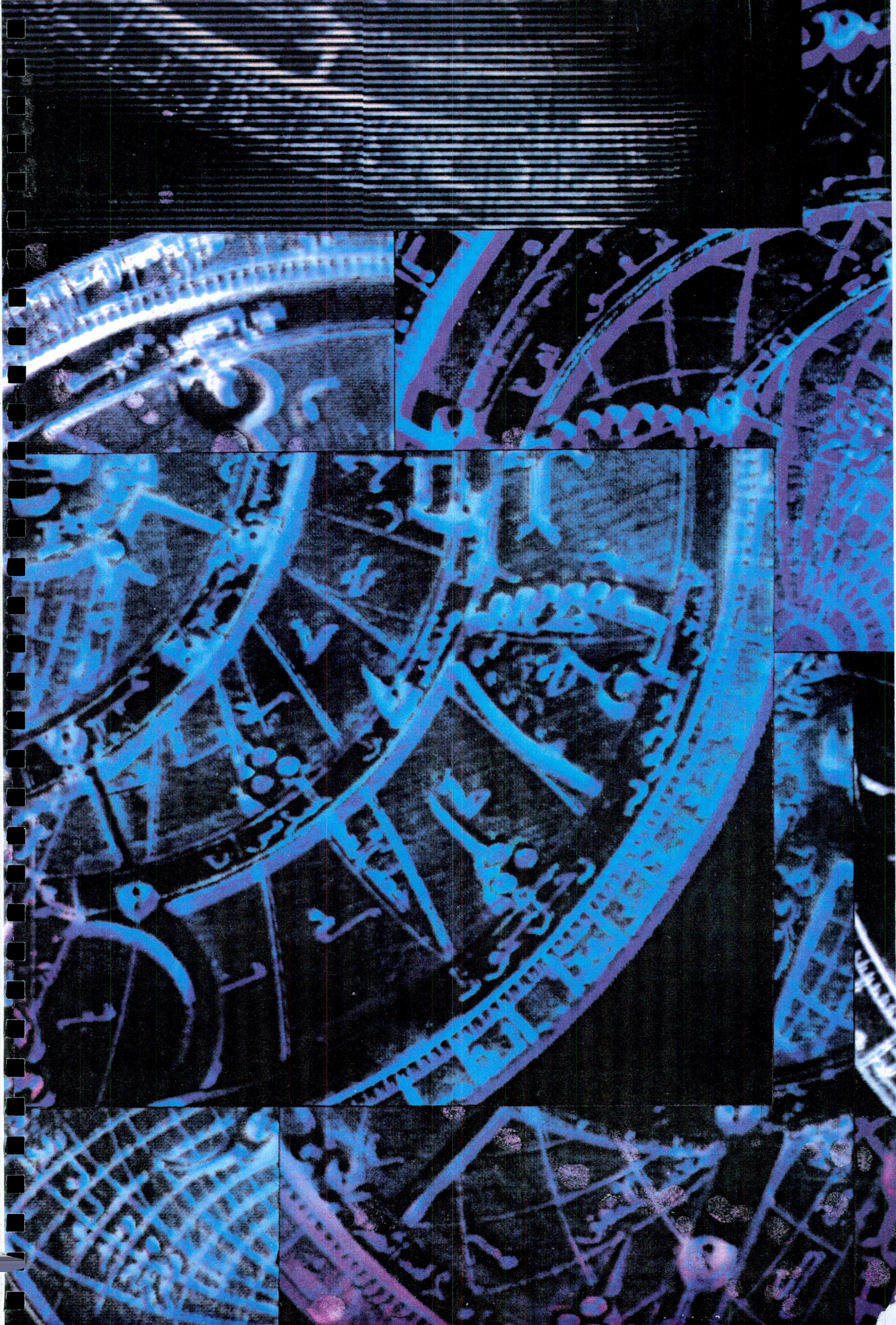
Inanna is that they own.

That which does the theme afterwards.

They become bitter.

Not a level on a few moments I see. Thank you. Yeah. Arty stuff.











cosmic cogwheels, has something of the Day of Judgement about it. The cog-like forms seem to menace the viewer, and symbolise some greater inexorable process, extinguishing life as a matter of course. They might also allude to the whirlygig thought patterns of the dying director, who begins to work on concepts with a dynamism that was previously dimmed. As these responses show, due to the fact that McKean has worked here in such a deeply personal manner, deciphering literal meaning is an impossible task. Perhaps what is required is for the viewer to trust in personal response, to allow speculations of meaning to replace hard and fast certainties.

Here one comes to an example that is of a similar nature to the above, but with a very different visual distinction. *Illustration 9* (following pages), allots much of its emphasis to the two main painted images. Curiously enough, McKean's use of thicker paint, and looser brushstroke is limited to but a few panels in *Signal to Noise*. In all of these, the subject matter is tied to events of long ago; - old stories that the character muses over in his entropy. In this example, the story in question is set on the last day of the year, on the last year of the previous millenium. The representation of Pope Sylvester II contains nuances of cubism, with its attachment of papers for painting upon and around, and its sharp planar stresses. Plenty of the artist's devices for interpretation are visible, despite the alien aspect of figurative description.

