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A Frame of You:
Characters in Graphic Novels

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract

Tutkimuksessa pohditaan henkilöhahmojen rakentumista, merkitystä ja ontologiaa sarjakuvan, erityisesti angloamerikkalaisen sarjakuvaromaanin moniulotteisissa merkkiympäristöissä. Ensisijaisena tarkastelupisteenä toimivat lukijan kognitiot: millaisista elementeistä henkilöhahmot rakennetaan, millainen suhde niihin muodostuu ja miten nämä ilmiöt eroavat kirjallisuuden tuottamista rakentelu- ja samastumisprosesseista – kirjallisuuden henkilöhahmoista.

Työ etenee teorioiden vertailusta ja soveltamisesta havainnollistavaan lähilukuun. E.M. Forsterin, W.J. Harveyn, Baruch Hochmanin ja Aleid Fokkeman kirjallisuudentutkimuksen piirissä kehitettyjä henkilöhahmoteorioita tarkastelemalla muodostetaan aluksi mahdollisimman kattava ja käyttökelpoinen käsitys siitä, mitä henkilöhahmolla yleensä tarkoitetaan. Tutkimus hyödyntää erityisesti Hochmanin kehittämää kognitiivista mallia, jonka mukaan henkilöhahmo on yhtäaikaisesti sekä kirjallisen teoksen rakenne että se yksilöllinen, joustava skeema, jonka lukija tästä tekstuaalisesta datasta muodostaa. Tätä henkilöhahmokäsitystä tarkastellaan sitten sarjakuvan erityispiirteiden, esimerkiksi julkaisukäytänteiden, kuvasisällön ja aukkoisen kerrontarakenteen lävitse. Sarjakuvateoreettinen osuus tukeutuu erityisesti Scott McCloudin näkemyksiin sarjakuvan kerrontamekanismeista. Lopuksi havaintoja testataan ja konkretisoidaan kolmen klassikkoaseman saavuttaneen sarjakuvaromaanin Neil Gaimanin *The Sandmanin*, Alan Mooren ja Dave Gibbonsin *Watchmenin* sekä Art Spiegelmanin *Mausin* turvin.

Tarkastelu osoittaa muun muassa, että kuvan ja sanan kaksoiskoodaus ei välttämättä jyrkennä rajaa henkilöhahmon fyysisen todellisuuden ja sisäisen maailman välillä. Päinvastoin, erilaiset merkkijärjestelmät voivat sekoittua sarjakuvissa niin perinpohjaisesti, että eroa ulkoisten, diegeettisesti todellisten piirteiden ja subjektiivisten tai figuratiivisten visualisointien välillä voi olla vaikea nähdä. Kuvan ja sanan yhteistyö on tosin omiaan vahvistamaan henkilöhahmojen koherenssia, mikä onkin sarjakuvien tiimityöskentelyn ja fragmentaarisuuden nimeen vannovassa maailmassa tarpeen. Fragmentaarisuus kääntyy helposti jopa henkilöhahmojen eduksi, sillä se antaa lukijalle runsaasti tilaa osallistua ja samastua hahmojen seikkailuihin.

Asiasanat – Keywords henkilöhahmo; sarjakuva; sarjakuvaromaani; sarjakuvahahmo; Gaiman, Neil; Moore, Alan; Spiegelman, Art
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1. Introduction

How hard can it be to be a superhero when you only have to do it one panel at a time? In fact, how do we even know that we are looking at the same hero in every panel – not just his stunt doubles, identical twins, passers-by wearing similar capes? The simple answer is: we do not know, but simply believe so. Of course, the two heroes in the two different panels are not really two different people – they are not people at all, but two different drawings. Comic books are by no means made of heroes, or villains for that matter, but of ink and paper, of words and pictures. As clichéd as it may sound, the only superheroes we are ever likely to encounter are, in fact, between our ears. Still, we all know just as well who Batman is, do we not? Welcome to the strange, extremely overlooked world of comic book character theory. Since, strangely, no previous research has committed itself to unraveling the structure and meaning of the mysterious entities inhabiting our comic books, this thesis aims to do so, mostly with the help of the cognitive character theory of Baruch Hochman and comic book theory of Scott McCloud.

After all, comics is an ever-growing medium in both readership and appreciation. As a union of words and images, comics can utilize the strengths of both in its attempts to adapt to today's rapidly changing media climates. It has, for example, married well with the Internet: comics narratives are concise and expressive enough to reach enormous audiences, yet their inherent artistry and fragmentariness make them better laboratories for digital image editing technologies and hypertextual experimentations than, for example, audiovisual art could ever be. On the other hand, in a world where images seem the readiest answer to the growing need for quicker, more international communication, comics may well become an important herald to print media. Still, anyone planning research on comics should be prepared to hear an occasional comment on how men in tights are hardly worth academic attention.

As most of today's avid media-users are well aware, however, comics is not a specific genre, but a medium or art form that stretches far – very far – beyond the superheroes and the silly newspaper strips with which it has been so closely associated. In consequence, the creatures that inhabit this multitude of graphic narratives are vastly different in both content and construction as well. So, even though the increasing popularity of comics is slowly melting the paradigm, the term "comic book character" has accumulated a good number of unflattering connotations: the two-dimensional, unrealistic, gaudily dressed bad role models are still the dominant stereotype. What is more, the very term "comics" implies

that all the stories and characters they involve are invariably comical – which why comics professionals have made more or less futile efforts to coin alternative terms, such as sequential art, iconotext or graphic novel.

Truth of the matter is that both comics and characters are – and have for the longest time been – very central to Western culture. Comic book scholars have traced the tradition of sequential picture narratives all the way to Egyptian and Mayan murals, some of which were created over a thousand years BCE. Granted, comics in their modern form, as combinations of text and more or less stylized pictures, were only conceived in the 19th century by Swiss caricature artist Rodolphe Töpffer. (McCloud 1994, 10–17.) Considering that the current, flexible mass media formats have slowly formed during the past century, it is no exaggeration to regard comics as an art form that is still taking shape. As for fictional characters, they have always been permanent fixtures, even nuclei, in all kinds of stories ever told. Although this great importance – and even the very possibility – of coherent human subjects has been widely questioned by the postmodern rhetoric, characters continue to seem rather indispensable parts of all kinds of narratives, including comics. As far as telling and listening to stories are very human activities, it is difficult to imagine a narrative without any manner of human perspective. That perspective can only be provided by the mysterious humanlike entities we call characters.

Regardless, neither characters nor comics have been a favorite topic of scholars in any field. The lack of comic book research can, of course, be explained by the fact that comics have not yet been so firmly institutionalized. That is, there is no established discipline that would treat comics as their central subject. Instead, they have been left to the margins of art, literature and media studies. Consequently, the most notable comic book theorists can still be found amongst comic book artists themselves: the works of Will Eisner and his self-proclaimed disciple Scott McCloud have for long been regarded as the most insightful and influential theories in the field. More surprisingly, though, the most prominent character theories are almost as recent. Although the concept of character had already been assumed by Aristotle, the first theoretical explorations focusing exclusively on literary characters – such as those of W.J. Harvey, Baruch Hochman and a handful of structuralists – were not written until the latter half of the 20th century. Also, the scale of most character theories, even in the field of literary studies, has been far from ambitious. One of the first and best known modern character theories, that of E.M. Forster's, is little more than a crude dichotomy to flats and rounds. Strangely, even though characters are central, even essential to stories, they, too, seem

to be left in the fringes and side notes in academic research. That is, they are mostly examined in close relation to the texts they inhabit.

It is no wonder then that the combination of the two, characters in comics, is an even rarer find in academic contexts of any kind. This thesis is meant as a band-aid to that lack of research. Since there is no specific theory to build on, the goals and starting points are necessarily rather board and applied. The only sensible approach seems to be two-fold: first, what kind of a concept of character can be extracted from the different character theories of our time, and second, what implications do the workings of comics have for that concept of character? To be more exact, it is necessary to explore the ontology and the building blocks of character – what is it that we perceive as character in the first place? Then, when it is taken outside the purely textual, literary context, what happens? How is the character constructed in a medium with such diverse pictorial content and such fragmentary structure as comics? It seems probable that the multifold gaps and images inherent in any graphic narrative should alter the way characters are perceived – for instance, their coherence and capability to engage the reader. In comparison to literary characters, the differences between the verbal and the pictorial content might also cause a stricter divide between the interiority and the exteriority of character.

This exploration will not be restricted to any particular kind of character since successful classification of such fluid entities is quite tricky, if not impossible. Rather, this thesis aims to underline that fluidity, the enormous diversity of comic book characters. So, it seems reasonable to focus on particular type of comics, the Anglo-American graphic novel, instead. Graphic novel is not really a genre in the sense that it would include some specific kinds of themes, worlds or characters. Rather, it is a publication form that emerged in the Western market in the 1980s. That was when the three most widely canonized landmark comics – Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1985–86), Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* (1986–87) and Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980–91) – saw the daylight, and once the audiences and the publishers realized what comics are capable of, works of similar weight and extent have followed as a steady flow. On a more general level, graphic novel can be defined as a relatively long, "multi-issue" work with a continuous story arc. Most of them are originally published as separate issues and collected in the album form later. (Versaci 2007, 30.) The term is also associated with dark, serious, often fantastical aesthetic, although such implications are necessarily quite subjective. It is safe to say, though, that graphic novels are generally aimed at adult audiences and that they are more artistically ambitious than, say, *Donald Duck* or newspaper strips. In addition, only original stories are usually qualified as

graphic novels; they are not adaptations of any previously published stories in any medium (Versaci 2007, 30).

The longer, more mature and more ambitious stories are definitely one of the reasons why graphic novels are chosen in the focus here. Although these features may not guarantee especially complex or life-like characters, at least the characterization techniques employed should be more easily distinguishable, diversified and, perhaps, experimental in long, coherent works. The fact that graphic novels are not bound by specific genre conventions or concentrated on one type of stories or characters also helps in finding sufficient diversity. This should make the results of the study applicable to as wide a range of comics and characters as possible. Moreover, graphic novels are the type of comics with which yours truly is the most familiar. Thus, this thesis should be proportioned to the framework of Western graphic novels published between the 1980s and year 2012. The observations are, however, counterpointed by occasional examples from newspaper strips and Japanese manga, simply because their publicational realties and vocabularies are so substantially different.

As Uri Margolin notes, characters are hardly "independently existing entities" but "theory-dependent conceptual constructs" (1990). That is to say, the character is something that is dependent on the readers' perceptions. It cannot be observed directly, which is why one must choose a theory through which the character is viewed before anything can be said about it at all. This question will be considered in greater detail in chapter 2, but simply put, the two points of view most extensively applied in this thesis are a cognitive and a semiotic one. The choices derive from another point Margolin makes: that the theory on character should be congruous with "the general theoretical paradigm adopted" (1990). Since the main context here is comics, semiotics seem a very obvious choice. The different abstraction levels of comic book imagery have often been read through Charles S. Peirce's theory of different sign classes, and Scott McCloud's comic book theory, the most central comics-specific source of this thesis, has much in common with it. These are complimented by Aleid Fokkema's semiotic character theory. Of course, the different signs also imply a necessity of the reader that interprets those signs. Thus, cognitive psychology becomes necessary: characters may be built of different kinds of signs, but the act of building is in the reader's cognitive processes. Baruch Hochman's character theory bases on such ideology and is, consequently, utilized here. In addition, Forster and Harvey's character theories as well as comics research articles on narrower, character-related topics are included for wider, more

profound perspective. As they do not contradict the cognitive conception of character presented, they also prove its potential to wider application.

The cognitive character theory operates largely on the basic terms of cognitive psychology, the most important of which is a schema, a mental model of an entity, an idea or an action. The construction of such models has been depicted as a cyclic mental process by American psychologist Ulric Neisser: as the human mind processes different experiences and stimuli, it organizes the gained information into a hierarchical construction, a schema, while these perpetually updated schemata, in their turn, direct the cognitions through which we experience the outside world. In other words, our perceptions of reality continuously change the way we perceive reality. This cycle accumulates into heterogeneous but hierarchical mental representations of things, personal conceptions that incorporate all types of information from sensory data to emotions and values. (Mustonen 2000, 26–28.) The cognitive view of character, then, defines characters as schemata that the reader continuously, actively builds during the reading process.

This notion of mental representation is not to be confused with the symbolic representations figuring in texts themselves. Such representations are, in a manner of speaking, semiotic counterparts for schemata: rather than chains of cognitions, they are chains of symbols, such as words or pictures, that point towards or "speak for" something else. This "something else" may be, for example, an entity inhabiting some possible world, "a member of some non-actual state of affairs", that is, an irreal construction we perceive as a character (Margolin 2005, 53). In other words, representation as such does not make a particular claim on reality. Thus, the representations that attempt a reference or at least a likeness to reality are explicitly called mimetic representations here, mimesis being the ages-old term for the mimicry of real life. (Freadman 2005, 306, 309.)

These tools and theories are mostly employed in the first main chapter that focuses on different character research traditions of literary studies. After exploring a handful of different ontological approaches, character taxonomies and elements it should be possible to form a comprehensive, serviceable conception of character, through which the world of comics can then be examined. To be more exact, chapter 3 will survey the effects the institution, the image content and the gaps of comics might have on this conception. Although textual elements are an important part of comics as well, textual construction of character is discussed so thoroughly in the previous chapter, it is considered secondary in chapter 3. Finally, the observations and findings are tested and illustrated by three case studies in chapter 4.

All three texts under closer inspection are highly acclaimed graphic novels by renowned, contemporary British and American writers and artists. *Maus* and *Watchmen* are obvious choices by virtue of their pioneering role in the formation of the graphic novel. That Art Spiegelman received a Pulitzer prize for his *Maus* and that *The Time* magazine hoisted Moore and Gibbons' *Watchmen* on its list of "All-Time 100 Novels" speak well for the exceptional fame and appreciation these comics have enjoyed (Grossman & Lacayo 2005). The third case study subject is no less esteemed: Neil Gaiman's extensive fantasy epic *The Sandman* (1989–1996) has accumulated an impressive collection of awards, including 26 Will Eisner Awards. Also, being slightly longer and more recent than the other two works, it widens the scope appropriately. Such prominent works are well worth studying due to the volume of their readerships alone; few comics can be considered as mainstream. Moreover, such fame is mostly a result of the skillful employment of comics' best assets. All three are ambitious works that, due to their complexity, demonstrate the medium's potential to characterization in interesting ways, ways that are likely to inspire and influence a number of graphic novels that are still waiting to be born.

2. Lessons of Literary Characters

Indeed, the lack of character research is hardly a wonder among comic book theory as long as the question of character is still something of a minefield among the more well-established art forms as well. Actually, character has often been regarded as the least theorized basic element of narrative fiction (Käkelä-Puumala 2003, 245). As Rimmon-Kenan puts it, it seems impossible to formulate a systematic character theory that would not be extremely reductive or impressionistic (1983, 40). Reasons for this evasiveness are easy enough to conjecture.

First, the character is an extremely complex narrative structure – both the conveyor and the product of plot, themes, focalization as well as several other narrative devices. Character's ties to the plot have been especially tight already from the Antiquity, so much so that Aristotle and other classic theorists have treated characters as mere agents of fatalistically causal chains of events (e.g. Hochman 1985, 20). Of course, the relation could as easily be seen reversely: especially in modern novels, where the plot is much more rarely guided by destiny or other supernatural powers than in Greek drama, plots consists of little more than the actions of characters. These actions, again, are usually intertwined with something that readers like to perceive, by human analogy, as "personalities" of those characters. We learn about the natures of characters through their actions but, if we accept the psychological aspects of the character as mimetic, we also believe that characters' actions are often motivated by their natures – would the story of *Faust* ever occur, if Faust was not the ambitious character he is? In short, it is very difficult to tell where characters end, plots begin and vice versa. The same applies to thematic structures: it is difficult to convey pervasive themes only through narrative style, story structure or milieu. Though they usually contribute to them as well, the messages, the morals of narratives, have to be reflected by characters to become meaningful. Since the character is so multifaceted and so central to the narrative, it is often, understandably, only analyzed as a part of the whole.

Second, the question of character is surrounded by certain mysticism. Since characters are usually anthropomorphic, they are – save for the characters in some experimental postmodern works – created to reflect and mimic ourselves. Consequently, our response to them is often more intimate and emotional than our response to the other narrative elements. Some theorists claim that our perception of literary characters is much like our perception of other people, while others emphasize self-recognition and identification (Hochman 1985; Frow 1986). Thus, it can be quite challenging to analyze characters

objectively, and some might even be intimidated by what they might find. Even the most perfectly fabricated characters – fabricated as they are – are bound to have imperfections, inhuman aspects, if nothing else, some degree of incompleteness. Contrarily, some might fear of finding that literary characters are *too* much like real people and, consequently, of locating the very same imperfections in themselves. In short, fictional characters tend to bear the same horror as all human-like yet somehow disfigured creatures, the concurrent familiarity and otherness of werewolves, harpies, Frankenstein's monster and the like. The structural complexity of the character is thus complimented with its stunning ideological complexity: all readings and theories on characters are always somehow linked to the ideas, conceptions and values the writer, the reader or the researcher associate with real human beings. Even the structuralist tendency to deny the mimesis of the character is a product of a certain worldview or, to be more precise, of the fragmented and insubstantial idea of the postmodern man.

Third, this twofold complexity of the character brings with it certain methodological complexities. The more multifaceted the character is considered to be, the more it requires a multidisciplinary approach. Especially if the character is viewed to be akin to the real human beings, it engages, in one way or another, with all the arts and sciences that are dedicated to exploring the sphere of human life. Exceedingly psychological views of character are a distinct symptom of this: especially psychoanalytically oriented literary theorists tend to impose on characters such intricate terms of depth psychology that are hardly unproblematic even when applied on real people. For example, Dorrit Cohn's theory of narrative voices (1978) and – to a bit lesser degree – Baruch Hochman's theory of character traits imply that characters' words and actions may sometimes be motivated by their unconscious (Hochman 1985, 63). Granted, the trend of fragmented literary characters seems to call for some way of explaining the incoherencies of their behavior, and such surprising streaks in real people may well be explained by unconscious forces. However, even the basic make-up of characters is still so sketchily theorized that literary critics would do better considering the more textual constituents of characters, rather than speculating on areas and terms on which they have no expertise. In other words, the notion of unconsciousness is a valid part of the human analogy of character, but any deeper psychological analyses on characters should probably be left for psychologists or, rather, for multidisciplinary projects.

Besides psychology, there are several other points of view that character theories – like many other theories on literature and language – might struggle to avoid, such as anthropology, ethics, aesthetics or other areas of philosophy. Regardless of how humane or inhumane characters are, they are reflected from or by real people in one way or another.

Thus, the question of what characters are like will always be followed by questions like: what *should* characters be like? While these questions can be answered by, for example, reader-response theorists, they always invoke larger problems and subject areas as well. In ancient Greek drama, for example, it was necessary to place certain types of characters in certain types of plays and storylines to enforce and maintain certain moral codes – it is no coincidence that only royal and noble families seem to face the worse tragedies. Even in modern times, effects like catharsis, which is based on the audience's identification with the ill-fated character, have been considered important means for individual moral development (Puolimatka 2010, 93–94). Thus, questions concerning the kind of characters to which we should and want to relate in order to explore, improve or vent ourselves have connections and consequences far and wide. Indeed, since any character in any book is a question about and answer to what it is to be human, they have a large weight on their shoulders. On the same note, one can hardly blame structuralists for wanting to reduce the character to a simple textual sign or a mere function of the plot.

Fourth, some theorists, such as John Frow have suggested that the character is so under-theorized simply because it is such an obvious subject (Käkelä-Puumala 2003, 245). Since a character is an analogue of human created by a human, we, as humans, seem to observe and read it quite naturally, according to the very schemata we use to read ourselves and other people around us (Hochman 1985, 42). Anyone can explain what a character is. Textually created human entities and consciousnesses appear in all texts from newspaper articles to diaries. Especially if one has never attempted to create one, there does not seem to be much to it. The fuzziness of their borders only become clear when one scratches the surface, for example, when trying to write or analyze a piece of fiction. What is a character, after all? How or why do I perceive it as human? How human does it have to be? Is this story about him or why is he in the story in the first place? Once the questions are found, they are surprisingly difficult to answer – and might remain unanswered forever and after. The characters are creatures of art, not science, after all.

Despite everything, there are, however, a handful of theories on literary characters, which can quite easily be divided into three schools: mimetic theories, anti-mimetic theories and those that wish to make a synthesis of the two. In other words, the field is quite divided and no theory has won particular authority over it nor been spared from controversy. It is thus necessary to paraphrase some of those theories in this chapter and distil a view of character that is clear and unified enough for the purposes of this particular study.

2.1 To Be or Not To Be: A Brief Survey of the Terms and Theories

When tracking down the very roots of the concept of fictional character, it is worth noting that the words representing this concept vary from language to language in both etymology and connotation. Different derivates of the Latin word *persona* seem to be the most common type: French *personnage*, Spanish *personaje*, German *Person* and their English counterparts are cases in point. Since the primary meaning of *persona* – and especially its English variants – is usually regarded to be 'human being', the terms seem to imply that characters are somehow modeled after real people. However, as ironic as it might sound, the older, more original meaning of the Latin root is actually 'a character in a drama'. More precisely, it was probably a borrowing from an Etruscan word referring to the masks the actors were wearing on stage. (Käkelä-Puumala 2003, 242.) Thus, it is actually the conception of real human beings that seems to be based on the conception of fictional characters, not vice versa, which only goes to show the great importance works of fiction, and especially the characters inhabiting them, have in our understanding of the world and ourselves.

Other variants of the term seem to play on the same convertibility of humans and characters but in different ways. The Finnish term *henkilöhahmo* seems to imply a more clear-cut duality between the human-like aspect (*henkilö* meaning a 'person') and the insubstantial, artificial aspect (*hahmo* meaning a 'figure' or 'form') of the character. *Figur*, which is widely used in German and other Germanic languages, also stresses the artifice of the character, referring to it as some kind of a pattern or pawn. In addition, it bears implications of physical body and outward appearance. Contrarily, the most commonly used English term, *character*, strongly connotes personality and uniqueness in real and unreal people alike. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, for example, gives nine definitions for *character*, the paramount of which is: "all the qualities and features that make a person, groups of people, and places different from others". Other interesting ones include "a person, particularly an unpleasant or strange one" and the one most relevant to our subject here: "a person or an animal in a book, play or film". (Hornby 2005, 246.) Interestingly, the dictionary does not reserve the term only for humans but states that animals or even places may be or have characters. Also, since the word is used in most of its meanings at least as much in the context of the real world as in the contexts of different fictional worlds, it requires no particular stretch of imagination to include all kinds of beings, human and non-human, fictional and non-fictional, within the sphere of *character*. In contrast, the Finnish term

henkilöhahmo is quite exclusively used to refer to anthropomorphic beings in fictional worlds. The haziness of the English term is, in fact, what makes all this attention to the terminology necessary and is also, no doubt, one reason for the haziness of existing character theories.

In short, the conceptions of real and unreal persons are so closely intertwined that the confusion is inherent even in the term itself. It is, however, noteworthy that both the English word *character* and its Greek root *kharattein* also signify a symbol or a letter, which serves as a kind of secretive nod towards the structuralist character tradition (Käkelä-Puumala 2003, 242).

Coincidentally, the structuralistic theory has something in common not only with the original Greek word, but also with the original Greek character theory. Aristotle was the first to formulate theories for several aspects of fiction and character is no exception. He was somewhat interested in the personalities as well as the actions of dramatic personae (Käkelä-Puumala 2003, 245). Aristotle did recognize characters as somewhat individualized beings possessing personality traits and feelings. In his view, however, these inner workings only exist in terms of the plot. That is to say, they have to take the form of action to be worthwhile, or even recognizable. This brings us to the equation that Aristotelian characters are merely functions of the plot. Stories are not really about the characters but different chains of happenings to which they must "contribute".[1] (Forster 1962, 91–93.)

As mentioned above, this view is surprisingly well in line with many of the character theories produced around the 1960s. These theories were part of the far vaster structuralist movement especially prominent in France where it was closely interlaced with the narrative innovations of *noveau roman*. This theoretical paradigm has always been well-known for its disregard for a cohesive subject, heightened in Barthesian declarations about "the death of the author", from which there is not too long a leap to the death of the character. Thus, it is no wonder that this research tradition was reluctant of giving the character any priority over other narrative constituents.

Some of the structuralist theorists, such as A. J. Greimas, shared Aristotle's view that characters can only be used to act out the plot. This is well illustrated by the terminology he uses: Greimas preferred to call individual characters actors and considered them little more than interchangeable particles of different functional paradigms called actants. All in all, he describes six different kinds of actants: the sender, the object, the receiver, the helper, the

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[1] Of course, one must remember that Aristotle's theory concerns characters of drama specifically. It is much more difficult to offer direct access into a character's head in a stage play than in prose fiction. If one does not write a drama full of taxing monologues or unrealistically confessional dialogues, the only option for expressing anything about the characters is through action.

subject (or hero) and the opponent (or villain). (e.g. Käkelä-Puumala 2003, 255–6.) Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp proposed a similar categorization known as the seven spheres of action. These spheres are called the aggressor, the donor, the auxiliary, the princess, the father, the committer, the hero and the bogus hero. (e.g. Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 46–7.) It is rather irrelevant here that the number and content of such categories could endlessly be called into question. It is more important to note that attempting to place every character ever created into one or several of these roles leaves little room for their personalities, inner lives or uniqueness. What is more, these functions can as easily be fulfilled by human beings as animals, objects or even abstractions. In fact, Greimas was happy to give these functions to anything that could be used as a grammatical subject (Käkelä-Puumala 2003, 255).

This notion borders the even more radical branch of structuralist character theory, which sees the characters not even as actors but as purely artificial and functional strands of the textual fabric. This means that the names or pronouns used to refer to characters do not and cannot refer to anything outside the language or even outside the text. In other words, characters can be viewed simply as subject positions, grammatical voices that are inherent in language but have no substance beyond it. In experimental works, such as several specimen of *noveau roman*, subjects are not required to have any anthropomorphic qualities or even coherence. For example, some of Robbe-Grillet's works (e.g. "The Secret Room") are narrated in such minute and impersonal way that reminds the reader of a camera movement rather than a recounting person. The human figures described this way are also so static, opaque and one-dimensional that they can hardly be called characters but, rather, parts of the picture.

Another, very different but almost as reductive view of the character is the semiotic approach represented by Joel Weinsheimer. He goes so far as to equate characters with motifs, signs that reoccur in the text for an aesthetic effect. Weinsheimer's view also bypasses any coherence the characters may be perceived to have, because their names or any other signs referring to them always recur in new, varying contexts. (Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 44.) In other words, a name mentioned in one paragraph cannot possibly have the same meaning as the same name in the next paragraph. This kind of view renders the very existence of a coherent, unique character impossible, which, in turn, undermines the whole value attached to the character: would it not be absurd to identify oneself or form any other kind of a special relationship with a single word in a single sentence?

