National College of Art and Design

Sequential Art

Contemporary Graphic Narrative

With reference to the work of Bill Sienkiewicz & Dave Sim

Aiden Kenny *March 1991*

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A Thesis submited to the
The Faculty of History of Art and Design
and Complimentary Studies
in candidacy for
Bachelor of Design in Visual Communication

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INTRODUCTION

and contextualisation

Everyone has read comic books. When we were children their simple humourous storylines and colourful illustrations appealed to us all. The adventures of Mickey Mouse and Dennis the Menace made up a substantial part of our formulative reading. At a slightly later age we enjoyed comics about heroic WW II tommies and stern jawed 21st century policemen. Then as teenagers we stopped, comics were subliterature and reading them beyond a certain age was actively discouraged.

This situation has altered over the last decade. Comics now attract an older audience than ever before. Although this could be seen as a decline in general cultural standards, it has to be balanced against the fact that there is an increasing number of sincere artists choosing to express themselves through this form. They are attempting to bring mature artistic values to the medium. Their work is finding varying degrees of acceptance amongst a literate public and the form is finally beginning to achieve some cultural significance. The comic book seems to be an art form whose time has come. 'In a society that is becoming increasingly visual (which may be just a polite way of saying semi-literate) comics are the literature of the future.' (Spiegelman 1988 p 61).

As humour is not a central element in most of the relevant new work the word 'comic' is misleading. A new term is needed to properly define the form. A lot of the labels currently being bandied about - graphic novel, visual narrative, co-mix etc, are often elaborate marketing tools. The traditional definition of the comic book as a mixture of word and image is unsatisfactory, because so much information can be conveyed non-verbally in this medium. Personally I prefer the term 'Sequential Art' because all the variations of the form convey information through a sequence of images denoting the passing of time, this is their common element. I use the word 'art' as I have always considered the medium a popular art form and the only relevant question being whether it was good art or bad art.

Stylistically there is little to separate 'Sequential Art' from comic books. To make a distinction between the two, I would use the following definitions:

> Sequential Art expands the medium to include more than repetitious juvenile entertainment.

> The crucial difference lies with the intentions of the creator.

> Through his work the artist attempts to say something meaningful, of lasting value.

Sequential Art aspires to higher aims.

Because Sequential Art can be seen as a refinement of the comic book (or the comic book as a bastardised form of Sequential Art), their history is collective and interchangeable. It is essential to put current work into context before discussing it. For this reason I have included a concise chronology.

When I have arrived at the present day, I want to analyse the existing state of the medium in a number of ways. Firstly I plan to discuss the language and structures of the medium and how its unique qualities are becoming more relevant, and changing its role in modern society. There will be a brief mention of some of the more important artists now working in the field, to give some indication of the range of work currently being produced. Then I want to examine the central relationship which I see as being crucial to any discussion of Sequential Art. The relationship that seems to exist between the personally expressive content of a given piece and the publishing conditions under which it was produced. In my view the new directions and freedoms exhibited by the medium are linked to a subversion of the conservative publishing structures that monopolised the form.

To show the breadth of possibilities that the medium is able to accommodate, I intend to discuss the work of two very different artists. Both are exploring the boundaries of the medium, but in completely different ways. While their work is experimental and alternative, it is not avant garde, in the sense of the very left-field Sequential Artists, who operate with one foot already in the gallery system. Rather their work is semi-mainstream - presently it reaches a small audience, but has the potential to appeal to a much broader range of people.

The first artist Dave Sim is a difficult case, consistently refusing to be pigeon-holed. In his work he challenges our whole conception of comic books, what they are and what they should be. He works within a definite historical context, confining himself to the existing language and conventions of the form, using these structures in new and exciting ways to construct complex sophisticated novels of up to 1200 pages in length.

The second artist, Bill Sienkiewicz brings a broad range of influences into his work. Over the last decade he has consistently created eclectic experimental and interesting work. Concentrating mainly on the visual side of the medium, the influence of his work to date has altered the look of a lot of contemporary comics. Currently he is involved in projects attempting to bring the form to far wider audiences than simply

existing comic readers.

But before discussing contemporary Sequential Art, I want to put it in context with a brief summary of its history.

Chronology
Almost all existing histories of Sequential Art seem to start halfway through the 19th Century in Europe. But if you are prepared to look outside the confines of the Western world, it is possible to go back considerably further.

As early as the 12th Century, narrative picture scrolls were being produced in Japan. These were continuous rolls, up to 80 feet long, telling religious stories. During the Edo period, from 1600 to 1867, narrative picture books appeared with up to 20 pages of illustrations and texts. While most of these books were also concerned with religious stories, there were also 'Kibyoshi', humourous stories with a strong satirical edge. By the mid 19th Century, the Japanese already had established a rich tradition of narrative art.

Around this time the groundwork for the modern comic book was being laid in Europe. Rodolphe Topffer, a Swiss author produced his Histories en Estampes (Stories in Etchings 1846) which pre-empted both the comic and the cinema, using cross cutting and montage 50 years before such techniques become the standard language of film.[1.1] In 1865 Wilhelm Busch's influential book Max and Moritz appeared. [1.2] This early German 'bilderbogen' (picture story) still kept text and image as separate elements. The eventual appearance of the comic strip in the form that we know today only occurred when Sequential Art moved from the world of books into the world of the media.

As part of the turn of the century newspaper wars between Joseph Pulitizer and William Randolphe Hearst in New York, large colour comic suppliments were created as circulation boosters. Both publishers felt that illustrations and colour were key weapons in the war to attract a population of semi-literate working class immigrants. These early Sunday suppliments were beautifully printed by colour lithography on a large format which would be commercially impossible to produce now. This full page format gave the first comic artists an unrepeatable opportunity to experiment and explore the medium. Accordingly the early comic strips are characterised by manic energy and exuberant humour.

The person to successfully move away from these cartoon beginnings was Windsor

McKay. In 1905 while working for the New York Herald, he created the superb <u>Little Nemo in Slumberland</u>,(1.3) a fantasy exploring a boys dreamworld. This strip was unlike any of its predecessors, McKay replaced slapstick, with spectacle. He began to use the narrative possibilities of all the elements at the artists disposal. He treated his page as a visual whole, creating rhythms and patterns with the panels which contained the scene. Often contracting their shape to reveal close-ups or expanding for enormous architectural vistas.

While McKay's work stressed the visual elements of the comic strip, the work of George Herriman emphasised the literal. His creation <u>Krazy Kat</u> first appeared in 1913, originally a daily four panel black and white strip, a coloured Sunday page was added in 1916. <u>Krazy Kat</u> was an ostensibly simple humour strip about a dog, a mouse and a cat being hit with a brick. Around his simple storyline Herriman created a modernist universe, an unstable world of ever changing desert backgrounds.(1.4) His characters spoke a Joycean mix of 'Shakespearian English, Spanish, Yiddish and Slang that reads like poetry' (Spiegelman, 1988 p 67). Herriman stands as the first artist to really use the medium in a personally expressive way. While McKay's work is visually impressive, it is intellectually cold, sterile and impersonal. Through <u>Krazy Kat</u> we enter the world of George Herriman, see into his mind. This is what gives the strip its timeless quality (it is currently being reprinted in The Guardian, 78 years after its creation).

The early years of the medium were characterized by a spirit of experimentation and exploration as artists grappled with a new form of expression. During the 1920's this spirit changed, the most important elements of the vocabulary and syntax of the medium had evolved and artists began to consolidate what now existed. Commercially the main change was the rise to prominence of the syndicate distribution system, which gave creators more outlets for their work, but also created artistic limitations. Under large corporations like the Hearst owned International News Service (now King Features Syndicate) artists were encouraged to produce work similar to what had proved most successful.

At the end of the 1920's a new set of formulae appeared with the arrival of the adventure strip. Graphically this was a change from the cartoon form to a more figurative form of illustration. Stylistically, Alex Raymond and Burne Hogarth tried duplicating the sequential flow of the cinema in strips like <u>Flash Gordon</u> and <u>Tarzan</u>.

The modern comic book format was created in the mid 1930's. This was originally designed as an expanded use for the presses that printed the colour newspaper

suppliments. At first only reprints of newspaper strips were published, but as demand grew, work was commissioned for the new comic books.

Most of the work produced could best be described as 'primitive'. Unlike the newspaper strip, which was generally conceived, written and drawn by one individual, comic books were produced in a sweatshop-like atmosphere with many contributors. Splitting the workload between as many as six individuals meant a faster turnover and also made it easier for the publishers to retain control of the rights. Under such a system it is not surprising then to find that most of the comic books produced in the 1930's, including the most successful <u>Batman</u> and <u>Superman</u> were of a much lower standard than work published in the newspapers many years previously. They were crudely drawn and told superhero stories. 'Notable mainly as primal expressions of pre-pubescent fantasies'(Spiegelman - 1988 p.69).

While the comic books became phenomenally successful, selling millions of copies, any work of lasting interest or artistic merit was still being produced for the newspapers. One of the most influential of the new artists was Will Eisner, who created an adventure strip, centred on his fictional detective, <u>The Spirit</u> in 1940. [1.5] This appeared in Sunday suppliments and was read by as many adults as children. Not being tied down by any editorial formulae (and having six pages a week to fill) Eisner began telling stories in a way that uniquely fused the visual and literal elements of the medium. He would never use a drawing to merely illustrate a caption or neither add a caption box when the drawing was self explanatory. Rather he would combine both in a visual narrative style that 'shows' a story rather than 'tells' it.

During the 1940's while the Americans still produced their Sequential Art mostly in the form of disposable 30 page pamphlets, a totally different format was developing on the other side of the Pacific. In 1947 Osamu Tezuka created the comic <u>Shintakarajima</u> (New Treasure Island). This 200 page comic book told its story through extensive use of visuals. Graphically it was characterised by large double page spreads and the use of long sequences of frames to depict single actions. Reading this kind of book was like watching a film.[1.6] Tezuka was a frustrated animator who was unable to get his ideas on screen and turned to the comic format to express himself.

By the 1950's the Japanese weekly comic had evolved into the format that still exists today. That is, a glued square bound book of around 350 pages, with about 15 black and white serials inside. Circulations of one million were common. Creating stories which ran to thousands of pages in length allowed Japanese artists to develop

character and plot to a level unimaginable anywhere else.

While the Japanese comic medium flourished during the 1950's, it was a different story in America. Superhero comics were passé, while Horror and Crime comics became the big sellers. One company which produced notable work during this period was E.C. This was due to the unusually enlightened hand of publisher William Gaines and an unusually talented editor Harvey Kurzman. Cushioned by profits from the companies crime and horror books (titles like 'Tales from the Crypt' etc..) artists were encouraged to put their best work into its war comics and most notably the iconoclastic satirical Mad magazine. But the high artistic standards at E.C. were the exception rather than the rule, and their intention to produce work well above the industry norm could not save them from what was coming. In the McCarthyite atmosphere of the 1930's, the days of the crypt were numbered.

The next major developments in the history of the American comic book can be traced back to one man. Dr Frederick Wertham was a child psychiatrist, who believed in a definite relationship between comics and juvenile delinquency. His views were expressed in his book, the anti-comics manifesto Seduction of the Innocents. In which he claimed that comics instilled negative traits in children and created 'unwholesome' fantasies and abnormal ideas. He associated comics with homosexuality as well as delinquency.

On publication the book became a focal point for anti-comic feeling among parent groups and teacher organisations. This groundswell of public concern reached its peak in a brief hearing by a US Senate Sub-committee in 1954. This hearing created an impression among publishers that legislation might be passed against them. Their reaction was to adopt a code of self regulation. Imposed just six months after the publication of Seduction of the Innocents, the 'Comics Code Authority' sanitized and crippled the medium. It confined comics into a ghetto for small children and adolescents, just at a time when television was beginning to exert its influence. Comics' previously huge sales figures slumped and many publishing houses collapsed completely.

In my opinion the adoption of the C.C.A. not only asserted the moral cowardice of the publishers, but also revealed their own lack of belief in the material which they were publishing. They did not believe in the worth of their material and did not respect the medium enough to withstand pressure from moralistic groups.   Feeling the tide of public opinion turning, they willingly capitulated, imposing strict self regulation on the artists.

While the mainstream industry declined further in the 1960's, a new marketplace began to appear. By the mid 1960's America was supporting a healthy counterculture. Commercially the arrival of short run web printing presses made it possible for people to produce their own alternative newspapers. In turn the underground newspapers made a new comics scene possible. Papers like the Berkely Barb and the E.V.O. (East Village Other) began to run experimental comic strips. Inspired by the spirit of the times these strips were wild, vibrant, irrelevant, subversive and immersed in everything the Comics Code forbade.

When, inevitably, the first underground comics appeared they avoided the existing distribution network and were sold through 'head' shops and record shops. Free from the structured regulated commercial systems that had built up in the mainstream, comics could again become a medium of self expression. The new artists were responsible only to themselves as they were really making comics to please themselves. There was no censorship and many artists were wildly experimental in terms of content, form and style.

The most influential underground artist was Robert Crumb, whose Zap Comix 1 was published in 1967. In the true spirit of the times he sold the first issue from the back of a car on the Haight-Ashbury Strip in San Francisco. His stories were quirky, personal and often semi-autobiographical. In his work he analysed the role of the little man in 20th Century society. His characters were invariably downtrodden, beaten and repressed - frail, sensitive people in a harsh competitive world [1.7]

Over the next decade a network of underground publishers was established and by 1974 this market had been flooded by substandard books exploiting the sexual and violent elements of the underground phenomena. The boom was over, the market collapsed and most underground publishers went broke.

The emphasis then shifted to Europe. Inspired by the ideals behind the Underground Comix, European artists began producing liberated self-expressive comic work for adults. The French and Italian artists did not encounter the resistance to sequential art that seems to characterise the English speaking world. In France there was an explosion of creative work in 'Bandes Dessinee', (designed strips) spearheaded by the uncontainable Moebius.

The artist Jean Giraud made his name in the late sixties drawing French Westerns (seriously, Lieutenant Blueberry).[1.8] At the start of the 1970's he began using the

pseudonym Moebius after the mathematical strip with two sides apparently forming one. Under this name he created experimental work completely different to anything he'd done previously. He created bizarre visual essays, marijuana influenced dreamscapes with fantastic improvised storylines, most notably <u>Arzach</u> and <u>Le Garage Hermetique</u>. (1.9)

In mainland Europe narrative art currently holds a level of appreciation equal to the other popular media. The French have established a museum of sequential art. They also hold the world largest comic festival at Angouleme every year.

During the 1980's we return to America where the industry changed direction once again. Following the gradual establishment of specialist comic shops in most major cities the direct sales market became more important than the traditional newstand market. This meant that the majority of sales were now going to older readers, actively seeking out titles rather than the impulse-buy of the child in the corner-shop.

The arrival of this definite comic-buying market with its substantial disposable income, helped support the growth of the independent publishing movement . This new breed of publishers, although still out to make a profit, are characterised by a respect for their creators. Today more artists own copyright of their creations and receive royalties for reprints and merchandising. A lot of thoughtful, interesting and mature work has appeared over the last decade. Creators like Dave Sim, Chester Brown, Alan Moore, Gilbert and Jamie Hernandez have taken the medium into unexplored territory.

The comic book form has finally started to receive media attention in recent years. Unfortunately, most of this is misguided, being based on the so-called 'Renaissance' in mainstream comics. In my view the only Renaissance evident is in the PR and Marketing strategies of the large companies, DC and Marvel. Following the demographic shift in the readership these companies have moved away from the Comics Code Authority and concentrated on printing titles for mature readers. The new format books are generally produced to a high quality on gloss paper with stiff covers and a high cover price aimed at the high-spending late teen market. Any maturity in the content of these books is questionable, as they are still the familiar post-pubescent power fantasies, up-dated with more explicit violence and implicit sex. Ignoring the pulp, there is currently enough work of merit being created, for the potential of the medium to become generally recognised. It is only after escaping its present subcultural role, that any proper attempt at approaching its potential can be made. But this must involve an artistic step as well as a change in public perception.

While creative people continue to see the medium as only capable of communicating with children and teenagers, then of course it will remain dominated by hacks with adolescent minds.

At the moment, sequential art has a better opportunity to expand out, to reach more people than it ever had before. The only question is 'Are there enough artists with the intelligence ability and humanity to grasp this opportunity?