The jagged crown of office that the clergyman wears is heavily burdened by the thick shadow of a cross that falls across it. The year, however, is 999 AD, and the cross' immaterial presence has been lengthened on one side (or else rotated) to sap its icon of direct allusion. Where this stretching of its shape occurs, the surface texture of the crown becomes tarnished, and corroded. On both halves of the face, attention again has been merited to the eyes of the figure. The left eye is the source from which the black cross emanates, whereas the highlights on the crown and forehead are traced to the more strongly defined right eye. The pages of printed empheria that masks the mouth and lower face of the figure, perhaps evince of a man incapable of self-expression, or even identity, when divided from the sanctity of his religious doctrines. They also conceal the Pope's fear, in the God-fearing terror shared with the attendants of the midnight mass, that the clock's last toll will herald armageddon.

The panicking figures of the painting on the second page are described with an even looser hand. Traces of animal forms surface in the melee, from the crustacean to the equine. Resembling a colourless bonfire of waxen mannequins, the expressive qualities of the faces are similar in strength to those of Jack B. Yeates. The surface of the painting has been furiously scythed, in a series of scratching motions, further agitating the scene. Unlike the holy man on the facing page, these individualls lack the colour of their own convictions, in both their religious creed, and the logic that



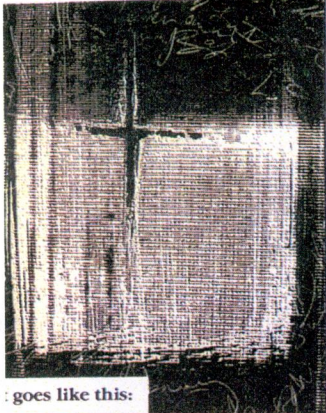








an across a story the  
her day that seemed  
effect for the film.



goes like this:



ome. 31 December, 999 AD.  
ope Sylvester II stands on the  
alcony of St Peter's Basilica,  
midnight mass for a packed  
rowd of nuns and peasants,  
ionks and lords, all of them  
alf-convinced that this is  
midnight for the world.



The hands of the great  
clock edge toward the  
top of the dial.



Tick,

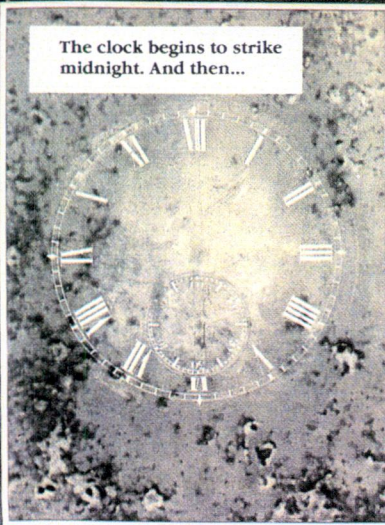
tick,



tick.



The clock begins to strike midnight. And then...



Then it stops.



Just stops.

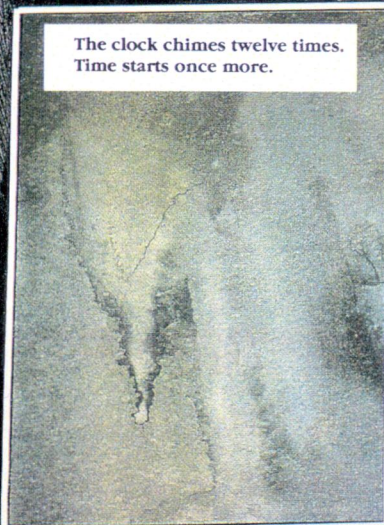
People scream.



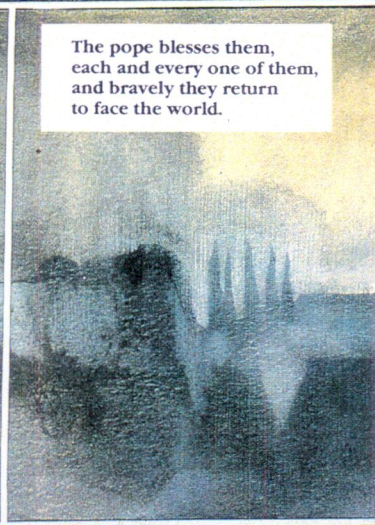
Tick.

Some die: their hearts stop with the clock. There is panic and madness and fear, in this dark midnight,

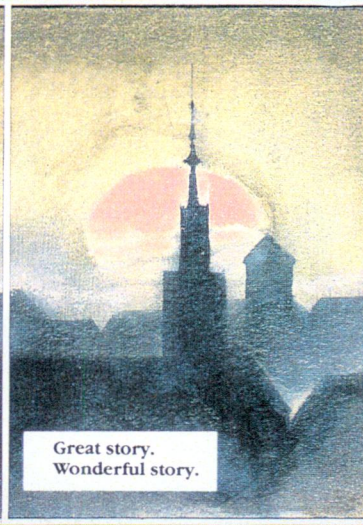
The clock chimes twelve times. Time starts once more.