All this lays bare the structuralist view that there is nothing special about the character. It is merely a word among words or – at its best – an openly artificial structure that

has a specific task to perform in the syntax of the text that hosts it. For a structuralist, there is no depth, no magic, no humanity behind the names and the pronouns we see in the works of fiction. They are just interchangeable parts and pieces of which some postmodern writers would certainly dispose if only the use of language did not always necessarily imply a speaker and a listener.

This implication remains, however, an inseparable part of language. There is something inherently human about language and something even more inherently human about narratives. No matter how deep the crisis of the Western subjectivity, characters still continue to reflect the human in the writer and the reader, to provide the human point of view that makes any given narrative relatable and thus, comprehensible, interesting and valuable to real human beings. Regardless of the academic theories and trends, a story without any anthropomorphic entities will never be a best-seller because it would be too difficult to encode as well as to decode. It is as impossible for human readers to step outside their human sphere of experience as it is for human authors to create something that is not filtered through their human perspective. This is probably why more traditional views of character have endured the pressures of structuralism as well as the postmodern notions about the fractures in real-life identities.

The so-called traditional character theories are based on the individualist view of man that dominated Western cultures for the latter half of the past millennium. Born as the product of *cogito ergo sum*, it was further reinforced by the 18th century reinvention of self as a discursive subject and further elaborated by the birth of modern psychology in the 19th century (Käkelä-Puumala 2003, 244). In other words, traditional characters are immediate family of the modern man. This, again, has led the writers and literary theorists of the time to emphasize the similarities between the human and the character or, as Hochman phrases it, between *Homo Sapiens* and *Homo Fictus* (Hochman 1985).

Even if Aristotle viewed characters as constituents of a larger structure, there was a seed of traditionalism in his theory as well: he attributed different traits and feelings to them (Hochman1985, 29). This human-like mental activity is the very core of *Homo Fictus*, the fairly independent, mysterious entity that traditional theorists take the character to be. Within these theories, characters are regarded as beings that can think, feel, dream and possess coherent identities of their own. These aspects are often brought to life by character focalization or first person narration and complimented by "credible" external frames, such as descriptions of the character's physique, gestures, family and home. All this the traditionalists like to speculate in the same psychological and social terms that are used to speculate real

people, and all this is what makes the character a person in its own right, distinct from the writer and the narrator (Käkelä-Puumala 2003, 250). Since a single character can convey different views than the entirety of the novel, it can be viewed as possessing a personality, even a whole life that is in some way separate from the novel and its creator.

As with the structuralist school, there are different degrees and versions of traditionalist character theories. One feature that most theories have in common, though, is that the texts in which the characters appear can never fully exhaust them. In other words, the texts never capture the entirety of their characters, but merely depict them or refer to them (Hochman 1985, 32; Margolin 2005, 53). On which plane the "actual", entire character exists, is a different matter altogether. Some theorists might see them as inhabitants of different possible worlds, while others consider them cognitive constructions suspended between the triangle of the author, the text and the reader (Margolin 2005, 53–55). If a character is based on a real, historical figure, the point of reference is an issue of even further argument: can a work of fiction – or even language, for that matter – ever refer to something real? These controversial ontological issues are one of the main weaknesses of the traditionalist theories, because they are difficult to resolve either logically or empirically. Yet, leaving them unsolved leaves the basis of the theories rather wobbly and unscientific: while humans are certainly capable of creating cognitions, to what extent can these cognitions be considered independent entities?

Another notion that different traditional theories seem to share is a normative one: they tend to invest much more aesthetic weight as well as more substantial values in the character than structuralists do. This is only logical: the closer the kinship between us and the characters is viewed to be, the dearer they should appear in our eyes; the closer their ties to real world are viewed to be, the greater their impact on that world should seem. Much of this value is also derived from the relative independence traditionalists attribute to the characters. They are not perceived as reflections of the narrator's will or slaves to the plot but as unique, personalized cores of narratives. As it happens, this is another point that leaves these theories rather vulnerable to criticism: the role and importance of the character depends, of course, on the genre, subject and structure of each narrative as well as the features of the character itself. Thus, one important difference between *Homo Sapiens* and *Homo Fictus* is that the value of the latter is not exactly innate. This, in its turn, is derived from the fact that characters, no matter how life-like, can always be read in relation to a fabricated structure that is the narrative around them (Hochman 1985, 64).

All in all, existing character theories have all too rarely stressed the fact that different conceptions of character are based on different kinds of characters which, in turn, are based on different kinds of narratives. Early Greek drama, confined to strict time frames and barren of stage effects, put much more restrictions to its lone protagonist than long-winding novels of any liberal country or era have ever had to impose on their vast and eclectic character galleries. Ultimately, as times and their literatures have always changed and will always change, the very possibility of creating any lasting and universal character theory seems rather doubtful. In this light, the dividedness of the field is a virtue rather than a flaw. On the other hand, this notion places an even greater urgency on the research of comic book characters: since graphic novels undisputedly set different restrictions and requirements to their characters than regular novels, a new theoretical approach is not only possible but necessary.

Not only are different theories applicable to different kinds of characters but it seems both structuralist and traditionalist theories have features that are logically undeniable but which the opposing theory nevertheless seeks to deny. There is no escaping the structuralist notion that characters are, indeed, inseparable parts of their host texts and thus much less independent than the traditionalists like to think. At the same time, the strucutralistic desire to treat characters as something completely incoherent and inhuman is ultimately impossible, or at the very least, extremely reductive. On these grounds, this thesis draws mostly on the latest character theories, which have attempted to reconcile the differences between the two older traditions.

The main point of these synthetic theories is that the traditionalist and structuralist theories are not mutually exclusive but concentrate on two different aspects of the same issue. That is to say, the character has at least two aspects or ontological planes to it: in the much-quoted words of Baruch Hochman, it is both "utterly embedded" in the text and "radically detachable" from it (1985, 72). Here, the embeddedness is the side of the coin structuralism captures and the detachability the side traditionalists depict. Different theorists have built bridges between these sides by different theoretic tools: Hochman's own approach is clearly cognitive, whereas Aleid Fokkema tries to describe the relation in semiotic terms. James Phelan has even added a third, intermediate aspect in the play – in his view, the character consists of three "components", a mimetic, a thematic and a synthetic component. The first includes everything that makes the character "a person", the second considers character as an idea – a part of the narrative's thematic fabric – while the third is the purely textual, artificial side of the package (Margolin 2005, 57).

Different character theories could, of course, be categorized in a dozen alternative ways. Instead of talking about the structuralist, traditionalist and synthetic branches one could put the theories in descriptive and normative baskets. Of course, it is difficult to imagine a theory that would not depict its subject in any way. Similarly, there is a clear normative agenda in both traditionalist and structuralist theories: the first one roots for the so called "round" characters and the second one for "flat", fragmented ones. The theorist that can be considered most normative of all is, however, the one who coined these well-known terms of flatness and roundness – E.M. Forster.

Another useful divide could be made between the theories that seek to describe the traits of individual characters and the theories whose main purpose is to make difference between several characters. One could, perhaps, call these intra- and interpersonal approaches. Theories of Hochman and Fokkema represent the former category, while W.J. Harvey has probably made the biggest contribution to the latter. Structuralist theories that reduce characters to the performers of specific actions, such as the theories of Greimas and Propp, are, in one sense, quite similar to Harvey's theory. They are mostly concerned with the "casting" and hierarchy of characters.

The supposedly gaping gap between the structuralists and the traditionalists is, however, so central it is still mentioned in most contemporary sources on literary characters. The decisive watershed seems to be the question of mimesis, which, in its turn, is in key position when determining the ontology of characters. All mimetic theories dictate that a character must exist rather independently on some conceivable level – either as a cognition, an agent or an inhabitant of a possible world, "a member of some non-actual state of affairs" (Margolin 2005, 53–56). Conversely, non-mimetic theories emphasize the artificiality of characters, that they are intentional constructions made by real people. What is more, they have been constructed from and in language, which in itself can be considered arbitrary and insubstantial.

This tension between mimesis and artificiality becomes especially interesting when one examines the multifold semantic systems of a comic book. As Maria E. Reicher points out, we are accustomed to talking about fictional characters as if they existed – many languages have no system for distinguishing real from irreal (2010, 111). Language is designed to create fictional worlds as effortlessly as possible – it is already required by conditional and negative clauses – whereas representing the world through hand-drawn pictures is clearly something that requires work and design. Especially cartoony drawing styles favored by several comic book artists are hardly natural; there is necessarily something

very "made" and non-mimetic about such pictures. Clearly, this is why no comic researcher can afford to commit to fundamentally mimetic character theories.

Furthermore, the non-mimetic quality of comic book characters automatically renders the mimesis of their forefathers, literary characters, more doubtful. As discussed later in this thesis, a comic book character is a much more iconic and, therefore, more individual kind of a sign than a mere name of a literary character could ever be. Where literary characters are always constructed through different grammatical positions that can only be anchored to and sorted by names or pronouns, comic book characters tend to have not only a name but a "physical" form to fall back on. As many experimental works have proved, names are mutable, even disposable, even for real people, where as an image of oneself is something more substantial and, thus, a firmer base for fictional existence. In other words, while the visual "bodies" of comic book characters might have a number of mimetic flaws, the very existence of that elaborated visuality gives most comic book characters a greater claim to human-like coherence and independence – they might not look entirely real, but at least you can see them with your eyes, not just your mind.

2.2 Every Me and Every You: Classifications of Characters
2.2.1 Forster: Flatness and Roundness

In any field or topic, the most simple and intuitive classification systems seem to be the most popular and persistent ones, simply because even laymen are able to apply them to almost any given instances. The theoretical field of fictional characters, too, is haunted by some crude dichotomies that are as widely used as they are reductive.

Almost as often as characters are divided into heroes and villains, they are divided into protagonists and minor characters. These divisions are often the only ones presented in encyclopedias, even literary encyclopedias, but are rarely useful or unproblematic (see e.g. Hosiaisluoma 2003, 303). Heroes might turn into villains or antiheroes, or vice versa, and whether they did or not, these labels bear little significance to the literary analysis of the character since they are the results of, rather than starting points for, these analyses. The line between protagonists and minor characters is even more controversial and restrictive: if there is no grayscale lost between them, how do we tell them

apart and does it matter if we do? Should minor characters be considered unimportant vessels that are only used to convey the story of the ever-so-important main character? Or does the difference between main and minor characters lie in narrative viewpoints, so that minor characters are the objects and main characters the subjects of focalization? Is it simply so that we are given more information about the main characters? Does that necessarily make them more interesting than their more secretive brethren? One could even develop an argument over the number of protagonists – is it possible to have several of them, and if so, how many? Who is the protagonist in Aleksis Kivi's *Seven Brothers* (1870) or Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869), for example? Could there be seven or, in Tolstoy's case, even more of them?

While scholars like W.J. Harvey have devised more elaborate theories to counter these black-and-white divisions, E.M. Forster's is only reinforcing them – effectively so, since his metaphors of flatness and roundness are quoted in almost any imaginable account on literary characters. It is fair to note, however, that his essayistic classic, *Aspects of the Novel*, was first published in 1927, long before structuralists or any other kind of theorists had showed any real interest in the subject.[2] Having little tradition to depend on, Forster had little choice but to state his own intuitions, and these intuitions have clearly resonated with several theorists and laymen throughout the past century. Otherwise, his short-spoken description of flat and round characters would now be long forgotten.

The aptness of the metaphor has probably been Forster's key to success. It is easy to guess what he means by flatness: one-dimensional types or caricatures built around a single "idea or quality", trait or obsession. This kind of simplicity often results into comical effects or unchanging stereotypes that are easy to recognize. According to Forster, this typicality or recognizability is what makes them accessible to our "emotional eye", that is, more than empty, recurring proper names. Since characters like this do not develop and since their flatness is often grotesque enough to attract attention, they are easy to remember and fathom – and, also, to write. They maintain their sole but distinct quality forever and after, which makes them instant atmosphere creators and the antidote to our "yearn for permanence". Tragic flat characters, however, Forster deems rather dull. (Forster 1962, 75–80.)

Even though Forster does not disregard humorous, non-mechanical flat characters either, he clearly states the greater importance and finesse of round characters. Thus, it is strange for him to describe them much more vaguely. It is often considered one of

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[2] Had the structuralist school already existed, he would surely have hesitated to title his character chapters "People".

the great weaknesses of his theory that he defines the more important half of the pair by negation: characters that are more than flat are round. Their only distinct characteristic is their ability to surprise the reader by virtue of their depth and development. (Forster 1962, 84–85.)

Clearly, Forster's categories correspond to many of the commonest character dichotomies. Flat characters are minor and comic while roundness tends to be embodied by tragic protagonists. The comic book cliché of a serious hero accompanied by a comical side kick – such as some versions of Batman and Robin or even Morpheus and Delirium in *Brief Lives* – are obvious realizations of these correlations. Though Forster was unaware of the forthcoming divide between the traditionalist and the structuralist school, it is also easy to see the similarities between the round and the traditional character concept as well as, correspondingly, the flat and the structuralist character concept. Also, more often than not, the roundness of the hero is counterpointed by the flatness of the villain. Seemingly, authors tend to create protagonists in their own image or, at least, to be likeable or interesting. While protagonists thus have some absolute worth from the conception, villains are often created to fulfill a simple purpose: give the protagonist something to do. The effect is further complemented by detailed inner focalization of the protagonist, which brings him closer to the reader, while the villain usually remains a distant, superficially described evil. To illustrate, one can consider such classic pairs as Sherlock Holmes and Moriarty or Frodo and Sauron in *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–55). Even though both Moriarty and Sauron are positioned as the ultimate enemies, they barely make appearances.

The rigidity of these divisions are especially bad advertisement for comic book characters. Since the very term – 'comic book characters' – implies that all of them are necessarily comic, they should, according to Forster, serve the story best if they were left flat. Since Forster also believes that "a proper mixture of characters" is paramount in the composition of any work of fiction, the supposed supremacy of flat characters would render the entire art form of comics rather worthless (1962, 87). Luckily for comic book characters, though, Forster does not combine his concepts of flatness and roundness with inner and outer focalization or description of the characters. Rather, he considers them a different device altogether.

As I shall later argue, comic book characters are represented through two rather separate but interlocking ways: their outward aspect is mostly established in iconic images, while their inner worlds are mostly created textually, through more conventionalized sign systems. Since these systems can usually be separated, to at least some comprehensible degree, it is easy to conclude that building some sort of controversy between them is at least

as easy as synchronizing them. Better yet, even the slightest asymmetry between these two systems in a single character is enough to elevate it from the rut of unidimensionality. This alone should be able to convince the skeptics that not all comic books are realms of flat characters – although most humorous strip comics use the typicality and recognizability of them rather self-consciously. Of course, there are also comic book characters that would fall into the category of round or tragic characters regardless of whether their inner and outer worlds are in sync or not: the whole term 'graphic novel' was coined to guide mature readers towards more serious, even predominantly gloomy, "comic" book content – including more mature, serious and gloomy characters (Versaci 2007, 30; Herkman 1998, 22). The protagonists of Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* (1989–1996)*, Alan Moore's *V for Vendetta* (1982–1989) and Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1985–86) are, perhaps, the most iconic examples of this relatively new, more complicated character type: they are all torn by inner conflicts to the degree that, undoubtedly, gives them a capacity to "surprise the reader". Furthermore, just like any other art form, comic books can be claimed to include characters that cannot decidedly be deemed neither flat or round. This kind of more finely grained character classifications are discussed in the following chapters.

It should be noted, however, that even Forster appears to be keen on having some intermediary options between the flats and the rounds. At least some desire for flexibility is reflected in his ideas that these categories should not be thought as something permanent, but some skillfully constructed characters, such as those of Jane Austen's, can shift between the two alternatives, even within one sentence. Thus, even characters that appear flat in the beginning might be "capable of rotundity." (Forster 1962, 82–84.) This idea is rarely mentioned by the quoters of the theory, which is perhaps for the better. Mutability of the categories compromises their feasibility by making them less a character trait and more a device that could rather be attributed to the narrator.

Forster's other thoughts on characters have reached the commentaries just as rarely. He has, for example, commented on the "realism" of literary characters by criticizing the excessive description of their love life at the expense of other basic human needs, such as eating and sleeping (1962, 61). While these considerations reveal a very mimetic view of character, some of Forster's expressions describe character as an artificial construct. He, for example, refers to them as "word masses" and claims that characters differ from real human beings in that they are exhaustible (1962, 52, 54). Everything the author knows about them is everything they are. In other words, Forster is willing to trace the existence of characters back to the author. This is, of course, in line with the principles of biographic literary research that

still had some authority in the beginning of the 20th century, when Forster's book was published. In more modern theories, as we shall see, the referents of character statements are much more difficult to track. On the other hand – and rather contradictively – Forster sees characters as having some kind of mysterious independence or even free will: "they are creations inside a creation, and often inharmonious towards it; if they are given complete freedom they kick the book to pieces – –" (Forster 1962, 74).

2.2.2 Harvey: Roles and Functions

Although their theoretical starting points are quite different, it would not be an oversimplification to state that W.J. Harvey's character theory could be read as an amendment to Forster's flat and round dichotomy. Harvey's briefly explained concepts of protagonists and background characters correspond closely to the ideas of roundness and flatness, but he does add two intermediate alternatives between them: the card and the ficelle. So, if Forster's theory is best suited to grasping the opposite extremes of the character universe, Harvey has been an influential advocator for the multitudes of characters that fall closer to the median. Furthermore, he deems all types of characters important, because the variance in their depth reflects the array of different relationships we have with actual people in actual world: we cannot be equally familiar with everyone we meet, so why should we be equally familiar with everyone we read?

The protagonist, Harvey maintains, can simply be identified as the most complex, most mutable and, thus, most engaging member of the character cast. Because, in Harvey's view, protagonist is the very thing that any story is about, he or she also tends to embody its moral. (Harvey 1965, 56.) In other words, Harvey gives the most central characters greater value than he does for the plot. A true protagonist does not work for the plot but is above it, the deeper meaning and human relevance behind it.

The role of background characters is, of course, the opposite. They might be used as pure "mechanisms of the plot", but their allegiance could be as much to the protagonist as it is to the story. This is because they represent the wider social context of which every individual is a part. In other words, they function much like the choir in classic Greek drama. (Harvey 1965, 56.) Given their purpose, certain typicality, or flatness, is actually a virtue in a background character, because each typical character stands for all the

members of that type – one politician stands for all politicians, one wood elf for all wood elves – not just him- or herself. This allows them to create a much wider "human context".

What Harvey calls ficelles are actually quite similar to background characters in that they are equally functional and as clearly subordinate to the protagonist. The difference between these two categories, however, seems to be that ficelles do transcend mere typicality. This is due to their tasks as mirrors and touchstones. They serve as foils, contrasts, analogues or alternatives to heroes by, for example, being watered-down versions of them or by clarifying the problems and morals of the story through their insights. They provide the unchanging point of reference and certain normality that help the reader to grasp and appreciate the changes and anomalies in the protagonist. As ficelles usually stand between the background characters and the protagonists on the scales of complexity and ideology, they are, indeed, intermediate characters in every sense of the word. Harvey adds that a ficelle can also function as a relief, a buttress or a symbol – or even serve the plot or represent the society in the same way background characters do. (Harvey 1965, 62–68.)

The most interesting aspect about the ficelle is that Harvey considers them the readerly agents in the stories. After all, the much commoner view is that readers are expected to indentify with protagonists. These contrasting views are, of course, based on two very different types of protagonists. Some protagonists, especially those functioning as first-person narrators, are extremely plain and average, more like hollow shells where readers can pour their own selves in order to step into the storyworld. Ishmael in *Moby Dick*, Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* and several of Franz Kafka's protagonists instantly spring to mind. On the other hand, there are plenty of protagonists whose experiences and traits might be so far outside of the average reader's life experience that relating to them is almost impossible. One can think of such mentally unstable characters as Don Quixote or Raskolnikov or characters with otherwise extreme traits, like Dr. Jekyll or Dorian Gray. This means that either Harvey is wrong to maintain that protagonists are a homogenously complex group of characters or that characters like Ishmael and Marlow should not be considered protagonists but ficelles. Indeed, in the light of Harvey's theory, Ahab and Kurtz might read as the true protagonists of their stories.

Within the world of comic books, Harvey's theory seems even more applicable. A notable number of serialized comic books and graphic novels centre around larger-than-life protagonists. Any superhero comic is a case in point, as are mythological comics like Mike Mignola's *Hellboy* or Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman*. In addition to superhuman protagonists, such (auto)biographical central characters as Marjane of *Persepolis* (2000), Vladek of *Maus*

(1980–1991) or Alison of *The Fun Home* (2006) are too particular to function as avatar-like agents of the reader. Hergé's Tintin is one of the rare blank protagonists inhabiting the sequential art universe and, as such, is quite clearly a "victim" of intricate, action-packed plots. Because comics are often serialized, it is often impossible to hold the readers' interest just by starting, stretching and ending a story arc after another. Instead, years and years of publication are stapled together with catchy, popping protagonists. As a result, a vast proportion of comics are character- rather than plot-oriented. This is also reflected in the titling traditions: most comics, from the classics like *Spirit* to the pulpier kinds of *The Amazing Spider-Man* and *Garfield,* carry the name of their protagonists.

On the other hand, all protagonists, even those who are actually gods (i.e. *The Sandman*), animals (i.e. *Mouse Guard*) or aliens (i.e. *Superman*), are always human and anthropomorphic enough to be understandable and somewhat relatable to us. Also, despite the inhuman qualities and relatively complex personalities of superheroes, their popularity is often accounted to the way they embody the masculine fantasy of surpassing all competition and becoming the best possible version of oneself. This suggests that, under the capes and masks, superheroes are surprisingly relatable. Indeed, once the costumes come off, it is not uncommon for Spider-Man to struggle with his boss and girlfriend like any man on the street.

As it happens, comic books, especially serialized ones, seem to be fertile ground for Harvey's second class of intermediate characters, so-called cards as well: stereotypically, they are the new, recognizable and memorable villains, rivals or love interests that writers device to stir new story arcs or to show new sides in the same old protagonist. Unlike ficelles, who are more like plumped-up background characters, cards are "ends-in-themselves", so much so that they might sometimes be mistaken for full-blown protagonists (1965, 58, 62). In comic book world, this is often realized as spin-off series and miniseries starring popular secondary characters (e.g. *Death: The High Cost of Living* (1993) or *Jack of Fables* (2006–2011)).

In short, cards are the kind of characters who are "triumphantly themselves". A card enjoys a relatively developed personality but is free from the strains of change and moral that loom over the protagonist. They can realize their often intense, vivid personalities or even mutiny against the story for all they like because they do not perform such specific functions that hold back ficelles and background characters either. Their inability to learn often results in somewhat comical effects, but this comical streak is not the entirety of a card's character. In fact, card's freedom and constancy are not entirely absolute earmarks either, as they can only perceived in relation to torn, growing protagonists. (Harvey 1965, 59–62.)

One of the key words in Harvey's theory is, in fact, relation. In his view, each character is used to define other characters around it. That is to say, they create a network of relationships, a "human context" that encompasses every character of every category as well as the narrator, the author and the reader. Different character categories and traits, such as flatness and roundness or individuality and typicality, can only be indentified in the framework of such "interpersonal" context – since there is no set scale that could be used to measure such characteristics, they are necessarily very relative. (Harvey 1965, 52–73.) In fact, Harvey could even have fused this network together with the reader's actual social relationships, because, it would seem, identifying any mimetic qualities is only possible when the fictional people are compared to the real people we know.

There are some noteworthy advantages to this relationship theory. First, it holds true inside the paradigm of modern personality psychology: conception of self only becomes possible when a child learns to dissociate him- or herself from others. As Harvey puts it, "other people must exist if only to show us what we ourselves are not" (1965, 52). Just like all the opposites tend to define each other, without "the other" there is no self. To what extent a fictional character can act as "the other" is also an interesting question and probably varies from medium to another. In pure text, the only instantly available distinguishers are the names and pronouns – and especially second person narration is more confusing than reassuring – whereas in visual media, the images of characters function as powerful, classic instances of "the other", something that could not stare us from the mirror. The question has been widely theorized in film research and in case of comic books, the "otherness" of the characters should be even more obvious because of their stylized, even inhuman appearances. On the other hand, as will be argued in following structures, stylization can also have the opposite effect of seeming universal. In spite of this minor difference, Harvey's relational claims can quite effortlessly be applied to any medium with fictional characters, which is another of its strong points. Moreover, unlike Forster's theory, it is not normative.

The only thing that does not seem right is that despite all his rhetoric of relativity, Harvey has chosen to present his character theory in categories rather than scales or axes. No matter how flexible these categories are, the very act of categorizing is essentially reductive. Harvey's tendency to classify characters specifically in terms of their functions is also quite peculiar considering that Harvey is a self-proclaimed supporter of mimetic art theory and thus, mimetic view of characters.[3] Every chance he gets, he notes the analogies

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[3] This, again, is both surprising, considering that his book is written in 1960s, and not surprising at all, considering that he makes realistic novels his starting point.

between characters and human beings and, especially, stresses the inexhaustibility of any given character. In Harvey's view, a character, at least a well written one, always overflows its formal and thematic roles or tasks assigned to it, and it is exactly that surplus, that "little extra" that makes a character an individual like us. After all, we can never know everything about someone else, and similarly, what character experiences is never exactly the same the reader experiences. It is as if Harvey could not choose which to stress, the instrumentality or the inherent value of the characters, which makes him one of the earliest bridge-builders between traditionalists and structuralists.

Another sign of this is that Harvey's claims of mimesis are anything but rigid or naive. Rather than denying the ultimately artificial nature of language or the god-like position of the author, he admits to them. He sees the fact that characters are simultaneously positioned as subjects and objects a virtue rather than an issue: their complicated position creates a "double vision" which allows us to see characters simultaneously as individuals and as parts of an organic whole. They are, at the same time, moral agents building their identities through choices and tied to the fates chosen for them by the author. From this follows that the character poses certain individuality as a construct, but is not altogether real. Rather, it is the very real mental processes of the authors and the readers that borrow it reality and relevance. This view is clearly congruent with Baruch Hochman's cognitive character theory, which shall be introduced next.

2.2.3 Hochman and Fokkema: Traits and Codes

Many modern theorists have tried to avoid both the reductiveness and the prescriptiveness of categories by describing characters through different axes and scales that can be used to chart either the formal make-up or human-like attributes of any given character. While character categories can mainly be used to determine the differences between separate characters, trait-based theories give better insight into individual characters – although this type of understanding is a good starting point for the comparison of different characters as well. Here, I have chosen to include Baruch Hochman's and Aleid Fokkema's suggestions, because they both are relatively new and extensive. Also, despite their many differences, they are based on almost identical, cognitive view of character and compliment each other well. Another well-known trait theory is that of Joseph Ewen's. The three axes of his theory – complexity,

development and the richness of the character's inner world – are, however, more than sufficiently included in Hochman's theory (Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 55).

