1

RANDY DUNCAN AND MATTHEW J. SMITH

How the Graphic Novel Works

Graphic novels are the long-form of a mode of communication called comics. Comics appear in single-panel cartoons like those on editorial pages, daily comic strips like Scott Adams' *Dilbert*, webcomics such as those published on Thrillbent.com, periodical comic book magazines like Marvel Comics' *Amazing Spider-Man*, and graphic novels like Marjane Satrapi's memoir, *Persepolis*. Comics are built using combinations of symbols in a medium fixed in time. Typically, these symbols are rendered through hand-drawn artwork, though artists have communicated using photography as well as montages and mash-ups of various images to achieve the same effect. Comics rely on the interaction of symbols to create meaning, possibly by the interaction of different kinds of symbols (say, pictures and words placed together) or by a sequence of images in relationship to one another. Comics are a collaborative medium in which the creator reduces the ideas that the creator wants to communicate into a finite set of symbols and the reader adds in additional information in the process of decoding the presentation. Thus, comics are both reductive and additive, as both the source and the receiver in the exchange contribute to the dynamics of meaning making. This first chapter explains how comics in general – and by extension those in graphic novels – function to facilitate the creation of meaning between creators and readers.

Graphic novels may be created by single storytellers or by a team among which the tasks of producing writing, line artwork, coloring, and so forth are divided among multiple contributors, a bit like an assembly line where workers perform different tasks in order to produce a single product, like a car. Such is the case for the example page used in this chapter to illustrate just a few of the basic principles of comics (fig. 1.1). This simplistic golden age superhero comic book is a far cry from the sophisticated graphic novels of today, but it does provide, on a single page, very clear examples of the basic components of the comics form, from which even the most literary of graphic novels is constructed. Figure 1.1 is a page taken from a fifteen-page

8

Fig. 1.1 Writer Ken Crossen and artist Jerry Robinson created "The Making of the Mightiest Man" in *Atoman* no. 1 (1946). The complete story is in the public domain and may be read at the Digital Comic Museum: http://digitalcomicmuseum.com/.

RANDY DUNCAN AND MATTHEW J. SMITH

story in the 1946 premiere issue of *Atoman*, written by Ken Crossen and drawn by Jerry Robinson. Crossen was a science fiction author, noted for creating another more successful superhero, the Green Lama, and Robinson was famously one of Bob Kane's many ghost artists for *Batman*, and he is credited with the creation of the most significant supervillain of all time, the Joker. *Atoman* did not fare as well, and the series lasted only two issues. It came along in the post-war period during which the initial popularity in the superhero genre of comics was declining; however, it was developed at a time when many of the standards of Western comics storytelling were well established, if in some of their simplest forms, and for these reasons serves as a helpful reference.

This essay will discuss four key elements to the functioning of graphic novels: the panel, the sequence, the page, and the narrative, and is thus divided into corresponding sections. (At the initial level of the panel, composition takes into account consideration of a subset of elements that include framing, blocking, acting, and *mise-en-scène*, as will be discussed below.) A word of caution: this partitioning is somewhat arbitrary and concepts discussed under each heading may overlap and support one another in the actual creation of meaning.

The Panel

The fundamental unit of comics is the panel; a panel is defined as an area on the page (or screen, if one were to view webcomics, for instance) that captures a distinct moment or scene. The task of the creator is to determine how to encapsulate, or capture, the key moment(s) or scene into a panel. Comics are not film and typically do not enjoy the relative luxury of devoting storytelling space to capturing every nuance of movement; instead, comics display key movements, evidencing the reductive nature of comics storytelling. Effective storytellers have to be gifted at discerning what to include – and consequently what to leave out – in order to communicate with the audience.

Unlike photography, where the camera lens captures a single moment in time, the comics panel may capture a period of time much longer than the instantaneous wink of a camera's shutter. Thus, two characters might have an entire exchange in back-and-forth dialogue in the same panel that features a single static image. For example, in the fifth panel of the *Atoman* page, the heroic Atoman and his nemesis, Mr. Twist, are engaged in a conversation, but it is unlikely Atoman held his hand in mid-air throughout the length of both of their comments. Rather, Robinson probably selected that moment as the most dramatic pose in the midst of their

10

exchange. It is not at all unusual for a panel to capture the visual infor-
mation of activities that would take some time to perform in reality, and
thusly show both cause and effect in the same panel. The fourth panel
in the *Atoman* example illustrates this beautifully: even though Atoman
may be moving at superhuman speeds, he still enters the room, strikes
one henchman hard enough to knock him off his feet, and races across
the room to intercept Mr. Twist's acid bath, all in the space of just one
panel.