1.1 'Voyages et adventures de Docteur Festus' Rudolphe Topffer
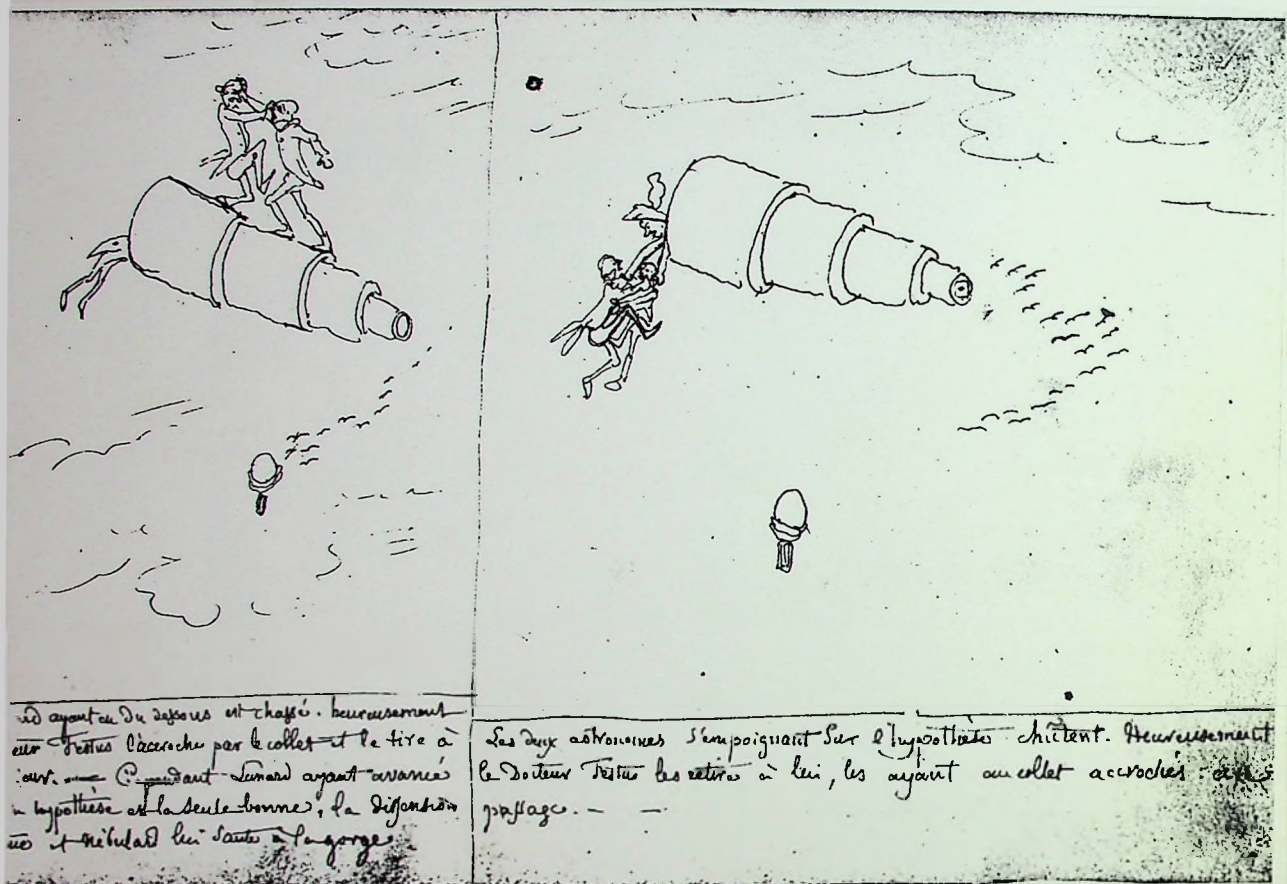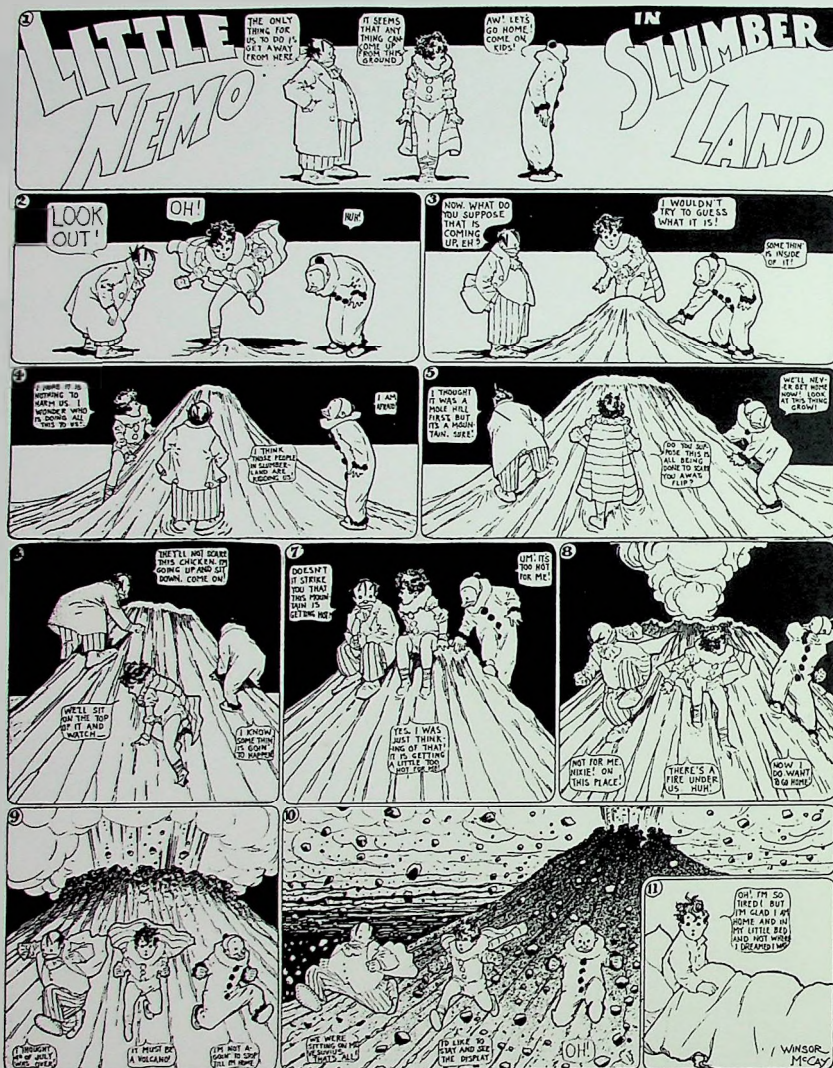
Das Pusterohr

Pop—from his hand the crust is flying,
Old Bartelmann of fright's near dying.

Und – witsch – getroffen ist die Brezen,
Herrn Bartelmann erfaßt Entsetzen.

Then at his eye Frank aimed a dart;
Which made it sorely ache and smart.

Und – witsch – jetzt trifft die Kugel gar
Das Aug', das sehr empfindlich war.

1.2 'Max und Moritz' **Wilheim Busch**

Exploring a boys Fantasy Dreamworld
1.3 'Little Nemo in Slumberland' **Windsor McKay**
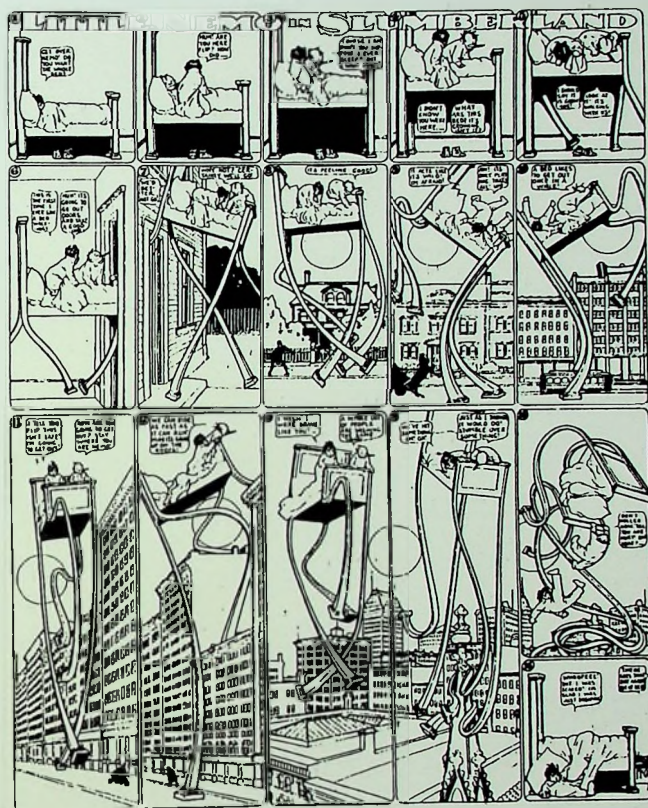
McKays panels change shape to accomodate the storyline
1.3a 'Little Nemo in Slumberland' **Windsor McKay**

Joycean dialogue and shifting scenery
1.4 'Krazy Kat' George Herriman

Eisner uses a strong visual style, changing points of view and 'camera' angles,
note the wave panel which indicates the change of scene

1.5 'The Spirit' Will Eisner

The visual metronome of the tap is used to pace this scene
1.5b 'The Spirit' Will Eisner

"long sequences of frames used to depict single actions"
1.6 'Tekka no Makihea' **Shotaro Ishimori**
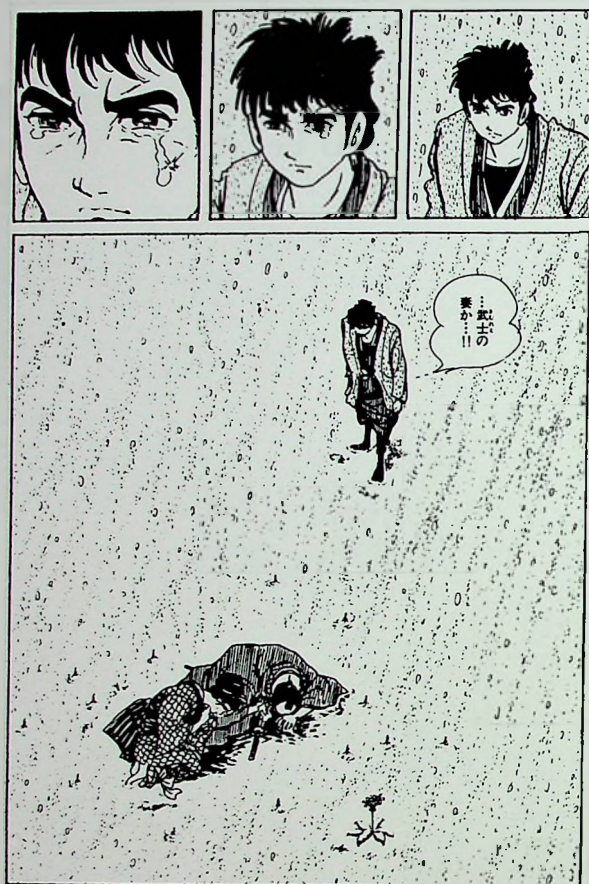
"Reading this type of book is like watching a film"
1.6b 'Sabu to Ichi' **Torimono Hikae**
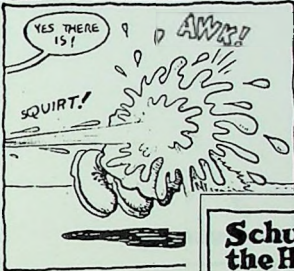
Mr Natural, Schuman the Human, and "Stoned Again'
1.7 'Zap Comix 1' Robert Crumb

1.8 'Lieutenant Blueberry' Jean Giraud (Moebius)
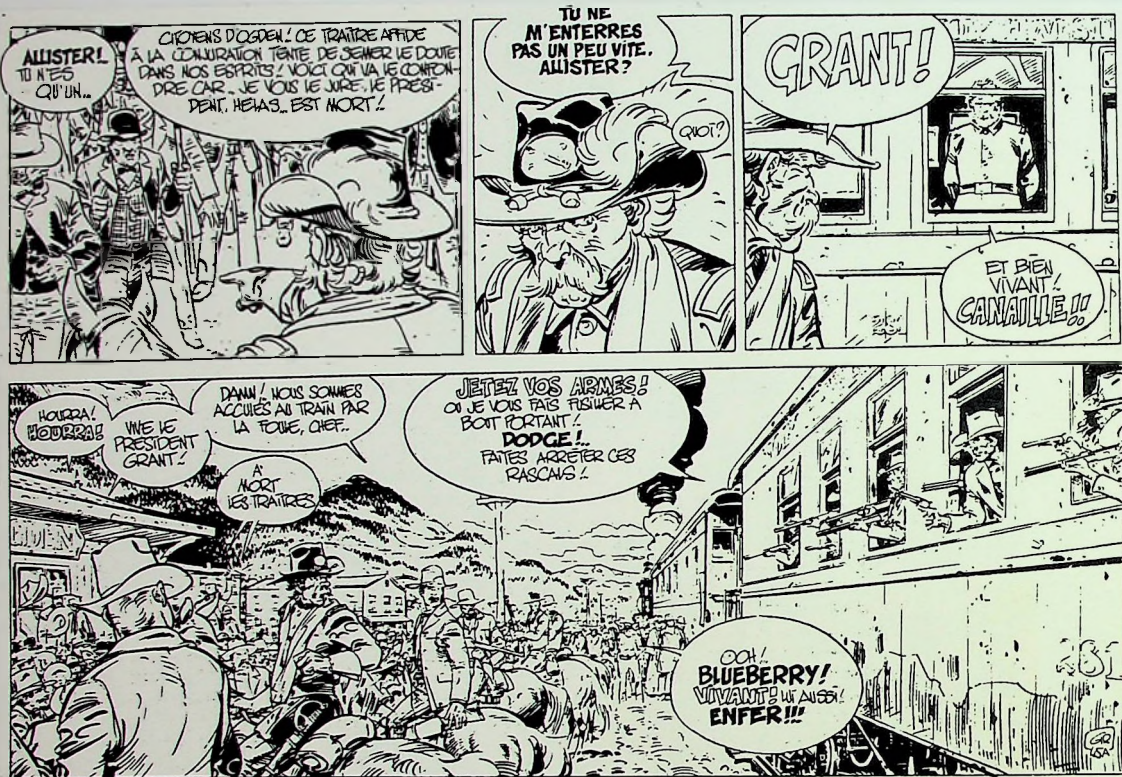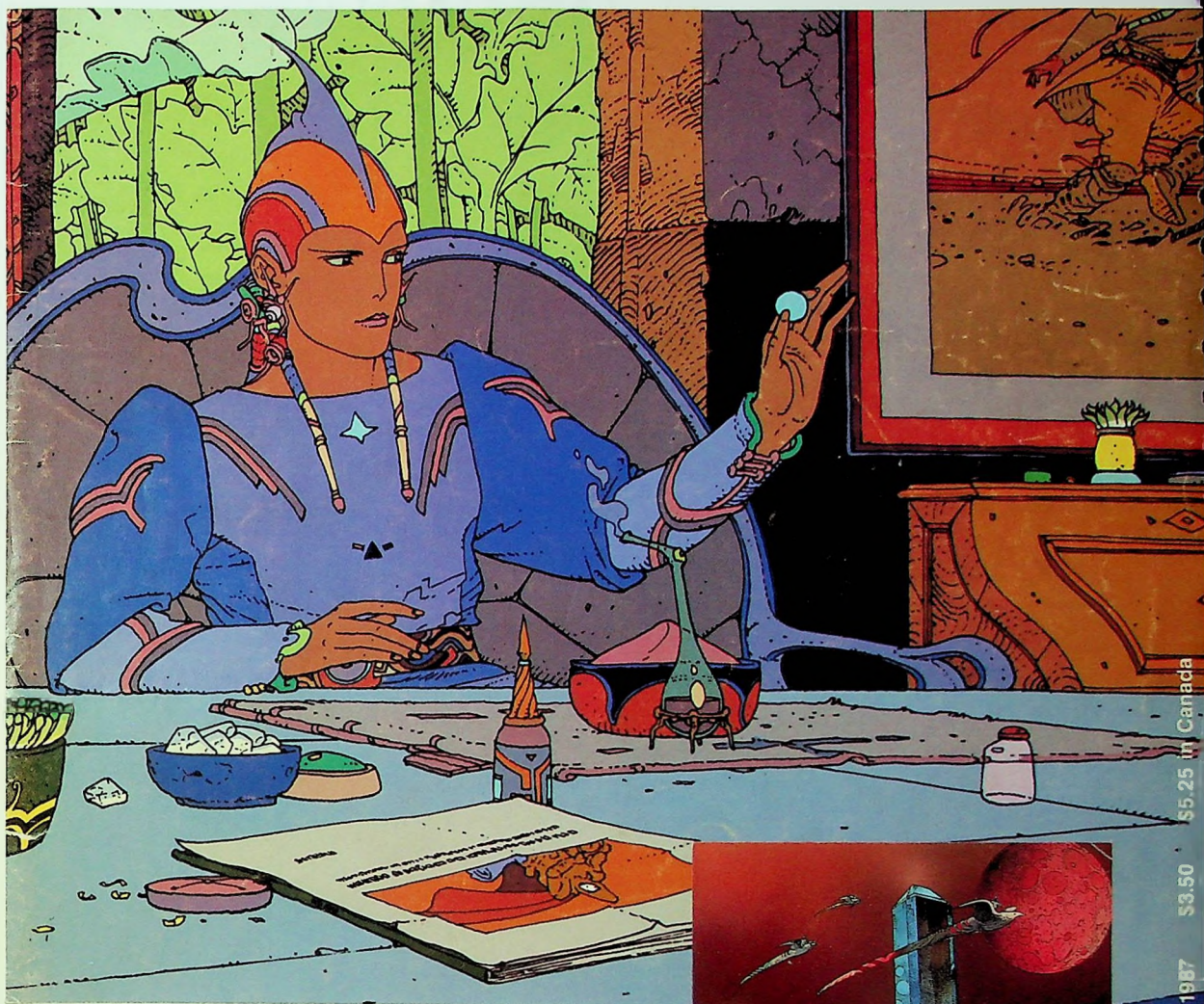
1.9 'The Goddess' and 'Crystal Dream' **Moebius**

2

ANALYSIS

of contemporary comics

To examine the role of sequential art in today's culture, we must look at the concept of reading. Whether it is a small comic book or a 500 page novel, sequential art is meant to be read. It is not watched like a play or a film. It is what McLuhan called a 'cool' medium, one which involves a high level of reader participation.

The narrow definition of reading, that of simply reading words and letters is now outdated. Today we live in a world of signs and symbols. All of which we must be able to understand to communicate effectively. Visual information is equally as important as text. The whole field of Graphic Design hinges on that statement. Visual communication is not simply a way of reaching illiterates, rather textual communication must be seen within a broader language of signs and symbols. Sequential art is a prime example of this. Reading this medium involves a broader range of comprehension than simply reading words.

Many of the artists working in the field see the medium as an 'emblem of mass consciousness' (Wagstaff 1988 p 8), and the conveyor of some sort of universal language. I would disagree, while I see the medium as having its own original methods of communication, this language has to be seen as a product of existing culture, not as something absolute, standing outside of society. The effectiveness of the comics has to rely on an understanding and acceptance by the audience of the representational code used by the artist. Although the symbology of the comics is often very simple, it still has to be learned. There are a whole range of accepted rules which the reader must share to fully understand the piece.

The main language of sequential art is graphic narrative, telling a story through the graphic visualisation of concepts. It is based around the combination of simple signs and symbols,"combining two dipictables to create something graphically undepictable - a concept". (Eisenstein, 1947, p 87).
A straightforward example of this being stars drawn around a foot to represent pain (2.1), a bubble with a point joining words to a head symbolises speech etc.

This symbolic language is then placed within a larger language of sequence. This introduces the broader concept of structure. Every symbol is part of an image and every image is an element of a sequence. Images within a sequence are partly defined by their relationships with the surrounding images. The way the frames in a particular sequence are structured gives rise to the language of cutting, montage and pacing. In the construction of this structure, the illusion of narrative timeflow, there is a very strong dialogue between the artist and the viewer. The viewer is compelled to interact and piece together the full sequence of events from the fragments provided

by the artist. This ability to structure and organise visual information gives the medium its links with television and the cinema. This combination of elements from the graphic arts with elements from the kinetic arts creates the unique language of sequential art. ' The comics offer obdurate resistance to traditional aesthetics they refuse to be pigeon holed.' (Horn, 1976 p 59).

This unique position is leading artists to now explore experimental ideals while reaching a mass audience.