All in all, Hochman lists eight pairs of opposites. These form scales, on which every and any character can be placed – or so Hochman believes (1985, 89). All his scales are rather technical, that is, they describe how characters can be constructed and presented, but say little about their actual traits or actions within the storyworld. This level of abstraction, of course, makes the theory quite universal, but how would it fare in other media, such as comic books? Considering that the scales do not deal with language itself but rather the effects it creates, they might, in fact, prove surprisingly adaptable.

The first of Hochman's scales actually touches on one of the key areas of sequential art, stylization vs. naturalism. These terms are, of course, extremely mutable and elusive, as they are based on the notion of "reality" or "normality", which varies from epoch to epoch, culture to culture as well as – I dare say – reader to reader and medium to medium. The degrees of stylization are measured by their deviation from this ambiguous "norm". (Hochman 1985, 90.) Any drawn or otherwise fabricated representation of the world is necessarily stylized, and creating different effects of mimesis and identification depend on how much each element is simplified or exaggerated. In fact, all art forms operate on choices of inclusion and exclusion, and whenever something is excluded, the mimesis of the whole is compromised, in other words, stylized. From this follows, for example, "amplification through simplification", a significant effect especially characteristic of comic books, which Scott McCloud has famously underlined and which shall be discussed in more detail later (McCloud 1994, 36–49).

Since Forster's normative conceptions of flatness and roundness are largely based on the degree of stylization involved and since stylization is so heavy-handed in the comic book world, it is understandable that comic book characters are so generally regarded as prime examples of flat characterization and vice versa. It should be noted, however, that the textual elements as well as the more abstract levels of narration are free to operate on entirely different levels of stylization than the images to which they are linked. This could be considered one of the fortes of the medium and has proved especially staggering in biographical and documentary graphic novels such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus* or Josh Neufeld's *A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge* (2009), which both depict real people in real catastrophes through quite naivistic, visual means: Spiegelman replaces people with fable-like animal figures and Neufeld's use of color is strictly decorative. Obviously, these effects will

not make the stories behind the works less real but they do give a personal, openly subjective edge to them, rendering them more touching and less authoritative.

The second scale is suspended between coherence and incoherence. Hochman rightly notifies that the coherence effect is based on different things in different characters. Extremely mimetic characters are supposed coherent by virtue of their "humanness": if real people possess indivisible identities, so should life-like characters. The plausibility of inner unity has, however, been questioned ever since Freud, and with even growing urgency in postmodern literature. On the other hand, allegorical, satirical or otherwise extremely stylized characters, which are based on a single theme or trait, are bound together by that very theme or trait: the Miser is deniably himself as long as he behaves miserly. For some "masking" characters or picaresque heroes – such Odysseus, Peer Gynt or, in comics, Tintin – that trait is, paradoxically, their elusiveness and extreme ability to adapt. Still some other characters might seem coherent on the surface but have a split or shared personalities on a deeper level. Hochman gives Catherine and Heathcliff of *Wuthering Heights* as an example of this type: even though they are quite stable personalities in themselves they refuse to feel whole without each other. (Hochman 1985, 97–102.) What Hochman does not mention is how different levels of coherence or incoherence are perceived. This question will be pondered in a later chapter.

Closely related to coherence is the scale of wholeness vs. fragmentariness. In the same way a character's coherence is indebted to the plot, a character's wholeness is indebted to the thematic structure. In other words, thematic content and convention is able to charge any behavioral patterns of even the simplest characters in such a way that they seem to mean something, thus adding attributes to the character, making it more complete an entity. According to Hochman, simpler, more fleetingly described characters can also gain a sense of wholeness through the way they epitomize a type, especially if this typicality is paired with concrete, detailed description. In short, wholeness is not only reserved for "round" characters. Rather, only very mechanical, functional characters seem to lack it. The way Hochman means it, wholeness could also be equated with (relative) inexhaustiveness. (Hochman 1985, 103–116.) In case of comic books, the issue of wholeness also encompasses visual perception: if characters were to jump off the pages, would they really look as stylized as they do on the pages (*Who Framed Roger Rabbit* style) or do we simply read comic book figures as signs that point towards even more human-like beings?

The scale of literalness is also meshed with the thematic nature of any literary work. Because a story can always be conceived as a system of symbols – artificial signs that

refer to a whole field of meanings and entities – it is impossible for any literary character – even for Harvey's cards – to be "purely him- or herself". From this follows that no story, not even an autobiography, can contain historical characters as such. At best, characters like Napoleon in *War and Peace* (1869) or Shakespeare in *The Sandman* can be said to be based on historical figures, but after the many filters of human perception, conception and language, their ontological standing is ultimately the same as that of the completely fictional characters. There is, however, clear variance in when a character can be considered primarily self-referential or primarily as a representative of something larger, such an idea or type. On the other hand, characters that are clearly characters in their own right can give birth to entirely new types – Hochman mentions Hamlet and Don Quixote as examples. Thus, literalness can be viewed as a more abstract, less normative hyperonym to individuality. (Hochman 1985, 116–122.) Interestingly, while literary characters are rarely aware of their symbolic value, the symbolic importance of the masked avengers is a common theme in superhero comics. This aspect is clearly spelled out in their use of emblems and relations to the media. Spider-Man is a perfect example of a hero struggling with his public image, whereas Batman, who aims to evoke fear in his adversaries, has chosen a bat, the symbol of his own darkest fears and memories, as his herald.

Next scale, the ever-popular complexity – close akin to Forster's rotundity – intersects the scales of stylization, coherence and wholeness. Hochman aptly remarks that complexity does not simply mean an overwhelming number of traits and personal details but can also, and even more effectively, be conjured forth by contradictions and developments. (Hochman 1985, 124–125.) These inner conflicts are usually brought to daylight by the means of Hochman's sixth variable, transparency, while the resulting developments are realizations of the seventh variable, the degree of the character's dynamism.

Hochman considers the most important derivative of transparency to be the access to the character's motives. To me, the issue seems to be much larger: I would include any mental activity that is shown to the reader, and the means by which they are shown, on the transparency scale. Hochman does, however, make a good point noting that complete transparency is not a simple short-cut to a complex, engaging character: certain degree of ambiguity usually engages the reader's imagination much more effectively. (Hochman 1985, 125–131.) This might be one of the secrets that allow comic book characters to engage the readers so effectively: while there are textual elements – such as thought bubbles – that can offer similar direct access to the characters' heads as many literary devices do, they are almost invariably *pictured* from third person perspectives – even in autobiographical works. That is,

the pictorial devices very rarely position the reader inside the characters' skin, allowing them to retain at least a part of that sense of mystery real, opaque people always pose to us.

As for dynamism scale, its length and stretchiness varies greatly from genre to genre. While realistic novels, *Bildungsroman* and tragedies often concentrate on the inner development of the characters, romances, farces, fairytales and commedia dell'arte require rather stable, unchanging characters. (Hochman 1985, 132–133.) In graphic novels, too, the characters' ability to change is usually limited by the requirements of genre and publication form. Serialized publications with several different story-arcs and creators warrant an entirely different kind change than a graphic novel that is published by a single artist in a single volume. Usually, the characters that have to function as the protagonists of serialized publications for indefinite periods of time tend to be very rigid, so that they would be recognizable and translatable from artist to artist and story to story (e.g. *X-Men, Spider-Man*), while the characters of more finite series are usually designed to change in certain way to push through a certain message (e.g. *The Sandman* or *Watchmen*). Alternately, characters with very long publicational life-spans can also be developed in the way that resonates with the changing audiences and Zeitgeist (see ch. 3.1).

Hochman also ponders how the change in characters can be measured: since the changes usually occur at the end of the work, we cannot take advantage of the same kind of behavioral observations we might be able to make in real life. Thus, the feeling of change is usually expressed through imagery or other larger structures of the work. (Hochman 1985, 135.) Interestingly, in *The Sandman*, Morpheus' development is marked quite explicitly by ritual, nominal and visual discontinuity: there is a funeral, even though an anthropomorphized abstraction of Dream cannot possibly die, and, in addition, the new and improved version of Dream is marked by a new name as well as a new set of colors and emblems (see ch. 4.1).

The final scale depicts closure as opposed to openness. Basically, this means the degree to which the characters' conflicts are resolved, which in its turn, influences the degree to which we gain clear understanding of their fundamental nature and motives. While epilogues and happy, romantic endings provide traditional closure, modern authors favor open endings. In comic book world, the serialized publication form and the way characters are recycled from author to author tend to create an exceptional demand for open endings. Hochman implies that the more the characters are left without closure, the more it is possible to imagine further adventures for them. That is to say, unresolved characters continue to "haunt" the world beyond the text. (Hochman 1985, 138–140.) Ironically enough, he

completely ignores the possibility of character's death, which Forster, in contrast, has considered one alternative for a perfect closure – the other being a marriage (1962, 60–62).

Hochman himself readily admits that many of his scales correlate with each other, so much so that it is doubtful whether all of these factors are completely independent and necessary. As with all trait theories in any field of research, it can always be argued that there should be less or more variables. While traits like stylization and wholeness or wholeness and closure could quite easily be combined, one could suggest adding factors like activeness vs. passiveness, dependence vs. independence – in relation to plot or other characters –and so on, it is always dubious to claim that any theory is completely universal or exhaustive. Something is always lost between or outside different scales. Also, while this sort of theories do allow very systematic approach towards different characters, it is always healthy, especially in the field of art, to step outside all the guidelines. Moreover, schematic analyses of this manner have not been practiced much. It should also be noted that theories like this form interesting parallels to trait theories used in psychology. Whether it is a good or a bad thing probably depends on the stand each reader or researcher has in the mimesis question.

Aleid Fokkema's character theory could also be treated as a trait theory, because it aims to describe the constituents of an individual character in a systematic way. Her starting points are, however rather unusual. While all the other theorist discussed here have concentrated on the realistic novel, Fokkema's focus is on postmodern literature. Secondly, she is a semiotician, whose character paradigm is not based on scales or axes but on a semiotic tool invented by Umberto Eco: codes. This opens the horizons immensely, because the characters are not placed on one-dimensional scales but examined in terms of different modes and aspects of their fictional existence. In semiotic or classic structuralist terms, we connect the signifiers – language telling us about the character – to the signified – in this case, the ideas of a character's features – in multiple conventionalized ways. These conventional patterns are what Eco calls codes. (Fokkema 1991, 45.)

Fokkema separates denotative codes from connotative ones. The former only concerns the explicit signs that distinguish the character and refer to it, such as its name or different personal pronouns. The latter is much larger and more muddled field as it connects with almost everything else that is said or implied about the character. We decode these descriptions in several different layers, which is why Fokkema distinguishes five different connotative codes. (Fokkema 1991, 74.)

The most basic of these codes Fokkema calls the logical code. This means that we, rather automatically, read characters as submitting to simple logical truths. For example, they cannot realize two mutually exclusive alternatives at the same time: they either exist or do not exist, they are either human or inhuman, but not both at once. The biological code involves much more concrete and specific assumptions, for example that the character has natural, physiological needs and origins. That is, characters who abide to this code are assumed to eat, sleep, die, have biological parents and so on. At least as common and important is the psychological code. It can be equated with our human tendency to read characters in such a way that they have inner worlds or at least some mental activity: thoughts, emotions, dreams, motivation et cetera. The fourth code is a social one and includes our presuppositions about the characters' social status. Almost any given character does, indeed, belong to some sort of a community, race, profession and several other social classes, but this code is already easier to dismiss than the other three. The final connotative code Fokkema mentions is the code of metaphor and metonymy. On the most basic level, this means that we expect to receive some sort of information about the character's appearance and surroundings. With a slight stretch, it can also mean that stories are usually built in such a way that we can use almost anything mentioned in the story to deduce something about the characters' personality, motives or symbolic value. (Fokkema 1991, 74–76.)

Fokkema discovers that even most postmodern characters, whose primary purpose is often to overrule as many old, mimetic character conventions as possible, become understandable to us through these codes, codes that are originally a product of the realistic character tradition. This is a significant discovery, because if most characters of any literary genre abide to these codes, as Fokkema believes is the case, they function as an excellent tentative answer to one of the most elementary questions about the character: what makes characters characters. (Fokkema 1991, 181–182.) In other words, the DNA of characters, so to speak, is in the conventions according to which people encode and decode them, conventions that are rooted in the way real people and, by association, mimetic characters function. This would bring us back to the prior conclusion that it is extremely difficult for a character to elude at least some degree of mimesis and "humanness".

Hence, it should be clear that both Fokkema's and Hochman's theories are based on nearly identical cognitive views of the character. Hochman theorizes that we "read" fictional characters through the same mental schemata we use to understand real people around us. Because the characters are understood as human analogues, the schemata are, by analogy, transferred from human–human situations to human–character situations – from a

social encounter to reading a book. In addition to the context, there are, of course, other differences: the raw data we receive about a literary character is purely textual, not sensory, and we cannot interact with the characters. Of course, visual media, such as graphic novels, do add more sensory, life-like data to the mix and new technologies do enable some basic-level interaction as seen in, for example, hypertexts or so-called visual novels, but this does not belie the fact that there are clear differences. Hochman adds that the amount of data on any fictional character is essentially limited whereas the data produced by real entities is infinite. One could easily disprove this by saying that the lives and, consequently, information on real humans are always limited by their life spans while it is always possible to produce new data about any character. It should, however, be noted that real human data is chaotic while data on characters is highly organized. (Hochman 1985, 31–33, 59–70.)

While there are differences in the raw materials, cognitive processes through which they are interpreted are quite similar. They also produce similar end-products, mental representations that Aristotle would call *final causes* and Fokkema *interpretants* (Hochman 1985, 32; Fokkema 1991, 54–55). These mental representations include both the explicit and implicit information given in the text, but also plenty of the reader's world knowledge and personal experience. From this follows that no matter how real or unreal they might be, we can never know a person or a character "as such"; all we know are our colored, limited interpretations of them. The character is thus suspended between the raw data of the text and the unique mental images it evokes in each reader. While this might make characters seem hopelessly elusive, this dual nature can also be viewed as a virtue: it helps to reconcile mimetic and structuralist notions on characters and explains why both views can, in fact, be defended. In short, structuralists concentrate on the raw data and traditionalists on the interpretants, but both fail to see the processes connecting them. Cognitive character theory stresses those processes and thus, allows us to see characters as both "utterly embedded" in texts and "radically detachable" from them. (Hochman 1985, 72). Fokkema agrees.

This thesis is, likewise, mostly based on the cognitive view of character simply because this kind of viewpoint seems to hold water both logically and empirically. In other words, it does not go against a common reader's intuitions but also seems sufficient enough for academic purposes. Due to its dual nature, it is also able to capture something from both mimetic and anti-mimetic character theories. Words on paper – let's face it – are indeed just that, words on paper, no matter how carefully they might be chosen or arranged. Thus, structuralists are right to demystify them. Yet, most modern theorists agree it is completely counterintuitive to claim that we do not respond to literary characters as if there was

something life-like about them. Similarly, it would be sadly restrictive to state we *should* not do so. All the while it has to be remembered, though, that fictional characters, by definition, cannot physically "exist", save on the same level as other "abstract objects", such as the very idea of humanness (Reicher 2010). From this follows something that was already formulated in Harvey's theory: that the humanity of the author and the reader are reflected, bestowed or lent to characters through complex cognitive processes. Because the examples of Hochman and Fokkema have already proved that this approach is applicable on realist and postmodern characters alike, applying the same principles on comic book characters seems plausible. The quality of the cognitive processes themselves, however, is bound to change when moving from medium to medium.

2.3 Snips, Snails and Puppy-dogs' Tails: Basic Elements of the Character

In his encyclopedia of literary terms, Yrjö Hosiaisluoma defines literary characters as "persons whose appearance, thoughts and actions are described in a work of literary art" (2003, 303). In the previous chapters, it has been discussed why equating characters with 'persons' is problematic to say the least. This chapter, in its turn, will dissect the other claim Hosiaisluoma makes, that is, what constitutes a character – any character regardless of their role or rotundity. Hochman's and Fokkema's theories already hint to this direction, but here we will take a slightly different, perhaps more mundane point of view to the "inward" and "outward" aspects that constitute a character.

In another literary encyclopedia, Uri Margolin concludes that the absolute minimal condition for a character's existence is agential capacity. If a character is something that is capable of occupying a subject position either on a theoretical or a syntactic level, it has to be something to which we can refer. This, again, requires that the character has at least one property by which we can distinguish it from the rest of the story-matter, at least one characteristic or attribute, at least a single streak of identity. While this might, indeed, be considered the bare minimum of character, there are several other features that apply to such a large majority of fictional characters they can be considered, if not a condition, a norm: coherence, temporal continuity and some degree of uniqueness, for instance. (Margolin 2005,

53.) In fact, it is no exaggeration to claim – as Fokkema does – that lack of any human-like qualities is extremely unusual. The conventions are such that we assume all characters to be capable actors in physical, social as well as mental spheres, even if all of these capabilities are not explicitly expressed.

In his rather roundabout article on comic book characters, Frederick Luis Aldama also founds characters on agency, but maintains that true agency is always interlocked with morality. That is to say, characters are such that they seem to make choices. This implies some degree of mental activity, while Aldama's other minimal condition for a character, movement in time and space, usually requires some type of a physical presence. (Aldama 2010, 318–319.) Scott McCloud, who could be considered a somewhat sovereign authority of contemporary comics theory, also lists inner life and visual distinction – that is, a perceptible, recognizable appearance – as two traits "no great comics character can do without" (2006, 63).

In short, characters are perceived to exist within their storyworlds in a somewhat Cartesian manner, which is not to be confused with the ontological duality posed by Baruch Hochman. If characters exist as both textual data and mental images, both of these dimensions can be further divided into two semantic fields: 1.) external features and actions, and 2.) internal features and actions. Again, this should not be confused with Rimmon-Kenan's two modes of character description, because both external and internal qualities can be described explicitly or implicitly (1983, 78–79). Even in comic books, where all external features might seem to be right under our noses, the images are so stylized, that is, so inaccurate that we might have to measure, for example, a character's attractiveness or personal charisma by the way he compares to or is regarded by other characters. Of course, visual media can also include unseen characters that never "enter the stage" – or, like Destruction in *The Sandman*, make a very late entrance – but are mentioned or described verbally by other characters. Furthermore, compared to texts, sequential art only adds visual information, not hearing, touch, taste or smell. These features will still have to be articulated in language or implied by pictorial means so that the reader can evoke them between the frames (McCloud 1993, 88–89).

In this chapter, we will briefly inspect the construction of both outward and inward qualities of characters as well as some peculiar aspects that seem go beyond them. Margolin mentions both uniqueness and coherence as very conventional constituents of the character, but neither of these can be viewed exclusively as parts of the character's internal or external presence. Rather, they encompass and result from both. They are also beyond the

modes of direct and indirect description, larger textual phenomena that require more effort from the reader's part. Because it is the reader's task to piece the character together, there is much he or she contributes, from implied qualities to wider connections, all depending on different reader–character relationships. Thus, these extra-elements deserve a subchapter of their own.

2.3.1 Facades: Appearances and Names

Even though characters have not been a popular focus for literary research, they have at least held central positions in the actual works of literature. The physical aspects of characters, on the other hand, have not been popular in modern Western literature, in theory nor in practice. In realistic novel tradition, the idealizing of round, psychological characters has rendered external features of characters instrumental: the descriptions of a characters' physical appearance, for example, exist less to provide aesthetic pleasure to the mind's eye than to serve as indexes of the characters' inner worlds. Both modern and postmodern character traditions have also disregarded the physical aspects, but for different reasons: modern novel underlines the workings of the consciousness at the expense of showing where that consciousness lives, while the dissolving of the character – to which several postmodernists subscribe – demands scrapping such concrete constants as fleshly bodies.

Of course, as Italo Calvino's *Cloven Viscount* (1952) or Nikolai Gogol's *Nose* (1836) demonstrate, stretching the physical aspects is also a very plausible tool for exploring the limits of the character. The former is a fairytale account of an Italian viscount, who returns from war against the Turkish, concretely, in two halves. The charm of the book is that it challenges the reader to imagine halves of characters as independent actors: one half, of course, turns out to be a wicked and the other a gentle one, which underlines the ridiculousness of such clichéd dichotomies – if human beings really have bad and good sides, should that division not extend to our physical bodies as well? Still, part of the appeal is in the physical disfiguring itself, the tragicomic mental image of a cloak-clad figure jumping around on one leg. *Nose* takes such mental images even further: is it not delightful to imagine a nose that is treated a high-ranking civil servant? Gogol also bestows a great deal of agential capacity and personality on a physical feature that is rarely even mentioned in literary works, as if to point out how several aspects of the character – especially physical ones – are underused and underappreciated.

Literary traditions and critical preferences aside, conventions like Fokkema's biological code suggest that characters are, nevertheless, usually read as if they had physical bodies. This has led, for example, E.M. Forster to criticize how seldom characters are described to eat or sleep in novels (1962, 60–61). Indeed, it is not only the appearances that are left to the margins, but writers and critics often overlook the physical aspect of characters altogether. As an example, half of the critics introduced above – W.J. Harvey and Baruch Hochman – do not heed the physical aspects of characters at all. The only physical phenomena that seem to avoid this neglect, at least to some extent, are love and death, which belong at least as much to the mental sphere. The fact that the physicality of characters is thus undercut might be a testament to the way structuralists see the character: because a character is ultimately a mental representation whose actual physical aspect is, in fact, no more than spoken or written language, assumption of a human-like body might stretch the human analogy too far in some readers' minds.

Even so, in visual media such as film or comic book, the tables are turned. While it is entirely possible to write a book without any mention of the appearances, ages or genders of the characters, the same trick is near-impossible in visual media. There could comprehensibly be extremely metaphorical, stylized or otherwise experimental works that manage to avoid showing their characters, or at least their actual forms, to the viewer, but it is undisputedly unusual. Rather, visual media derives most of its power from the pleasure of viewing. Especially film researchers love to operate on the rather complicated rhetoric of watching and being watched, of subjects and objects, of hierarchies and identification, but the simple pleasure of watching something aesthetically pleasing or shocking should not be ignored either. For many artists and readers of comic books, the images are not just means to an end, but have absolute value as art. Compare, for example, Juanjo Guarnido's minutely drawn, tastefully colored artwork with Juan Diaz Canales' straightforward, generic plotlines in *Blacksad* series: in visual media, the appearances are not always dominated by the inner worlds of characters or the requirements of plot[4]. Instead, the characters are often drawn clearly abiding to or clearly against general beauty ideals, simply for the sake of making them pleasing or jarring to the eye – to make them a memorable, visual spectacle. While some artists, like Yana Tsoboso, the creator of *The Black Butler* (2006–) series, take extreme care to make everything from the clothing to the meals of the character as pretty and decorative as

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[4] Not to disregard the fact that the appearances of characters in *Blacksad* often do serve as metaphorical indicators of the characters' roles and personalities (see ch. 3.3.2).

possible, others, like several underground comix artist or Charles Burns, best known for his graphic novel *Black Hole* (2005), seem to revel in the ugly, strongly realistic details. Strong visual aesthetics are, all in all, especially apparent in manga, where it is not unusual to superimpose full-body images of characters between the frames, devote entire pages to wordless close-ups or, such as in Hiroaki Samura's *Blade of the Immortal* (1994–), arrange characters into occasional, mandala-like designs. These do not advance the plot but function more like portraiture or decorative elements that both attract the reader's eye and underline something about the character.

According to Scott McCloud, visual media's play on sheer physicality of things can be further compounded by realistic styles and colors. He maintains that cartoonish drawing style nears language in that it reduces physical objects into ideas, mere outlines that convey the meaning but do not stop to celebrate the aesthetics or particularities of objects. Realistic styles, on the other hand, invite us to view the objects as such, to perceive their "weight, texture and physical complexity". Color can play a part in the realism, considering that we do not live in black-and-white world, but it also has objectifying power of its own. Color emphasizes shapes and makes the viewer more aware of the picture plane, often at the expense of the content it is trying to convey. Not to mention that shapes and colors can trigger physiological reactions in the reader as well. (McCloud 1993, 44, 132, 189.) To sum, the most simplistic of iconic pictures are necessarily more mimetic than arbitrary, purely symbolic language. Thus, visual media engages the reader much more physically than text, and the physicality of the reading experience is likely to make the reader more aware of the characters' physicality as well.

The peculiarities of different media aside, the physical aspect of character can also be approached through its subcategories, one of which is, simply, physical appearance. This can, furthermore, be subcategorized in several ways. Non-verbal communication and other temporary features, such as postures, gestures and facial expressions are often excluded from this area, as are the features that cannot be perceived by sight alone. Of course, some features are borderline cases in that they are synaesthetic: for instance, roughness or smoothness are primarily sensations of touch but often have some visual indicators as well. (Jääskeläinen 1999, 4–5.)

Hair, clothing and make-up, on the other hand, are often included in the sphere of appearance. These could be classified as mutable components of the overall appearance. The character has certain control over them, which means that they are potentially charged with intention and communicational meanings. That is, features like this tell us more about

the individuality of the character than the less changeable features like age, height, weight, race or gender do. Permanent features like these are more likely to evoke stereotypes and social expectations. They are not communicative, but our schemata of different narrative conventions and stereotypes charge them with meaning nevertheless. (Jääskeläinen 1999, 48.) By Rimmon-Kenan's terms, there are causal (≈communicative) and metonymical (≈stereotypical) relations between the outward and the inward features (1983, 85). In this sense, reading characters is much like reading real people.

A character's immediate surroundings can often be described in a similar manner as appearance. Some things about their environment the character can change and some things he or she cannot. Thus, part of the surroundings can be read communicatively – a character who keeps his desk meticulously tidy expresses something about himself that a character with a messy office does not and vice versa – while another part of the surroundings carries stereotypes – a character who lives in a penthouse in Midtown Manhattan evokes an entirely different set of expectations than a character who lives under a bridge in Mongolia (Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 86). As with appearance, these layers of communicative and stereotypical meaning function quite similarly in literature and real life, but literature adds another layer of meaning, meaning deriving from design, which real life does not have. That is to say, the intentions of the writer and the conventions concerning the organic unity of a work fuse meaning even into the elements that would be considered incidental in real life. From this follows that anything surrounding the character – friends, family, house, hometown, objects, even landscape or weather – can potentially reveal something about him or her by analogy, contrast or metaphor.[5] In short, outward signs of character extend far beyond his or her person and into the entire storyworld.

As with real people, facades of characters also extend beyond concrete, physical things, into ideas and emotions they express, in speech or otherwise. At its one end, this aspect is close to nonverbal communication that may or may not be counted as part of the appearance category, and at the other end, it merges with the internal world of the character. This is not to say that all characters' gestures or utterances are or should be true and clear expressions of their mental activity. On the contrary, as all expressions function as parts of the public facade, they usually carry an additional load of social roles and expectations that do not exist or are at least more watered down inside the characters' heads. As Rimmon-Kenan puts it, the content of utterances is more often used to reveal characters' thoughts while the style

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[5] This is what allows Harvey to assign ficelles as foils or mirroring characters.

often refers to their place of origin or residence, social class or profession (1983, 83). Thus, expressions like all the other outward aspects tend to convey both communicational and stereotypical meanings.