In assembling a panel, creators have a host of decisions to make. Car-
toonists Jessica Abel and Matt Madden identify four compositional issues
involved in producing a panel: framing, blocking, acting, and *mise-en-scène*,
each of which is examined in turn hereafter.[1]

Framing

Panels are defined by a border called a frame. Most frames are rectangular, as
the rectangular forms of the printed page (and computer screens) are easily
divided into smaller, similar shapes. The very frame itself can communicate
ideas about the conditions of what appears within them. Typically, frames
are defined by black lines that surround the image, although variations are
possible. Panels outlined in this typical fashion can communicate a common
setting and, when in sequence with other panels, the steady progression of
the story. A thick or jagged line can connote an unusual setting or, in the con-
text of a story, a decisive moment of action or reaction. A frame composed
of a scalloped line might suggest that the contents are part of a memory, and
so on.[2] Note that in the *Atoman* page, five of the six panels are framed with
typical solid lines, moving the story along, while only the first one is pre-
sented without a traditional frame. In this instance, the choice to present a
panel without the typical frame helps to communicate the unbounded free-
dom that comes with Atoman taking flight.

When it comes to frames, size matters. Some panels comprise a mere frac-
tion of the page (or screen) while others lay claim to the entire available
space. (Cartoonist Jim Steranko famously once produced a Nick Fury story
that contained a four-page panel by continuing the artwork over as many
pages, but such practices are unusual.) In fact, one of the crucial differences
between the motion picture and comics media is the ability comics has to
alter the size of its frame. Filmmakers are constrained to one aspect ratio
(the proportion between the height and width of their screens), but comics
storytellers have the freedom to alter these from panel to panel. This presents
an advantage in design, pacing, and emphasis.[3] Note in the *Atoman* example

how radically the size of the frames shifts between the third and fourth panels. The third panel, where Mr. Twist begins to splash acid on Miss James, can be rendered in a smaller panel than the one that precedes it with only Mr. Twist's hand present, because we already know from the previous panel who is holding the acid. Besides, the tight space suggests the close proximity of the threat to Miss James. But in the fourth panel, Atoman's heroic entry, attack, and rescue are aided by the wider space given over to his dynamic actions.

Among the choices that are available to the creator in designing the panel is to determine what distance the objects in the frame will appear to be from the viewer. This is similar to where filmmakers place the camera in order to film a particular shot in movie-making. Some distances place the viewer far away from the activity: such long shots are ideal for defining the setting of a new scene (and, indeed, are also called establishing panels). The first and third panels in our example are long panels; the first shows the hero in flight over a cityscape and the third shows a room's-length of action. In most panels, the viewer is more situated at a middle distance between extremes. Such medium panels usually capture one or two characters from the waist up. In reality it is how we commonly see people in social settings, and thus when used in comics comes to represent most commonplace interactions. Note that the second and fifth panels in our example depict conversations between two characters and are medium views. Creators can also bring the viewer close in to the characters or focus on some object in detail. Such close-up panels help focus the viewer's attention on some emotional response or recognize some clue. In our example, panel three most definitely wants us to focus on the peril of the spilling acid and Miss James' alarmed reaction to it in a classic close-up. Panel six is also a close-up, a choice here used to focus on Atoman as he espouses his individual credo.

Creators can also sway a reader's reactions by manipulating the angles from which the objects in the panel are viewed. A straight-on panel at eye level suggests realism, as that is how most of us see the everyday world.[4] Panels two and four are examples of eye-level panels, even if the actions of the characters in these panels are not entirely realistic. In fact, most of the other panels here adopt more dramatic angles to heighten the drama of the Atoman adventure. In particular, panels one, three, five, and six cast the viewer at a low angle. Low-angle panels can make the objects in view seem more imposing, for awe or fear. Certainly, panels one and six could be attempting to put us in awe of Atoman's superpowers and resolve respectively, while panels three and five attempt to make us fear Mr. Twist's villainy. Although not depicted here, additional angles include high angles, which can

12

suggest an all-knowing, godlike perspective over the objects, and a tilt angle, which can suggest uneasiness about the scene.

Skilled artists can also make the panel visually interesting by being aware of several other elements of effective design. For instance, there is the rule of thirds, which suggests that within any frame, the eye finds it most pleasing when the composition places key elements off-center. Imagine dividing up panel six with three evenly spaced horizontal lines and three evenly spaced vertical lines. The rule of thirds would suggest that the best place to put Atoman's face would be at the intersection of any two of these lines, which Robinson has done, rather than center his face perfectly in the middle of the panel. Another technique for ideal composition is called spotting the blacks, that is, using shadows to direct the reader's attention. Note how in panel five Atoman's figure is outlined by the thick curtains around him, casting a focus on him, say, rather than Mr. Twist's henchman, a relatively unimportant character who almost fades into the curtains himself. With all of these considerations in mind, it should be obvious that each panel is an act of communication unto itself; indeed, "The frame is always an invitation to stop and scrutinize."[5]

Blocking

Creators can also influence meaning depending on where they place characters within the frame. In theater and film such placement is called blocking. Blocking can reveal things about the relationships between objects in the frame.[6] For instance, in panel two, Mr. Twist appears in the foreground and is much larger than Miss James, signifying his power over her in her captive position. In panel four, Mr. Twist's henchman is positioned between the door and Miss James, allowing Atoman to demonstrate his speed and power with two superpowered acts in one panel. Creators are making conscious choices about who to depict within a frame and how to place them therein. They are also determining what (re)actions to have them put on display.