> Comics themselves...are more like an ellipses within modern culture, an elusive link between high and low, whose meanings we will have to continue to complete for ourselves.
> (Varnedoe, 1990, p 228)

Throughout the history of sequential art, there have always been artists using the form to express their own personality and ideas. All of their innovations have gradually become absorbed into the mainstream. As with every art, the avant-garde explore new territory which then filters down through the hierarchy. Sequential art has had its own pioneers - the Americans McKay and Crumb in the 1920's and 1960's, the European Moebius in the 1970's. But currently there are more innovative artists active in the medium than ever before. The current crop of artists are inspired by the ideals of the 1960's Underground, but are determined to avoid the creative implosion that destroyed that movement. Most are avoiding the excessive self indulgence of the undergrounds in favour of more mature sophisticated storytelling.

Here is a brief summary of some of the more important artists in the field. Robert Crumb still remains one of the world's most complex cartoonists. Today his work has evolved, from the hallucinogenic acid dreams of the 1960's, into subtler autobiographical stories. Now in his late 50's, Crumb is chronicling his various mid-life crisis' in funny philosophical and humane comics. [2.2]

Art Spiegelman is another ex-Underground cartoonist who is still active. He is probably the most 'known' sequential artist working in America today. His high profile due to his book 'Maus - A Survivors Tale. The book is a biographical account of his father's life during World War Two. While the story is treated realistically all the characters are drawn antropomorphically, the Jews are mice, the Nazis are cats. [2.3] My own reservations about this type of stereotyping aside, the books tiny, simple-looking line drawings are very effective. The book has been popularly and critically acclaimed and stands as one of the only works in the medium to break into

wider literary circles.

The comic <u>Love and Rockets</u> features the work of two Mexican-American brothers, Jamie and Gilbert Hernandez. They both write and draw their own strips, set either in Los Angeles, or the fictional Mexican village of Palomar. The central themes of their work are explorations of friendship, love and social relations.(2.4) Along with Dave Sim, Los Bros Hernandez stand as the leading artists of the new generation.

In Europe, Moebius is still exploring his personal fantasy universe. With more of his work being translated into English his influence is now being felt here and in America. Like Crumb, he has left his drug-involved extravaganzas behind him. His most recent work, while still in a science fiction vein, deals with ecological issues in a thoughtful manner.(2.5)

There are many other worthy artists whose work can only be briefly mentioned. Chester Brown, who is exploring Christian guilt and social taboo's in his series <u>Yummy Fur</u>. Kyle Baker, whose entertaining work shows up the emptiness behind so much modern life. He combines social observation with a cynical wit and an impeccable ear for dialogue. Ted McKeever produces personal nightmarish accounts of lower America. His vicious penstrokes delineate a Kafkaesque world of cheap food, cockroach motels and public transport.(2.6) The list goes on.

With so many committed artists flocking to sequential art, it's worth asking what advantages does the medium offer over other forms. To my mind, the chief advantage is that it gives access to a large audience, while being much more a vehicle of personal expression than film or television. The expensive and industrial production systems involved in film and TV convert all individual ideas into collective decisions. They are democratic media and their end result is always group expression. In sequential art very little separates the artist from his audience. This gap, filled by publishers, has always been crucial.

Any artist who wants to communicate with his audience for any length of time must work with a publisher. In this respect he is similar to a novelist. However, the relationship between cartoonist and publisher has traditionally been the opposite to that enjoyed by novelist and publisher (2.7) In the world of comic books the artist worked for the publisher. The comic strip was not thought of as an art form, but as a commodity. Thus the publishing company owned the 'product' which the artist worked on.(2.8) With this system the commercial element used its economic advantage to exploit the artist. The work was produced under terms that made the

publishers the legal creators of the work.

Obviously such a system does not promote originality, instead it turns artists into employees producing 'work for hire'. This system is the reason for the lamentable quality of most comics published. Another reason why the history of sequential art has been dominated by second rate work is that the means of production encourages (and produces) second rate artists. I think that any artist committed to what they were creating would not work under such a system for any length of time. Traditionally comic strips were created by people who were hoping to one day advance to magazine illustrators or greeting card artists

> The cartoon strip artists had contempt for the comic book artists and the
> comic book artists wished they were doing something else.
> (Varnedoe, 1991 p 189)

This is the situation that is being challenged today. The artists working in the medium, <u>believe</u> in the medium and don't want to do anything else. There are now publishers in the field who share the artist's ideals and accept their mutual dependence. There are now more artists self-publishing their work. The major defining force in the medium over the last decade has been an ideological debate about the production and direction of the form.

However, the work produced by independent artists and publishers, still only makes up a tiny portion of the market. Most sequential art is still produced under the work for hire system for large publishers like DC and Marvel in America and Fleetway in Britain. The form remains dominated by escapist material. The public perception of comics as a violent, idiotic medium is largely correct.[2.9] Violent idiotic comics sell well and have done so for the last 50 years. The large mainstream publishers successfully churn out the same material year after year. Their only aim being to produce superficial, disposable mass entertainment. They own the formula and employ artists to produce stories to these formulae. This material has no pretensions to relevance or artistic value. Any criticism of these comics can only be as cultural and sociological phenomena.

The intentions behind the new sincere 'sequential art' material put it in a different situation. It must be able to stand on its artistic and literary merits. If the sequential art medium is to prove itself as good as any other medium, then it has to follow that its critical standards be equally as high. Work cannot just be seen as good-by-comics' standards, which is only a narrow unrealistic assessment, it has to be good by any standard, outside the confines of its own medium. There is little point in comparing

Brought to Light (1) to The Punisher, the latter being so inconsequential as to make the comparison meaningless. But maybe it is worth asking how The Spiral Cage (2) compares to My Left Foot (2.10)

This point is very relevant at the current stage of the medium's development. A lot of the new material is like manna from heaven for comic fans, they always knew that comic books were 'real' literature and now they have been proven right. (2.11) For the more discerning reader the situation is not quite so simple, it is important to see the wood from the trees. Because the comics medium has existed for so long within confined conventions, there is always the danger of seeing something as being worthy merely because it is different. Constructive, knowledgeable and healthy criticism are what is needed for the current sequential art movement to grow.

For this reason I think it is vital that the medium try to attract a new audience. It is only through exposure to new, more demanding and critically responsive readers that the quality of the form will improve. (2.12) Of course, initially more quality comics will have to be produced to attract this type of reader.

My own view is that, while I am fascinated by the kind of innovative work being done and applaud its arrival, I am also wary of giving it too much praise. We are, now beginning to see work which is comparable to good material on television on film and some contemporary literature. (2.13) But as yet, no-one has produced a work of art powerful enough to completely transcend the walls surrounding sequential art. The work we have to examine explores the boundaries and stretches the perimeter but ultimately remains within the comics ghetto.
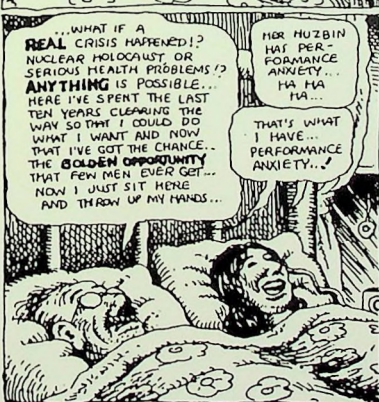
Footnotes

1. Brought to Light

Publication by the Christic Institute to publicise its lawsuit against the CIA and the American government (see chapter 3)

2. The Spiral Cage

The 'graphic-autobiography' of Spina Bifida victim Al Davidson, telling the story of his struggle against the disease and fight to gain acceptance among society.

A simplified visual language - stars represent pain
2.1 'Cerebus' **Dave Sim**

'Funny Philosophical and Humane
2.2 'Uncle Bobs mid-life crisis' Robert Crumb

Life in Auschwitz
2.3 'Maus' Art Spiegelman
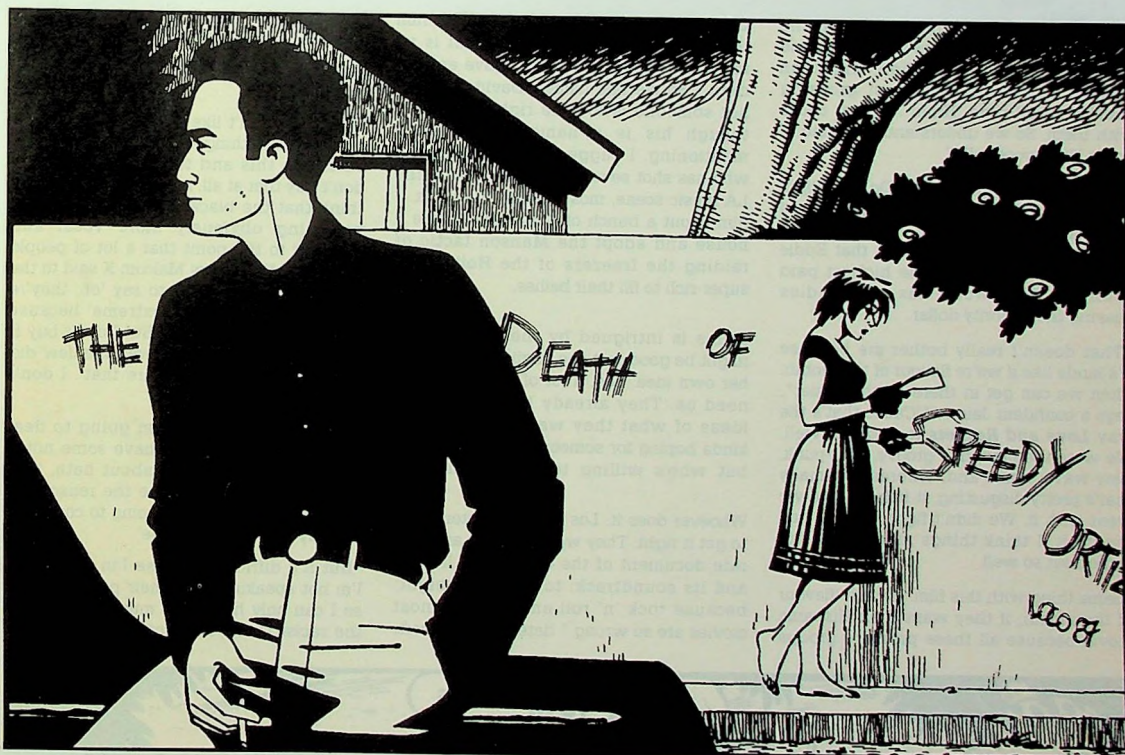
Life and love in small town Mexico
2.4 'Love and Rockets' Jamie and Gilbert Hernandez

2.5 'The Incal' Moebius
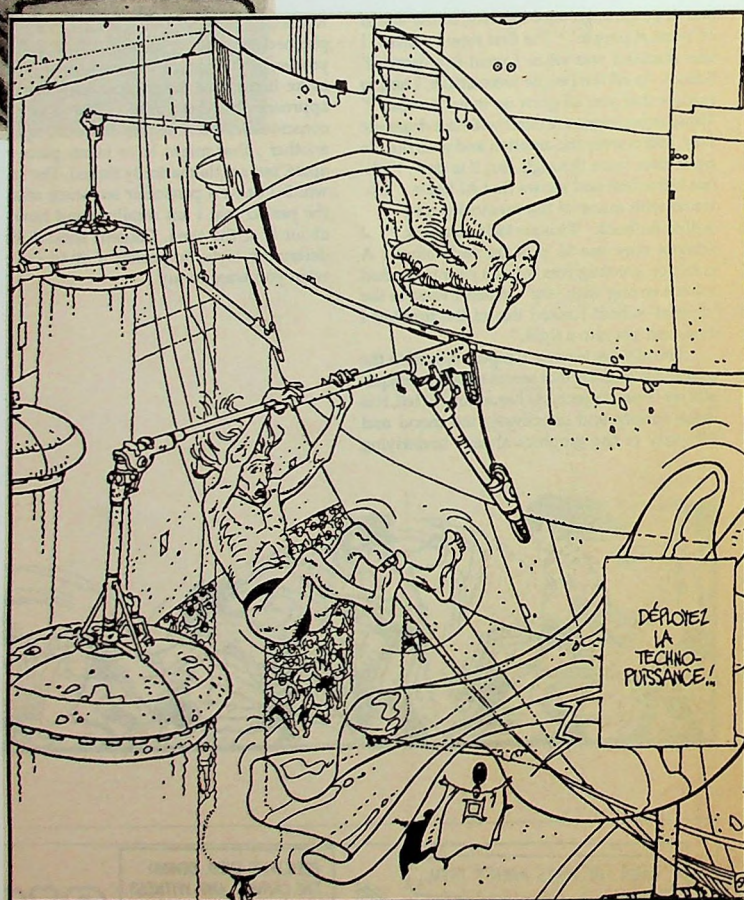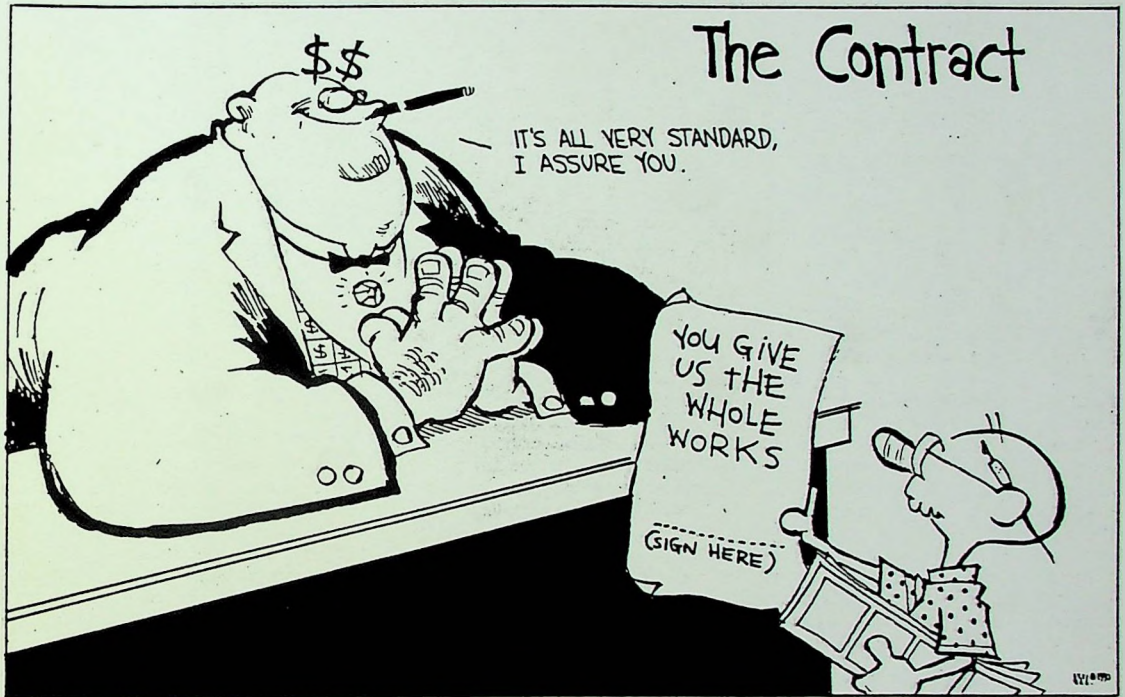
"The relationship between cartoonist and publisher has traditionally
been the opposite of that enjoyed by novelist and publisher"
2.7 'Editorial Cartoon' **Bill Watterson**

2.8 "The publishing company owned the product which the artist worked on.

"The accepted perception of comics as voilent
and idiotic is largely correct"
2.9 'Lobo' DC Comics

2.10 'The Spiral Cage' Al Davidson

'How to satisfy your junk culture appetite
and retain your credibility'
2.11 Advert   Kyle Baker

2.12 'RAW' Art Spiegelman

2.13 Editorial Cartoon **Bill Sienkiewicz**

DAVE SIM

the fine art of self publishing

The Canadian artist Dave Sim [3.1] is one of the true individuals operating within the field of Sequential Art. Or rather 'outside' of the field, because for the last 15 years he has stubbornly ploughed his own furrow, completely separate from the comics mainstream. Spurning the traditional economic structure of the medium he has self-published all of his work and become one of the most successful and respected creators around.

Sim began his career in 1977. He had created a comic called Cerebus the Aardvark, a funny animal parody of Robert E Howard's Conan the Barbarian, one of the most popular comics at the time.[3.2] After a number of unsuccessful attempts to have his work published in independent anthologies, he decided to publish it himself. Looking at the first episodes of his comic now, they were both artistically and intellectually naive. At the time, they were sufficiently different for the book to build up a loyal audience.

After producing about five issues, Sim began to see the limitations inherent is parodying such a limited genre. He set about transforming the content of his publication. Over the next two years 'Cerebus' metamorphosised into a series that emphasised political satire over parody.[3.3] Within Cerebus' pages he began to construct an imaginary world of feuding city-states and provinces. These powerblocks were forever intermeshed in complex political manouvering and counter-manouvering.

The eventual framework for Cerebus was finally established by issue 26, when Sim began a 25 part subset of the main series, called High Society. At this point he also announced his plan to produce 314 issues of Cerebus, creating one continuous story, which was to be subdivided into ten books. Critics questioned whether Sim could maintain a 25 issue series, but once High Society was completed he immediately started work on a more ambitious 50 issue series Church and State. He followed this with Jaka's Story, another 25 part book.He is currently producing Melmoth a 12part short story.

Sim's monthly Cerebus comic still sells more than 20,000 copies a month. Although this is a healthy circulation for an independent publication, it is not the basis for his financial success. The cornerstones of his market are the 500 page books which collect each 25 part storyline into one telephone directory-sized novel. The major comic publishers continue to produce so-called "graphic novels" of around 40 pages. Sim is alone in bringing out books with as many pages as 'real' novels and with all of

their conceptual complexity.

Artistically Sim's work is the essence of simplicity. A lot of current avant-garde sequential artists are trying to create a new aesthetic for the medium, producing frantic, confusing, post modern pastiches. His intentions are different, he is trying to distill the essence of classical comic book illustration. He is bringing comics to a higher level, purely on their own terms. To this end, he has completely mastered the existing language of the art and is now attempting to push that forward into new territory.[3.4] His work has been described as '....consummate storytelling, comics in Dave's hands come closest to music'. (Moore 1990 p 85)

With the best sense of timing and pacing in the field today, Sim's artwork reads perfectly, achieving a very realistic effect. The way he sequences and edits his panels gives the illusion that the reader is creating the images. In a sense, the artist becomes invisible. He never lets the visual surface layer of his artwork detract from its storytelling purpose.[3.5]

The unobtrusive nature of this artwork conceals some of its stylistic references. Avoiding the current trend for mixed media, Sim religiously works only in black and white, rendering in a beautiful brush line. The intricately detailed backgrounds in his panels suggest the architecture of Windsor McKay's strips.[3.6] The oversized Benday dots that give Cerebus his grey complexion suggest a more modern sensibility.[3.7] Unlike most current creators, Sim does not instinctively spurn the history of comics before 1965. Rather his work combines the best of what has gone before with his own unique personal vision.