All in all, as with real people, appearances and speech patterns seem to be the prime tools for establishing some characters as recognizable types. This is, of course, largely due to the stereotypical meanings loaded on them: each human and character can be regarded different and unique on the inside, and this uniqueness can also come through in the communicative, changeable aspects of their facade, but ultimately, outward features are liable to comparison and prone to remind us of something else, whether we like it or not. Changeable features can either reflect or contradict the unchangeable ones to create the overall effect, but the effects of the outward features are always linked to social categories and stereotypes. What is more, we tend to base our assumptions of the inward features on them. This an especially important notion in case of the visual media, because most of their visual elements are dedicated to revealing the outward features of the characters. The immediacy of these images easily force us into drawing our own conclusions about the characters depicted long before we have a chance to read or listen to the textual content that plumbs their mental processes more directly. Art Spiegelman's *Maus* employs this effect very cleverly and links it to real-life discrimination: we can tell the Jews from the non-Jews at one glance but it takes pages after pages spanning from generation to generation to appreciate their individual personalities. Given the stereotypicality of outward features and the reflections they cast on the inward features as well, it is rather surprising that classifying character theories have not commented on the appearances of characters. Of course, some genres, like commedia dell'arte and, to some extent, industrially produced manga, are openly based on a selection of stock characters whose sets of features often span from internal to external. For example, manga girls with eye-glasses (Jap. メガネっ娘, meganekko) tend to be smarter, more bookish and more rule-abiding than their non-spectacled colleagues.

Guiding these typifying processes are our schemata of prototypes. As Eleanor Rosch claims, these prototypes flesh the characters out to the extent that they might appear human-like and comprehensible even though we were told nothing about their inner worlds. This is only natural since in real life we never have an access to another person's mind, but the power of the prototypes is even greater: even if the only thing we know about a character is its name, we are able to build quite complete anthropomorphic interpretants on them. This is because we are familiar enough with the common syntagms and paradigms of human-like body structure, facial features and clothing to make educated guesses on the character's

appearance – the violations against these frames make a large part of the humor and impact of characters like the viscount and the nose introduced above. The initial prototypes vary greatly from reader to reader and culture to culture but the data given by the text aims to bring them closer to each other in a continuous, self-correcting process. In other words, each confirmed detail evokes more accurate prototypes. Since there is always something that is left unsaid or out-of-stage, the human analogy and sense of completeness that comes with it is only plausible through this sort of inference. (Jääskeläinen 1999, 158–162.) It is worth noting that if such framework exists for inward features, it is much more fleeting and unorganized.

It would not be fair to claim, though, that all outward features are somehow typifying. Having said that a mere name is enough to evoke a prototype, names are also the most important signifiers individualizing and setting boundaries to literary characters, that is, evoking Fokkema's denotative code. Essentially, they are the staples holding characters together, anchors to which other features are tied. If a literary character keeps changing or losing its name without any explicit notification, it ceases to exist as a singular element or at least becomes imperceptible to the reader as such – which, when operating with cognitive conception of character, are essentially the same thing. As Uri Margolin formulates it, "[n]aming practices are meant to ensure the identification – – and the continuity of reference to a given entity throughout the narration." They function as "rigid designators", constant crystallizations that cover in every instance everything the bearer of the name is, has been or will become. (Margolin 2005b, 337.) Quite frighteningly, though, these all-important labels are frequently replaced by personal pronouns, epithets or other definite descriptions throughout most narratives. Moreover, many (post)modern novelists have proven that names can be truncated, distorted, blurred or even left out – Franz Kafka's *The Castle* (1926), Italo Calvino's *Cosmocomics* (1965), Thomas Pynchon's *V.* (1963) and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) serve as fairly thematic examples of each case. Obviously, all of these practices go against the mimesis of the character and pose threats to its coherence, continuity and uniqueness, which is exactly why many anti-mimetically oriented writers and theorists have attacked this weak point.

Due to their visual "bodies", so to speak, comic book characters have much wider basis for their individuality and coherence. They are usually coded into (at least) two semiotic layers, symbolic and iconic. In other words, even if their behavior and lines of thought are not coherent or recognizable enough to be identified per se, they have both their name and their iconic appearance on which to rely. Coincidentally, many comic book protagonists do have a plethora of different names: the title character of *The Sandman*, for

example, can also be called Dream, Morpheus, Murphy, Lord Shaper, Prince of Stories, Dream King or even Kai'ckul without much confusion, because he is always recognizable by, for instance, his star-like eyes. Similarly, these double-checks are necessary for the many superheroes sporting double-identities, two entirely different looks and two different names to go with them. To complicate the matter, these identities should usually appear completely unrelated to all the other characters within the storyworld while the reader should be able to perceive the continuity between them. Obviously, effects like this call for a complicated identification system that stretches beyond names.

In addition, *The Sandman* uses a synaesthetic device unique to comic books: the speech bubbles of some of the characters can be identified by their unusual colors, shapes and letterings (Image 1). This is, of course, a visual device but it suggests that the voices of these characters remain the same even as their physical shapes change. In other words, with a slight stretch, comic books could be claimed to be able to provide their characters with not only unique names and appearances but unique voices as well. Of course, different voices could also be simulated in works of plain text, by using different fonts, font sizes or other effects. This is a fitting reminder of that not even "plain text" is without visual gimmickry and that the sensory aspect of a text might well be congruous with the sensory aspect of its characters.

One widely used device are emblems and signature colors. It is almost as if comic book heroes wanted to ensure their continuity by double-coding their names as well: the bat symbol is a natural, iconic reinterpretation of the language-specific name Batman while the Rorschach-test-like mask, which Rorschach from *Watchmen* wears, doubles and underlines his superhero alias by cultural reference. In *The Sandman*, the appearances of the god-like Endless are even more mutable than those of superheroes, but they, too, can be identified by their emblem-like "sigils" or by other unchanging physical traits such as eye or hair color.

There is certain materiality or sensory to names themselves. According to Philippe Hamon, names can suggest character traits in four ways: visually, onomatopoetically, articulatorily and morphologically. Three of these associative fields are based on different senses. By visual association, Hamon means that the look of the name can evoke associations about the look of the character: for example, a name with very wide or round letters could be associated with a fat, mellow character and a name with very angular, thin letters could be associated with a bony, choleric character. To illustrate, one could observe, for example, how the big round letter starting the name Obelix echoes the body shape of Asterix's companion. As for onomatopoetic association, it could also be called acoustic association as it is based on

hearing: when pronounced, a name can resemble, for example, laughing, whispering or growling, which sets a certain tone for the bearer of the name. For example, due to its many hard consonants Rorschach's name sounds strangely compatible with the ragged outlines of his speech bubbles, not to mention his less than smooth demeanor. Articulatory associations are evoked by the feel of the pronunciation itself. (Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 88.) Long and complicated names, for instance, give a first impression of overall complexity and depth – if the name is not lengthy and unpronounceable to the comical extent, in which case the reader might find it difficult to take the character seriously. Tintin's archenemy, Roberto Rastapopoulos could be an example of such borderline case – as *Tintin* is an adventure comic for all ages, its villains are not supposed to be entirely scary.

The fourth association field, morphological connections, moves away from the senses and to the realm of semantics. By this, Hamon means the morphological units of names. All names have etymologies and meanings, and occasionally, some of them might prove revealing. Names can be symbolic, ironic, prophetic or otherwise meaningful in several ways, overtly or less so, and according to Margolin, many writers have clear personal naming preferences (2005b, 337). There are some special cases to expand on, however, such as allegorical characters, whose names parallel their characteristics very explicitly (Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 88). The Endless of *The Sandman* are a great example: Death is, indeed, the grim reaper, Despair the embodiment of despair and so on. Another semantic name game to consider is common in superhero comics: there is often some tension between the two names, one that the character has been given as a child and the other he or she has chosen for him- or herself. Essentially, given and chosen names are another example of communicative and stereotypical outward features.

Names are often considered very symbolic and laden with meaning simply because they are symbolic – arbitrary, linguistic signs that happen to point to entire persons. Because they are so manifest, small and clear-cut, they often offer themselves to in-depth analyses. It should not be forgotten, however, that if a work of art is considered a unified, meaningful whole, all the outward features of the character can be connected to their inner worlds and to the symbolic constructs of the work just as justifiably as names.

2.3.2 Minds: Perception and Consciousness

As already implied, mental, private features and activities – thoughts, emotions, motivations, temperaments, dreams, delusions and so on – are usually considered primary to the physical, public assets of the character. This is probably because personalities, the individuals Western cultures so ardently adore, are located in the mind. To be exact, the post-Kantian view of human worth dictates that the thoughts and emotions of people should be treated as ends in themselves, and most people, indeed, tend to be interested in how the human mind works, if only to compare and check that they themselves are normal. It also seems very natural to place the inner qualities first in command: if characters are considered to resemble real people, most of the things they say, do or perceive well from a combination of external conditions and inner motivations, but it is the mind that ultimately makes the evaluations and decisions. Thus, especially the realistic and modernistic novel traditions have established human mind as their main topic, leaving the more physical aspects to serve as its humble frames.

Another important point backing the priority of the mental, is that everything we perceive as physical is actually filtered through a mind or few: first, schemata prescribe what we can perceive and second, they interpret that perception in more or less biased manner (Mustonen 2000 26–30). This principle holds true in real life and art alike. For example in literature, the act of description always presupposes a perceiver and a perceived. This polarity is structural and necessarily there, no matter how much trouble the author takes to conceal it. Consequently, it is never possible to describe or perceive the outer aspects of any fictional characters "as such". Thus, descriptions do not only reveal something about the described but something about the describer as well. Even all the inclusions and exclusions – what is described and what is not described – not to mention the choice of words, depend on the motives and choices of the describer. Sometimes the reactions of the perceiver might even take the center stage: Pasi Jääskeläinen finds in his thesis that a perception can trigger anything from personal associations and re-evaluations to physical reactions in the perceiving character. (Jääskeläinen 1999, 11–12, 26.)

Because of the visual material, comic books might seem to relay information more "directly" and objectively than written discourse. Even in the era of digitalized photo manipulation, people still have the tendency to believe their eyes and state that pictures do not lie. This is, of course, an illusion. In actuality, picture does not even have to be manipulated to be biased. If anything, questions of perspective and point of view are even more concrete for

pictures than words. The following chapters will demonstrate how a skilled comic book artist can use perspective and cropping to convey the point of views and moods of characters or narrators. Distorting the actual drawing style to convey the colored views of characters is, however, a rather rare device, which could and should be developed much further. In literature, it is very common for character focalizers to use attitudinal words and give biased testimonials about other characters or anything at all – as an example, one can check how differently each character sees Heathcliff or Wuthering Heights in Brontë's classic. In comics, *The Sandman* is one of the rare examples where the appearances of characters and environments are constantly altered as the focalizers change. Hippolyta Hall's delirious vision of her surroundings after the kidnapping of her son in *The Kindly Ones* is an especially extreme example (Image 2). On the other hand, Bill Watterson's *Calvin and Hobbes* (1985–1995) proves that there is nothing so scholarly or confusing about this effect that it could not play a central role in a simple newspaper strip as well (Image 3). Usually, however, comic book artists prefer to keep the style the same from frame to frame to convey a camera-eye-like sense of realism. Considering the gaping differences between comics and film, the dominance of this and many other movie methods is actually quite overwhelming. So much so that it is easy to agree with Alan Moore's view that the expressiveness and self-assertion of sequential art could be taken much further if it ventured outside the conventions of other visual media (Moore 2008, 4).

In short, the way characters function as the perceived is analogous to the way we make assumptions of other people's cognitions in real life: our readings of outward signs are both based on and instrumental in forming something psychologists call the theory of mind, the assumption that other people have mental activity that is somewhat – but not entirely – similar to that of ourselves. Conversely, the way character functions as the perceiver – the "direct" access to the character's head so often considered the touchstone of round, "realistic" characters and great "realistic" novels – is without a real-life counterpart. In prose literature, this kind of "direct" access to a character's mind is realized by either first-person narration or character focalization. Both devices are entirely possible in comics as well, although it is extremely rare for both words and images to exemplify the former type. Even the most intimate of first-person narrations are usually limited to the word-dimension as the narrator is viewed from the outside. In case of very character-centered or single-handedly created autobiographical comics, the line between the inner and outer worlds is, however, very vague, because the entire comic can be read as the central character's mental projection (see ch. 4.3).

First person narration was originally introduced specifically by autobiographies. Thus, first person narrators, no matter how real or fictional they might be, are often perceived as if they were disguising themselves as the true writers of the text. This is, of course, not the case, which leaves open the question about the narrator's ontological standing. (Cohn 1978, 14.) Different character theorists disagree whether narrators should be counted as characters, but essentially, the differences between characters and narrators are merely matters of rhetoric and points of view. If the minimal condition for character is agential capacity, the narrator, a narrative agent, is clearly a potential character to say the least. Considering the mutually revealing natures of perceiving and being perceived, it is also obvious that narrators of all kinds offer data, on which the reader is able to base an interpretant. Thus, narrators, especially first-person narrators commenting on their life, thoughts and feelings, can certainly be considered characters here. An even clearer case are unreliable narrators, because their unreliability can usually only be understood through their character-like, that is, human-like qualities.

Omniscient third person narration can offer almost as direct access to the characters' thoughts as first person narration when it quotes the thoughts directly. In free indirect narration, the line between the narrator's and the character's thoughts blurs, and when one steps to the area of character focalization, the signal might grow even weaker. In this narrative mode, the narrative voice may only be colored by the character's attitudes and word choices. On the other hand, character focalization can also be as expansive as diminishing the omniscient narrator altogether. Thus, the relationship between the third person narrator and the character focalizer can be as varied as the scale between objective and subjective perceptions and a skilful reader can play them off against each other to understand the internality of both sides.

Mental access of this kind also opens new possibilities for the representation of the subconscious. Despite E.M. Forster's complaints that sleep is regarded very "perfunctorily" in prose fiction, there have been a decent amount of schools, genres and writers drawing on dreams – for example, such psychoanalytically or surrealistically oriented authors as Herman Hesse or Franz Kafka – and the expressive arsenal of comics should be able to match those (1962, 61). Indeed, the way comics combine words and images is eerily reminiscent of the way some psychoanalysts, such as Didier Anzieu, have proposed unconscious cognitions to be constructed (Mikkonen 2005, 300). It is no wonder, then, that one of the earliest strip comics, *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (1905–1927), and one of the most acclaimed graphic novels, *The Sandman*, base much of their contents and characters on

dreams. That said, they can hardly be read as very mimetic accounts of sleeping or the workings of the subconscious: in both of these comics, it is extremely debatable to which extent the dream worlds and creatures are reflections of the characters' minds and to which extent they have a life of their own. Since dreams are so closely meshed with fantasy, they are not considered in further detail here. They can, however, be discerned as a part of the characters' inner worlds and as a significant subject matter for comics. Dreams are, after all, largely visual, which is why they can be given exciting interpretations through the flexible pictorial devices of comics.

2.3.3 Additives: Coherence and Relations

If we read Hochman's cognitive character theory to the letter, the construction we call "the character" is actually the final cause, the mental representation the reader has formed in his or her head. In this sense, every aspect of the character is more or less reader-made and it is impossible to itemize what part of the final construction is based on some specific parts of the text and what is the reader's addition. Because every sentence has to be interpreted in one way or another, not even an explicitly mentioned attribute exists as such: every reader has a different schema of stubbornness or paleness, for example. Thus, something is *always* added and all the external and internal aspects described above can only be called aspects insofar as a reading mind perceives them as such.

On the other hand, the text that provides "the raw materials" for the character does exist in spite of the reader. So, even though the text and the reader merge inseparably in the construction called character, they do precede it as independent entities. Thus, I would consider it reasonable to discuss the clearly "reader-born" elements of the character, that is to say, elements that require especially active cooperation from the behalf of the reader. Also, many of these features are so abstract in nature that it is difficult to associate them exclusively with either the internal or the external domain. It is better to consider them here as separate, underlying factors of the puzzle.

First, all indirect characterization methods require some deduction. Be it a feature suspended between the internality and externality of the character – an expressive gesture or some revealing valued possession, for example – or an item of data that is ambiguous or ironic in any way, the reader has to actively interpret them in order to make them harmonious, contributive parts of the character schemata. One clear-cut example is the

interpretation of facial expressions. In literature, it is impossible to exhaustively describe even one, frozen facial expression. In comic books, it is exactly the frozenness of the image and the stylization of it that makes the task more difficult than reading real people's faces. In case of literature, we are usually offered only partial information, certain subcodes such as the position of the eyebrows, shape of the eyes or shape of the mouth (Jääskeläinen 1999, 25). With the help of these subcodes, we can form a more complete conception of the expression and deduce what thoughts or emotions hide behind it. Conversely, the emotion might be mentioned and illustrating it with an appropriate facial expression is left to the reader. The image content of comic books can, of course, only employ the former alternative, for example, through the use of extreme close-ups. Especially in manga, it is not uncommon to only show a close-up of characters' eyes – they are unrealistically large and expressive for a reason – or to hide the upper half of their faces behind hair or gutters whenever they are overcome by an emotion (Image 4). As all the other kinds of implicative, gapped image content in comics, this seems to strengthen the reader's identification with the character (see ch. 3.3.1). In order to grasp the feeling from a subcode like this, the reader has to search his own emotional reserve, that is, feel some part or degree of the emotion the character is feeling. This also applies to superheroes, who often have their faces at least partially covered by masks.

Much in this manner, based on his or her knowledge of the world and literary conventions – or Fokkema's semiotic codes – the reader must fill any small or large information gaps he or she finds disturbing. This activity is necessary for understanding the narrative on its most basic level, but the participation and personal views of the reader are even more significant on the higher abstraction levels of which the characters themselves are (usually) unaware. For example, satiric, allegoric or otherwise symbolic interpretations might be suggested or at least implied by an omniscient narrator, but they always depend greatly on the reader's views. This causes them to vary from reader to reader and makes literature worth discussing. Intertextual or historical allusions likewise have to rely on the reader's knowledge.

Any structural patterns the characters might be involved in are also, almost by definition, invisible to them in traditional literature. The reader often has the advantage of viewing the work from a god-like perspective – knowing more than any single character knows – and acknowledging the conventions to which the characters are submitted. This allows, for example, mapping the character relationships more objectively and predicting the actions of the characters based on their conventional roles – for example, the hero never dies in the end, unless the story is a tragedy, in which case he or she probably does die. This also

enables the indirect characterization device that Rimmon-Kenan calls characterization by analogy. She considers this a secondary method of indirect characterization because it can only be based on earlier, more direct data on the character. Analogues can be based either on similarity or disparity and they can either be suggested in the text or left entirely for the reader to discover. Merely to illustrate the field, Rimmon-Kenan expands on three types of potentially analogous elements: names, environments and other characters. For example, in *Watchmen* the substory of *The Black Frighter* and its protagonist, the sea captain, are in many way analogous to the characters of the main story (see ch. 4.2). Analogies can also be ironic, in which case, the reader also has to detect the controversies to grasp whatever humor or tragedy lies in them. (Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 87–91.) For instance, Viktor Frankenstein's paranoid and guilty anxieties are often contrasted by very serene, open and beautiful Alp sceneries in Shelly's *Frankenstein* (1818). Viktor's name, meaning "winner", can also be read ironically, seeing that his own creation ultimately gets the best of him.

This network of relations between characters, the human context, as Harvey would call it, means that even simpler, one-dimensional characters can prove interesting as long as they contrast and mirror each other dynamically (2006, 69). In other words, even though some characters might seem uninteresting in themselves, their interaction may prove to be bigger than the sum of its parts – some characters simply "activate" the most interesting sides of each other or, simply, their disagreements bring the underlying issues to daylight. Not even a crocodile is very interesting, if it simply sits on a rock, but try poking it with a stick. McCloud uses Walt Kelly's newspaper comic *Pogo* (1948–1975) as an example, but most strip comics from *Peanuts* (1950–2000) to *Mutts* (1994–) illustrate the phenomenon well enough. In comics where the character concepts are based on opposing elements, such as *Fantastic Four*, this kind of contrasts and complements are almost schematic (McCloud 2006, 72).

Another, even more important aspect requiring the cooperation of the reader is coherence. As already explained, the coherence of a literary character is largely based on names and reading conventions. Fokkema's logical code could be seen as a kind of a prerequisite for coherence, which in itself is a very similar phenomenon to the codes. However, no amount of logic or identifying signifiers will be able to build a unified sense of a character in the mind of a reader who has consciously oriented towards spotting the inconsistencies and seeing the character deconstructed into a series of subject positions. Especially if one considers the ideal of round characters that are expected to grow and develop during the course of the story, it seems necessary for the reader to play along and

accept possible disruptions and credibility issues as sudden quirks, surfacing unconscious ticks or suchlike. While some disruptions in coherence may be caused by the clumsiness of the author, they can also be considered "realistic": human minds are usually complicated enough to be unpredictable and many novels do dedicate themselves to describing mental conflicts or other extreme conditions. Thus, especially in postmodern culture where the sense of self is often fractured, some sense of incoherence could even be considered mimetic.

Readers of comics also have to tolerate several kinds of discontinuity. For example, the more realistically the characters are drawn, the more difficult it is to make them look exactly the same from frame to frame, as the angles, lighting and facial expressions change. If different issues are drawn by several different artists – as in the case of *The Sandman*, for instance – the problem is clearly magnified. Of course, it does not necessarily have to be viewed as a problem: most readers accept, even appreciate the different styles of different authors and consider them to highlight different sides of the character, making it perhaps less unified but more complex and interesting. Furthermore, more abstract, simplified drawing styles can be perceived to "include" the more detailed and realistic styles: the fact that Marc Hempel's Delirium in *The Kindly Ones* does not have the same dark circles around her eyes as Michael Zulli's Delirium in *The Wake* does not necessarily mean that they are not there. Perhaps they simply are not depicted.

The matter complicates, if the character is not only drawn but also written by several artists. Is it possible for two different people to produce one, unified character? This depends on the point of view one has on the ontology of the character. It is not uncommon for readers to view the versions of different writers somewhat separate and different: it is often useful to specify, whether one is talking about Frank Miller's Batman or Alan Moore's Batman, Don Rosa's Donald Duck or Carl Barks' Donald Duck. If one follows Hochman's cognitive theory, however, it is ultimately the reader's choice, whether he or she can assimilate the data provided by different comic book creators into one schema or whether they require separate mental representations. The "radical detachability" Hochman talks about is exactly what enables one to take a specific schema of a specific character and use it as a starting point for new stories. The people whose schemata of the same character are substantially different may, however, dismiss them as "non-canon" or be unable to recognize the character at all. In any case, different versions of the character are always linked intertextually – they usually have the same name, for example. The name cannot be considered a decisive criterion here, however, because real people also have namesakes. Another useful, but not entirely decisive indicator is the endorsement of the creator or the

"owner" of the character (Richardson 2010). What would be included or excluded in the character's biography in encyclopedic books, for example, might give an entirely different view of the character than what a die-hard fan has decided to include or exclude in his or her personal schemata.

In case of some popular franchise characters, there are even intermedial issues to consider: if a comic book is made into a live-action or animated movie, the character is linked to real-life people, actors or voice-actors, who necessarily add more semantic and semiotic layers to it. How characters fare between mediums and what is their relationship to their real-life impersonators are questions that have been investigated very little and are too large to be tackled in this thesis, but as the other coherence problems, they ultimately depend on the ontological status one gives to the character and the differing interpretations different people produce in and for different contexts. The comic book industry itself seems to be aware of the issue, since it is discussed by fictional means in Mike Carey and Peter Gross' new, inventive series, *The Unwritten* (2009–): the main storyline examines the relationship between the protagonist of a very popular book series reminiscent of *Harry Potter* and the author's son, on whom the character is claimed to be based.

This rather frustrating, reoccurring deduction that a character has slightly different, separate existences in the minds of each reader, brings us to a third aspect of which the reader is largely responsible: the perceived uniqueness and individuality of the character. More complex and central characters are not viewed as unique unfoundedly: the more a text provides data on a character, the more readers process it and invest in it. These processes are what make the interpretants inside the heads of different readers slightly different and thus – genuinely unique. It should be noted, however, that the same holds true for the minimally sketched and stereotypical characters: the more a character has gaps, the more it requires the reader's own supplements. No matter how general or stereotypical this added information might be, each reader has slightly different stereotypes and knowledge of the world. Thus, the uniqueness, the human-like qualities, the extra that overflows the textual data, is potentially existent in any character, flat and round, but only to the extent the reader puts it in them.

All this leads to an interesting paradox: as concluded earlier, coherence of the character is based on the act of reading, but the same act of reading is what dismembers the objectively and independently existing textual data and transforms it into an individual, elusive schema that can never exactly coincide with the ideas of another reader. Then again, this process is congruent with our relationships with real people. Because it is practically impossible to know another person completely, everyone perceives each human being a little

differently. In this sense, the text is to the character what an actual person is to other people's conceptions of them. We could call the unchanging, material source of the conceptions the actual underlying "truth" behind the different schemata, but in reality, it is so impossible to grasp completely objectively that it is not very practical a tool outside philosophical speculations. Accordingly, all character research should acknowledge that the "character" they are talking about is, indeed, a mental construction – or several different mental constructions – rather than the independently existing piece of text that produces them.

Finally, not only is each reader's interpretant different, but different readers also respond to different characters in different ways. Some despise Raskolnikov while some sympathize with him; some are disturbed by the far-fetched and ethically dubious methods of Batman while others would trade lives with him without batting an eyelid. These differences are partly due to the differences of the interpretants and partly due to, plain and simple, personal preferences. Naturally, any emotions a character evokes in a reader will alter the course of further perceptions and interpretations.

Of course, the engagement process goes beyond simple sympathies and antipathies and collides with different theories on the "reality" of fiction. While it is possible to conceive a character completely anti-mimetically – as verbal statements attached to a name or pronoun – turning textual data into a full-fledged conception of character necessitates play with fictional propositions. This could be regarded as the minimum level of make-believe demanded from the reader because it enables indirect characterization and allows the reader to attribute actions and changes to a character. It operates on the idea of formal coherence, not on the idea of referentiality: this level of engagement, the level of formal propositions, does not imply that the character exists in any other than a purely hypothetical level. Margolin maintains, however, that full engagement with character requires even more mind games, stepping beyond this level of *de dicto*, into the level of *de re*. Essentially, this means accepting that the character does, indeed, exist in some possible world, a man-made, illusory environment, which the character perceives as the reality. This makes all the names and attributions of character referential, although only in a make-believe sense. According to Margolin, most readers happily ascend to this level and imaginatively reposition themselves in the fictional world. (Margolin 2010, 401–409.) This allows one to "meet" and observe the character in the world, within which it "exists". Considering that the "existence" of this entire world is enabled by the cognitive processes of the reader, this theory does not go against Hochman's cognitive character theory but merely approaches the phenomenon on a higher abstraction level.