Acting

Characters are not only placed strategically within the panel, but they are also given the opportunity to emote. The great comics innovator, Will Eisner, believed that his craft drew strongly from the tradition of stage acting.[7] Accordingly, he emphasized the importance of the human figure in communicating mood in comics storytelling. Eisner called this emphasis "expressive anatomy," referencing how "body posture and gesture occupy a position

13

of primacy over text."[8] Body posture and gesture are often widely recognized within a given culture, even though the same gestures may mean different things to people from different cultures; however, research into human facial expressions by psychologist Paul Eckman has identified six universal expressions which correspond to distinct human emotions: happiness, surprise, anger, fear, disgust, and sadness. Whether culturally dependent or universal, though, it is clear that creators can convey important information through the way their characters act. Consider Miss James' expression in panel three: even if you did not read Mr. Twist's threat, you can recognize the terror on her face by the positioning of her eyebrows and the shape of her mouth.

Cartoonists who have worked in more abstract styles have developed additional means for revealing the inner states of characters using a set of symbols that cartoonist Mort Walker called emanata.[9] For instance, a floating heart over a character's head might indicate she is in love. Another innovation that cartoonists have developed are the motion lines or "zip-ribbons" used to depict motion. Comics are a static medium and can only infer motion, not depict it like film, television, and video games can. Lines rendered behind a character are meant to communicate momentum. Interestingly, Robinson did not choose to use the technique of motion lines in panel three to show the quick movement of Atoman across the room; instead, he elected a less common technique of rendering several after-images to suggest that the speed with which the character was moving was so fast that the eye would perceive multiple images in that instant. In manga, speed is often depicted in an entirely different technique called subjective motion, where the object in motion is in focus and everything else in the surrounding environment is blurred or streaked. Such conventions allow the character to put forth a performance that further refines the creator's message.

Mise-en-Scène

Within each panel, the creator makes strategic decisions about what elements to present to the reader. In film analysis, such a totality of elements is discussed using the French term *mise-en-scène*, meaning "to put in the scene." *Mise-en-scène* takes into account the characters, backgrounds, dialogue, and sound effects appearing with the frame. Sometimes the *mise-en-scène* can vary from panel to panel, even in the same setting, if altering it helps focus the storytelling. Consider the condition of Mr. Twist's lair. When Atoman enters in panel four, it seems as though he is entering through a typical doorway into a cavernous empty room with no discernable divide between the floor, walls, or ceiling. Yet in panel five, there are clearly defined draperies

14

hung on the walls and an exposed beam on the ceiling that was not visible just one panel earlier. Readers familiar with the conventions of comic book storytelling probably don't pause to wonder why Mr. Twist's décor fades in and out; rather, they can accept that such background detail in panel four would have distracted them from Atoman's dynamic entrance. Blurring the background detail in this panel punctuates the action all the more. When the pace slows down in the next panel to a conversation between the hero and villain, the restored details allow the scene to be more visually interesting even when not much physical activity is taking place.

Arguably, the most essential element to *mise-en-scène* appearing inside the comics panel are words. Experts such as Robert C. Harvey argue that words are central to the definition of comics, but numerous examples of wordless comics abound, from woodcuts by Frans Masereel in the early twentieth century to Andy Runton's silent *Owly* kids' comics today.[10] When words are used, they are used to complement the images, filling in for one another what the other cannot.[11] Words can reduce the polysemy, or multiple meanings possible within images, thereby anchoring them.[12] When words are juxtaposed against images, one begins to manipulate meaning. For instance, Abel and Madden present the example of a picture of an apple.[13] By itself it might symbolize health or the harvest, but label it with some word like "New York" and the meaning is directed in a particular fashion. Label that same picture "temptation" and another set of meanings grounded in biblical connotations for those familiar with them come up.

There are four common ways comics use words: as dialogue, thoughts, sound effects, and captions. Characters' dialogue usually is captured in word balloons that float around them. Eisner suggests that they come from a tradition of one's breath, which you can see as vapor on a cold day.[14] In fact, the Italian word for comics, *fumetti*, is named because of word balloons. The tradition can be traced back to medieval manuscripts, where scrolls, not balloons, trailed from characters' mouths with their words printed upon them. In contemporary practice, the speaker is indicated by a tail leading off of the balloon and pointing toward the speaker. Note in panel six how the tail of the word balloon above Atoman's head points to him; Mr. Twist isn't depicted in that panel, but the direction of the tail of the balloon points back to his position in the previous panel. A jagged shaped balloon could indicate shouting or mechanically reproduced speech such as a voice emanating from a radio or television.