The content of Sim's work is equally difficult to classify. It is characterized by contradictions and juxtapositions. He has chosen to tell a complex story which will take around 28 years to relate. He is attempting to do this through a medium supposedly best suited to telling simple vapid stories. He is rebelling against the built-in obsolescence and disposability of the medium, while challenging accepted notions of what a comic book is and can be. Within the main body of his work he is also playing with our preconceptions, using stereotypes and genre situations in new ways. In his hands, what we think of as familiar becomes quite unfamiliar.

The whole series is based on a conceit. The central character, Cerebus himself, is a three foot high cartoon Aardvark with grey fur. Although this is a visual nod to the cartoon origins of the medium, the silly animal 'cuteness' of the character is contradicted by his role as a ruthless dictator comparable to Hitler or Stalin.[3.8]

While this probably sounds inane, it makes sense within the context of what Sim is attempting to do, which is to constantly attack the readers expectations. In this case he does so by providing a character which visually appears to demand a particular sort of reading and then ruthlessly reversing what we think the character should be. Further to this end he has surrounded the one true cartoon character in the book with a large cast of apparently recognisable figures. The inspirations for the characters encompasses real life personalities and fictional characters from literature and the mass media. The cast represents an attempt at an archetypical 20th Century pop-cultural mythology. The range of this cast takes in deadly serious political characters like Baron Weishaupt and Bishop Powers, between them controlling the population's mind and soul (Sim embellishes them with a neat line in witty Machiavellian dialogue.)[3.9] It includes characters "borrowed" from reality, Oscar Wilde to Mick Jagger (the best example here being Lord Julius, a word perfect homage to Groucho Marks).[3.10] Finally it descends to characters like the ridiculous 'Moonroach', Sim's sly parody of mainstream comics culture - a kind of medieval superhero.[3.11] The extreme variations in the cast and the fluency with which he handles their relationships and interactions shows the breadth of Sim's storytelling ability.

While his stories are humourous and entertaining above all, there are always serious undercurrents propelling the plots. The interplay between farce and earnestness is another of the contradictions at the core of his work. His principle concerns are with power and the various ways that power corrupts.[3.12] In the High Society storyline, he satirized politics and government by putting Cerebus in the position of puppet dictator. In Church and State he was manipulated into the papacy to end his usefulness as a political pawn. In creating 'Pope Cerebus' Sim was examining absolute power and its ability to corrupt absolutely. His work deals with big themes and his satirization of the powers-that-be in society reflects his own unique philosophies on life. In his books power is always patriarchical and always flawed. His women are always the strongest characters and there is a strong feminist ethic to his work.[3.13] At the end of the Church and State storyline, the stage was set for the overthrow of the existing powerstructures by a feminist sect. Whether Sim will be as venomously satirical of this new matriarchal power remains to be seen. As well as expressing his unique views through his storytelling, Sim's business practices are equally as idiosyncratic. He is seen as an outsider by the comics mainstream, for his economic as well as his creative beliefs. As a self publisher he involves himself in every aspect of production from initial concept through to distribution of the mass-produced product. He is a utopian idealist who runs his business on theories of artistic morality.

> If it makes no difference artistically then I will make decisions on the basis
> of money. If I think it makes a difference to the work artistically, the artistic
> position is the one I go with.
> (Sim, 1989 p 88)

Behind this rhetoric lies the mind of a shrewd and successful businessman who although he claims to 'keep producing a comic book that is totally uncommercial,' (Sim 1989 p 96) now stands as one of the highest paid comic artists in the North American Continent.

His unique business philosophy is centred around an artistic ideal. He talks about a hypothetical 'artist' who is free to operate within the market place, producing his works of art. Between the artist and the audience lie the means - printing, publishing, distribution. Ideally if the artist has control over the means, then his creative work is completely free from outside interference and editorial censorship. It is a purist's dream, one which he follows to the letter and one which has worked very successfully for him. The one concession that he makes to his principles, is the distribution of his monthly comic book, for sheer logistical reasons. (His novels are self distributed - ordered over the 'phone and mailed out.)

While I agree that such a system is a desirable ideal, I don't see it as the perfect solution for all artists, which is the view Sim advocates and one I would question. In print, his ideas come across as perhaps too committed, to black and white. He has a tendency to see all artists as being as moral and well intentioned as himself, but refuses to believe that publishers can share high ideals.(3.14)

> An artist goes in with his creative work, which is something few people have
> and he's dealing with someone who has money, something a lot of people
> have.   (Sim, 1989, p 89)

His belief that artists are per se more moral than publishers, seems misguided to me. Publishers and writers work together quite successfully in the field of literature. I don't believe all artists have the aptitude or inclination to self-publish. I just think artists should be aware of the commercial world and should seek publishers sensitive to the needs of the form and who share their own ideals. His strongly held beliefs place Dave Sim at the extreme end of the sequential art field.

Misgivings aside, self publishing has worked perfectly well for Sim. He now has the freedom to address any issue, any way he wants, without any interference. While

most of this freedom comes from personal control, there is another factor that I'd like to comment on. Although Sim has a large audience in comic book terms, relative to the mass audiences of TV and film, it is tiny. With his commitment to a 28 year storyline, he has painted himself into a corner of sorts. Within his continuity, he makes no concessions to new readers. To fully understand the current issue of Cerebus, you need to have read most of the 130-odd issues preceding it. This makes his readership virtually a closed system. In terms of creative freedom, a small, loyal dedicated audience is a very positive advantage. This gives him the freedom say, to viciously satirize religion, without the dangers of overwhelming criticism from the Moral Majority, that are faced by more 'high profile' media. Looking at the controversy surrounding The Last Temptation of Christ it seems worth wondering just how far into public view Sim would want to take his work?

I think that the answer to that question can be found in his existing work. It is clear from interviews that he wants to be thought of as one of the most artistically ambitious sequential artists in the world. Whether consciously or unconsciously taken, his decision to stay within the languages and patterns of the traditional comic form (subvert it though he may), continues to alienate him from the general reader. If he is waiting for the rest of the world to find out about him, I'm afraid he has chosen the wrong vehicle for his mission. He can continue making the most beautiful lyrical and entertaining comics that he can find for his own loyal audience.(3.15) Outside of that audience, I fail to see a readership, not steeped in the traditions of comics lore, taking the Tragic Life of Cerebus the Aardvark very seriously.
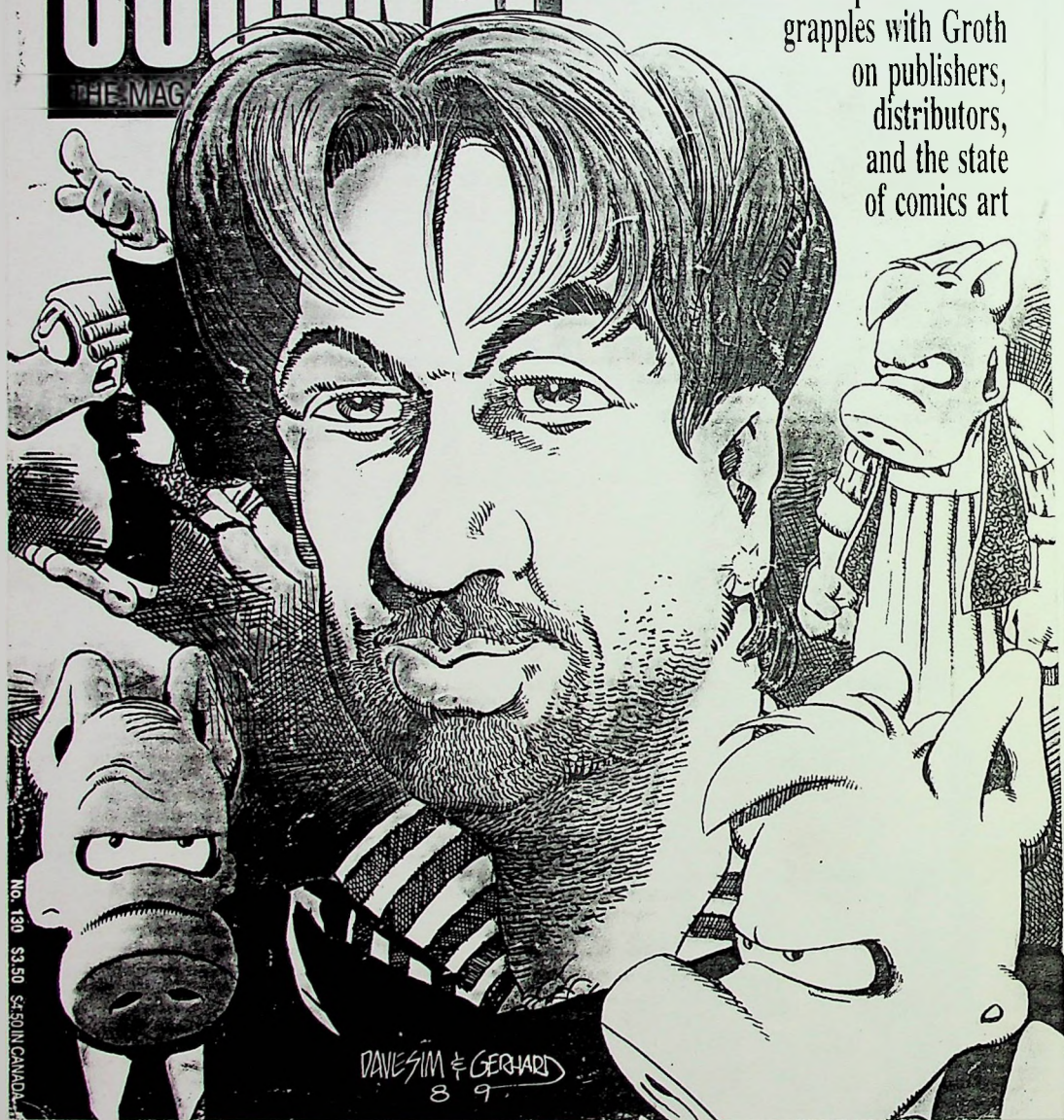
Would the real Dave Sim please stand up

3.1 Self portrait **Dave Sim**
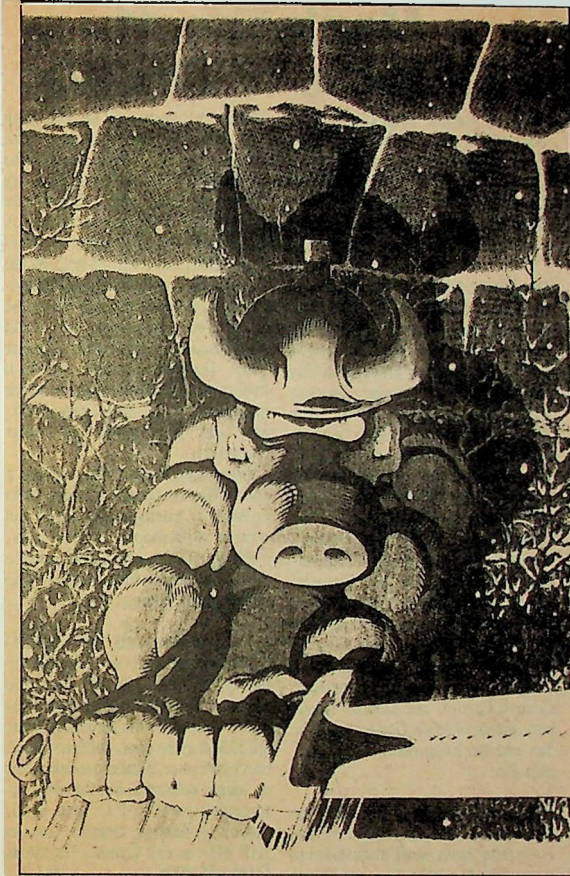
A Three foot high parody Aardvark
3.2 'Cerebus' **Dave Sim**