The *de re* level of engagement serves as a stepping stone to the most concrete and personal level, *de se*. This refers to any kind of impact the character could have on the reader's real life. The said antipathies and sympathies – and any other emotions or attitudes a character might evoke – are part of this domain. What is more, one can discover parallels between the character's and one's own personality, past or current situation. This, in turn, may result in re-evaluation of one's experiences or even alteration of memories, as they mix with the character's experiences. Of course, *de se* also contains the entire, complicated field of identification: putting oneself in a character's shoes might change one's world-view, self-image or even behavior. One might, say, believe that Goethe's Young Werther was right to kill himself and follow his example. On the other hand, the reader might find parallels between a fictional character and some real-life person, other than him- or herself, in which case the identification with the character might help the reader to gain better understanding of its real-life kindred spirit. (Margolin 2010, 410–414.) This frighteningly manifold hold fictional characters have on the reality is, of course, the cause behind censorship, therapeutic effects of literature and the role stories play in cultural and ethical upbringing. In this light, the mistrust and censorship directed towards comics throughout the past decades may not seem entirely misplaced, especially if one believes Scott McCloud's claims that "no other art form gives so much to its audience while asking so much from them as well" (1994, 92).

3. Mysteries of Comic Book Characters

As we have already established, characters are highly complex narrative elements that intertwine with several other elements and occupy several layers of the stories they inhabit. Thus, more or less any device of any given narrative medium can be used to present them. Naturally, this applies to comic book characters also: understanding them requires understanding the entire medium from publicational frames to the narrative ones. In this chapter, we will examine the concept of character in this minimally researched framework. How do the industry, the images and comics' other semiotic conventions warp the characters in comics?

3.1 Serial Affairs: A Publicational Point of View

Before diving into the semiotic fabrics and possibilities comics has to offer as a medium and art form, it is important to acknowledge the realities of their publication, especially considering that the creating processes of comics range comfortably from one extreme to another. No other medium offers itself to such a wide selection of artists and audiences. On one hand, comics has always been an apt communication channel for independent, marginalized artists, as evidenced by the underground movement of the 1970s (Herkman 1996, 19). Making a comic strip requires little more than a pen, some paper and some perfunctory knowledge of the conventions. What is more, with the rise of the Internet, any private individual can use the expressive force of comics to single-handedly convey their views to the modern, image-oriented public with a minimal budget. On the other hand, comics have grown into full-fledged, highly organized million-dollar industries in the medium's key areas, the United States, France and Japan.

In France, as in the rest of Europe, comics have remained less commercialized and, consequently, more highly esteemed than in the USA, where large publication houses and syndicates have grown rather steadily for the past century and still dominate the field today. While Franco-Belgian comics have only been directed and uniformed by a handful of schools and styles, American comic book culture is a product of several larger forces from the coat-tailings of Hollywood iconography to the stern censorship of 1950s known as Comics Code. (Herkman 1996, 16–18.) At present, the American industry is largely monopolized by

two houses, Marvel Comics and DC Comics, who make a substantial part of their profits by collectibles and Hollywood films. In the undercurrents of this million-dollar superhero business, some exceptionally ambitious and experimental artists of the 1980s, such as Will Eisner, Frank Miller and Alan Moore, as well as new commercial terms like graphic novel, have prompted more and more young adults to read comic books (Herkman 1996, 22). This has created a new market area with a demand for more complicated, often darker story content and characters, which is mostly catered for by smaller publication houses or separate publication divisions like DC's Vertigo.

In Japan, the comic book market is even more carefully divided into different target groups: *shōnen* (boys), *shōjo* (girls), *seinen* (men) and *josei* (women). In addition, the enormity of the market and the recessions of the 1990s have encouraged formation of such novel genres and niche markets of which the Western comic book industry can only dream – everything from cooking, tennis or harem manga to those targeted specifically to housewives or salarymen have thrived so well further fragmentation is still in process (Thompson 2010). The entire phenomenon has its roots in the wood engravings of the Edo period (1620s–1867) and the term *manga* was coined by the great Hokusai himself, although post-war American influences are also apparent (Thompson 2007, xiii). These somewhat artistic roots, favoring of relatively long story arcs and emphasizing artistic vision over profits, have maintained comics' strong position in Japanese pop culture, but on the flipside of the vast market lie, in comparison to Western comics, rather rigid genre conventions and a large gallery of stock characters. Manga started its slow invasion to the West in the 1980s, and its popularity has grown rapidly since the beginning of the 21st century (Thompson 2007, xii). As a consequence, many Western artists have started to adopt many of the storytelling techniques developed in Japan (McCloud 1994).

While organized industries like these are able to produce whole selections of monthly, even weekly publications, it comes with the price of more decentralized distribution of work. The most basic division is between writers and artists but the function of artist is usually a subject to further divisions: the master artist, who mainly determines the visual style and composition, is more often than not augmented by an inker, a letterer, a colorist, an assistant applying the rasters or even a secondary artist responsible for the backgrounds. As with literature, there is also the background force of editors and publishers. In addition, large comics syndicates can develop and afford digital tools unavailable for independent artists: as computers have become mundane, the lettering, coloring and editing is more and more often done digitally.

While all these facilities allow more efficient production of more polished comics, they do entail downsides and implications that are seldom considered by an average reader. While the assistants and digital tools might give the creators more room for experimenting, they – not to mention the deadlines – can also be restricting. Especially computer software that can only offer the same functions and effects day in and day out can habituate the artists to only work within those readily provided frames and staunch innovation at the expense of convenience.

Second, having a master of images and a master of words collaborate does not necessarily equal dazzling results – an important thing to note now that popular prose authors like Stephen King have started to try their hand at comic book scripting.[6] As Scott McCloud remarks, images and words can only merge in the reader's mind if their interplay is carefully balanced: if both the artist and the writer commit to taking their contributions to the esteemed, "high art" extremes of their respective art forms, the results are at risk of becoming semiotically incompatible. This is because highly abstract text and highly realistic, objectifying art evoke two entirely different worlds: that of ideas and that of objects. According to McCloud, this mismatch easily leads to jarring reading experiences, which can only be avoided by bringing the words and pictures closer together, by simplifying pictures into indicative, symbol-like signs and words into concrete, immediately fathomable speech acts. (McCloud 1993, 48–49.)

While McCloud's argumentation is valid, this is hardly the only effective way of combining words and pictures. As discussed in the previous chapter, fictional characters are often perceived to have both physical and mental presence: is the former not best evoked by realistic drawing style that embraces the substance and aesthetic of the physical, and does mimicking the latter not require moving to completely abstract spheres? While it would, of course, be one-eyed to argue that the outer character is solely presented by images and the inner character solely by words, the possibility of discerning such divisions proves that characters – or the stories they inhabit – are not and *cannot* be completely unified and one-dimensional. Thus, rather than stubbornly sticking to the ideals of flow and unity of the character, one can also welcome the jarring elements as something that creates scale, conflict and interest. Granted, if the texts and pictures drift too far apart, their relationship is in danger of becoming so straightforward the finished product might seem more closely related to an illustrated book than a graphic novel.

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[6] King is a co-author in DC Comics' new monthly publication, *American Vampire* (2010–).

The possibility of mismatching the words, the images and, moreover, the characters they create can also be viewed as one of the comics' strong points. It is a great tool for deconstructing different stereotypes linked to different types of characters, narrative genres, drawing styles and the medium itself. Second, it can be used to create a number of tones and effects, from comic to macabre, on entire stories or distinct characters. Third, it might help the artist to cheat his or her way into the hands of new audiences. Art Spiegelman's *Maus* is a prime example of such mismatch: the deceivingly simple drawing style masks gravely serious, historical and exceptionally metatextual story content, a combination that might encourage more sensitive readers to acquaint themselves with such a grim topic as the Holocaust and, on the other hand, introduce a whole new world of autobiography to escapistic comic book readers. Another, much more amusing instance is R. Sikoryak's *Masterpiece Comics* (2009), which reconstructs literary classics such as Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915) or Bertolt Brecht's *Waiting for Godot* (1949) through the visual means and narrative conventions of famous humor comics. Translating heavy classics into cartoons has been used to trick children and lazy readers into the joys of "real literature" since the *Classics Illustrated* (1941–71), of course, but such works – at least those of Sikoryak – should not be regarded as mere adaptations (Versaci 2007, 185). Although hybridized, they are stories in their own right, have their own characters and their own means of constructing them. That is to say, although much of the humor in Sikoryak's comics come from the recognition of the intertextual link, part of it wells from the mismatch between the classic character and the cartoonish exaggerating style in which it is presented. Humor aside, this mismatch allows the reader to see the classic character as well as the paralleling comic book character in new light: maybe Gregor Samsa and Charlie Brown are somewhat similar spineless antiheroes – as Mr. Sikoryak himself formulates it, "[d]espite their sincere efforts, circumstances always seem to conspire against them" – and perhaps Beavis and Butthead really are the Didi and Gogo of today's pop culture (2009, 65).

Thus, the collaboration of several artists and the collision of their styles is not as fatal to the characters as it is to the artists themselves. As the original artistic vision is lost into countless communicational gaps and compromises, the romantic ideal of a lone, genius creator fades and is replaced by nameless mass of minds and hands – a comic ceases to be a divinely inspired work of art and turns into a cold, deliberate product. The large comic book industries have, indeed, substituted normal cyclic creative process with assembly lines where everyone has a specific task and is kept in check by tight deadlines. This phenomenon is undoubtedly one reason for the perpetual disdain for comics, and it has undoubtedly had

effects on the contents of popular comic books, including characters. Different target audiences are offered different kinds of characters, for example: protagonists of *shōjo* comics tend to be young girls, just like their target audience and so on. The bright, primary signature colors of early superheroes are no coincidence either: colors were added as soon as the "four color" technology was developed, because they were good for the "branding" of superheroes and because colored comics sold more on the whole (McCloud 1993, 187–188). In consequence, Dave Gibbons favored broken and secondary colors (e.g. Nite Owl's brown suit or Ozymandias' purple suit) in *Watchmen*, to signify the work's ideological departure from the naivety of traditional superhero comics.

Of course, many of these publicational issues are not unique to comics. TV series rely at least as much on commercialization, large production teams and, of course, serialization. Another feature that has probably obscured comics' standing as an art is that they are not very often created or consumed as solid, single pieces but as several, physically separate issues. Even graphic novels like *Watchmen* or *The Sandman* that were always designed to be of a certain, more or less concise length are often published as weekly or monthly issues that are only later collected into an album form. Some series, however, have no predetermined end points but are published on set dates as long as they sell. Different story arcs that begin, end and intertwine within the entire publishing run can, of course, be collected into albums and treated much like finite graphic novels. In Japan, the serialization form is different still: there, the industry favors thick, periodically published anthologies, such as *Shōnen Jump* or *Ciao*, that include issues of several series by several different artists. These stories, too, are later separated and collected into their own volumes, or a series of them, known as *tankoubon* (Thompson 2007, 501).

While serialization might make the stories seem scattered, it also has some noteworthy advantages. Most obviously, serialized publication offers a very large and flexible space for narratives both spatially and temporally. More concretely, the extension of spatial space means publishing a large, even infinite number of issues or albums, which means the artists have more pages to fill with more frames to fill with more words and images. This, in its turn, can be used to stretch the temporal dimensions of the narratives: not only can single story arcs, suspended over several issues or albums, cover months, years or even decades of in-story time, but the same characters and storyworlds are often carried on from arc to arc. Rocco Versaci states that comics is "the ideal medium in which to examine characters over a long period of time": when periodical publication lasts for years, it usually has to burn up years of narrative time as well in order to remain interesting. As a result, the readers can

follow "almost in real-time" as the characters grow, mirroring the readers' own aging process. Versaci mentions the Hernandez brothers' *Love and Rockets* series (1982–1996) as one of the rare comics where the characters mature in terms of both their physical appearance and worldview. (Versaci 2007, 21–23.) As another example, the 75 issues of *The Sandman,* published over more than eight years, show a very slow but significant change in its protagonist through several small story arcs that center around different characters and issues, but connect and relate to each other like brush strokes to paint the bigger picture of Morpheus' development (see chapter 4.1).

Not all comic book characters change over the years or story arcs, however. The heroes of adventure comics or humorous strip comics are actually quite close akin to picaresque characters in that they stumble from an unlikely situation to another suffering no more than occasional, superficial scratches. Hergé's *Tintin* (1929–1976) is a prime example: since the stories as well as many single scenes within them are built around mysteries or gags, character development is rendered unimportant or even harmful. Tintin refusing to crawl into a secret tunnel because of some childhood trauma, for example, would only slow and hinder the plot. By making him quite emotionless and generic, plainly likeable fellow, Hergé invites the reader to identify with Tintin and experience the adventures through him. In McCloud's terms, he is the simplified, one-size-fits-all mold, the "vacuum" in which our own identities are pulled so that we could immerse ourselves in the more vividly and minutely depicted storyworld around him (McCloud 1994, 36). Tintin's psychological depth and credibility is thus sacrificed for the sake of plot and reader engagement – where there is little or no personality, it is impossible for changes of personality to manifest either. His appearance changes extremely little throughout the decades as well, which might partially be caused by his extremely stylized look but also by his role as the constant fixed star through the colorful adventures amidst different continents and cultures, the staple that makes everything around him recognizably *Tintin*.

In humor comics, the stakes are entirely different. In comics like *Calvin and Hobbes* (1985–1995) or *Peanuts* (1950–2000) the milieus and stories are much smaller and simpler, which, in fact, often leaves the characters the nuclei of the strips. Despite this, they do not change: Calvin remains six years old through the entire decade of publication and Charlie Brown never confronts the Little Red-haired Girl. One can wager this is because many of the jokes and aphorisms in these strips are based on the readers' knowledge of what the characters are always very much like: if the characters were more mutable, the resonance of the gags would become diminished and muddled. The clarity of the ideas they convey is

based on the fact that their personalities are constant and otherwise simplified. Because of their permanent dreams, vices and expressions, they come to represent certain things, types and emotions in the readers' heads – in the same way mimetic sweat drops are conceptualized into conventional signs of comic book language, the characters themselves can be constant and simple enough to function like symbols. The pleasure comes from mixing these constants with each other in different contexts: because Charlie Brown and Lucy are always the same, Charles M. Schultz can place their predictable dynamic in different situations to convey different ideas. It is much like putting familiar words into a sentence where the grammar is predictable, but the meanings are always contextual and new.

Versaci claims that superheroes are "ageless" as well (2007, 21). But are they? Certainly, the most popular superhero titles have had long enough publication runs to prove that their protagonists do not mature "in real time" like the heroines of *Love and Rockets*. In case of some superheroes, this can be accounted for their supernatural or genetically exceptional physiques. Second, they might remain unchanged for many of the same reasons as Tintin. Considering that American superhero comics is probably the most commercialized comics genre there is, there are probably marketing viewpoints to consider as well: superheroes are icons. In order for them to be recognizable and stand for the ideals they claim to stand for, they have to be unchanged and uncompromising – a point parodied in *Watchmen* through the unyielding demeanor of Rorschach. Punisher punishes the criminals for his personal losses, Spiderman tries to live up to the great responsibility imposed by his great power and Batman, who has become Batman due to a great trauma, tries to transfer his fears and sufferings to his enemies. Were they to abandon or alter these ideas, their actions and very identities as superheroes would become meaningless or at least much more puzzling. On the same notes, however, there are pressures for superheroes to develop as well: Would it not be good for marketing to make the heroes more mature as their readership matures? If superheroes stand for certain ideals, should they not change as the ideals of the surrounding culture change?

Some superheroes have, in fact, undergone dramatic changes over the years. Here, the most obvious example might be Batman, representations of whom have clearly matured and grown darker, more violent and more controversial over the past few decades. Wolverine and many other superheroes have also been added gloomier or at least more serious streaks as the niche market of graphic novels has continued its steady growth and as the acclaimed self-mockery of such landmark works as *Watchmen* or *Dark Knight Returns* have set new standards for the genre. Of course, the change is obscured to some degree by the

fact that the same heroes are depicted differently by different artists: as evidenced by their entire portfolios, Frank Miller's tastes are much darker than the character's original creator Bob Kane's[7].

The fact that several superheroes possess double identities also opens some interesting venues for change: on the surface, the ideals linked to the mask might be kept intact while the man or woman behind it changes – even to an entirely different individual. For example, Lee Falk's masked hero The Phantom is not an actual character at all but rather a role that is passed on through generations – hence the nickname, "The Man who Cannot Die". Another interesting example is Marvel Comics' Spider-Man, who was originally created by Stan Lee and Steve Ditko in the 1960s as the secret identity of a Caucasian photographer and science student, Peter Parker. In the original *Spider-Man*'s parallel publication *Ultimate Fallout* Parker was, however, killed by Green Goblin in June 2011 and replaced by a younger, Afro-Hispanic boy called Miles Morales, who is also rumored to turn out homosexual in future issues. Marvel executives explain that the change reflects the changing Zeitgeist: in modern world, heroes should be able to represent minorities, not just white, heterosexual, Christian men. That is, Marvel now publishes two parallel Spider-Man story continuums, one where the traditional Peter Parker version lives on apparently agelessly and another with an alternative, emancipatory successor. (Bates 2011.) Interestingly, this reflects not only the ethnic and ideological diversification of the Western world but also the trend of giving the readers more power of choice: digital media are habituating the audiences to vast selections from which everyone can pick the exact things that suit their tastes, so the print media has to keep up and diversify. Still, something remains a constant: the writers emphasize that both Spider-Mans stand behind the same motto, "with great power comes great responsibility" (Bates 2011).

Of course, instead of making the life stories of single characters deeper and longer, the extra space can also be used to widen the entire character cast. Not all characters tend to be the same from story arc to story arc. On the contrary, new stories more often than not require introducing new characters. This phenomenon is especially schematic in superhero comics, where new plots tend to rise from the shenanigans of new super villains or the appearances of new allies or love-interests. With time, this pattern results in rather expansive character galleries – how many Batman villains can you name? or how many X-Men mutants

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[7] Frank Miller is very well known for his disturbingly violent neo-noir series *Sin City* (1991–2000) while Bob Kane's career included developing several children's cartoons.

are there and what are their special abilities? would make excellent party games in a comic book convention.

Frequent introduction of new characters is rather systematic and well-founded in *The Sandman* as well: often referred to as a story about stories, the patchwork-like structure of *The Sandman* requires a nearly endless flow of new, diverse characters to share their life stories and perspectives. This is made especially overt in *The Worlds' End* where very different characters from very different worlds get stranded in an inn and recount their experiences to pass time, largely to the tradition of *Decamerone* or *Canterbury Tales*. As a result, the character gallery of *The Sandman* easily amounts to dozens or even to a hundred, even if one only counts characters with proper names. Like *The Sandman*, many other fantasy series, such as Alan Moore's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999–), Bill Willingham's *Fables* (2002–) or Mike Carey's *The Unwritten* (2009–) boast a number of intertextual characters, which links their character casts to those of the alluded texts as well.[8] Even if Mina Harker of *The League* never mentions her sister or husband, all the Bram Stoker's characters are still somewhere in the associative background.

When paired with commercial interests, this two-fold expansion of time and space can even result into vast fictional constructs the fandom have aptly titled "universes": for instance, all the superheroes of the American comic book company DC Comics are perceived to exist within the same storyworld, which allows the characters, originally created by different artists, to encounter each other in so-called crossover series like the *Justice League of America*. Marvel, too, has created its own "Marvel universe" with similar crossover franchises like *The Avengers*. While the concept of such universes is mostly pressed by comic book companies for commercial reasons – to justify different crossovers and spin-offs – it is important to acknowledge the other factors as well. After all, the phenomenon is largely enabled by certain structural elements, one of them being the flexibility of issue-by-issue publication, the other being the strong genre conventions that make different superhero titles similar enough for compatibility. Such universes can also be seen as the result of and a resource for the collaboration of several artists: different styles and points of view do not have to collide in such a large fictional space, but they become juxtaposed enough to interact.

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[8] The members of the League of Extraordinary Gentlemen are all picked from famous Victorian novels: Mina Harker from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), Captain Nemo from Jules Verne's adventure stories, Dr. Jekyll from R.L. Stevenson's horror classic and so on. Again, the protagonists of *Fables* are modernizations of familiar fairytale characters like Snow White or Big Bad Wolf, while the protagonist of *The Unwritten* is an overt parody of Harry Potter. The series also features Frankenstein's monster as one of its major characters.

The sense of vastness and long-windedness is further extended by the prolonged nature of the actual reading process: the sheer number of pages can make some graphic novels quite long reads, but even more significant are the empty "idling" periods real-time readers are forced to spend between the publication dates of consecutive issues. Naturally, this alters reader engagement. Harvey notes that while separate episodes of TV series often seem insignificant or even boring to an incidental viewer, following a series faithfully can result into effects that single, self-sufficient works are unable to create. First, repeated, almost habitual encounters with familiar characters and places tends to be hooking. Gradually, it starts to "work like a drug", a daily or weekly injection of escapism. Second, because the series becomes part of the viewer's routine, memories of fiction are likely to mingle with the parallel memories of reality, so much so that something about the real people might "leak" into the characters and vice versa. At least many readers of Victorian serialized novels have reported that the prolonged, repetitive reading habit has made the characters of those novels seem more real and intimately relatable than those of non-serialized novels. (Harvey 1965, 110–111.)

Obviously, if the secret is in the serialization, collecting and reading separate comic book issues is likely to produce the same effects – which might be one of the reasons why issue-by-issue publication has continued to be popular, even in the era of self-contained graphic novels. It simply keeps the readers coming back for more indefinitely, while a single work is done when it is done. Of course, hooking the reader also requires skill from the artists' part and has lead to many clichéd cliff-hanger formulas that might, at worst, make the characters' behavior contrived: can they really be at the brink of a romance or a disaster every single day?

All in all, comics as a medium is a peculiar mixture of continuity and fragmentation. On one hand, the characters are scattered around different artists and issues but on the other, they seem to be able to make the jumps most of the time. Obviously, this requires exceptionally strong, even extreme characters that can be easily recognized across different styles and contexts. Unlike it is often assumed, however, rigidity and extremity alone cannot help a character to mold into the needs of dozens of different stories and artists or generations of audiences. Indeed, the extended, disjointed spaces and creational processes that are often blamed for the one-dimensionality of comic book characters also direct them to the opposite direction: how could a character not accumulate more and more content around its bones as it fares across such vast and variable terrains?

3.2 Picking up the Pictures: Comics' Semiotics

Without images, there are no comics. Although terms like *comics*, *sequential art* or even *graphic novel* do not exactly necessitate inclusion of pictures – written language being graphically displayed sequences as well – different definitions of comics are fairly unanimous in that pictures are more important a component of comics than words. Even Scott McCloud, with his professional insight into creating comics, defines comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence" (1994, 9). The word "pictorial" is consciously used here to place the words second in hierarchy, in the vague category of "other *images*". Similarly, dictionaries tend to define 'comic book' as "a magazine, especially for children, that tells stories through pictures" – no mention of words at all (Hornby 2005, 300)[9]. Basically, all this derives from the fact that we are liable to call a wordless sequence of pictures "a comic" – in absence of a better term, perhaps, but still – while series of plain words have long before been established as 'literature' of some sort.

The flipside of the issue is that pictures and words have plenty of common ground as well. Letters were born from pictures, and written languages of some cultures (most famously Chinese and Japanese) still bear some likeness to their referents (McCloud 1994, 142). For example, from the Japanese kanji for horse, *uma* (馬), one can still quite easily distinguish the mane, the tail and four legs. A bit more subtle example is the kanji for human, *hito* (人), which clearly shows the two legs keeping us in the upright position and thus distinguishing us from other mammals. This sign is especially interesting in that it merges the two primary meanings of English word *character* into one, seamless entity: it is both a conventionalized symbol – the kind of character used for writing – but it can also be regarded as an extremely simplistic cartoon representing human form – the kind of character discussed in this thesis.

Even though most modern languages are less ideogrammatic, they too stem from such representational signs that have gradually been abstracted to representing sounds instead of things. Also, no matter how arbitrary and obscured their connection to their referents might be, each letter is still a little image – extremely conventionalized, perhaps, but still a visual tool of communication, just like everything else on a page of a comic book. Because of this, written word and other pictorial signs are able to combine in multiple ways

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[9] Also note the overt pejorativity of the definition.

and merge into one, almost seamless whole we call a comic. This will be the topic of the first sub-chapter.

In the second sub-chapter, we take a step away from words and venture deeper into the world of other visual signs. Their contributions to and effects on characters can be understood through semiotic classifications of signs and through the conventionalized vocabulary of the comic book medium itself. As a rule, all signs fall somewhere on the axis between "opaque" signs (symbols), whose meanings are based on (at least seemingly) arbitrary conventions, and "transparent" signs (icons), information value of which is based on visual likeness. There are, however, other things to consider as well: metonymical sings or indexes, the whole dimension of design that is inherent in any man-made image and the typifying effects of simplification and exaggeration.

3.2.1 Show and Tell: Word–Image Dynamics

The greatest advantage and disadvantage of images is that they seem to be produced and read more intuitively than words. This is because they lack exact conventions: while texts can easily be divided into single words or even letters that have set, encyclopedic meanings and are usually read in a set order, pictures have no such semantic or sequential structurings or even minimal units on which to anchor them (Herkman 1998, 68; Mikkonen 2005, 29). One could, of course, talk of single lines or shapes, but there are no set systems of meaning for such units. From this results that when drawing words, the artist does not have much room to experiment if he or she still wants to keep the result recognizable and readable, while the greater size and complexity of most iconic images means that the artist has more choices to make, that is, more chances to deviate and express. This is especially true for the images of people and other human-like beings. We are genetically programmed to recognize our fellow creatures, meaning that we search for anthropomorphic features even in the vaguest, most inorganic patterns imaginable (McCloud 1994, 33). Because we are ready to see potential human-like characters in anything, the artistic liberties and possibilities for anyone wanting to create a comic book character are nearly unfathomable.

However, there are aspects of human life that pictures fail to express clearly or at all. This is usually when words emerge to save the day, to make the comics' expression complete. Due to its more conventionalized and abstract nature, language is able to reach beyond visual realm of concrete objects and penetrate much deeper into the worlds of other

senses and intangible ideas that are central to characterization, such as emotion, identity or moral. In other words, words provide the kind of specific data pictures cannot provide, including such essentials as names or consciousness, which, for most people, operates for a large part on language. Thus, while it is possible to construct a comic with pictures alone – as evidenced by such diverse works as Hedrick Dorgathen's artistic graphic novel *Space Dog* (1993), Masashi Tanaka's dinosaur manga *Gon* (1992–2002) and pantomimed newspaper strips like *Ferd'nand* (1937–) – words are often necessary for "anchoring" and specifying their meaning. Not to mention that language, both spoken and written, is so widely used in our world that excluding it from a story would seem odd, alienating or at least unrealistic. While this is an effect some artists and stories might strive for, it would contradict with the goals of most.