Comics can also make us privy to the inner thoughts of characters through thought balloons. These are usually depicted by scalloped balloons with a trail of cloud-like puffs connecting the speaker to the balloon. Atoman's monologue in panel one could have just as easily been internalized by

15

changing his speech balloon to a thought balloon in that panel, but like so many of us, apparently he just talks to himself out loud.

Sound effects other than human speech also float in the panel, although usually not in balloons. Such sounds are called onomatopoeia. Some sound effects are conventions while others are purely innovations of the creators. Conventionally, a fired gun produces a "BLAM" and the sound of a fist hitting a jaw makes a "POW" on the printed page, but anyone who has ever heard a real gun fire or witnessed a brawl knows these are not necessarily the phonetically accurate sounds of these violent actions, but they try to represent the presence of sound in the environment in an attempt to heighten the realism of the experience. Interestingly, the creators of *Atoman* resisted the temptation to make the pouring acid in panel three "SPLASH" or the sound of Atoman's fist "POW" when he strikes in panel four.

Both dialogue and sound effects take place within the world of the story; they are sounds accessible to the characters (called diegetic sound); however, there are also words sometimes placed in boxes called captions (a type of non-diegetic sound). These are typically the words of a narrator or a character off panel superimposed over the panel for explanation or effect. Panel two in our example has an unseen narrator explain to us the transition from Atoman's location to Mr. Twist's.

Comics theorist Scott McCloud outlined seven relationships between the use of word and image.[15] The most common in contemporary comics storytelling, and perhaps most interesting, is an interdependent relationship where words and images work together to convey information that neither could do alone. Eisner stated a preference for a more picture-specific combination where the image conveyed most of the meaning. In contrast to that style are more word-specific combinations, where the text contains most of the information and the visuals merely illustrate it. Such is the case in panel six, where Atoman's face stands as little more than an illustration to his speech.

Sometimes words and images repeat identical messages in duo-specific combination. This kind of repetition occurs a lot on the example page, including when the narrator explains Atoman's motion in panel four. At other times words and images can be additive in nature, where images help words or words help images. In panel one we already know Atoman is flying, but his words make clear his destination. At still other times words and images might seem to be parallel combinations, as the pictures tell one story and the images develop another. Even montages are possible where the words become part of the images.

Eisner's expressed preference for visuals doing most of the work in communicating through comics is a sentiment echoed by other professionals and summed up in the counsel to would-be cartoonists: show, don't tell.[16] Our

16

Atoman example comes to us from an era when comics made heavier use of words than contemporary comics storytelling, and should be viewed in historical context rather than as a model of current practice.

One masterful panel in a graphic novel comes from Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*. On page 17, with shocking juxtaposition of words and imagery, she reveals that her father, Bruce, was a pedophile. The panel appears at the top of a page and contains a wide, eye-level, medium view of the Bechdel family facing forward in the pews of an ornate church with stained-glass windows and hanging chandeliers. Bruce is blocked into the center, as if he were separating whatever lies on either side. His expression is blank, his head bowed, but his eyes glance to the left side of the panel, as if he were cautiously checking out what lies to his side; to the right is his family in their Sunday best, kids looking bored to be there. To the left, in the direction of his glance, is a procession of young acolytes. A caption representing the words of Bechdel as narrator is positioned above the border and reads, "He appeared to be an ideal husband and father, for example." A second caption within the frame adds, "But would an ideal husband and father have sex with teenage boys?" These words appear to have an additive relationship with the image, setting up a contract between appearance and inner character. Bechdel chose to place that revelation in the most incongruous context imaginable, cracking the veneer of their perfect family in the most unexpected setting.

It is possible to communicate all of the above phenomenon in a stand-alone panel, such as those that typically appear as political cartoons or so-called "gag" cartoons in newspapers (for example, Bil Keane's *The Family Circus*). The multi-panel comic strip – and the long-form storytelling vehicles that build on it – introduces additional phenomena to comics when two or more panels are placed in relationship to one another.

The Sequence

Following on from the panel, the sequence is the next key element in the functioning of the graphic novel. Sequences arise when panels are placed in relationship to one another, or juxtaposed. Even adding a second panel begins to build a story, especially as it affords greater opportunity for conflicts within and between characters.

It would be impractical for creators to show every moment in the progression of a story and so they encapsulate, or select, the key moments of the narrative into segmented images. Eisner explained that a host of choices lay at the creator's discretion, and the effectiveness of one's storytelling abilities was often a reflection of one's ability to choose among the many possibilities of just what to depict and what to leave to the reader's inference. For