One Aardvark one vote;
Cerebus debates democracy with the aristocracy
3.3 'High society' Dave Sim
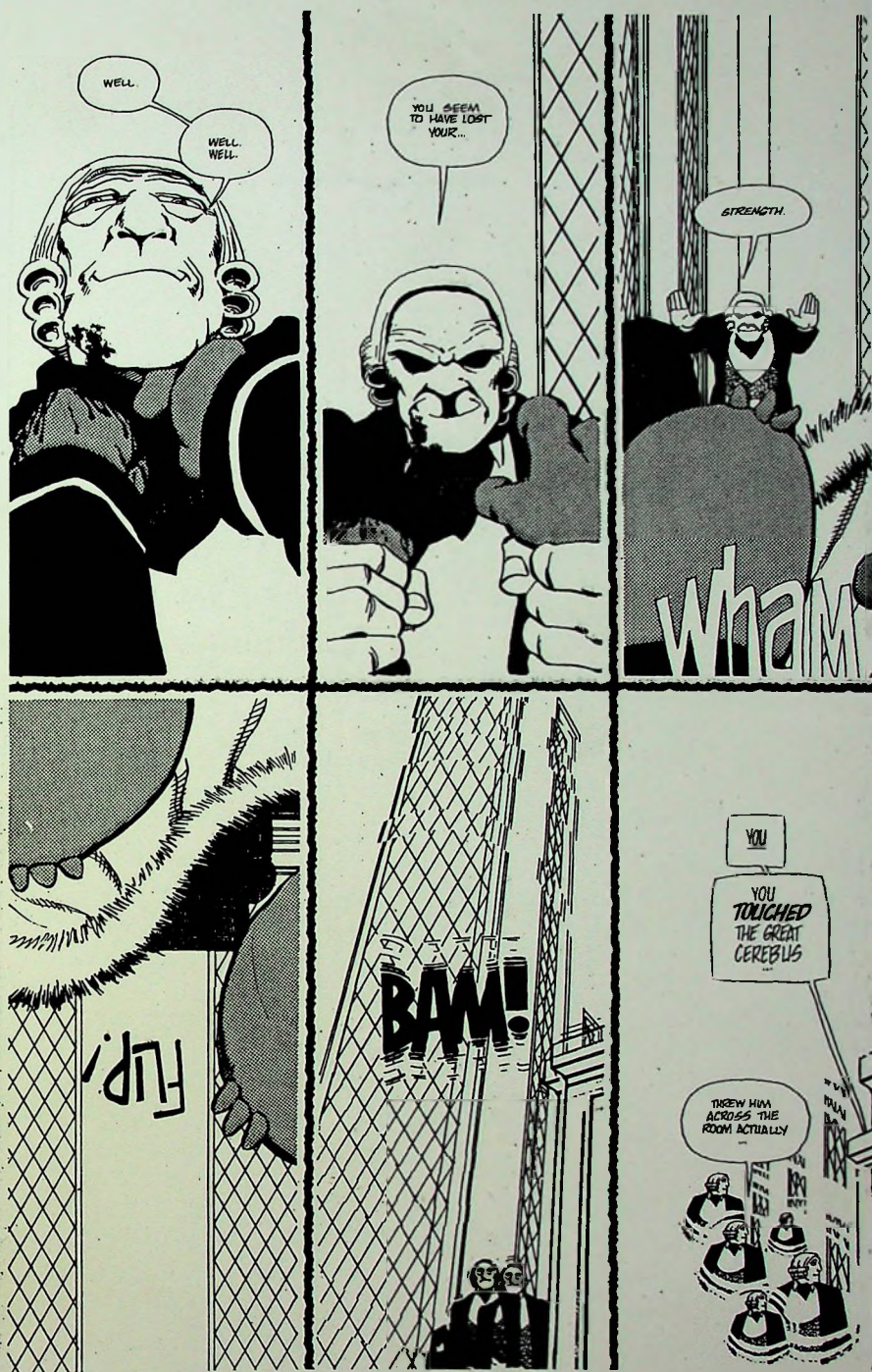
Accomplished use of visual devices and sound effects
3.4 'Dead Friends' **High Society**
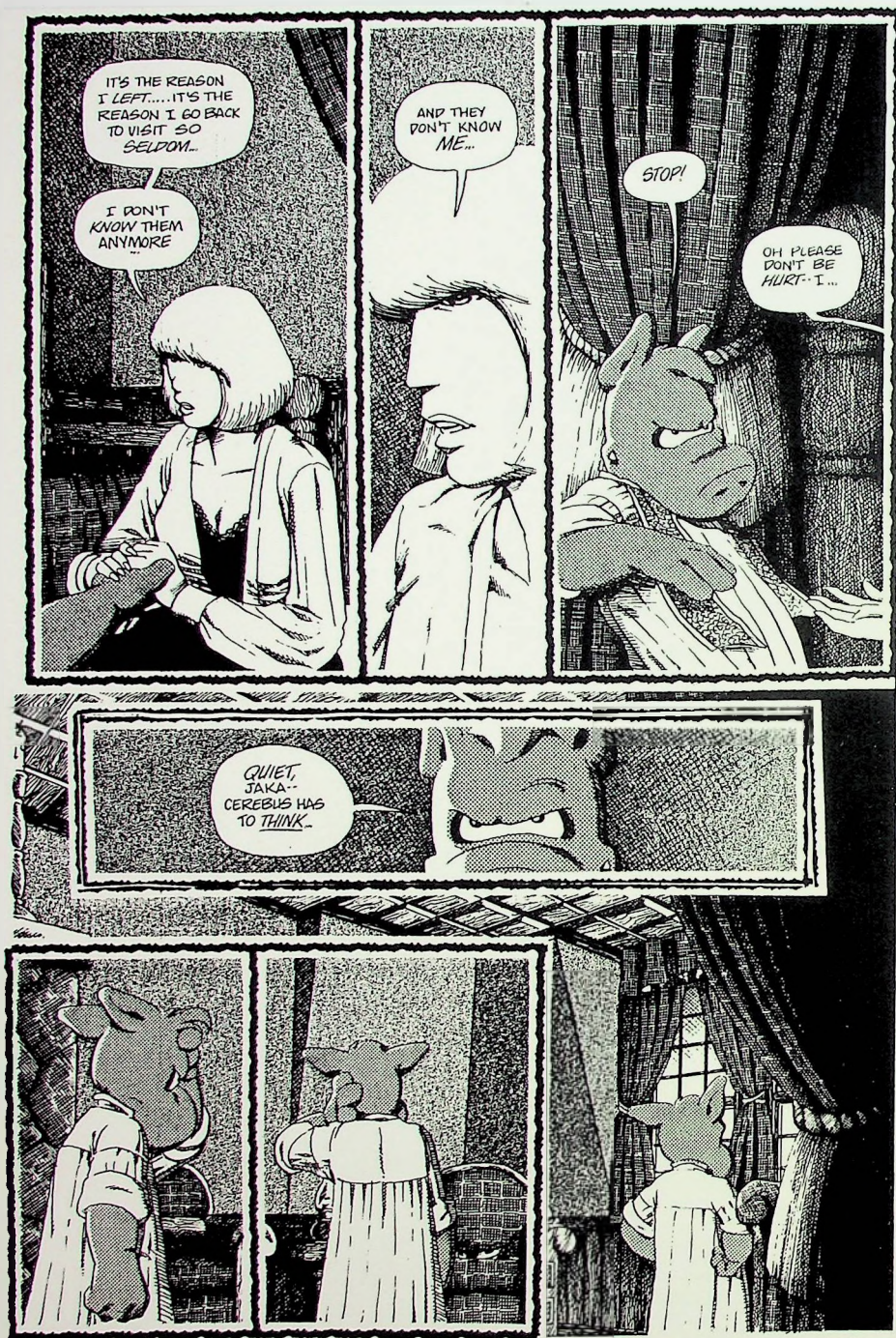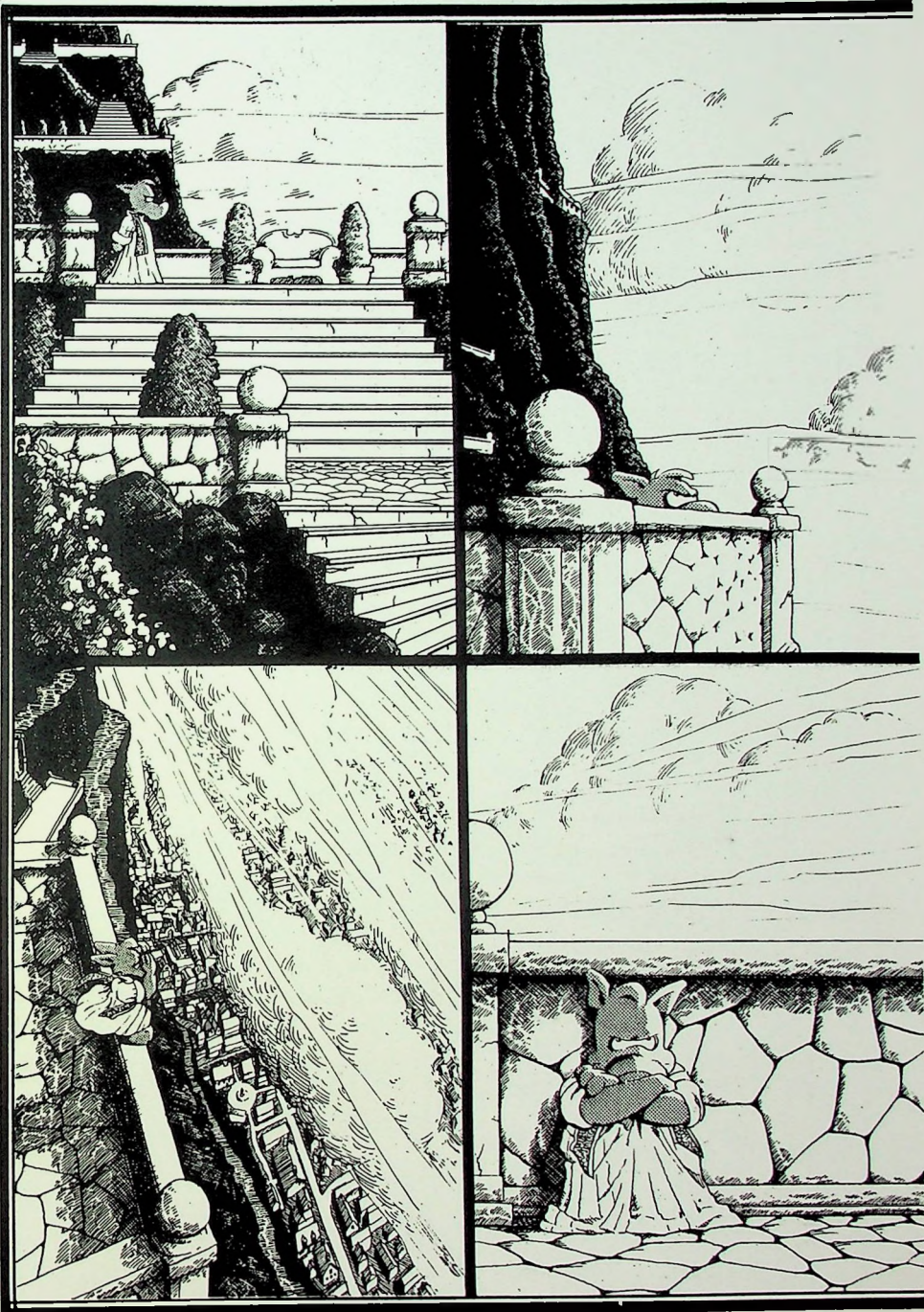
"Intricately detailed backgrounds"
3.6 'Fascination and Fruition' **Church and State Vol 1**
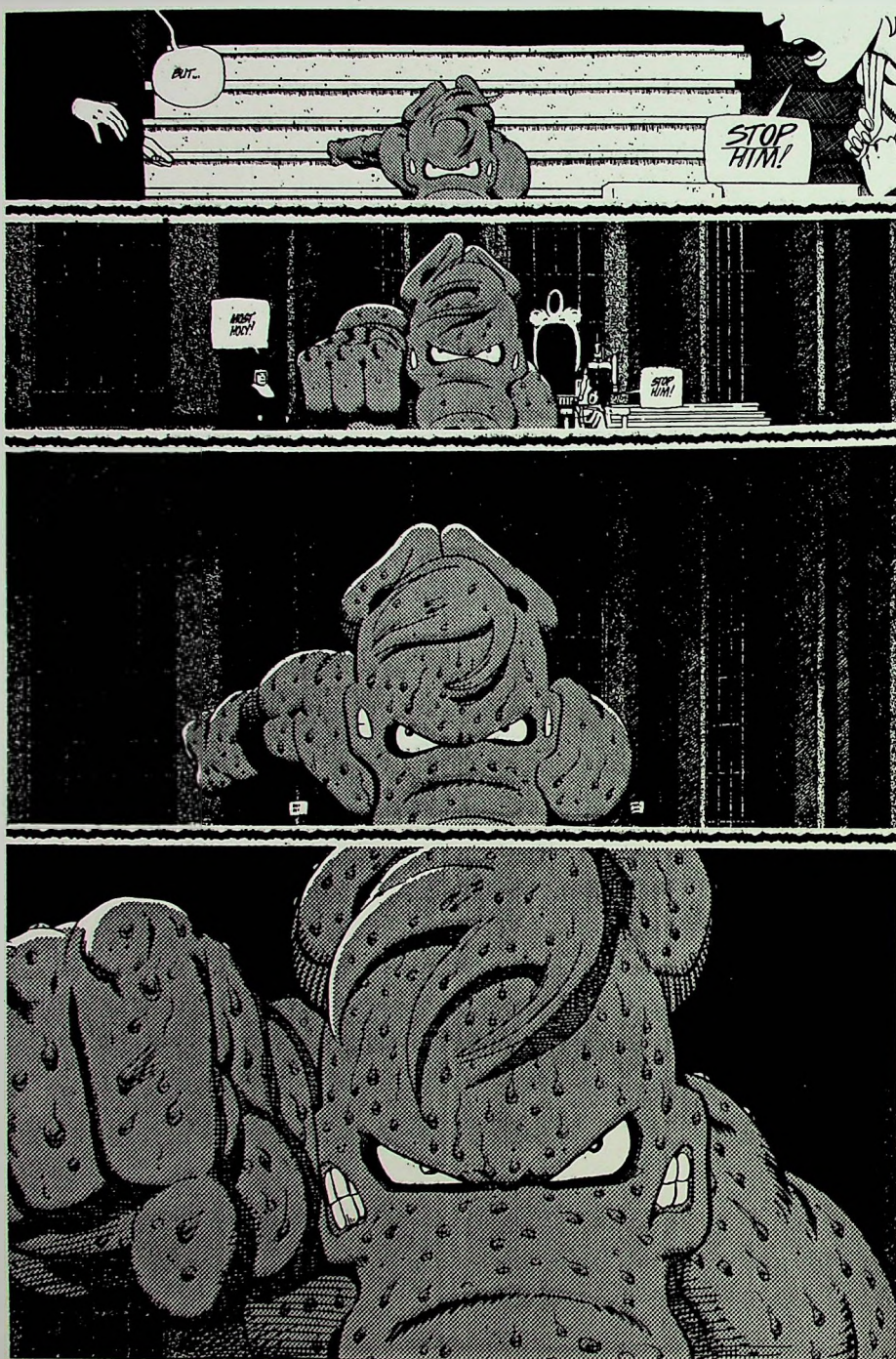
"Roy Lichenstein would have approved"
3.7 'Ave Avid' Church and State Vol 2

"Pope Cerebus on a good day"
3.8 'Audacious Tenacity' **Church and State Vol 2**
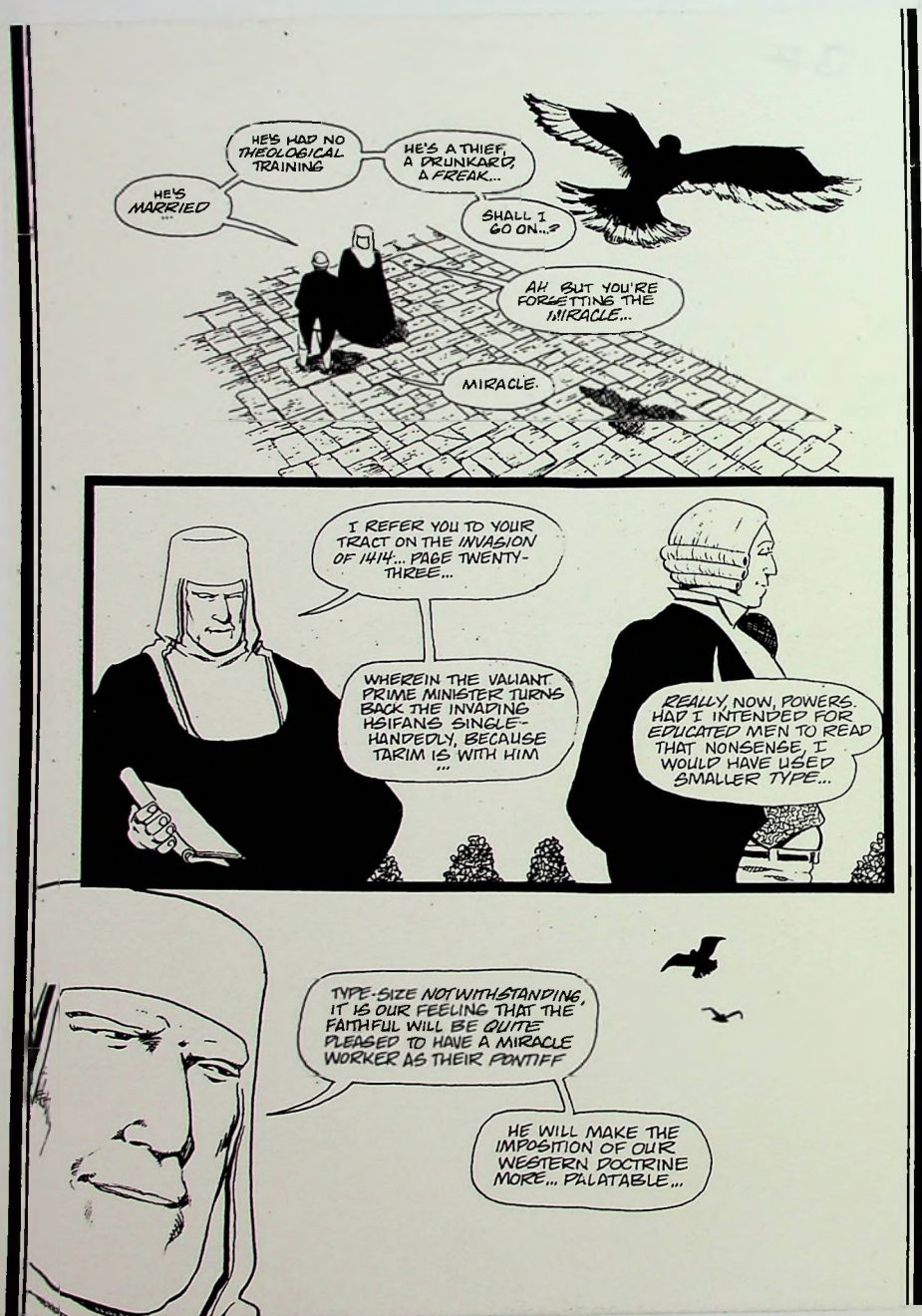
"Baron Weisshaupt and Bishop Powers discuss typography and theology"
3.9 'Never pray for change' **Church and State Vol 1**

"Lord Julius isn't my real name, I'm wearing it in for a friend!"
3.10 'Hovering below the fray' **Church and State Vol 1**

The merely magnificent Moonroach
3.11 'Towers Analogous' Church and State Vol 2

"Absolute power corrupts absolutely"
3.12 'The Unknown Given' **Church and State Vol 2**
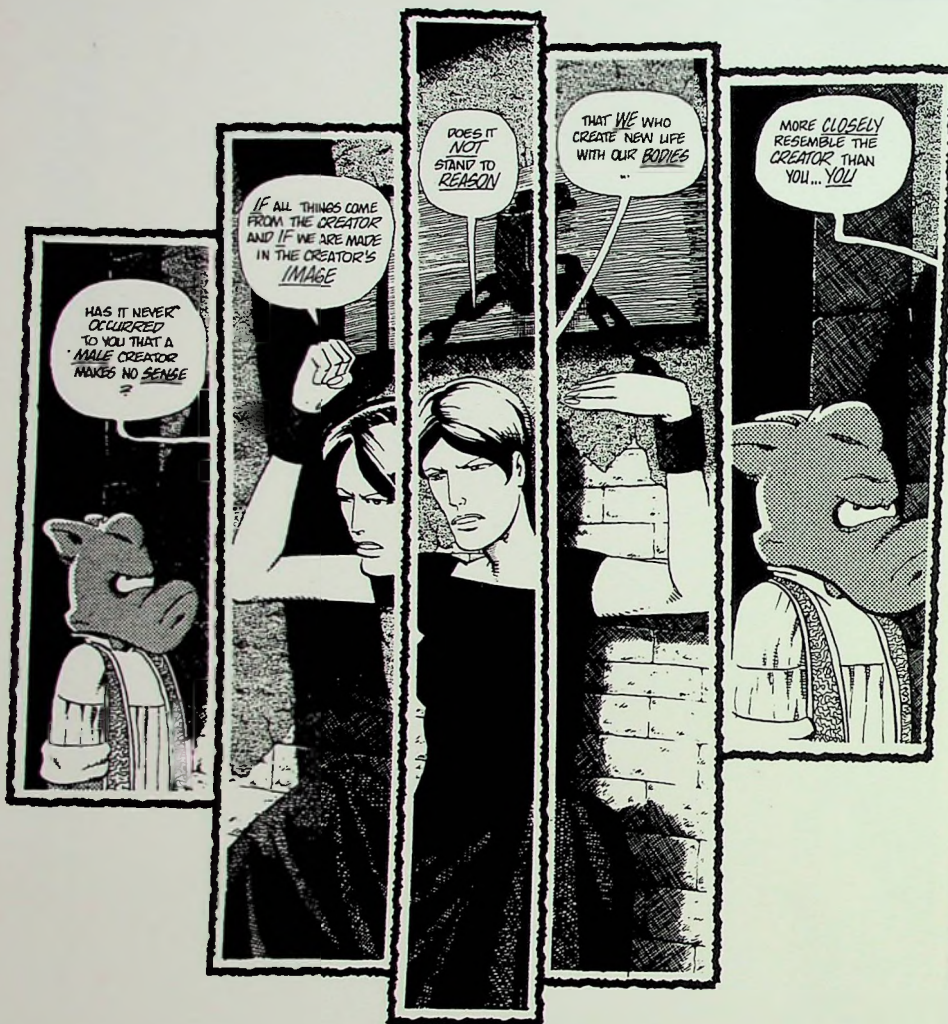
"Feminist Theology"
3.13 'The Unknown Given' **Church and State Vol 2**

Speech text in cartoon: SURE--I'VE THOUGHT ABOUT SELF-PUBLISHING BUT IT... SEEMS SO RISKY...
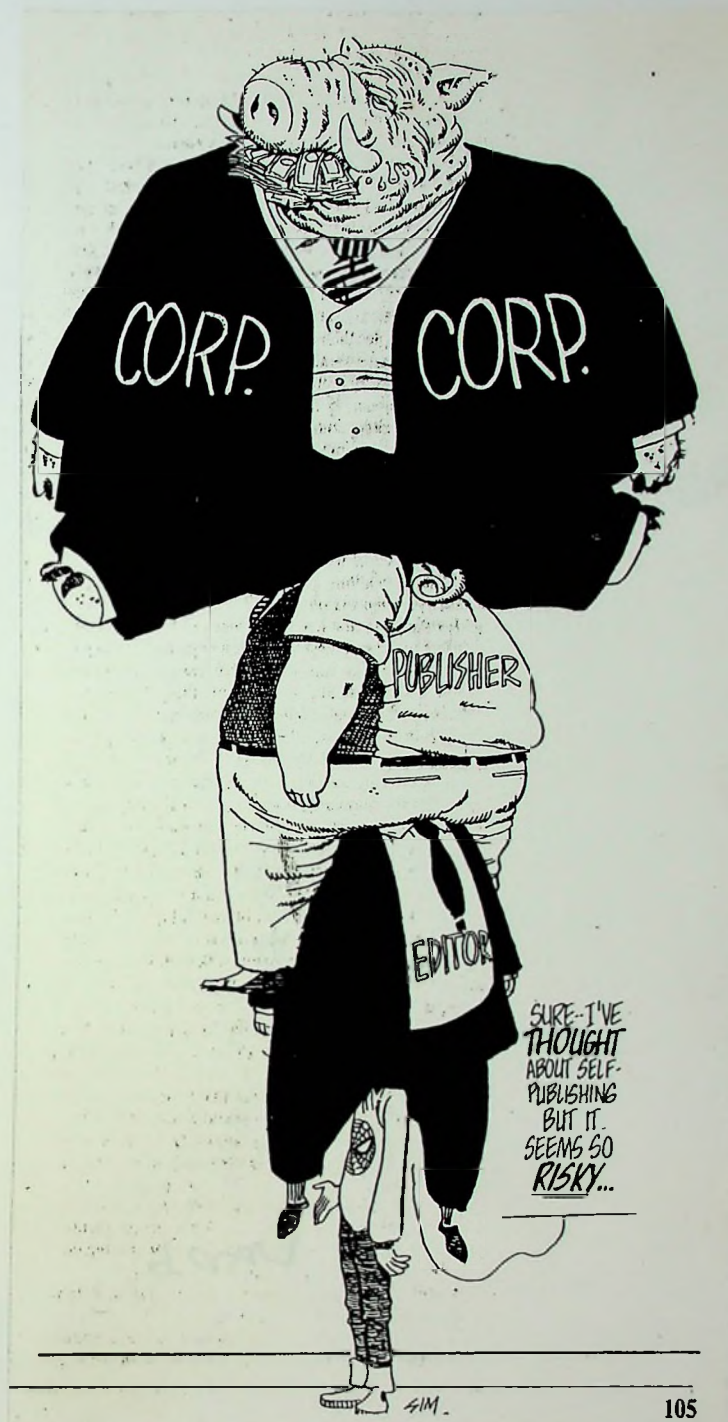
Sims interpretation of the Corporate Hierarchy
3.14 Editorial Cartoon **Dave Sim**