Having said that, it would be a mistake to assume that words are any less subjective than their more iconic cousins. Both pictures and words are read subjectively, but in different ways. While a picture might cement the reader's perception of the appearances of the things it portrays, it leaves everything else to the reader's knowledge or imagination. There is no time aspect in a still picture, which is why everything preceding and following it is left open as are the names and other specifics of people, places or, for example, facial expressions. Words, however, do not cement anything, really. While *Papilio machaon* or *Paris* do refer quite unambiguously to quite specific things, they mean little or nothing to a person who does not have sufficient information on the referents. In other words, *Papilio machaon* could translate as any kind of "an exotic creature" for one person, some sort of "a butterfly" for another person and "the Old World Swallowtail that flitted though grandma's garden that fine afternoon in April" for yet another person. Like the quantity of information, the quality of information varies as well: all of us have different information, experiences and opinions on people and places called *Paris*. It is only through longer sequences of words and conventions of coding and decoding that the meanings become gradually more specific. Thus, comics – which boast sequences of both pictures and words evoking different types of subjective interpretations, while also anchoring each other's meanings respectively – have considerable potential for rich and accurate communication.

Words and images have differences – and similarities – in terms of perception psychology as well. Images are usually regarded as a subject to so called top-down processing, where large sensory chunks are grasped immediately and then interpreted little by little. Language works conversely: each word is like a piece of a puzzle the reader has to piece together in order to conceive of meaningful wholes. This is referred to as bottom-up

processing. (Mustonen 2000, 25–27.) To put it simply, pictures have to be broken down while words have to be compounded before the narratives they convey can be extracted. This is another reason why distinguishing word-like units of meaning from images would be a somewhat futile effort. Because we do not consciously base our understanding of images on single shapes or lines, analyzing them would not be very helpful to or even representative of a natural image-reading process.

Of course, this is not to say that images could be exhausted at just one glance. The eye has to move across the image just like it has to move across a line of text. The direction of the movement may not be as linear, but it is, nevertheless, somewhat predictable. For example, our gaze is instinctively drawn to bright colors that might signal danger, to human faces, where we expect to find valuable social information, and to the direction of movement, because we want to find out the targets and results of actions. Such evolutionary habits hold true in comics as well, but the eye of a comic book reader is probably lead much more compellingly by the conventional reading order: Western comics are read from left to right and up to down. This rule guides the reader from frame to frame and, by analogy, within each frame as well, helping the reader to decide the order of speech bubbles and other things that would be subject to a certain temporal order. For example, Don Rosa, one of the most ambitious artists of Disney comics, likes to draw so many details, actions and small background gags in each panel that it is often impossible for a reader to perceive everything at once.

Gestalt psychology has also proven that perception of images employs certain bottom-up processes. These are called gestalt effects, automatic heuristics that help us to group visual units into meaningful wholes. In other words, human eye has the tendency to arrange chaotic visual information into recognizable shapes – such as that of a human body or face. For example, similar targets or targets that are close to each other, either spatially or temporally, are usually grouped together. (Mustonen 2000, 21–24.) Basically, this is what has enabled printing comic books – and other pictures – by rastering. While such cognitions are rather unconscious, they can be consciously recognized as bottom-up processes: connecting small, insignificant pieces of data to construct something meaningful.

In short, images are perceived and interpreted with the help of both kinds of processing. Similarly, habituated readers treat words, even sentences as wholes and would not necessarily notice if one letter or word had gone missing. It is, however reasonable to claim that top-down processing is dominant in perception of pictures as bottom-up is dominant in the reading of texts. So, what of the combinations of words and images?

It was stated above that comics resort to similar conventional reading orders as texts. The need for such ordering suggests, that panels can be broken down to several temporal units (see McCloud 1994, 96). This, in its turn, indicates that comic book frames are grasped through a peculiar mix of top-down and bottom-up processing: a reader usually glances at the frame as a whole first (top-down), if only so that he or she can establish in which order different elements from speech bubbles and sound effects to facial expressions and actions are meant to be read (bottom-up).

Moreover, it is the nature of comics to juxtapose images in an intentional order, much in the same way it is the nature of literature to juxtapose words. This subjects the images of comics to another layer of bottom-up processing. During the course of a comic, readers get to see recurring pictorial figures, such as characters, from several different angles and distances, in several different positions, lighting conditions and so on. This allows them to update their mental picture of such figure little by little, which is exactly what happens in the reading of a literary character, for example. New data accumulates into a gradually deepening and sharpening schema of a person or a place – a prime example of bottom-up processing and a fitting pair to Rosch's prototype theory (see ch. 2.3.1). Even entire comic strips can be seen as fragments that the reader has to "collect" in order to form a comprehensive idea of the world, characters and values of the series (Herkman 1998, 89). At the other end, much of comic book writing tends towards simpler fonts and more easily – immediately – understandable language, bringing it closer to the intuitively perceptible plane of images, in other words, allowing them to be to be grasped in a more top-down manner (McCloud 1994, 49). From all this, one can conclude that switching and mixing bottom-up and top-down processing is characteristic of reading comics, so much so that it is ingrained much deeper than in the superficial alternation between speech bubbles and pictures.

These similarities and interminglings between words and images are significant, because they allow the two elements to merge into seamless, meaningful wholes that are the lifeblood of all comics. What has enabled the existence of comics in the first place is that these two communicational tools are similar enough to be compatible but also different enough to be complementary: pictures can always add something to words and words can always add something to images. They are never exactly the same. What is more, they can be juxtaposed in countless ways, put in very different relations with each other, and there are few issues that have fascinated comic book theorists as much as these relations (Herkman 1998, 54–55). Comic theorist R.C. Harvey goes even so far as to claim them the most definitive

feature of comics (McCloud 2006, 128). There have also been many attempts to classify these relationships.

The first thing to notice, naturally, is that whether the split into words and images can be made at all. Sometimes the two are so thoroughly integrated they form a single visual body. A good example of this are sound effects, onomatopoetic words whose extra-textual qualities are further illustrated by their sizes, shapes, colors or textures (Herkman 1998, 50). A little less integrated type of a combination is what Scott McCloud call montages, words "treated as integral parts of the picture" (1994, 154). Of course, this definition would allow one to treat most comic panels as montages, because text boxes, speech bubbles or sound effects are important parts of panel composition – it is never irrelevant where they are placed and what they look like. Thus, McCloud is probably, inaccurately, talking about such frames where the two are somewhat inseparable and have similar visual value, where words are not just words but assume the same level of "physicality" as pictures. Such effects can be seen, for example, in the dream sequences of *The Sandman*, where the picture content is so conceptual and "unreal" it allows the words to bleed into the same space (Image 5). All in all, such combinations can be used as a special effect to picture something that is beyond visual and language, such as sound or cognition. After all, most people tend to think in both pictures and words at the same time, without ever thinking of separating the two.

Should we be willing and able to distinguish between the textual and the pictorial content, we can analyze their relationship a bit further: which one of them is dominant and to which extent do they overlap? McCloud talks of word specific combinations, where the pictures are merely used to illustrate the textually presented narrative – typical of comic book adaptations of classic novels, for example – and, accordingly, of picture specific combinations, where pictures do most of the storytelling and sparse textual additions function mostly as a "soundtrack". As for overlapping, the range goes from fully overlapping – McCloud's duo-specific combinations – to no overlapping at all – McCloud's parallel combinations. (McCloud 1994, 153–154). The former is typical of the over-redundant storytelling technique of children's comics, where the pictures and words are used to convey approximately the same message. The most common example of the latter are scenes where text boxes are imposed on images that are often ironically or metaphorically – but not exactly – related to them. This is often used for transitions, where the pictures are already establishing the next scene in a new setting while the dialogue of the former scene is left to "echo" in the text boxes. Moore and Gibbons employ this effect in abundance in *Watchmen*, when weaving the analogous sub-story of *The Black Freighter* into the main storyline.

The vast majority of comic panels, however, inhabit the middle ground of the said domination and overlapping scales. In McCloud's terms, these balanced, interdependent word–image relationships can be classified to additive and interdependent combinations. As the name suggests, additive relationship is that of elaboration or amplification: the words or the pictures could manage alone, but are able to convey wider or deeper meaning together. Interdependent combinations, on the other hand, require both to make sense. In such cases, something crucial is told and something equally crucial is shown. (McCloud 1994, 154–155.) As Juha Herkman remarks, though, the line between the two categories is somewhat blurred (1998, 58). Then again, other theorists have opted for similar divisions. According to Roland Barthes, words can "anchor" the meanings of pictures or form the message in collaboration with them (Herkman 1998, 53). This anchoring relationship is very similar to McCloud's additive combination – albeit "anchoring" seems a bit more dominant and definitive an act than "elaborating" – while the Barthes' collaborative relationships and McCloud's interdependent combinations are essentially the same thing.

How does this all relate to characters in comics? Daniel Clowes, one of America's most acclaimed creators of alternative comics, includes the following discussion of word–image dynamics in his "comic-strip novel", *Ice Haven* (2001):

> Are comics a valid form of expression? The jury's still out, I'm afraid. There exists for some an uncomfortable impurity in the combination of two forms of picture-writing (i.e. pictographic cartoon symbols vs. the letter shapes that form 'words') while to others it's not that big a deal. Alleged awkwardness aside, perhaps in that schism lies the underpinning of what gives 'comics' its endurance as a vital form: while prose tends toward pure 'interiority', coming to life in the reader's mind, and cinema gravitates toward the 'exteriority' of experiential spectacle, perhaps 'comics', in its embrace of both the interiority of written word and the physicality of image, more closely replicates the true nature of human consciousness and the struggle between private self-definition and corporeal 'reality'. (Clowes 2001, 4.)

To put it in simpler terms, Clowes implies that comics reserve its pictorial resources to the description of characters' outward, physical features while words are the best, most accurate means of reaching into their inner worlds. The division seems, indeed, quite reasonable in light of traditional pictorial and textual media: through generations, art has depicted the outer beauty of the world while literature has definitely focused on such invisible, cognition-based things as thoughts, morals, emotions and identities. Considering how meshed text and images are in comics, though, it is doubtful they constrain themselves to such clear-cut roles.

Also, as discussed in chapter 2.3, while outward and inward features of the character are, indeed, somewhat separate systems by human analogy, they are, again, by human analogy, closely connected. That is, many outward signs function as signals or indexes of what is happening on the inside, while all perception of the outside world is necessarily filtered through cognitions. One could also compare Clowes' (or, to be more exact, his character's) claims to Rimmon-Kenan's notions about direct and indirect characterization. It seems Clowes is mostly taking into account the former: pictures are, indeed, perfect for giving explicit information on a character's appearance while direct information on personality traits can only be conveyed in words. Of course, some facial expressions can covey moods so clearly it requires minimal amount of deduction on the reader's part. Correspondingly, it is always possible to say something about a character's physical state in words, but this is often, reasonably so, regarded redundant in comics. So, direct description of outward features can be attributed mostly to pictures, while inwardness would be impossible to depict very elaborately without words. Indirect characterization, however, can – and often does – go against this pattern. In addition, some devices of indirect characterization, such as analogies, may well be based on both textual and pictorial data.

Thus, the differences of characterization techniques between literature and comics are mostly semiotic, not semantic. Literature has to convey both outwardness and inwardness of character in just one sign system, language, while comics have two, pictures and language. Thus, comic artists do have the option to distribute the work, for example, in the way Clowes suggests – or some other way. The textual and pictorial content of a comic can, for example, go to entirely different directions stylistically and still produce a coherent character. Indeed, as mentioned above, the incongruity of the two systems is a viable way of producing depth, irony and humor in characters or entire narratives. Of course, text and picture content could as well be kept congruous to create clear, memorable characters for either realistic or caricaturistic effect.

The multitude of possibilities can easily be illustrated through the different word and image combinations described above. We have already noted that montage-like combinations are good for mimicking complex cognitions, such as dreams, but what of other combinations? Clearly, duo-specific combinations have quite little to offer in terms of complex characterization. Rather, they work when some point about a character really has to be emphasized. Word-specific and picture-specific combinations, on the other hand, tend to keep in line with Clowes' supposition. Picture specific combinations can be used to give plenty of information on the appearances, surroundings and even actions of characters, while

necessarily leaving their thoughts quite mysterious. Correspondingly, word specific combination usually refers to frames with plenty of monologue – interior or otherwise – long dialogues or large blocks of psycho-narration. In other words, such combinations can be used to plumb the minds of characters – but not necessarily. Big chunks of text might just as well be dedicated to the extrapolation of atmosphere or context, especially when the art is very simplistic or focused on details. Alan Moore's *From Hell* (1991–1996) is an example of this: it combines sketchy, almost impressionistic line-art with abundant textual elements, even footnotes, that are laden with historical and atmospheric details.

Needless to say, the less room there is for one or the other of the comics' sign systems, the fewer are the possibilities for contradicting them. On the other hand, letting one of the systems handle the storytelling, leaves the other free for experimenting (McCloud 1994 157–159). Clear picture-telling can allow, for example, wilder, stream-of-consciousness-style interior monologue, while leaving the plot to the words allows much more expressionistic art and makes following a limited first-person view much easier. Both techniques could well enhance the reader's identification with the character.

Parallel combinations, of course, create some conflict between words and images by definition. They are great for relating different characters and situations to each other, in other words, for creating analogies. The constant, transitional overlappings between the main and sub-stories of *Watchmen,* for example, invite the reader to compare the main characters of the story to the anti-hero of *The Black Freighter* (see ch. 4.2). Similarly, in the third chapter of *Watchmen*, where two scenes – one with Dr. Manhattan giving an interview on TV and the other with Nite Owl and Silk Spectre fighting thugs on an alley – overlap regularly with the aid of text boxes (Image 6). Pictures of one scene are complimented with text boxes "echoing" the dialogue of the other, paralleling scene. These echoes, of course, can seem fitting to the scene to which they do not belong as well, almost like parodies of the lines that the characters in that scene *could* utter, but do not. In short, the text boxes imply the disnarrated area of the characters. (Moore & Gibbons 1986–87, chapter III, 10–14.)

As for the balanced combinations, both additive and interdependent assortments allow, first and foremost, very mimetic depiction of human communication. In real life, people do not explicate everything in words, but point at things, include gestures and such extratextual signals as use of space. Like film, comics can capture the entirety of a character's verbal and non-verbal communication, whereas literature has to pick what to include and what to exclude. Comics *can* do the same, by framing something out, but it does not have to. Also, while it cannot replicate continuous movement or speed the same way film can, it can

enhance the non-verbal signals by picking and depicting the key postures and facial expressions – no meaningless intermediary movements to water the message down (Eisner 1985, 103–106). At its best, a comic can explain things like a real person, but without the constraints of reality, time or space – a point well illustrated by Scott McCloud's comics on comics.

In addition to mimicking reality most effectively, interdependent combinations can be used for several artistic effects. By contradicting the words with the images, it is possible to depict, for example, situational humor or lying in interesting ways. Thought bubbles are especially useful here, because they reveal to us the characters' real thoughts, whatever their outward reactions, depicted by images and speech bubbles, might be. McCloud presents great, simple examples of such cases in *Understanding Comics* (1994, 155). Such combinations can also be used – even quite suddenly – to reveal an unreliable narrator: words tell what the narrator wants to tell while pictures reveal the actual truth, or vice versa. This type of effect is used in, for example, the sixth chapter of *Watchmen*, where Rorschach is interviewed by a therapist: Rorschach answers to the inkblot test the way he supposes a sane, content person would, while the reader is shown – through full-blown flashbacks – what he really sees. (Moore & Gibbons 1986–87, ch. VI.) Moore and Gibbons could also have presented the contradictions in single frames for a subtler effect (as in Image 7).

Of course, the pictorial and textual styles and contents of each frame, scene or comic could be varied quite endlessly for any number of effects, some of which, one should think, are still undiscovered. The textual variety has already been widely researched in literary studies and briefly discussed in the second chapter of this thesis. Thus, what still requires a closer look is the pictorial side of the story.

3.2.2 Show and "Show": Abstraction Levels

As we have already found, there can be no comics without pictures. Where words take the upper hand, we are usually talking about something other than comics altogether: illustrated texts or maybe *carmina figurata*, poems that are shaped to look like pictures. It also makes sense to claim that comics are read from frame to frame, and frames, in their turn, are read as pictures that include texts, rather than vice versa. What is more, in comics, everything from voice to time is incorporated onto the picture plane, that is, everything and anything a comic book artist wants to express, he or she must convey visually, through two-dimensional,

limited spaces – regardless of how those things would be perceived and conceived in real life. Characterization illustrates the problem perfectly: how does one render the entire sphere of human experience on paper? Comics have most literary means at its disposal, of course, and it can go beyond those, by the way of several pictorial devices, some of which it shares with other visual arts, but some of which are quite unique to it. Indeed, different kinds of more or less conventionalized pictorial modes and effects compose an important part of comics' expressive potential. Even though everything is conveyed through the same technology – mute, unmoving images – not everything on a comic book page is meant to be understood as literally, as subjectively or as happening in one and the same moment or degree of reality. What the reader sees is never exactly the same as what the characters see, and distinguishing the "real", "physical" pictorial content from the abstract or purely artistic effects is what is often referred to as the "grammar of comics" (Herkman 1998, 67–68). This grammar is usually learned spontaneously, through reading of different kinds of comics, but there are several theories that might help one to approach the issue a bit more analytically.

Many of these theories are, understandably, created by semioticians, and one of the simplest and, thus, most applicable ones is that of Charles S. Peirce's. His theory is based on the notion that signs – any meaningful units we use for communication – are perceived to have different types of relationships with their referents. Iconic relationships are based on visual resemblance, indexical relationships on continuity and symbolic relationships on convention. In other words, there are three kinds of sings. Icons, such as photographs or "realistic" paintings, aim to represent the appearances of their referents "directly", so that the onlookers could recognize them immediately, top-down, by relying on their senses rather than their knowledge or deduction. Symbols, on the other hand, are what Peirce calls traditional, Saussurean signs, signs whose referential relationships are based on arbitrary conventions. Obviously, pictorial content of comics is mostly iconic while textual content is bound to be symbolic. (Herkman 1998, 64–65.)

In addition, the repetitive nature of comics' visual content has the tendency to abstract iconic signs into symbols. During the couple of centuries of their steady existence, comics have created an entire arsenal of simple expressive and emotive imagery that balances between iconic and symbolic: a saw as a signal of sleeping, little birds, stars or bells representing unconsciousness, daggers and skulls replacing curse words and so on. Lines picturing movement are also more of a convention than something true to actual visual perception. As already mentioned above, many kinds of simple, visually distinct features or even entire characters can come to symbolize something that is not immediately linked to

them outside the world of a specific comic or comics in general. For example, *ahoge* or "idiot hair", which refers to a single strand of hair sticking out of a manga character's head either perpetually or momentarily, is used as a visual sign of the character's frivolous nature and, possibly, low level of intelligence. On the other hand, characters like Moominmamma, Superman or Charlie Brown have become synonymous with the kind of roles or personalities they manifest. Thus, as Peirce suggested, symbols are often born of icons and indexes (Mikkonen 2005, 31).

Speaking of indexes, they rely on automatic associations based on everyday experiences: they stand for the reasons or causes, of which they are the results or consequences. The most clichéd example is smoke as the indexical sign of fire, but there is no shortage of more interesting examples in comics. (Herkman 1998, 64–65.) After all, the entire medium is based on the human tendency to perceive visual juxtaposition as a sign of causal or temporal continuity. In other words, each comic book frame is interpreted as an indexical sign of the preceding frame or frames (Herkman 1998, 65). Many of comics' special effects are also based on continuity: floating hearts above comic book characters' heads point towards the amorous feelings they are experiencing, sound effects result from whatever action caused them and even speech bubbles can be read as indexes of speech (Herkman 1998, 66). The little tails attached to each bubble are, in fact, explicit visual signs of their continuous nature, that is, of their bonds to the speaking character. All in all, indexes seem to be closely related to gestalt psychology.

Scott McCloud also talks about mimetically and conventionally read signs, although he conceives them a bit more flexibly, as the two ends of one long scale of abstraction. Also, he is not exactly a semiotician but a comic book artist, drawing his theory directly from and applying it solely to comics. Sadly, McCloud's use of the term 'icon' is much more confusing than Peirce's: he uses it to "mean any image used to represent a person, place, thing or idea", thus including the alphabet and other Saussurean sign systems in the mix (1994, 27). Still, underneath the lacking terminology, he expands on some of the Peirce's core ideas: as McCloud puts it, some signs are understood "instantaneously", even without formal education, while other signs require decoding. This translates into an opposition between received and perceived information – or, in Peirce's terms, between iconic and symbolic images. However, while Peirce sees iconic and symbolic as mutually exclusive categories, McCloud considers them as variables, extremes that leave plenty of much used middle ground between them. (McCloud 1994, 49). As the examples illustrating Peirce's theory above prove, he is smart to do so: if icons and indexes have the ability to evolve into symbols, their

boundaries cannot possibly be very clear-cut. Funnily enough, the relationship between the two theories are analogous to the differences of certain character theories described in chapter 2, and here, too, the flexibility of scales seems more advantageous than heuristic categorizing.

In short, Scott McCloud makes the gesture of laying out all the unquantifiable degrees of abstraction, everything between "reality" and pure "language", and asks comic book artists and other sign-makers to explore. He does not stop there, however. With his masterful sense of spatiality, which working with comics has undoubtedly developed, he adds a third variable into the mix, stretching the two-dimensional scale into a triangle. This third variable is not related to Peirce's indexes – McCloud does not cover the topic of indexical or metonymical signs at all – but to the questions of design and artificiality inherent in all works of art. In other words, this third corner of the triangle stands for another type of abstraction, gradual dissociation from representation and referentiality, "the realm of the art object, the picture plane, where shapes, lines and colors can be themselves and not pretend otherwise" (McCloud 1994, 51).

McCloud calls this third dimension "the picture plane", which is a less than excellent choice considering that this third dimension ought to be congruous with language as well in order for the entire theory to make sense. Unless, of course, "language" is understood as material pieces of writing here, rather than as an abstract system of relations and differences. This seems to be the case, in fact, because in his chart of examples, McCloud places texts with increasing level of design and sense of "physical" substance, such as synaesthetically rendered sound effects, closer to the picture plane end of the triangle (1994, 53). He does not actually explain this side of his triangle, though. Naturally, language has a number of ties to pictoriality as well, from ekphrasis to all sorts of figurative expressions, but this is not exactly what McCloud means with "the picture plane". Some avant-garde branches of concrete or metatextual poetry, texts that underline their own materiality, might come closer to the mark as they "want" to be viewed as objects, not ideas.

Alternately, the link between language and the picture plane could be understood through design and artistry. McCloud hints towards this direction, but does not unravel the question completely: if every "meaningless" line – that is, a line that has no equivalent in the referent it aims to represent, a line that is there just because it looks good or compelling – can be read as a departure towards the picture plane, could there not be words or even whole speech acts that are not really "necessary" but just included for an artistic flavor (McCloud 1994, 51)? Thus, McCloud's term "the picture plane" would probably be more serviceable if it was renamed "design", "aesthetic" or suchlike. This would bring the attention

towards the personal and situational choices the artist makes during the creative process and put less stress on the notion McCloud makes of "the art object". Perceiving an artwork or a single feature of artwork quite necessarily involves noting its materiality. If "the picture plane" stands for such materiality and if McCloud only treats "language" as concrete, written texts, then the language side of corner would, in fact, never leave the picture plane at all.

One could quibble over the naming of the other two corners as well. As we have already discovered, it is a bit unclear what McCloud means by "language". As for "reality", McCloud is right to frame it with quotation marks – the said corner is, after all, more closely associated with the conventions or realism rather than actual reality itself.

Because of his generous inclusion of examples, though, it is easy enough to understand what McCloud means by each of his scales: art as an artifact, art as references to ideas and art as simulation of our (visual) perception of reality. The latter two correspond, indeed, quite neatly to Peirce's symbols and icons while the first has the potential of explaining the little "artistic extra" that has no representational, mimetic value and thus, cannot be judged by its relationship to its referent at all.

While Peirce's semiotic theory is more closely concerned with communication, on what our encoding and decoding of different types of signs is based, McCloud's viewpoint is perhaps a more artistic one. His main concern seems to be how comics could be used to express something meaningful about the world we live in, or how to represent and speak to real human beings through such medium. Consequently, questions of mimesis become central to his theory and, as he seems to acknowledge, comics can, in fact, connect to reality on several levels of abstraction. It is not always necessary – or even wise – to go the "reality" tip of McCloud's triagram, because "realism" is not just a question of near-photographic picture content. Rather, it is a question of perception: when a comic's representation of the world is close to what the reader believes the world to be, it is considered realistic (Herkman 1998, 32). While some extremely picture-oriented readers might, indeed, dismiss comics whose artwork does not follow all the rules of perspective or anatomy expertly, for others, the simplifications comic art makes have proven more valuable than photorealism. This is because simplified pictures leave more room for readers' own imagination: they can add their own details according to their own world-views, that is, make the comics realistic to *them*. In fact, the more simplified a picture is, the more it resembles a prototype, not a specific entity but a concept that can encompass a wide range of different instances. In short, cartoonish, unrealistically *drawn* comics have the potential to be *perceived* as realistic by more people than their more minutely rendered relatives.

McCloud's theory on identification draws on the same idea. When the face of a comic book character is left so blank it could be anybody, it just might become a vessel to anybody who reads the comic. It becomes an "empty shell" that is ready to assume the reader's identity and allow "travel in another realm", making entire experience of reading a comic book extremely immersive and "realistic". (McCloud 1994, 36.) According to McCloud, this *masking effect* has been used especially skillfully and extensively in Japanese manga, where the iconic, simple looks of the characters are often reinforced by detailed, realistic background art (1994, 43–44). What he does not mention, is that the identification process is further reasserted by the clear division of target audiences: the protagonists of *shōnen* comics, aimed at young boys, tend to be young boys while the protagonists of *shōjo* comics, aimed at young girls, tend to be young girls and so on. Obviously, it is easier for little girls to identify with other little girls than grown, robust men.

The value of McCloud's identification theory lies in the fact that this phenomenon is fairly unique to comics. A cartoon character has universality that characters in most other media can never achieve. In films, the characters keep reminding us about the actors who personate them; they stand for "the other", not for ourselves. Similarly, in literature, the names of characters – being important tools for character coherence – often get in the way and remind us of the "otherness" of the characters. This, like many other characterization practices have been successfully subverted by many modern and postmodern writers, though. One of such character-blurring techniques is second-person narration, employed by writers like Jay McInerney or Chuck Palahniuk, and another is plain anonymity, which seems to be especially common for first-person narrator-protagonists, as in Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1931–1927) or in many of Haruki Murakami's novels. Logically speaking, narrative techniques like these should have similar immersive effect as cartoonish comic book characters, especially if the "you" or "I" is not too elaborately defined or identified by any other means either. After all, as John Fiske has pointed out, realism is as much dependent on the content as it is on the form (Herkman 1998, 37).