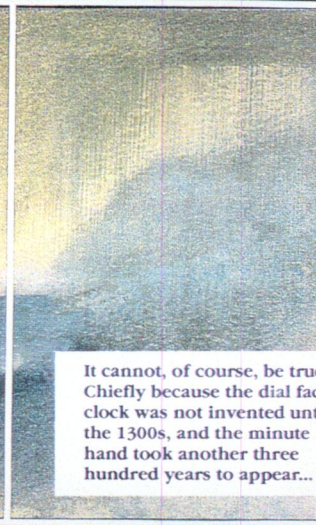
The pope blesses them, each and every one of them, and bravely they return to face the world.



Great story.  
Wonderful story.



It cannot, of course, be true. Chiefly because the dial face clock was not invented until the 1300s, and the minute hand took another three hundred years to appear...









denies apocalypse when lack of faith denies salvation. The obscure photo-reference material that occupies the majority of the other panels is part of a series of clock imagery that pervades the book. Like here, the use of photographic images commands brevity when invited to share the page with the painterly extremes. Their power to fascinate, is symbolic of the director's obsession with his failing health, desperate to complete the script he has been creating prolifically.

In many ways, *Signal to Noise* is McKean's finest work. Author Jonathan Carroll pays homage to the artist's work on the volume:

"....A tale like *Signal to Noise* demands the reader take everything in at once before moving on.....All the unprecedented images that are a kind of hieroglyphics of the now. Compare it to the old stereopticon. Alone you have a card with 'only' two pictures. Slipped into the gizmo and viewed correctly, you have magic, vision beyond the ordinary.

(11, p. 6)

The addition of computer graphics to the artist's milieu is a contemporary assimilation of practised craft, and the cutting edge. In his other work, McKean lacks the subjective power of *Signal to Noise*. That is to say, they remain accomplished as graphic novel art, but have been superseded by following projects to this point. Surprisingly, the artist's first solo project *Cages*, is relatively uninspired in comparison. Where one might have expected McKean to enrich a personal work with the full range of his abilities, and push the execution that bit further, he seems to have made an attempt to doff the heavy coat of embellishment, and take a minimalist route.









# Conclusion.









uring this study of the work of Dave McKean certain recurrent features have surfaced. Some, like the instances of film noir inspiration, had likely genesis in the academic base that the artist possesses. Others were the peculiar painterly traits, ranging from the photorealistic to the almost slapdash expression. This flexibility that characterises McKean's aesthetic has been scrutinised in detail in the preceding chapter discussions. In many of these instances, where the artist is directed by the scriptwriter through use of captions, the result is an objective sequence, communicated without detracting from the flow of continuity. What makes McKean's treatise that much more interesting is the manner in which he meets the requirements as mentioned above without restriction, yet manages to infuse each panel and image with a personally expressive tone.

One of the benefits this medium enjoys is the association with animation and cinema. Unlike these media, however, the graphic novel or comic is without the limitations of time-spatial restriction. That is, a personal rate of absorption can be implemented. The viewer is not conscious of the restrictions of duration imposed by moving images. Rather, it is the familiarity of these motions that grants the stilted nature of static images a certain animation. McKean's exploitation of these filmic traits smooths the flow of viewer perception, giving the sequences a vague meter of their own, adapted and tailored by the individual.

The assessment of the artist's success is largely a process of personal empathy- this meaning the individual responses it encourages, like any expressive work. In the first chapter, we saw how McKean had immediately interjected an abstract tonal expression between the first and third panels of the opening page of *Violent Cases*. In the discussion that ensued, one could observe how any or all of a number of interpretations could be made of the artist's intent. This ambivalence serves the context well at this point in the narrative. Irregardless of individual response, the very form of the tonal splash marries the images of pain and fire, and fails to threaten or impede continuity. In chapter two, The cover for *Arkham Asylum* had been revealed to be a composite of thematic symbols, presented in an understated, yet commercial way. *Signal to noise* in chapter three gave us example of pure subjective composition, freed from constraint or linear progression.

To sum up, the probings of Margot Hornblower describe the underrated status that McKean and his peers endure;

"Some of the finest artists, including Schuiten, Mattotti and the Briton Dave McKean, have been hobbled by unimaginative texts. McKean, a leading light in British comics, illustrated last year the hauntingly beautiful *Signal to Noise*, the story of a film director dying of cancer, but the minimalist







captions by Neil Gaiman added little to the artwork. Comics, notes British critic Roger Sabin, 'run the gamut from cringe-worthy self-indulgence to inspiring invention.' Worse than film or literature? 'Eighty percent of comics are trash', he says. 'So is eighty percent of any medium'...

'Comic must be taken seriously as an artform,' says Joachim Kaps, who wrote his doctoral thesis on comics. "They are a more varied and less passive artform than film or television.'

True or not, comics- like movies, books or TV programs- are an expression of the times. Existential angst, political humor, raunchy titillation or straightforward storytelling-take your pick. The medium is worthy of any message."


(10, p.77)











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