Fluid Storytelling
3.15 'Odd Transformations' Church and State Vol 1
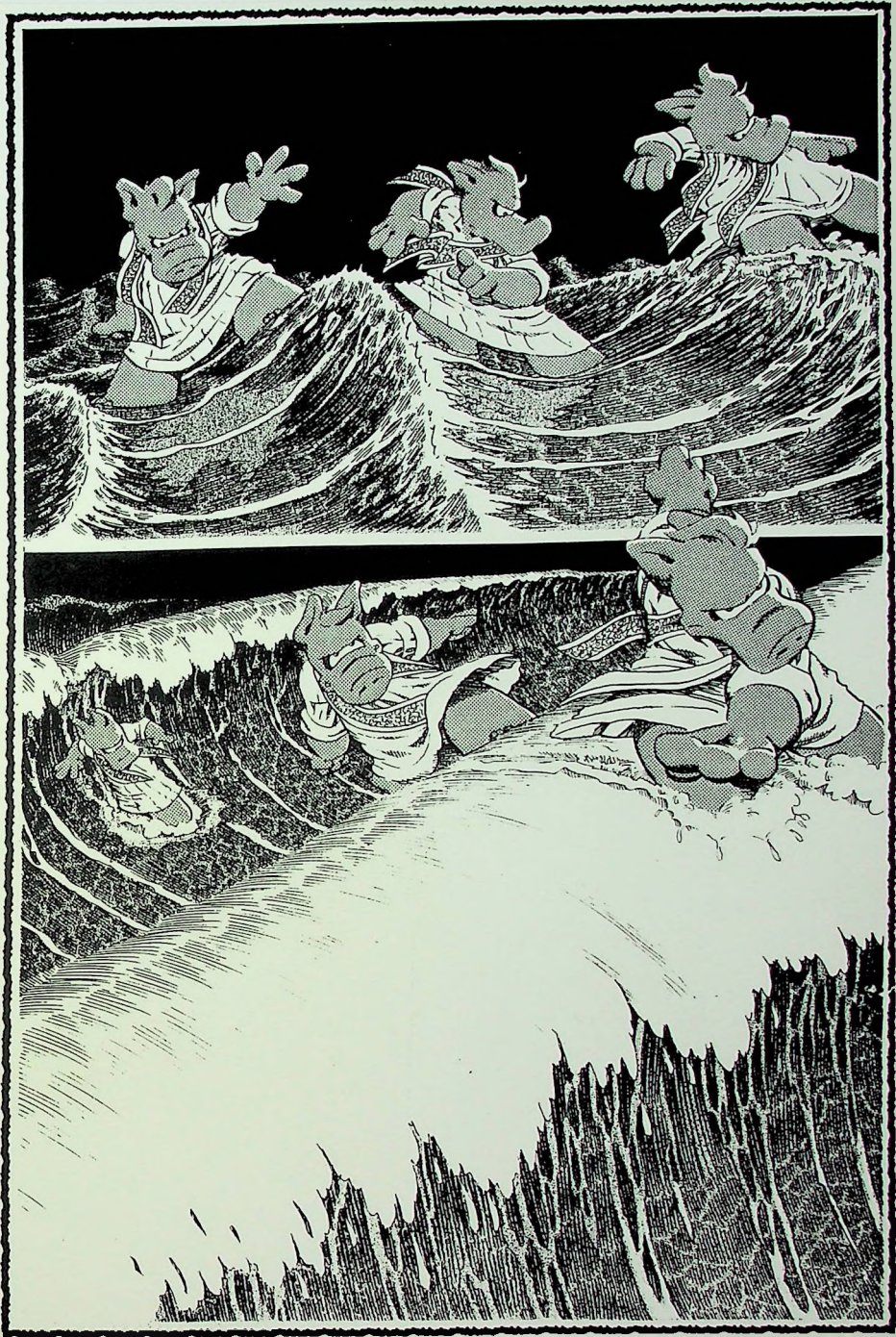
Fluid Storytelling
3.15a 'Odd Transformations' Church and State Vol 1

BILL SIENKIEWICZ

painting by numbers

Bill Sienkiewicz is another of the most innovative and influential artists working in the comics medium at the moment.[4.1] He is a creator who brings a fine art sensibility to his work. His books more than any others express the paradox of the comic form, caught between its low art origins and high art aspirations.

He began his career at the beginning of the eighties with an unerring belief in the potential of the sequential art form. At the time he saw the major publishers as his only way to get his work into print. To begin with, he worked for Marvel Comics, one of the two largest American publishers, drawing conventional superhero strips. Within a year his work was being acclaimed by comic fans. At this time his drawing was a tight realistic style, modelled on that of Neal Adams, the most acclaimed superhero artist of the 1970's.[4.2] As his work became more popular, he himself became disillusioned.

He quickly realised the artistic vacuum that he was caught in. He came to the medium with high ideals, but found himself employed in merely the literal illustration of formulaic stories. His solution to this was to completely alter his drawing style and narrative techniques. In a short space of time, his work metamorphosed into a complex electric style which drew on a much broader range of references than the normally inbred nature of most comic art. This new experimental work was too much for the powers-that-be at Marvel. Disappointed at losing a successful Neal Adams clone, they demoted Sienkiewicz to a low sales comic - <u>Daredevil</u>. It was during his time on this title that he refined the "visual pyrotechnics" (Hunt 1990 p46) of his new technique. Visually this work was very powerful and completely unlike anything else in comics at the time. Imagine a hot wired mix of Gustav Klimt, Francis Bacon , Ralph Steadman and Tex Avery and you might get close.[4.3]

At this time, while Sim was beginning to explore what a comic book should be, Sienkiewicz was more concerned with upsetting pre-existing notions of what a comic book should <u>look like</u>. He abandoned the traditional media of pen and ink and tinted Benday dot screens. Instead his pages were covered in layers of paint, crayon scribbles, splashes of airbrush and even... 'Three dimensional effects, D.I.Y. collages of wires, circuitry and anything else that happened to come to hand.' (McCellan, 1990 p 94) Even though his work had matured visually, there was still an intellectual gap to be filled. The problem with early Sienkiewicz was that he was still working within the superhero genre. This led to an irreconcilable gap between what was being represented and the style he was using to represent it. The superhero formula lends itself to a more subservient visual representation and as a result his artwork was simply overwhelming the story it was illustrating.

So why did he continue to illustrate this type of genre material when his artwork was crying out for more intelligent subject matter. I would have to say that his reasons were primarily economic. During the first half of this decade, independent publishing was still a relatively minor force. None of the independents would have been in the position to pay him what he needed to produce this type of work. Similarly they would not have had the resources to print it properly either. The complex nature of his imagery could only be reproduced by four colour printing and needed expensive glossy paper stock to show up its nuances of colour and texture. So to continue experimenting, he had to stay with the major publishers.

The culmination of this period was 1986's Electra:Assassin series, produced for Epic Comics (Marvels 'mature' imprint). A collaboration with Frank Miller, the story was a violent, trashy, tech noir piece livened up by Sienkiewicz's high-energy, slightly deranged visuals. What gives this book its strange edge is the dichotomy between the subject and the form. Miller's script revels in its pulp roots, reading like William Gibson on acid and trying to be little more. Simultaneously Sienkiewicz's style is overtly 'painterly' and seems to be aiming for something higher.[4.4] The two make for uneasy bedfellows and the book is ultimately flawed as a result.

At the time, the book was seen as revolutionary and Sienkiewicz was hailed as the most exciting new artist in the medium. This newfound reputation allowed him to take stock of his artistic position. It also gave him enough influence within the Marvel organisation to convince Epic to publish his first self created piece. The idiosyncratic Stray Toasters was published by Epic in four parts and still stands as totally different to anything they have published before or since.[4.5] Sienkiewicz often mentions David Lynch and Eraserhead as influences and this book represents the closest he has come to Lynches dark, twisted world. Set in the near future, the story is "a dark industrial nightmare of family cruelty and serial killing." (McCellan 1990 p 94). It is undeniably his most emotionally powerful work to date.

One idea that Sienkiewicz had been exploring in his early experimental work, was a belief that the rendering of a drawing could become part of its subject matter. He took this concept to its extreme in Stray Toasters. Every scene assumes a different style that reflects it tone and atmosphere. The book is about confronting painful issues and peeling away the facade of security that surrounds modern life. The application of his rendering techniques to such strong subject matter produces aggressive and disorientating results.[4.6] Consequently the book is often a struggle to read, it demands a lot of participation from the reader. 'It took no quarter and gave no

quarter - Toasters rips the notion of security apart.' (Sienkiewicz, 1990 p 44)
As a complex and intricate piece of artwork Stray Toasters is one of the best examples of the potential of the medium. It takes literary devices like stream of consciousness and mixes them with cinematic techniques like montage and flashback. This mixture of words and images is collaged together to create an overall meaning. Sienkiewicz talks about this "exclusive vocabulary" when he says that Stray Toasters - 'would not have worked simply as a book because you need the visual counterpoint' (Sienkiewicz, 1991 p 43). Equally the complexity of the material would be lost in a translation onto film, because the reader could not dictate the pace at which it is viewed and consequently, the level of comprehension of the subject matter. 'You can do some of these things in film, but it passes. In a comic book you can take as much time as you need to look at it.' (Sienkiewicz 1990 p 44)

Personally I would draw a lot of comparisons between Stray Toasters and the experimental books of avant-garde typographer Warren Lehrer. The following description of his work could equally apply to Sienkiewicz.

> His page spreads serve as stages for the characters of his books, enabling readers to participate in the drama, by determining the pacing and order of events. (Carter, 1989 p 65)

In his books Lehrer tries to make narrative language visible.[4.7] His characters speak in type-faces and colours reflective of their personalities. Similarly in Stray Toasters some characters speak in hand rendered lettering in yellow boxes, others are typewritten in grey boxes, while Todd the semi-autistic child speaks in a childlike scrawl.[4.8] The combination of expressive typography with expressionistic illustration makes Stray Toasters one of the most unique pieces of sequential art published.

Having exploded beyond the confines of the formulae comics with Electra and then expressed his belief in the potential of more complex material with Toasters, his next major project took him far outside of territory traditionally defined for comics.

The Christic Institute is an American non profit foundation for 'law and national policy.' In 1988 the organisation filed a lawsuit against the American Government over the Iran/Contra affair and the activities of a CIA covert operations team. In an unsuccessful attempt to publicise their case they produced a paperback book Inside the Shadow Government. They later decided that the amount of detailed information they intended to convey was too intimidating in book form. Since many U.S.

Defence training manuals are comics and the C.I.A. has produced comic-books for Nicaraguan anti-government forces, the Institute sought to beat them at their own game.

In a second attempt to inform the public they published Brought to Light (A Graphic Docudrama) (4.9) This book is divided into two halves, the first story is drawn by a mainstream comic artist in a petrified "realistic" style evocative of Jehovahs Witness' comics or Charles Atlas adverts. The second story is a different matter. Illustrated by Sienkiewicz, he applies his intense visual style to grotesque political cartooning. It is his most shocking and violent book to date, but the artwork merely reflects the terrifying conduct of the accused C.I.A. agents. The book generated considerable controversy during its production. The original co-publishers Warner Brothers, pulled out at the last minute in fear of political retribution. Consequently the book was not published until after the 1988 presidential election.(4.10)

Criticism of the book generally questioned the balance between any possible increase in public perception and the possible trivialisation of important issues. This claim seems to have been levelled against the form not the content. On reading the book you will find no trivialisation. The introduction claimed that the book 'was firmly rooted within the historical tradition of political caricature and social satire.' However, Brought to Light goes much further than traditional political cartoons. Within its pages there are a great array of visual devices.(4.11) ranging from literal representation (actual photographs of bombing victims), to conventional symbolism (i.e. swimming pools of blood representing more largescale slaughter). There is no denying the subjective nature of the presentation, but any accusations of trivialisation are misguided. Personally I fell that the core of the criticism was based on the public perception of the trivialisation inherent in the sequential art form.

While a book like Brought to Light sets out to inform more than entertain, Sienkiewicz and writer Alan Moore realised that the most powerful aspect of the sequential form is its narrative potential. So to make the book's hard facts more digestible, they are couched within a narrative framework. The history of the CIA covert operation is narrated in a bar by an ex-agent. this violent and confused character is portrayed as an American Eagle, all beak and talons. Here Sienkiewicz subverts the most powerful symbol of American imperialism by portraying it as a down at heel barfly in a tatty suit. (4.12)

This narrative device also allows Sienkiewicz to pace the book. after five or six pages of densely packed graphics and historical information, returning to the eagle gives the

reader a visual "rest". while allowing time to absorb what has gone before, these short scenes also provide visual counterpoint to the next section. The eagle lights a havanna before talking about Cuba, or in one blackly comical scene, disconnects his left hand and lets it crawl along the bar, his right hand blissfully unaware of the proceedings. Although these scenes are visually very powerful, the symbolism is admittedly very heavy handed. But it must be remembered that this book was meant to communicate to as large an audience as possible. Sienkiewicz's more experimental works like Stray Toasters have little realistic chance of reaching anyone other than comic afficonados. so while Brought to Light seems to rely on visual cliches more than his other works, that must be taken as intentional.

The final piece I want to look at is this most recent and ambitious work to date. In collaboration with writer Alan Moore, Sienkiewicz is creating a book called Big Numbers . They are self-publishing the venture under the Mad Love (publishing) imprint. This move to self-publishing has been inspired (and at times assisted) by Dave Sim. The book represents the most significant move into self-publishing yet attempted by two established mainstream creators. Economic considerations aside, artistically Big Numbers stands as potentially the most important non-generic idiosyncratic publication in the independent market.

A disclaimer at this point, I would like to say that although Sienkiewicz has not written this book, the way that it has been produced and his interpretative approach to the material means that he must be considered the literal co-author of the book and not in a subservient illustrative role.

Spanning nearly 500 pages, the book is to be published in 12 chapters. Two chapters have been produced over the last year. With only two chapters to work with it is impossible to predict the eventual evolution of the story. The book attempts to depict a year in the life of an ordinary English town (Hampton) at the end of the twentieth century. The apparently mundane lives of 40 characters are set against the construction of a huge American shopping mall [4.13]. This icon of 1980's consumerism is contrasted with the hopes and desires of the dispossessed in post-Thatcherite Britain. The book's structure is based on fractal geometry and chaos theory, the new science of mathematics that is rapidly infiltrating all levels of popular culture [4.14]. Writer Alan Moore describes the book as representing

> That view of the world as a web of interconnected ego's and desires and ambitions and accidents and random events that seemed to me to be saying so something true, something important. (Moore 1990.p81)

What interests me about this book and why I see it as important, is the way it disrupts existing preconceptions of sequential art. The book is a deliberate attempt to appeal to the broader audience outside the comic markets. It almost seems designed not to appeal to existing comic readers. The key word when referring to this book is accessiblity. On the surface it is meant to be as easy and seductive as a soap opera but beneath that surface lies a structure more akin to a complex novel than a soap opera.

Artistically the book represents a refinement in Sienkiewicz's work. I would describe it as deceptively simple. He has stripped away a lot of the aggressive surface technique which his art was known for. Much of the book is drawn in an understated photorealistic style. In keeping with the concepts guiding the whole project, the artwork is visually simplified, but structurally complex [4.15]. Almost all existing comic book devices and symbols have been discarded. Without the traditional shorthand, like speed lines and thought bubbles to rely on Sienkiewicz has to work much harder to communicate. To express personal thoughts, he has to depict them in a character's face. As well as providing an artistic challenge, there were other reasons for abandoning the accumulated vocabulary of sequential art. Limiting the book simply to image and dialogue gives it a very televisual/cinematic feel, another aid to accessiblity.

Having noted the cinematic qualities of the book, it cannot just be dismissed as a well produced , glorified story board. When necessary, other stylistic approaches compliment the 'realistic' rendering. For one flashback, the drawing reverts to an aggressive pen and ink scrawl [4.16]. In a dream sequence the art fragments into a more expressive abstract style [4.17] . The 'photorealism' , while depicting most of the story must therefore be taken as just another element in the whole visual language of the book. Also while this representational style is currently dominant, there is no guarantee that the emphasis will not change as the story unfolds. In fact, a sort of visual progression has already been built into the art. The first two issues are in monochrome, but this is intended to gradually transform into full colour as the series progresses. This change may well symbolise the movement of sequential art from the gloom of its present cloistered existence into an area of more widespread appreciation. ' [The artistic approach] ties in with the revealatory nature of the series.' (Sienkiewicz 1990, p 33)

Big Numbers will need to be much nearer completion before a comprehensive assessment of its effects can be made. The existing two chapters have achieved

financial success, but this comes as no surprise. The creators existing reputations guaranteed sufficient interest among comic fans to ensure this. However, this interest is sure to wane, considering the subject matter, the high cover price and the erratic publication dates of the project. What remains to be seen is, whether the later issues can attract enough of the alternative audience they were aiming for, to survive.