This duality of form and content is something that should not be forgotten in regard of comics either: simple art does not, by no means, warrant a simple story. In fact, considering the flexibility and immersion provided by simple drawing styles, they can be powerful allies to complex, high-class and even documentary stories. Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000), Joann Sfar's *The Rabbi's Cat* (2002–) and Guy Delisle's travel memoirs would be apt examples here. On the same note, cartoonish characters, such as those in aforementioned examples, are not necessarily flat. Even such over-simplified strip

comic protagonists as Lise Myhre's Nemi tend to have such particular personalities that they can be called, if not necessarily round and evolving, at least something close to Harvey's cards. While this may not hinder the initial masking effect it will at least dilute the experience of identification over the reading process. In other words, it is not possible to have everything, at least not in the same package: one can either embrace flat comic book characters for the avatar-like functions they serve or one can acknowledge and appreciate the comics' ability to produce characters with plenty of content and "life experience". No matter how simple a mask the complex character carries, it will eventually reveal its identity, when the kind of "vacuum" McCloud talks about will disappear – at least to some extent.

Maybe the true richness of comics ultimately lies in its superb ability to produce both kinds of characters. Because it has always been a part of pop culture and because its drawing styles have flirted with cartoon and caricature alike, it is no wonder that comics have often been considered a simplifying as much as an exaggerating art form (Herkman 1998, 35). As it has never been restrained by the tastes and trends of more prestigious arts, it has been able to strive towards different kinds of extremes, as in the underground comix movement of 1970s. Also, as the entire medium has long been synonymous with humorous newspaper strips, there has been an enormous demand for developing comical effects for comics. One of the most common devices has proven to be exaggeration, both on the level of drawing – as in caricatures of famous people – and on the level of writing – as in current, political satire comics or in *Donald Duck* type of humor and characterization. One can think, for example, of Uncle Scrooge's enormous Money Bin or Gladstone Gander's ridiculously good luck. Exaggeration is definitely not uncommon in superhero comics either, considering the superhuman abilities of the heroes and the undiagnoseable derangements of the villains. On the other hand, comics' status as children's culture – or even folk culture – has directed it towards minimalism and efficiency in both art and writing. Look at the clean, sleek looks of almost any superhero, Disney character or strip comic protagonist or consider the repetitive, schematic storylines of these genres: the hero must save a friend or a love interest from a villain, but must make some kind of a sacrifice to accomplish the task; the hero breaks a valuable object or relationship and has to endure ordeals to fix it; a new character appears and changes the dynamics of the previous character cast and so on.

Comics have also been a strongly commercialized medium throughout the past century and what sells has often been a deciding factor in what kind of comics have got made. Exaggerations are as eye-catching as simple stories with simple characters and approachable art are identifiable to vast majorities, that is, the maximal number of potential buyers. What is

more, bestseller ideas, such as comics with superheroes, anthropomorphic animals or globetrotting adventurers, have shamelessly been copied and multiplied into full-blown genres.

As a result of such simplifying and intensifying dynamics, the current comic book world is inhabited by a wide range of types, stereotypes or so-called stock characters, some of which are steady enough to be considered as symbolic, conventional parts of comic book vocabulary as speech bubbles. From tragic heroes (Batman, Punisher, Daredevil) and trusty, comical sidekicks (Robin, Captain Haddock, Obelix) to wise, old mentors (Professor Xavier, Master Splinter, Jolly Jumper), contrastive archenemies (Sabertooth, Venom, The Joker) and characters who constantly flicker between friend and foe (Catwoman, Otto Octavius, Rayek in Wendy Pini's *ElfQuest*) most comic book characters have plenty of kindred spirits inside the medium or elsewhere in pop culture.

Some archetypes have formed through the medium's internal developments. For example, Alan Moore's *Watchmen* was created as an ironic commentary on the black-and-white morals and unrealistically stable identities of traditional superheroes. It explores in a more psychological and pessimistic manner why someone would really want to take up masked crusading and what would result from it: *Watchmen* touches on, for example, traumatic life experiences as a cause of unnaturally strong sense of justice, the god-complexes superior abilities might produce, the fetishist appeal of the costumes and the feelings of alienation truly superhuman beings would probably experience. Together with Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1985–86) and Moore's *V for Vendetta* (1982–89), which also complicate the morals of masked heroes, *Watchmen* launched an entire wave of antiheroes, and darker, more serious re-evaluations of such characters as Batman live on today in both print and film. On the other hand, many of these archetypes have their roots in the very dawn of Western culture: Greek drama fostered tragic heroes and the even the term 'mentor' originated form Homer's *Odyssey*.

Due to its differing cultural heritage, manga has its own, vast stock character reserve. For example, the protagonists of *shōnen* comics tend to be kind-hearted young boys with some special ability: *Detective Conan* (1994–) has prodigal deductive skills, Edward Elric of *Fullmetal Alchemist* (2001–2010) has an ability to transmute matter and Azuma Kazuma of *Yakitate!! Japan* (2002–2007) just happens to have warmer-than-normal hands, which make him an excellent baker. The stereotype of magical girl or *mahō shōjo*, a young, cute girl with an ability to transform into a superhuman being, have even given birth to an

entire genre named after it – much like the superheroes have done in the United States.[10] Like superhero comics, magical girl comics are also based on the notion of double identity. Many other manga archetypes are also common enough to have established names. For example, *yandere* means an initially gentle character who turns abusive while *tsunderes* prove to have softer sides despite the harsh first impressions. These are not exactly cases of double identities, but also imply a character that is at least two-dimensional, despite the stereotypicality. More commonly used terms *bishōnen* and *bishōjo* are less interesting in that they only refer to appearances of a character: *bishōnen* simply means an attractive, often androgynous young man, and *bishōjo* is the corresponding term for female characters.

One reason for the enormous popularity of stereotypical characterization in comics is probably that typification has been part of the medium from the very beginning. Rodolphe Töpffer, who has often been regarded the father of early Western comics subscribed, at least in some degree, to phrenology (McCloud 2006, 124). In other words, he believed that people's appearances – the shape of their heads – correlated directly with their personalities. Many comics still seem to display some fidelity towards some pseudo-phrenological tradition, although caricaturistic art has probably had more weight in the matter than Rodolphe Töpffer: it is still quite easy to tell friendly cartoon characters from unfriendly ones simply by observing the shapes and positions of their eyes and eyebrows. Evil characters tend to manifest their evilness in several physical traits from dark clothing to sly-looking, elongated faces, noses, chins or fingers. Many Batman villains, such as Penguin or The Joker are great examples and Disney comics would offer even more exaggerated examples. In Japan, Osamu Tezuka, arguably the most influential manga artist who ever lived, also used very similar character types from story to story, despite his open-minded exploration of different genres. McCloud notes it is "as if [the archetypes he used] were actors in a repertory company taking on different roles". Peculiarly enough, Tezuka was especially set on certain types of protagonists, while his minor characters have more variation. (McCloud 2006, 123.) As theorists like Harvey would testify, it is more common for the protagonist to be round, lifelike and thus, unique.

Another reason for the stereotypes' triumphal procession is undoubtedly the sheer visuality of comics. The image content of comic books has little choice but to underline the physical appearance of characters and, as mentioned in chapter 2.3.1, physical features tend to carry stereotypes. Also, considering that caricaturization is one of comics' most

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[10] Popular titles of *mahō shōjo* include *Sailor Moon* (1991–1997) or *Cardcaptor Sakura* (1996–2000).

important traditions and devices, it is very tempting for the artists to make the looks of their characters as evocative as possible. McCloud and Will Eisner both encourage artists to build character appearances on easily graspable concepts, such as animals, elements or such everyday stereotypes as "nerdy" or "brutish" (McCloud 2006, 73). Since it is impossible to avoid the evocation of stereotypes in any visual media, some artists do not even attempt to avoid them but utilize them. If readers associate the appearances of characters with something in any case, it is possible to make the points of those associations overt, in which way the artist can claim more control over way the reader interprets the characters. As McCloud adds, this also enables matching a stereotypical look with a personality that is not commonly paired with it, thus shattering the reader's expectations and creating surprise, humor, irony, even self-conscious commentary on the medium, genre or the stereotype itself (2006, 73).

In short, stereotypical looks – as well as personalities – are used as part of the medium's unique language, as one more meaningful layer of its art and communication. After all, stereotypical characters have iconic, indexical as well as symbolic aspects. Like icons they stand for themselves, as individual characters that look certain way. Even if we are not familiar with the stereotype they represent, and especially so, we recognize and read their physique, clothes and the entire facade like we read any other character. On the indexical note, they have their said pseudo-phrenological features, details that we read as indicators or results of something else: if they have narrow eyes, they might be crafty or cruel and if they have strong but proportional chins they are probably determined, even heroic, and so on. Like symbols, they also stand for the entire, conventionalized stereotype they personify. So to speak, they carry their entire brotherhoods in their backs: we can relate them to the other instances of the stereotype and predict their movements. We recognize that they symbolize certain values and narrative functions and, as a result, are able to give deeper meanings to their actions. This way, the semiotic complexity of comics, the diversity of different symbols and icons they incorporate, seems to enable, if not encourage, the use stereotypes – they "fit in" as just another kind of signs.

Of course, it should be obvious by now that not all comic book characters are stereotypical at all, but there are plenty of round, unique protagonists around as well. For example, Morpheus of *The Sandman* and several characters of Hernandez Brothers' *Love and Rockets* (1982–1996) match the entire checklist from psychological depth and motivation to notable personal development. Also, the still trending wave of autobiographical work has introduced some extremely real and honest characters, including Marjane Satrapi's and Alison Bechdel's "comic book selves".

It is worth noting, though, that realistic comic book characters like these can also intersect different abstraction levels and sign classes, maybe not as such, but in terms of their self-expression. No matter how realistically a character might be depicted in art or writing in general, their moods and personalities are usually shown through different "special effects" from time to time. Scott McCloud talks about, for example, symbolic and exaggerated facial expressions as opposed to "realistic ones", adding that most comics artists incorporate all of them to their work, at least in some degree. Drawing and reading "realistic" facial expressions requires basic knowledge on facial muscles and non-verbal communication because they function as iconic signs: we understand a comic book character to be scared, because he or she resembles a scared human being with his or her widened eyes and tense jaw muscles. Exaggerated expressions require less finesse, because they use the same signs as realistic expression, albeit in an amplified form. As no eyes of a real individual noticeably bulge out, regardless of how scared they are, exaggerated facial expressions are, however, less iconic. They require recognizing not only the expression but the convention of exaggeration through which the expression is filtered. Thus, they glide towards symbolic. Symbolic expressions, on the other hand, are not meant to resemble real human emotion in an iconic way at all, but as the name suggests, in a symbolic way. (McCloud 2006, 95–96.) Expressions like this – sweat drops, halos, horns, hearts, stars, bubbles, smoke and all the other sorts of signs floating about characters' heads – only become intelligible through the understanding of convention and the metaphor behind it. Such effects still have an iconic quality as the readers still recognize them as halos, hearts and so on, but their function has become symbolic. On the other hand, they can be regarded as indexes, because they stand as kind of substitutes or underscores for the real emotional expressions they replace. They allow even faceless stick figures to express emotion.

At the other extreme, even the most realistically rendered characters tend to reserve to such indexical effects, if nothing else, at least speech and thought bubbles, "desperation devices" that, regardless of their almost equal status in all manner of comics, have nothing to do with realism. On the contrary, speech bubbles are so obtrusively, so overtly indexical that superimposing one on any photograph is enough to change that photo's level of abstraction, to push it over the edge of illusory "reality" and into the world of more universal signs or meanings. This insertion of time dimension and symbolic language into a still, spatially and iconically organized picture also invites the onlooker to perceive the picture's happenings and implications more closely: what has happened, what will happen and why?

A speech bubble's ability to transform or reinvent pictures of all abstraction levels has been thoroughly explored in several picture blogs of the Internet: many memes, web-comics and other internet jokes are created by juxtaposing old, familiar photos, drawings or screen capture images with new, surprising textual elements. Popular pages like Comixed, Rage Comics or Dinosaur Comics are cases in point, while Internet-based, now printed *Garfield Minus Garfield* (2008) by Dan Walsh works contrarily. By digitally removing Garfield from Jim Davis' original strips, most of the dialogue is eliminated and Jon Arbuckle is left to goof and mope meaninglessly and indefinitely in empty, timeless frames. Of course, such transformations of story content also transform the characters. For example, Jim Davis seems to have intended Jon Arbuckle as a goofy, comical figure but, strangely, without Garfield he seems anything but. Conversely, the popularity of screen caption based sites like Comixed seems to be based on the way they parody the characters and situations in serious films or news images. All in all, it is fair to say that what such internet comics lack in quality they make up in popularity – even though internet memes are crude one-frame installations as often as they are sequential or witty, they invariably habituate vast audiences into reading interdependent combinations of words and images. [11]

Ironically, even though speech – usually a natural, mimetic part of human interaction and characterization – is depicted completely unrealistically – symbolically – in comic books, the contents of speech bubbles, texts that ought to be purely symbolic, often carry some indexical nuances as well. In other words, even though McCloud claims that texts inhabit the very symbolic end of his abstraction scale, meaning that their meaning is "fixed regardless of how they're rendered", comics often make use of different lettering styles and sizes to add emotion and meaning. Especially bold lettering as an index of syntactic stress or louder voice is widely used from genre to genre – McCloud uses it himself. An endless number of more exotic lettering effects are, of course available as well and are often complimented by the shape and color of the speech bubble. *The Sandman* is a true treasure chest of examples here: when a character is intoxicated, the font tends to fluctuate between small and capital letters, personification of order speaks in equal-sized, cubical letters, ravens in extremely gruff, unpolished letters, Egyptian gods in angular letters that resemble

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[11] Interestingly, Rage Comics has also started to establish new, iconic and symbolic facial expressions that lack from McCloud's table of basic emotions (2006, 83). Some of these, for example the face that has become a symbol of extreme frustration in internet language, derive from manga, while others, for example the one expressing reluctant but sincere respect and recognition, have been digitally abstracted from photographs. To be more exact, the former, "Y U No" guy is taken from Hiroya Oku's *Gantz* (2000–) while the latter, "Not bad" face was edited from a photograph of Barack Obama.

cuneiform and so on. Enki Bilal takes a step further in his *Nikopol* trilogy (1980–1992) by making his Egyptian gods think in hieroglyphs.

Conversely, pictures, which usually function iconically, can acquire unexpected symbolic qualities in comics. That symbolic expressions and other effects are just the tip of the iceberg becomes obvious when someone accustomed to Western comics attempts to read Japanese manga or vice versa. There is an entire jungle of effects that, due to their visuality, appear concrete but are really symbolic, indexical or metaphorical expressions for something else entirely – usually, characters' emotions. It is not uncommon for the entire backgrounds change according to the characters' emotions or auras: angry characters might seem to be emitting flames or lightning while dreamy or flirtatious ones are surrounded by flowers and sparkle. McCloud calls these "expressionistic backgrounds", adding that some of them – really aggressive, smooth or dizzying lines or shapes – not only give the reader insight to the characters' minds but trigger almost physiological responses, thus adding to identification and involvement with the characters (1994, 132–133).

Manga characters themselves are also prone to all sorts of transformations that, if understood iconically, might seem fantastical but are, in fact, meant to be read symbolically, as visual expressions of the characters' thoughts, feelings and relations to one another. Especially in comical manga, characters might unexpectedly appear to be wearing different clothes or transform into anthropomorphic objects or animals. Takashi Hashiguchi's *Yakitate!! Japan* (2002–2007) plays with such effects especially abundantly: when the characters eat something delicious they "illustrate" their taste sensations through craziest of actions and transformations. Intensely melon flavored bread makes the taster to bend into the shape of a melon, a *haniwa* shaped bread makes the taster turn into a *haniwa* and so on. This is not because the breads would have some magical qualities – their ingredients and preparation processes are actually quite realistically explained. Thus, the reactions are not "real" in every sense of the word and the series is not regarded as fantasy, even though the other characters do perceive the transformations and promptly comment on them. They are merely a very cartoony way of communication and self-expression, realized through a mix of iconic and symbolic layers of meaning. To complicate the matter further, some reactions in the series are based on quite elaborate puns, which takes the spontaneity out of the equation and turns those transformations into intentional commentary of the expressive device itself. In one volume of the series, one of the main characters instructs a newly appeared minor character on how to understand the reactions properly: seeing "the true nature of things" is only possible if one uses the mind's eye ("shingan"), in other words, interprets the "actual"

gestures in a metaphoric way (vol. 18, ch. 155). The readers are, of course, only shown the metaphoric "end product".

Even more common is the momentary assumption of the so-called *chibi* form. Chibis are basically tiny, super-deformed versions of the characters themselves, which, in addition to adding visual interest and cuteness, are usually used for showing the characters' most extreme emotions (Kjær 2008, 30). This is because exaggerated and symbolic expressions are usually much more congruous with the extreme visual simplicity of the chibis than with the idealized, "real" appearances of the characters.

Of course, the vocabulary of symbolic facial expressions and other "comic book effects" is different in manga as well. Sudden shocks might cause manga characters to grow spikes while embarrassment or puzzlement may conjure forth the aforementioned *ahoge* hair. Anger is often expressed by sharp teeth, mykomia, little steam clouds and so forth. Many of the effects can also be added to the speech bubbles, regardless of the fact that speech bubbles have no veins which would be able to throb. This proves that such effects function as Peircean symbols, rather than icons.

Another, perfect proof of this symbolic quality is the difficulty Westerners might have in interpreting the expressive vocabulary originated in manga. Unlike, for example, realistic (iconic) renderings of expressions, which are interpreted instinctively worldwide, signs like these are based on convention, and learning the conventions is a precondition for understanding the minds of manga characters. The gap between Western and Japanese "comic book grammar" is, however expected to close in near future. Many of manga's expressive effects are being adopted by more and more Western artists as comic book culture – along with everything else in the 21st century – becomes more and more global (McCloud 2006, 222). Hopefully, this will allow the Western and Asian stereotypes and characterization techniques to merge into something greater than their sum.

The way these effects from speech bubbles to expressive backgrounds make invisible visible – that is, refer to abstract ideas through the concreteness of visuality – make it quite impossible to distinguish between the internal and external traits of characters. If the internal and external qualities of literary characters are somewhat meshed with each other, as discovered in chapter 2.3, the same holds true, even to a greater degree, for comic book characters. As has already been discussed, it might initially seem that comic book characters should be somewhat more Cartesian by nature, seeing that they are constructed by both language and images, whereas the entirety of literary characters is constructed by verbal means alone. Comics and, consequently, comic book characters are, however, much more

complex than that. It seems to be the nature of comics to blur different semiotic classes into one another: language and other symbolic signs bear the same visuality as iconic signs while many of the images that seem iconic are actually quite abstract or at least extremely conventionalized in meaning. Both Peirce and McCloud also agree, that there is something beyond the iconic–symbolic opposition. Peirce has observed that some signs point "next to" themselves, so that they are interpreted through some kind of metonymy, continuity or causality. On the contrary, McCloud talks about the substance signs have in themselves – they are there for our visual pleasure, regardless whether they represent or refer to something or not. All these signs and mixtures of signs intersect in complex comic book characters in one way or another while more stereotypical ones can usually be understood as signs in themselves.

3.3 Beyond Pictures: Meaningful Absences

So far, we have considered how comics show and tell, but even with these two-fold narrative tactics, plenty is lost between the cracks; plenty does not get to be shown or told at all – often purposefully. While one part of comics theorists, such as R. C. Harvey, regard the word–image dynamics, which were discussed in the previous chapter, as the single most significant aspect of the medium, others, most notably Scott McCloud, consider comics, first and foremost, an art of absence. McCloud's affection and attention to the invisible aspects of comics is so strong he actually named his first and most famous theory book after it: *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1994). Mostly, this refers to what he himself calls closure. Whenever we only "observe the parts" but still "perceive a whole", whenever we have to complete the picture by relying on our past experience and deductive skills, closure takes place – and this is more often than one would initially imagine, in real life as well as in comics. As far as our senses are as "incomplete" as they are, "we depend on closure for our very survival". (McCloud 1994, 63.)

Comics are special in that they present the information gaps more overtly than other forms of art and communication: comics are made of fragments, panels that are linked together by nothing more than blank strips of paper and the reader's cognitions. Thus, gutters, as the blank spaces between the frames are often called, entail a great deal of mystery,

significance and reader involvement. It is where most of comics' movement, time flow and atmosphere take place, where the narrator is able to transport its audience across any extent of temporal and spatial distances. While frames are filled in by the comic book artist, the gutters are filled in by the reader – and the story is not complete without one or the other. (McCloud 1994, 68–69.)

The frame is often considered comics' basic unit but the gutter, as its negation and perpetual partner, so to speak, is no less important. The fabric of comic book is, however, full of all manners of holes, many of them not as manifest as gutters. The simplistic drawing styles, the framings and perspectives of the image content and the publicational hiatuses all give room to the reader's imagination. In fact, even the tension between the words and the images is based on the fact that they are never completely synonymous: there is always, necessarily, a gap between their meaning and that is exactly what makes their coexistence so dynamic and productive (Mikkonen 2005). Thus, the priorities of R.C. Harvey and Scott McCloud are not that incommensurate.

This chapter's priority is, nevertheless, to inspect the peculiar elements that readers are prompted to add to comics and their characters during the reading process. In chapter 2, some of the cognitive strategies readers can use to flesh out characters were already considered: Fokkema's codes, Rosch's prototypes and other kinds of schemata are all close akin to McCloud's closure. Since the basis of this kind of deduction is already covered, this chapter concentrates especially on the visual cues comics give for such processes. In the first subchapter the focus is on a more concrete level, how characters are represented through fragmentary and stylized image content, and in the second subchapter it seems justifiable to talk about implicit characterization techniques in general, that is, how characters are constructed through metaphor, metonymy and intertextuality. There the opposition of texts and images is not important, because both of them can be used figuratively and allusively.

3.3.1 Hole in the Heart: Gutters and Other Gaps

Just like works of any other art form, each comic is a result of an overwhelming number of inclusions and exclusions: what is important enough to be depicted or mentioned and what is not? Perhaps, there is something that cannot be depicted in this medium, in the given space or by the specific artist at all? It is never possible to include everything, and even if it was, making artistic choices is an important part of what makes art different from life – and

characters different from real people. They are in some way more and in some way less complete, designed. These choices of inclusion and exclusion underlie both the content and the narrative technique of each and every artwork, and even though the actual, material work of art only consists of the area of inclusion, shedding some light over its edges, to the area of exclusion, can hardly ever be avoided. From this follows that there are gaps on almost any imaginable level of comics and that these gaps are potentially charged with meaning. If the vastness of the phenomenon is not enough to make it worth considering, one can also note the important role all kinds of informational gaps play in the actual reading process. Since included strokes are already set by the artist, to match his or her vision, there is no room for the reader in them, only between them. Thus, it is in the area of exclusion where the interpretants, the reader's ideas of each character have to reside.

In literary theory, gaps have received a decent amount of scholarly attention. It is well known to all avid readers that texts can be used to guide the mind's eye to certain things, for example, by repetition, whereas other things are omitted for one reason or another. Some of these excluded aspects are simply uncreated, unimportant or uninteresting, but some are either so persistently avoided or play such a significant role in the whole of the narrative that the reader is secretly urged to find them from between the lines. Several researches of several disciplines have proved that this kind of cooperative meaning-making or interaction with the text produces exceptionally enjoyable reading experiences (Spolsky 2005, 193).

Generally, gaps in speech and verbal narration function quite similarly in comics as in literature. The most significant difference appears to be that in comics the amount of text is often limited by the sizes and shapes of the text boxes and speech bubbles. This means that comic book characters and narrators must either make their case in a more clear and concise manner than their literary counterparts or risk the clarity of their message. Generally, comic book creators have opted for the first alternative: characters of action driven comics, such as *Corto Maltese* or *Tintin*, do not waste much space for poetic expressions. Text boxes in such comics also tend to stick to bare facts like place names and dates. This results in the minimum of gaps with minimal textual content. As graphic novels have started to mature and strive for more mature audiences, writing has, however, developed towards livelier dialogue, complete with irony and implicit expressions. Actually, as far as dialogue is concerned, many comic book writers do not seem restricted by the spatial limits, because quick, short, imperfect chats are usually truer to life than lengthy speeches. What is more, writers like Joann Sfar or Tove Jansson have created very expressive, even philosophical characters and discussions with relatively sparse text. All this considered, it is, indeed, quite rare to find long, meandering

monologues in comics. Although, given enough frames, they are entirely plausible as well, as evidenced by Will Eisner's graphic adaptation of Hamlet's "To be or Not to be" soliloquy or, for example, Rorschach of *Watchmen* (Eisner 1985, 112–121). The same examples also prove that a greater of amount of text does not necessarily result into fewer information gaps: Tintin's communication is certainly clearer than that of Hamlet's.

Thus, it could be concluded that the number of gaps is not as much dependent on the given space as it is on the style of writing. Despite the restrictions of space – or, more likely, because of them – comics have tended towards very clear and unambiguous verbal narration. On the other hand, Scott McCloud's theory has reinforced the tradition for other reasons entirely: as mentioned earlier, he considers simple, immediately graspable language an ideal pair to the simplified, almost conceptual picture content, since these modes are closer together on the scale from perceived to received information (1994, 49). Indeed, the simple writing has probably partly resulted from the incomplete, often very stylized nature of the picture content, seeing as words can be used as the staples that keep the semiotic car crashes so characteristic of comics understandable. Consequently, stripping the textual content of a comic to its bare minimum would be a great strategy for activating the potential ambiguity of comics' picture content. For characterization, this would probably be harmful as a whole, since – as long as the reserve of iconographic expressive effects is still lacking – the depiction of characters' interiority is still very dependent on words. An almost mute character could, however, amplify the identification effect. It is easy to identify with a character who never says anything the reader would not say or agree with. In fact, mute characters were extremely common in comics' forefathers such as Lynd Ward and Frans Masereel's woodcut works or Max Ernst's *A Week of Kindness* (McCloud 1994, 18–19). There have also been some in popular strip comics: although Woodstock in *The Peanuts* or Odie in *Garfield* are not exactly mute, the reader is not able to comprehend their utterances. In graphic novels, however, they might be able to reach new dimensions still.