Sienkiewicz describes himself as "still idealistic after all these years, to think that the passion and belief in the integrity of the medium could still hold out.." (Sienkiewicz 1990, p 33). This belief in the integrity of the medium will have to hold out if this book is to succeed. While Sienkiewicz's artistic sensibilities have gone far beyond the accepted concerns of the comic book form, it remains to be seen if the public can make the same leap of imagination.

4.1 Self Portrait **Bill Sienkiewicz**
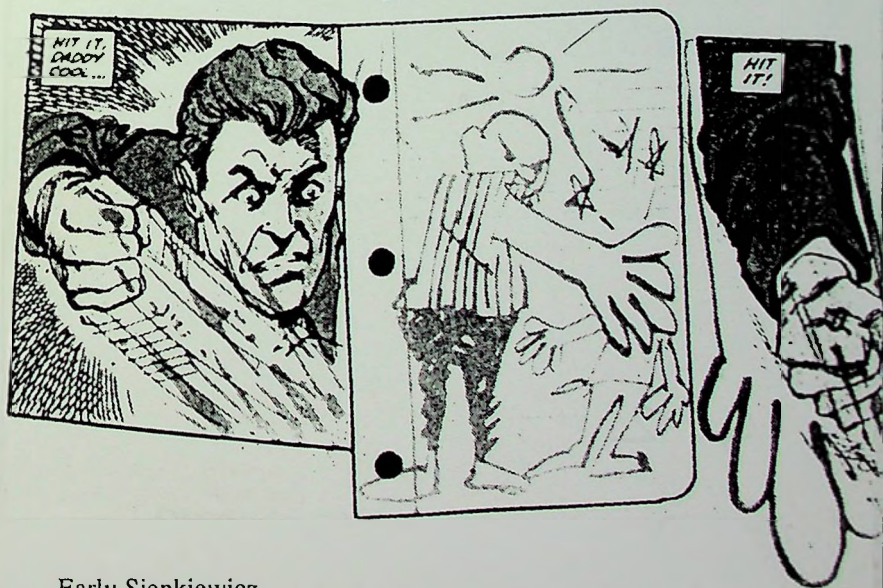
Early Sienkiewicz
4.2 'Moon Knight' Marvel Comics
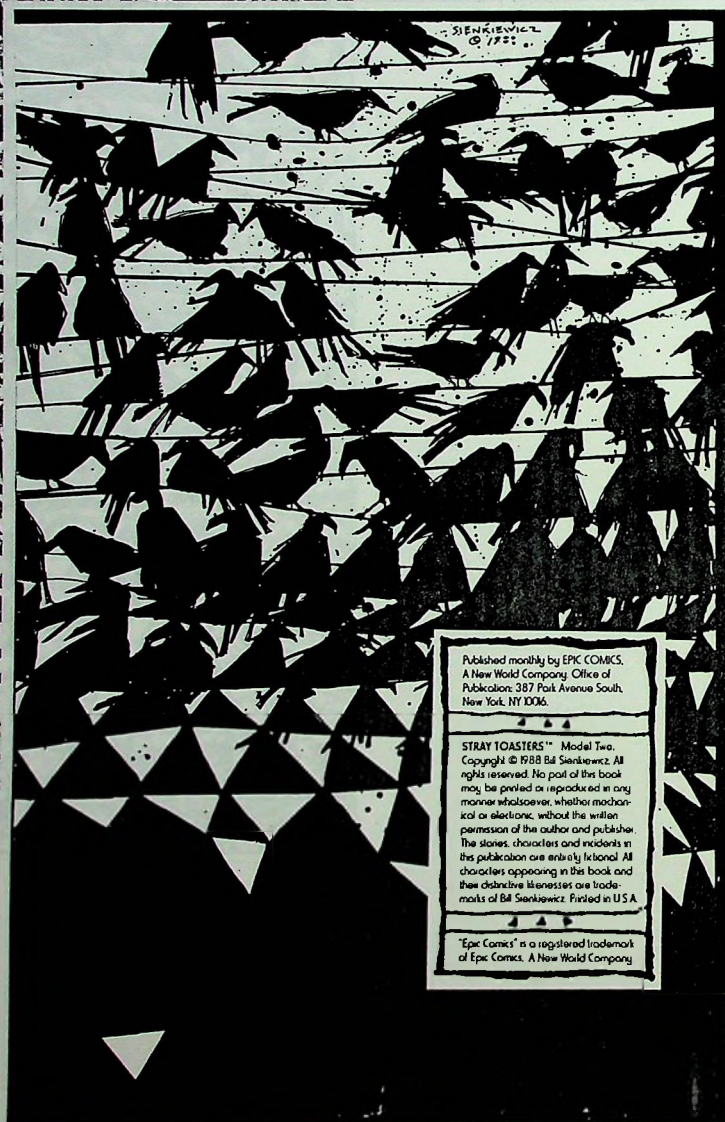
4.3 Influences
Working drawings for Stoclet Frieze   **Gustav Klimt**
Endspiece for Stray Toasters Model 2 **Bill Sienkiewicz**

4.3b 'Judith' **Gustav Klimt**
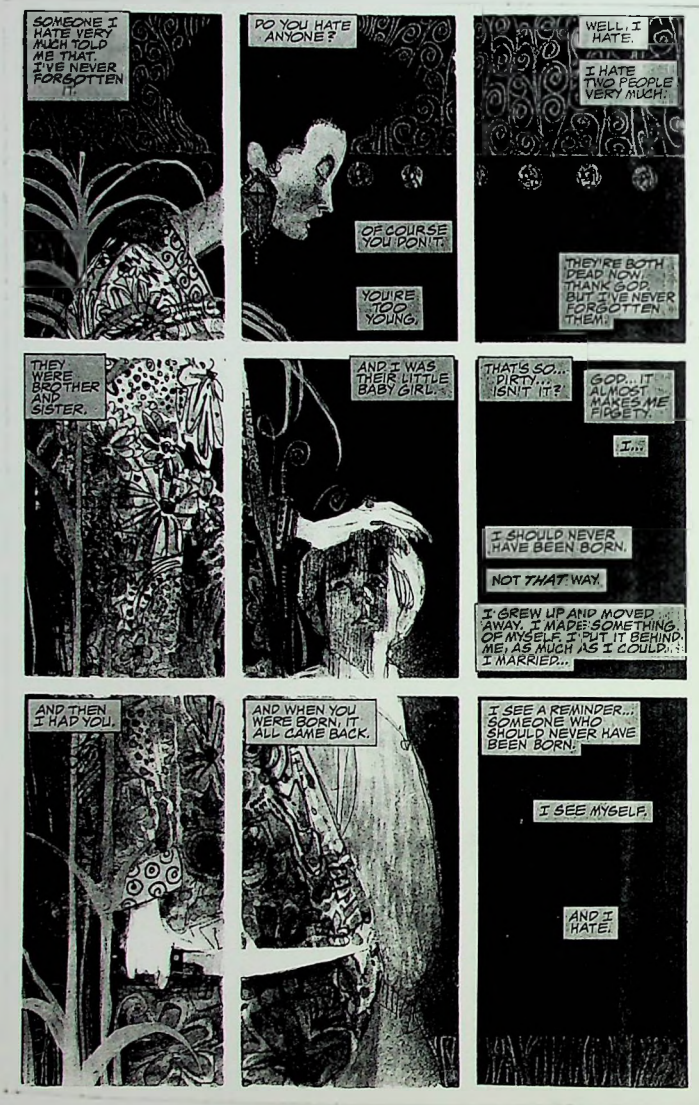
4.3b 'Dahlia' **Bill Sienkiewicz**
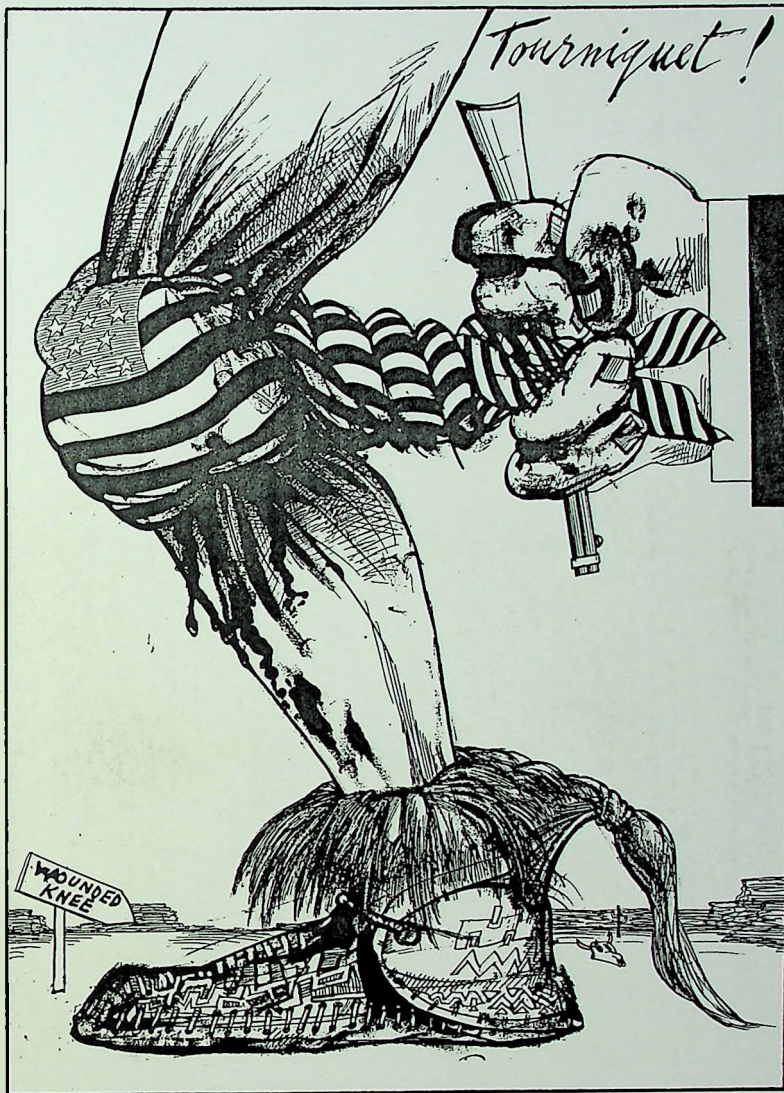
4.3c 'Tourniquet' **Ralph Steadman**
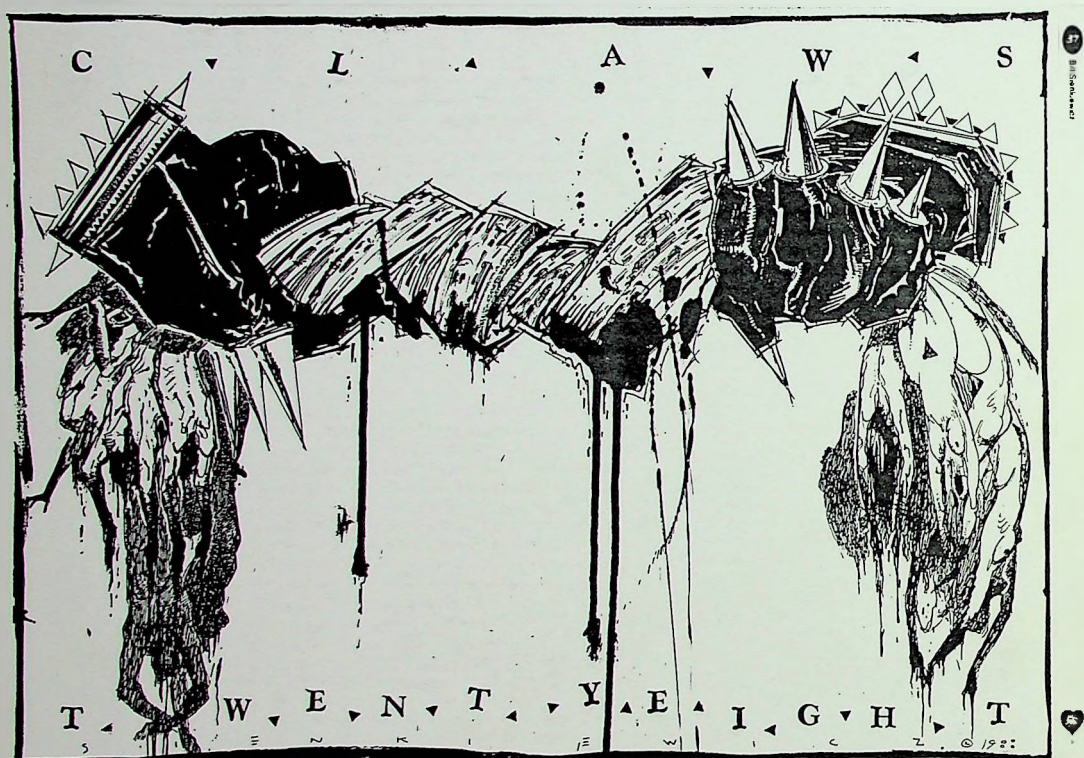
4.3c 'Claws 28' Bill Sienkiewicz
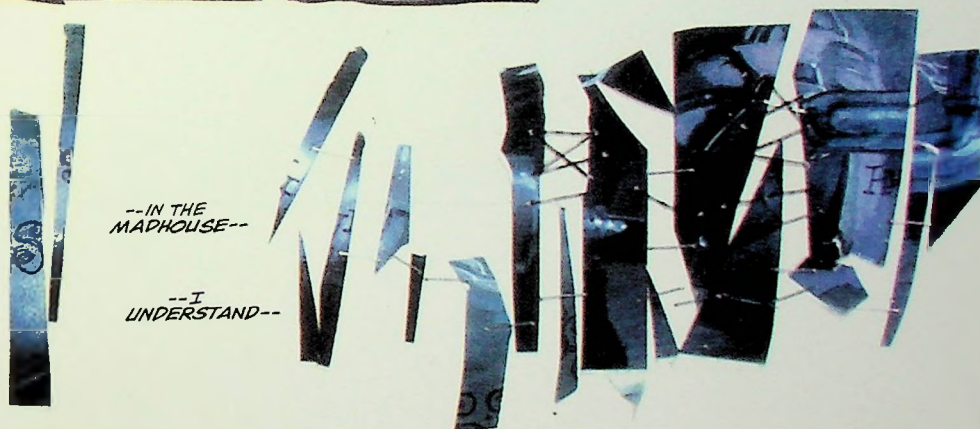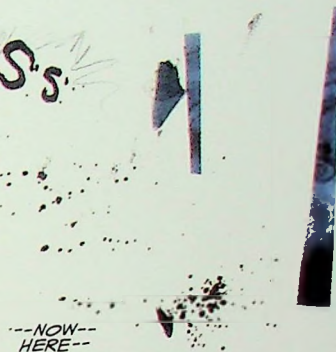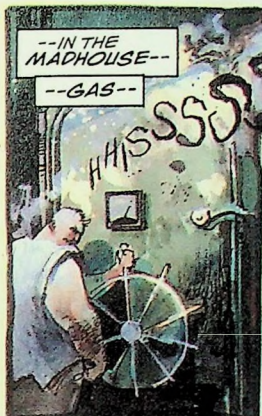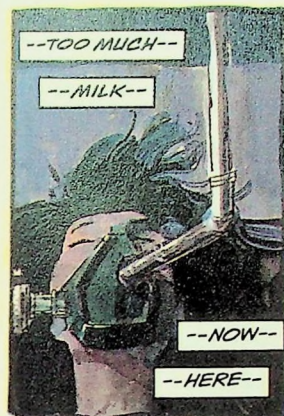
Destroying the surface of his artwork
4.4 'Electra:Assassin' **Bill Sienkiewicz**

4.5 Advert **Stray Toasters**

4.6 Various rendering styles **Stray Toasters**

4.6b Various rendering styles **Stray Toasters**

Experimental Typography and 'narrative language'
4.7 'French Fries' Warren Lehrer

Forceful combination of typography and hand lettering
4.8 'Stray Toasters' **Bill Sienkiewicz**

4.9 Advert **Brought to Light**

"My spine is falling! My spine is falling!"
4.10 Editorial cartoon satirising Warner Brothers **Bill Sienkiewicz**

4.11 'A great array of visual devices' **Brought to light**

'61. switching TACTICS, WE TRIED INVADIN' CUBA'S BAY of PIGS - WHY TOLERATE COMMUNISM near america, JUST CUZ OUR ALLIES IRAN + TURKEY share SOVIET BORDERS?

SCARED SHITLESS over RUSSIA'S CUBAN MISSILES, NOBODY NOTICED OUR TURKISH ONES.

WE ALSO IMPOSED EMBARGOES. ONE BRITISH COMPANY LEYLAND, broke THE TRADE BAN, shipping BUSSES to CUBA...

After consultin BRIT INTELLIGENCE, we HADDA LEYLAND transporter RAMMED and BEACHED INNA THAMES.

they got THE MESSAGE.

footnote #1 - (volume)

THE INVASION failed. We resumed OPERATION: MONGOOSE, OUR ASSASSINATION program. Guy named THEODORE SHACKLEY (the blond ghost) ran THINGS FROM a Miami BASE codenamed JM/WAVE.

UNDER SHACKLEY: Thomas Clines, then POOR ED WILSON, Later CAUGHT SELLING LIBYANS EXPLOSIVES -

GOOD WORKERS, SHACKLEY and CLINES BETWEEN '62 and '65, they PLANNED 33 ASSASSINATION attempts. POISON cigars for CASTRO. CHEMICALS to MAKE HIS beard FALL OUT...

PLAN 1   PLAN 2   PLAN 3

I KINDA' LIKED THEIR style, y'KNOW.

Problem WAS, the CUBANS were BRAIN-WASHED INTO THINKING THEY WERE happier UNDER CASTRO than BATISTA.

THEN in 63, OPERATION MONGOOSE personnel got CAUGHT SHIPPING NARCOTICS from CUBA to america.

I guess OLD HABITS DIE HARD.

'65, WE CLOSED JM/WAVE, leaving the EXILED CUBANS to TURN Miami into little HAVANA and AWAIT ORDERS.

See --- WE had PLANS for LAOS.

SHACKLEY and CLINES moved to LAOS WHERE WE'D positioned CHIANG'S CHI-NATS after 1961.

N   I   N   E

4.11a 'A great array of visual devices' **Brought to light**

4.12 The American Eagle **Brought to light**

4.12a The American Eagle **Brought to light**
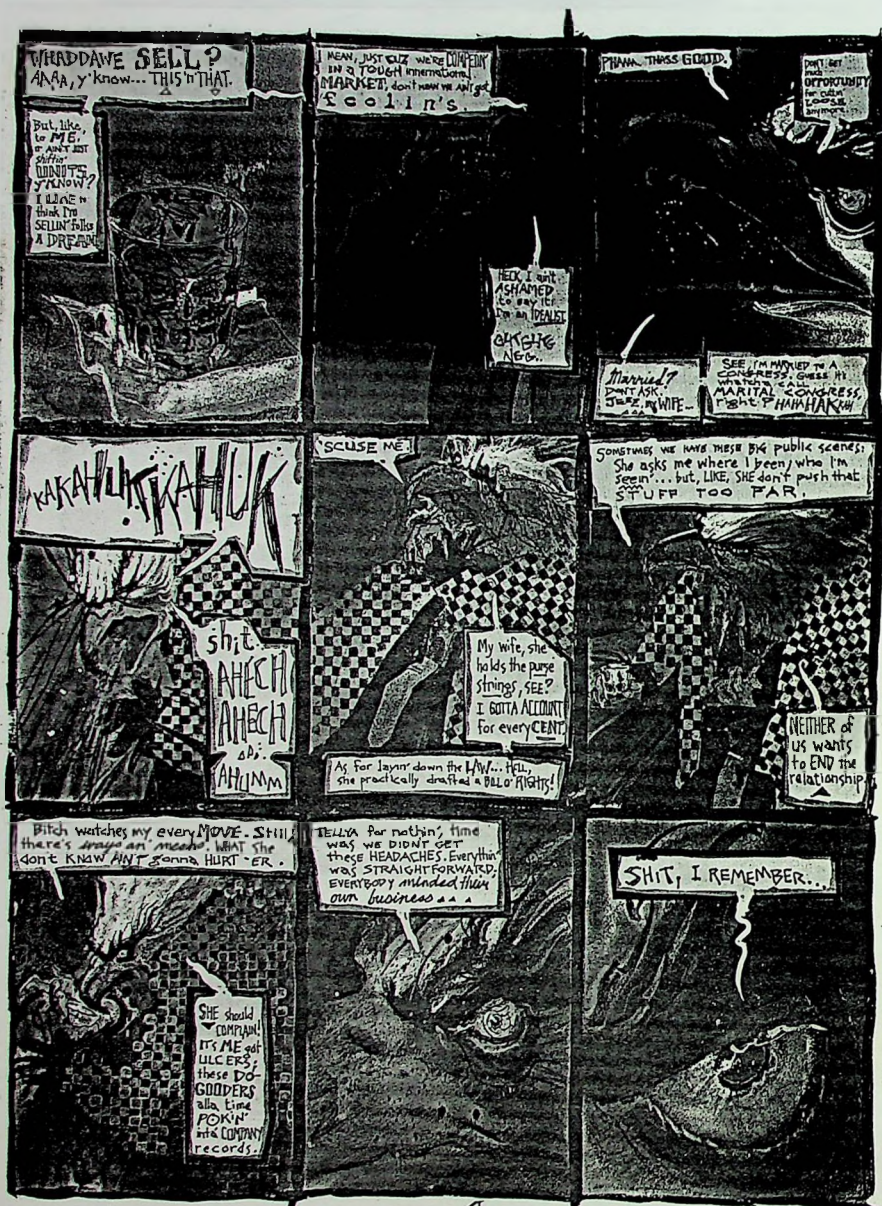
4.13 'The apparently mundane lives of the characters' **Big Numbers**
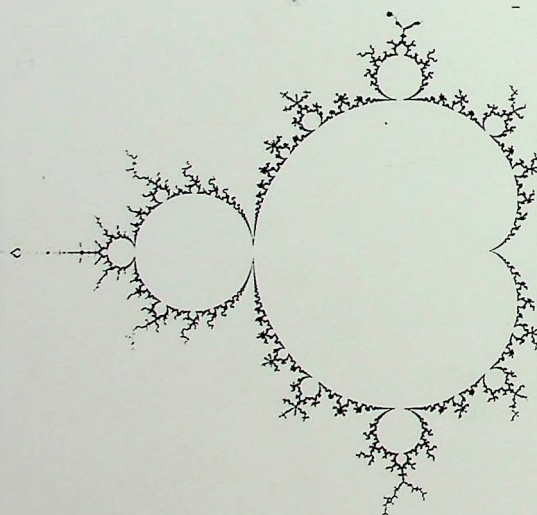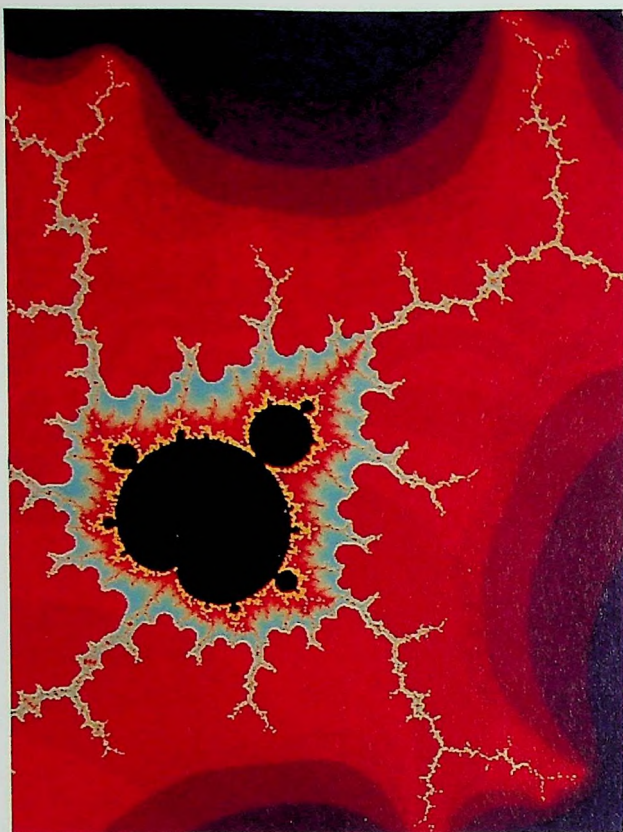
4.14 The Mandelbrot Set; the central structure behind Chaos Theory **Big Numbers**

4.14a 'Storm in a teacup'; chaotic geometry permeates everyday life **Big Numbers**
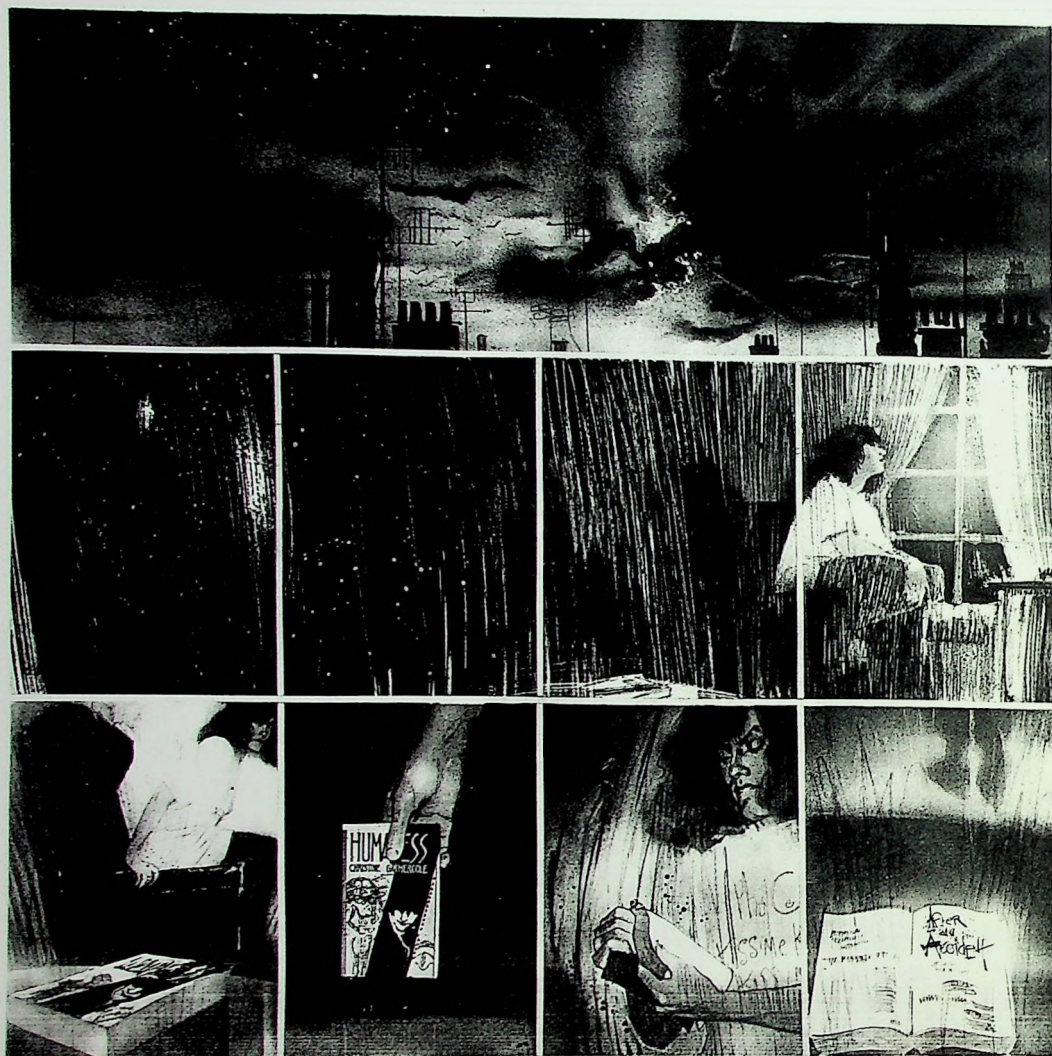
4.15 Visually simplified but structurally complex **Big Numbers**

4.15b Visually simplified but structurally complex **Big Numbers**

4.16 Symbolic change of style for flashback **Big Numbers**

4.17 More expressive abstract style for dream sequence **Big Numbers**

CONCLUSION

from silliness to significance

Sequential Art has existed in one form or another for over 800 years. The "comic book" is a far more recent variation, it represents a bastardised adaptation of the form. It was created for commercial reasons and moulded by publishing interests. The proliferation of mediocre children's comic books, with substandard content has tainted the whole medium. It is generally considered incapable of communicating subtle or complex ideas.

However, in recent years, the position of comic books in our society has altered. While the increase in talented artists working in the medium and the quality of their work have contributed, there is undoubtably a social element. The influence of television cannot be discounted, now that it has become the cultural centrepiece of our "post literate society". People have grown accustomed to images accompanying their entertainment. (5.1). Sequential Art fulfills that requirement, but in a more viewer-centred format. Although I would not advocate the comic book as the last bastion of classical literary values for an illiterate future, it is undeniably a form accessible to the modern post-literate television viewer.

It is this accessibility, combined with its potential for personal expression that are the medium's main attributes. The only mediator between the sequential artist and the audience is the publisher. Traditionally publishing in this field has exploited artists. Today there are an increasing number of idealistic publishers, who want more good work to be published and want their artists to 'be treated with the respect accorded literary authors' (Groth 1989, p107). There are also an increasing number of artists self publishing, a method that gives them complete control over their work.

What is vital now, is that this new work find an audience. At the moment, comic books and"graphic novels" are receiving quite a lot of media publicity, but this has an insubstantial "faddish" feel about it. Something more concrete will be needed if the medium is to attract attention as a fertile artistic environment. This will have to come from the work itself, not from publicity. The artists currently working in the field face this challenge, to change people's opinions about a form that has ben degraded for the last 50 years - to get people to look at Sequential Art again. Hopefully then, they will discover that there is material available which is mature, intelligent, different and worth looking at.

Of the two artists whose work I have examined, I have to conclude that only one is really attempting this change of public opinion. The work of Dave Sim stands as a powerful example of what can be achieved within the confines of the comic form. However the basically inaccessible nature of the material that he has produced makes

it impossible for me to see his work being appreciated by an audience outside established comic book readers. Allegory it may be, but I think Sim is mistaken in believing that a non-comics reader can relate to his 'Cerebus' world. He is not the modern day Jonathan Swift he would like to be thought of as. Although he is constantly developing and refining his skills as a cartoonist, he is doing so within an artistically and financially safe environment. In doing so, I feel he has condemned himself to a limited comic fan-type audience - admittedly one step up from the superhero fanboys, but still part of comic culture and not a more rounded literary audience.

On examination, the work of Bill Sienkiewicz shows a consistent effort to expand outwards to greet new audiences. When he began his career, illustrating turgid superhero comics he tried to address the readership, which had begun to grow up. His adaptation of expressive improvisational drawing styles was an attack on the style of mainstream comics. This had remained unchanged for almost 20 years, while their audience and the larger world outside had moved on. His work attempted to reflect the audiences craving for some kind of relevance and maturity. The limitations of the 'stories' at the core of his visual experimentations doomed them to failure. His dissatisfaction with the stifling atmosphere of the comics industry led him to search out more challenging subject matter. His self-penned Stray Toasters brought his attack on the visual side of comics to an extreme. Its nearly illegible quality signifies the comic book at the very edge, almost abstract, a threat to language and meaning. Having taken the form of his work to that extreme, he is now concentrating on bringing the medium to a new audience. To this end he is giving his work an appearance of familiarity and understating the formidable symbolic codes that have built up around Sequential Art. In his attempts to reach new audiences he is developing a new literary and artistic language for the form.

The role of Sequential Art will continue to change over the next decade as much as it has during the 1980's. The idea that comics can be a powerful, versatile art-form is still sadly foreign. People's expectations of and demands from the medium are not high and this will have to change as the amount of mature and intelligent material increases.

As a closing thought, eminent cartoonist Bill Watterson said in a 1990 speech,
Comics are popular art and yes, I believe their primary obligation is to entertain, but comics can go beyond that and when they do, they move from silliness to significance.

TWO KINDS OF PLACES

ANYHOW, THERE ARE ALL THESE PEOPLE IN THE WORLD **CONSUMING STORIES** (WHATEVER THEY MAY CONTAIN), AND THERE ARE ALL THESE OTHER PEOPLE IN THE WORLD **PRODUCING STORIES** FOR THEM TO **CONSUME.** THE PEOPLE **PRODUCING** THEM ARE **AS HUNGRY** AS THE PEOPLE **CONSUMING** THEM!

IN EVERY DIRECTION THERE ARE **STORIES** CALLING OUT TO US: "**READ ME**...
READ **ME!**"

THERE'S THE MAGAZINE YOU HAVE OPEN IN FRONT OF YOU AT THE MOMENT. **READ ME!** THE BOOK YOU'VE HALF FINISHED. **READ ME!** THE LATEST NEWS **STORIES. READ ME!** THE LATEST EPISODE OF EASTENDERS. **READ ME!** THE **STORY** OF HOW YOU DON'T HAVE TO TAKE A SHAMPOO **AND** A CONDITIONER INTO THE SHOWER WITH YOU, BUT THAT YOU CAN WASH AND GO. **AAAARGHH!** AN ENDLESS **BABBLE!**
ALL THESE **STORIES** AND ALL THESE **READERS**... LOCKED TOGETHER LIKE EXHAUSTED DANCERS, NEITHER OF WHOM WANTS TO BE THE FIRST TO STOP.'

WHAT IF IT'S ALL A **TERRIBLE MISTAKE?** WHAT IF THE STORY-CONSUMER ONLY CONSUMES BECAUSE THERE ARE ALL THESE STORIES **BEGGING** TO BE CONSUMED... AND WHAT IF THE STORY-MAKER ONLY MAKES STORIES BECAUSE THERE ARE ALL THESE CONSUMERS APPARENTLY **BEGGING** TO CONSUME?

WHAT IF IT'S ALL A **TERRIBLE MISUNDERSTANDING?**

SOME STORY-MAKER ONCE SAID: "ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE..." WELL, HE GOT IT **HALF RIGHT.** SEEMS TO ME THERE ARE TWO KINDS OF PLACES. YOU'RE EITHER **ON THE STAGE,** OR YOU'RE **IN THE AUDIENCE.** RIGHT NOW **I'M** ON THE STAGE AND **YOU'RE** IN THE AUDIENCE. TOMORROW IT COULD BE THE OTHER WAY ROUND. THAT'S THE WAY THE WORLD IS.

WE HAVE A **STAGE/AUDIENCE SITUATION** HERE, AND IT'S JUST POSSIBLE THAT EACH OF US IS HERE BECAUSE OF A HUGE MISUNDERSTANDING... OF **COSMIC PROPORTIONS!** THINK OF IT... WE COULD BOTH BE SOMEWHERE ELSE DOING SOMETHING **REALLY INTERESTING**... FOR INSTANCE I COULD BE CLEANING THE TOILET... BUT WHILE WE'RE BOTH HERE **YOU,** THE AUDIENCE, ARE EXPECTING A **STORY.** WELL THE **STORY** FOR TODAY GOES LIKE THIS: **THERE ARE TOO MANY STORIES!** AND I WOULD LIKE TO MAKE IT SO THAT THERE ARE NO MORE STORIES IN THE WORLD THAN ARE **ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY!**

THERE ARE TEN MILLION STORIES IN THE NAKED CITY, AND THIS HAS BEEN ONE TOO MANY OF THEM.'

AND HERE IS ANOTHER ———➤

The role of narrative in modern society
5.1 Diatribe Brian Bolland

The final word
5.2 'Calvin and Hobbes' Bill Watterson

β

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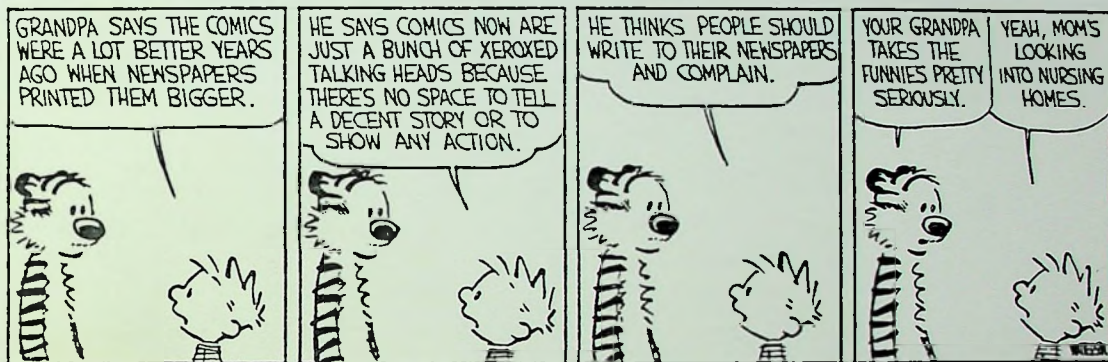
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