Of course, many inclusions and exclusions that are realized textually in literature occur on the pictorial level in comic books. As a writer must choose objects or parts of objects to depict, so must a comic book artist decide on framing. Setting the frame equals setting the focus. Thus, it is worth noting here that the most commonly used framing terms, which comics shares almost one-to-one with film, get their names and definitions from the characters: full shot includes an entire character, medium shot cuts him or her from the waist and so on. Needless to say that full and medium shots show the characters' postures and gestures well while close-ups and extreme close-ups are often concerned with facial

expressions. Panorama shot is the only commonly used framing type not focusing on characters, but it is still defined through them: unlike the other shots, it is not focusing on characters. So, it is not very surprising that, especially in Western comics, it is extremely rare to see a comic book frame that does not depict at least one character – devoting entire frames to non-human details is much more typical in manga (McCloud 2006, 216).

This, of course, suggests that characters are regarded extremely important in comics: they are not only placed in almost any frame, but usually to the central and front-most part of it. When this is paired with the differing drawing styles applied to characters and backgrounds – characters usually being more cartoony – gestalt psychology leaves us little choice but to concentrate on characters. They are not allowed to fall outside the panels, because they are what the stories are all about. Of course, close-ups and medium shots force the reader to resort to such basic closure strategies as Fokkema's codes or Rosch's prototypes – even if we do not see a character's legs in one frame, we still assume them to be attached to their upper bodies as normal. Usually such completions are quite unconscious and insignificant, but in case we have not been shown anything else of the character before, the artist engages the reader in "visual dialogue", as Will Eisner calls it. Drawing from our everyday experiences, we can assume that a character with a "fat head" has a "fat body". (Eisner 1985, 43.) Similarly, beautiful body implies a beautiful head, an old-fashioned hat suggests that the rest of the characters' clothes are old-fashioned as well and on. Of course, the artist is always free to use these clues to mislead and surprise the reader.

Such gags cannot be dragged on for entire graphic novels, though, and framings, very focused on the character as they are, tend to leave little characterizational gaps. If anything, they might concentrate on the character to the extent of neglecting their surroundings. From this follows that what is not so extensively shown – the storyworld – is easily interpreted through what is shown – the character. In consequence, characters might become instrumental in setting the atmosphere or creating a sense of the storyworld. As a matter of fact, many comic book characters do mirror the worlds they inhabit: Mike Mignola's Hellboy, a mythical beast summoned by Nazi occultists during the Second World War never visits a scene that is without myth, occult or history and the residents of Frank Miller's *Sin City* are just as scarred, gloomy and immoral as the city around them.

Besides focus and distance, framing is also affected by angle – effects like bird's or worm's eye view. Besides showing us new, perhaps significant sides and details about the characters, these effects also play a role in characterization and identification as such. It is common knowledge that someone shown from low angle tends to appear mighty or

intimidating and, conversely, when someone is shown from a high angle, they seem pitiful or insignificant. In other words, non-eye-level angles invite the reader to assume certain attitudes towards certain characters. To look at the issue from another point of view, however, angles, especially when exceptional, imply someone who sees from that angle as well. Thus, when the angles are altered according to the direction of the hero's gaze, that is, when the reader's and the hero's viewing angles coincide, identification with the hero is fortified as something the hero experiences is simulated to the reader. To put it more briefly, framing can let the reader inside the characters' minds, at least behind their shoulders, by showing what they see. On the other hand, as McCloud notes, purposeful use of high angles can also have an objectifying effect – the reader is reduced into a godly observer, who views the characters from above, instead of peeking over their shoulders or meeting them at eye-level (2006, 21). In sum, framing is about simulation. Different distances and angles position the reader in a very real way: within frames, we can only view the characters from where the images happen to show them.

Moving on to the contents of frames, it becomes evident that comic book creators have to make a lot of choices that film makers do not have to make, such as choice of moment. While film is able to show continuous movement, a comic book artist has to choose the key positions, postures, gestures and facial expressions to get the message through, to distil whole actions into frozen moments. Needless to say, the choice is especially crucial when the textual content is absent or lacking – images must patch the gaps left by words. Eisner finds that the "final stage" of a movement is usually the most significant one (1985, 104). Of course, as McCloud instructs, it is entirely possible to show any number of "empty" moments leading to the significant moments that propel the plot forward (2006, 12). After all, filmstrips are just like extremely slow comics, a series of still pictures – anything that can be shown in film can be shown in comics. The only difference is the illusion of movement: films' transitions from frame to frame are subliminal while comics' transitions are slow and conscious (McCloud 1994, 65). Thus, comic book creators are often advised to cut the intermittent frames – a rule that clearly favors plot over characters. From the plot's point of view, it is usually inconsequential whether characters briefly grimace, smirk or close their eyes during a single sword swing or dance move, but it would always, necessarily, be raw data for the reader's interpretation of the character.

Because current conventions in Western mainstream comics are such that no frames are "wasted", readers are accustomed to loading plenty of meaning in each frame. Thus, it would be extremely effective to include an occasional frame showing intermittent

stages of movement: following the convention, reader would try to decide the significance of such frame and – failing to see their contribution to plot – would probably find them crucial for characterization. On the other hand, readers are often capable of filling these gaps as they themselves see fitting for the character – whether the character blinks or pulls a face is already dependent on the reader's interpretant, not vice versa. In other words, the reader is able to "control" the movements and expressions that fall between the frames. This creates an especially intimate bond between the reader and the character.

Choosing the right moments to freeze is especially tricky in that it does not only test the comic book artist's instincts but also skill. While the artist might know exactly which facial expression he or she is looking for, this still leaves the matter of executing, bringing it on paper. In short, the drawing styles also tend to leave plenty of information gaps inside the frames – an issue that is closely intertwined with the different levels of semiotic abstraction discussed in the previous chapter. Cartoonish, stylized images ask for the reader's contribution to become understandable and life-like – providing that the reader wants to read the comic as a mimetic representation of the world, not as a literal depiction of a two-dimensional world inhabited by stick figures or wide-eyed, noseless manga-aliens, for instance. To put it simply, when the reader wants to read a stick figure – like those in the popular web comic *Cyanide and Happiness* – as if they were human beings, the reader has to "provide" them with everything from age and gender to nationality, social class and shape of the nose – unless the characters refer to such things in dialogue. In contrast, the realistic art of *The Sandman* illustrator Michael Zulli, for example, reads much like photographs of real people: the reader can perceive details like the characters' eye color, shape of chin or the fabric of their clothes quite effortlessly.

The straightforward conclusion here would be that the more stylized the art, the more gaps it leaves for the reader, but this is not always the case, especially not in the two extremes of visual abstraction depicted above. Realistic appearances challenge reader to fill them with matching interiorities. This is what we do with real people as well: the first impressions and assumptions – the prototypes – based on the abundant, predominantly visual raw data may later, gradually, be corrected, verified and complimented by more data.[12] In other words, while realistically drawn characters seem to leave less gaps than simplistically drawn ones, this only concerns the outward features, or in Fokkema's terms, the biological

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[12] It is interesting to note here, though, that Michael Zulli's beautiful, detailed artwork is most prominently featured in the *last* album of *The Sandman*. Earlier albums feature more stylized art, which means that the reader has to become acquainted with the characters "backwards": the readers are already familiar with the characters' personalities when they are shown such accurate renderings of their appearances.

and social codes of the character. By giving the reader more to work with, realistic exteriority actually creates gaps to the interiority, the psychological code. For example, if a character has an interesting-looking scar or tattoo, the reader is left to ponder about the story and significance behind it.

In the other extreme, in case of stick figures, the reader is either left to mold the character to his or her liking or, perhaps more often, led to ignore characterization altogether. *Cyanide and Happiness* barely has characters: apart from the shirts of different color, the figures look very similar. Also, they do not seem to have names or distinct personalities. It is even difficult to tell, if the green-shirted figure in this strip is the same character as the green-shirted figure in the next strip. In fact, it barely matters, because the characters are only used to play out the joke. All in all, stick figures are usually only seen in gag-based comic strips where characterization is very secondary – understandably, asking the reader to identify with a stick figure on any deeper level than "a fellow human-like creature" is a tall order. However, there are some exceptions to the rule: Icelandic comic artist, Hugleikur Dagsson is mostly known for his one-frame stick figure cartoons with extremely dark humor, but he has also published one album that tells a continuous story with his usual stick figure style. The characters of the story, called *Garðarshólmi* (2010), are very distinguishable, even interesting, despite their modest appearances. However, they do come across as stereotypes of a corrupt politician, a typical modern teenager and so on. But then, it is only appropriate, considering that many of the characters, such as Thor or Loki, are also mythical figures and thus, archetypes almost by definition.

Of course, most comic book characters land between these two extremes. That is, they look realistic enough to be recognized as themselves but cartoonish enough to be recognized as ourselves. For example, anyone can immediately recognize Tintin by his iconic tuft of hair, but his facial features are representative of pretty much any human being. In other words, comics can capture visually what literature often does verbally: what makes fictional characters so intriguing in the first place is that they are simultaneously us but not us, similar enough and different enough for comparison. The effect is only enabled by their certain "incompleteness". The gaps, any kinds of gaps, leave room for ourselves and stop the characters from becoming entirely complete and self-sufficient, entirely themselves, entirely "someone else". In comics, one way to create this "incompleteness" is by moving away from "the reality" on Scott McCloud's abstraction scale.

Of course, as already stressed for a number of times, nothing forces the textual content to move the scales along with the image content. We have already observed how

different the writing and the art of a comic can be in terms of realism – a true story told with journalistic accuracy can well be paired with extremely cartoony or maybe a surrealistic drawing style – but the visual and the verbal can be incongruous in any number of ways. For example, one could be serious while the other is humorous, one could be juvenile and innocent while the other is downright explicit or the relation could be entirely parallel, so that the two do not seem to have any logical connection, not style- or even content-wise. For instance, Chris Ware's peculiar childhood memoir, *I Guess* (1999) follows the conventional style of a memoir only in its textual bits: text boxes, speech bubbles and sound effects all flow into each other to form minute, realistic depictions of his memories. The extremely cartoonish picture content, on the other hand, depicts a stereotypical superhero fighting a stereotypical mad scientist. (Versaci 2007, 74–75.) As an example of less extreme mismatch, Mike Mignola's *Hellboy* pairs quite humorous dialogue with dark and edgy visuals.

Even more important than the endless options of incongruity, however, is the impossibility of complete congruity. Not even dual-specific combinations, not even with the sincerest of efforts by the greatest of artists can make a picture and a piece of writing entirely synonymous. It is impossible enough to translate one sentence from one language into another without even the slightest alteration of meaning, and intersemiotic translations, as Mikkonen calls them, are even more demanding. As each word and each picture are equivocal in themselves, it is impossible to make a meaning of two such units semantically identical. (Mikkonen, 2005, e.g. 326.) It is a different thing altogether to draw an ugly character and state that this character is ugly – they are different kinds of ugly. One of them probably contributes to the reader's perception of ugliness more forcefully than the other. Thus, comics always gives the reader two sides, even two versions of the character, the verbally constructed one and the visually constructed one. It is the reader's job to continuously reconcile these two and form a unified interpretant in the space between them. Comic artists often make the process as easy as possible – once again, even Scott McCloud recommends to keep drawing and writing quite close together on the abstraction scale – but what if it was not made as easy? Again, we stumble on a direction that is still somewhat unexplored, in theory and in practice.

Yet, the biggest, most radical and manifest gaps are left outside the frames – or rather, they *are* the outside of the frames. As unappreciative as it may seem, these little spaces between panels have been named *gutters* by the English-speaking comics industry. The most traditional form of the gutter is blank, black or white bar, but several other forms are possible as well. Especially in manga, it is rather common to use simple black lines or occasionally omit visible frames altogether. In the West, artists like Will Eisner and Tove Jansson have

also experimented with framing and, as a result, created gutters of several shapes and sizes. In her *Moomin* comics, Jansson occasionally disguises her gutters as all sorts or elongated objects that echo the themes and environments of the adjacent panels: a marine scene might have a fishing rod or a row of seashells as their gutters and so on. This raises a question whether the visual shape of the gutter could be used to make the gaps between the panels "less void", so that they would reflect the characters' moods, thoughts or intentions and, consequently, direct the reader's thoughts as well (Image 8). As a simple example, McCloud suggests that wider or borderless gutters can make the surrounding panels seem slower, more tranquil or even timeless (1994, 103). While this seems a logical conclusion, such effects are not a part of comics' conventional vocabulary yet and easily go unnoticed. Not even colors of the gutters seem to affect their "content" that significantly. Sudden changes of gutter color can, of course, be used to signal significant changes in time, space or overall mood, but in most commercial comics, the sole reason for the gutter colors and changes in them is visual interest.

This is reasonable enough as, most of the time, gutters are meant to be unnoticeable, and the best way to make them so is to keep them as blank and uniform as possible. Loading more meaning to them would only be confusing and steal attention from the panels. What is more, gutters, indeed, stand for gaps in the narrative. They are meant to be void of information. They are meant as the reader's personal space, which is why the artist or characters rarely tamper with them – on the visible, symbolic level, that is, because, in the end, characters do inhabit the gutters as well. They can blink, kill or even grow several years older between two panels, in a quarter of an inch of paper – changes that might be planned and insinuated by the artist, but which the readers must discover and "execute" themselves. McCloud compares a comic book reader to a trapeze artist who has to leap from panel to panel, trusting that the artist or rather, the comic, will catch him or her again on the other side (1994, 90). Where does this leave the character? Logically, they would have to ride on the readers' backs across the gutters and even the longer, volume-to-volume transitions – which sounds so hard a task, the artist would do well to give the reader as much support as possible. Rigid, concise personalities that are realized through emblems, mottos and suchlike as well as brief flashbacks in the beginning of each issue function as such support systems.

To approach the issue through another metaphor, panels function like windows, through which we can view the characters. However, once they have passed the window and go out of the view, it would contradict our way of reading the character – for example, Fokkema's logical code – to suppose that the unseen characters simply cease to exist, just to

be materialized again in the next panel. Thus, a skillful comic book artist should aim to bring the feel of the characters anywhere and everywhere. As we shall witness, in chapter 4.2, Alan Moore has devised some extremely clever tactics to achieve this in *Watchmen*. On the other hand, sometimes it is the comics' overall vibe, its common themes or particular brand of humor that seems to borrow some personality to the characters, rather than vice versa. For example, *Cyanide and Happiness,* already discussed above, functions like this: readers who are familiar with the comic and its humor can expect quirky, absurd, unpredictable behavior from all its characters. Distinguishing them from one another is not necessary, as they seem to share one, diffuse "personality" – that of the comic itself. In such comics, the character can be claimed to be "omnipresent" because, in a way, the only real character is the comic itself.

As a rule, however, it is extremely difficult to achieve effects like these, to export the presence of character outside the frames without the reader's voluntary help. While the gutters might look uniform, they read incredibly flexibly and thus, easily slip out of the artists' control. This is well illustrated by the fact that one gutter can just as well make a difference of one fraction of a second as it might separate ages and universes – McCloud lists six types of panel-to-panel transitions, starting from moment to moment and ending with non-sequitur (1994, 70–72). More importantly, however, a gutter in itself has no direction, no allegiance and no particular meaning – unless it is given some particular shape. In its traditional form, a gutter is almost a blank sign, which stands for nothing else than 'a gap in a comic book narrative'. This utter blankness is what allows it to situate between any manner of panels. Should one wish to change either of the panels to something completely different, the gutter is no hindrance but an enabler. This has evoked thoughts of comics with alternative plots, alternative reading directions. After all, the "content" of the gutter is only determined by two things: the surrounding panels and the imagination of the reader, is it not?

What of characters? How do they relate to alternative reading paths? Would the character be the same or remain the same in all the available courses of events? If we extend the human analogy to concern this question as well, the answer is no; if we expect the characters to act and react like human beings, the experiences they undergo will inevitably change them. In other words, the character starts splitting in the very gutter where alternate directions are offered. This simple answer would cover all the cases where the change of the direction is caused by something the character cannot control – chance meetings, natural catastrophes, accidents et cetera. Here, the reader simply acts as the hand of fate and directs the character to the direction he or she prefers or just happens to pick at random, much like when playing a video game. The question of character becomes more complicated if the

crossroads are caused by a choice – especially an important one – that the character has to make consciously. Most likely, both alternatives cannot be equally true to the character's personality, but the reader is not the character. Thus, it is impossible for the reader to know exactly how the character would choose and why. Secondly, even if he or she did know, the reader ultimately has the actual power to decide which panel to read next – a character cannot possibly make such a choice for the reader, so the reader will end up making the in-story choice that would actually belong to the character.

This blurs the boundaries of the reader and the character the same way that playable characters in video games do – can characters like this be fictional entities in their own right or are they merely pawns of the reader's imagination? This also raises the question whether a character, too, has some determining power over the gutters: even though the reader has some relative freedom in gutters and all the other gaps alike, he or she is likely to interpret such gaps in a way that is congruent with the interpretant he or she has assembled from the preceding data. It is unlikely to assume that a cruel, merciless character would stop to feed homeless kittens during his or her way home, even if that journey is not depicted. In short, for character, as for real human beings, the stable parts of their identities function much like destiny. Each character is a certain way and that way is much more determined and linear than the blankness of gutters. Thus, it is the characters that are perhaps most likely to cause trouble in the development of hypertextual or otherwise forked comics stories in the future: it is difficult to develop very round, complex and credible personalities in such formats.

Finally, we can conclude that while gaps of all kinds are, perhaps, something of a practical necessity in comics, they also involve two very notable benefits: focus and reader involvement. Comics are all about "amplification through simplification": this means, as McCloud explains, that "by stripping down an image to its essential 'meaning', an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't" (1994, 30). In fact, this concerns much more than the drawing style. Comics are essentially catalogues of units that are stripped – or focused – to their core meanings. By leaving intermittent movements, boring moments, insignificant details, objects and parts of objects outside the panels, comics force their readers to focus on the key points, the most important ideas each work wants to convey. As we have discovered, often the visual focus is on characters, but comics can portray the characters themselves in a similar, amplified manner: their key features, most expressive gestures and faces, most definitive moments are showcased while less significant, less interesting details are faded in the gaps, where readers can choose to pick them up and mould them to their liking if they so wish. It is no wonder, then, that comics have long been known as the

kingdom of superhumans and psychopaths – the stripped, holey nature of comics has the potential and the tendency to bring out the best and the worst of their characters and, by analogy, of humans in general. Some theorists have even suggested that comics are able to show visually and concretely how humans *actually* view other humans: our schemas of each other are never so realistic and accurate as not to be altered by piles of heuristics and littered by dozens of stereotypes. In short, comics and their characters are simplified and amplified in their entirety. (Herkman 1998, 127.)

Hence, as the paramount features are depicted by the artist, only secondary issues are left in the gaps, the area where the reader rules. However, this is arguably all the freedom and breathing space the reader needs – if one does not want to explore the ideas of others, one should simply just daydream or contemplate, without reading anything at all. Still, it is important to mix these new ideas with gaps that the reader can fill with familiar ideas. This, and only this, allows the reader to relate to the story and, as a result, interact with it in a pleasurable, productive manner. This applies to the characters as well. The rounder, the more "realistic" characters are, the more they are likely to possess traits the reader does not possess. The fact that they have some familiar qualities or, even more preferably, gaps which the reader can fill with something familiar, enables at least some degree of identification with the character. In these undetermined, gray areas of the character, the reader is prompted to participate in the creation of the character, to control it and, consequently, in a way, become it – shape it into his or her own image. The readers become attached to the characters because they feel partly responsible for them. Rocco Versaci, too, concludes that readers being able to "sympathize and empathize with comic book characters in unique ways" is one of the most significant outcomes of closure, although he does not expand on why he believes this to be so (2007, 14). The statement is so matter-of-fact as if welling from intuition, an intuition millions of comic book fans, who are willing to follow their favorite heroes through years and years of repetitive plot patterns, undoubtedly share. If closure in comics truly "fosters an intimacy – – between creator and audience" as McCloud believes, it is hardly possible without the help of characters, because the human perspective they convey is the only link, the only common nominator the two parties – the artist and the reader – necessarily share (1994, 69).

Whatever their mysterious effects might be, it should be undisputed that comics are always full of holes, some of which are in plain sight. Also, these gaps – of all kinds – have one undisputed effect: if the reader wants to form a whole, coherent idea of the story – or of a gappy narrative element, such as a character – he or she has to put in some cognitive effort. Ironically enough, fragmentary novels that make the reader work for the story – often

referred to as "open" or "writerly" texts – have been quite highly esteemed by many a postmodern literary theorist, such as Roland Barthes, while the big audiences tend to dismiss such works as too cumbersome and scholarly. If works like Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759–1767) or Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* (1927) are considered complex examples of high art by virtue of their famous gappings, why should comics, with their close-knit relationship to missing information of all kinds, be considered the lowest of the low? Of course, in literature the gaps tend to be deeper in the story while many of comics' gappings are considerably close to the surface and, hence, easier to fill.

3.3.2 The Great Masquerade: Figurative and Intertextual Tricks

The previous chapter was a discussion of gapping as omitting, but there are countless of other ways to withhold information from the reader. Instead of completely passing over something, the artist has the option of hinting towards it, expressing it in a veiled, indirect manner, for example, through a metaphor. Essentially, metaphor can be defined as replacing a sign or an expression with another sign or expression that is not commonly used in the context. Where the original sign is taken away, an information gap is created and the reader is left with both the task and the freedom to decode the new, unconventional meaning. Metonymy, too, requires for the reader to read "through" the denotative meaning of the sign and find the "true", intended meaning from somewhere else, from signs that have some semantic common ground with the sign used. Where metaphor is based on freer association, metonymy is based on logical semantic connections, such as continuity. In short, metaphors are close akin to Peirce's symbols and metonymies even closer akin to Peirce's indexes, only metaphoric links are not necessarily conventionalized like symbols. Rather, metaphors are more easily detected when they are poetic, that is, unexpected and unconventional.

A third kind of sign that requires the reader to look for the meaning from farther away is allusion. While metaphoric and metonymic hints can usually be decoded by convention, synaesthesia or association, intertextual references require specific knowledge. Even though more denotative in that sense, they still refer to meanings that are also "outside" the text. Without the texts to which they refer, allusions are "empty" signs; they create holes in the fabric of the text in which they figure. Still, metaphors, metonymies and allusions give the reader much less freedom of interpretation than, for example, gutters as their meanings are

to be found rather than invented. The boundaries of their meaning are not only limited by the context, but also by the signs themselves.

As these definitions of metaphor, metonymy and allusion should prove, they can, indeed, be treated as kinds of signs, similar to Peirce's sign classes introduced in chapter 3.2.2. Hence, it should be obvious that they can figure on all semiotic levels of comics: images of different abstraction levels can be metaphoric or intertextual just as well as texts. As for metonymy, much of the sign language of comics is actually based on metonymical relations: indexical signs like sound effects, emotive effects and speech bubbles become understandable as they are related to their sources, signs that have a logical, causal link to them. All in all, comics' tendency to simplify and amplify, to pick key features to stand for the entire idea, is a metonymic practice. (Herkman 1998, 85–87.) One sweat drop can also be considered a visual synecdoche of the sweat covering the character's skin and so on.

As for character theories, they have consistently ignored metaphor, metonymy and intertextuality as plausible ingredients of characterization. Even though Fokkema employs terms like denotative and connotative code, they do not have much to do with figurative language. Rimmon-Kenan, too, borders the subject in her discussion of analogy as a characterization device (1983, 87). Metaphor, metonymy and allusion might also fit her category of indirect characterization techniques, but these subjects, save for simple, causal, metonymic signs, are not covered in any detail. This could partly be caused by the rather abstract points of view most character theories employ: they answer the questions of what characters are or how they function rather than going to the specifics of their building blocks. Partly, this lack of research is probably caused by the lack of need for such research. All literary metaphors and allusions function very similarly and evoke quite similar research questions regardless of which element of the story they are aiming to describe, be it the milieu, an action or a character. In other words, there is very little to say about the area that is left between general notions about figurative or intertextual language and case studies on metaphoric or intertextual characterization.

In comics, however, this area appears somewhat wider. Since comic book characters have such constant visual forms that are so clearly distinguishable from the backgrounds and all the other pictorial story matter, it is quite simple, even tempting, to apply some sort of a metaphor directly to their appearances. It is an excellent way of making an aspect that some might regard as one of comics' greatest shortcomings into an asset: while necessity of at least some degree of stylization easily eliminates aspirations of rendering humans "realistically", it also frees the artist from doing so. Unlike film, comics do not have

to settle for showing ordinary, human-looking humans – instead, it can make its characters visually and semantically interesting by drawing characters in some figurative form. Combined with the desire to still make humanely significant stories with relatable characters, this urge to explore different visual worlds has resulted into a kaleidoscope of anthropomorphism in comics of all genres.

For decades, the general opinion seems to have been that "serious" adults' comics should present "serious", "realistic" human-like characters, where as anthropomorphic figures, "talking animals" only appear in children's comics and humorous newspaper strips (Herkman 1998, 33). In today's comics field, however, anthropomorphism comes in all shapes and sizes. In David Petersen's *Mouse Guard* (2006–), for example, the mice protagonists look very much like real wood mice, they are the same size and live in an environment wood mice actually live in, but rather than mice, they act like human beings: they talk, wear simple clothing, build towns and castles et cetera. Their mouse-form does not seem to carry any type of metaphoric messages either. It simply looks adorable and allows Petersen to introduce dark, *Lord of the Rings* type of themes in a way that is more appealing to and suitable for children. Thus, *Mouse Guard* roughly fits the stereotype of children's comics with talking animals, but it does use anthropomorphic figures differently than, for instance, Disney comics that usually concentrate on the humanness of such characters so much they hardly make use of their "animal-side". Also, *Mouse Guard* is not humoristic.

In contrast, adults' comics like *Maus* or *Blacksad* (2000–), make full use of the "human-side" by leaving the characters' animalistic appearances in a metaphoric role. In *Maus*, the metaphor of Nazi-cats chasing Jew-mice is as plain as is gets, and the strict symbolism of the anthropomorphism is further underlined by including photographs of the protagonist' real-life, very human counterparts and by occasionally showing the animal features the way they really are – as masks. *Blacksad*'s case is slightly more complicated. The comic features an entire range of different anthropomorphic animals. For a large part, this is just for the sake of spectacular visuality, but the different breeds and species also signify the roles and dominant personality traits of the characters. The bad guys tend to be sly and slippery creatures, such as a lizard or a weasel, while a fat, greasy bartender is portrayed as a pig and a police inspector as a German shepherd. Blacksad himself – a stubbornly independent, flippant, classic private eye type – is naturally a black cat. While this might appear a simple visual gimmick at first, the second album called *Arctic Nation* (2003) poses racist themes that make the reader question the nature of the series' anthropomorphic aspect altogether: in the world of *Blacksad*, too, racism is based on color, not species, which one

could imagine to be more important a factor in one's identity. Perhaps the characters of *Blacksad*, despite their very diverse and minutely rendered animal-like looks, are not to be read as animals at all – as opposed to, for example the mice of *Mouse Guard* who really are, on some level, mice – but simply as humans in disguise.

Of course, *Mouse Guard*'s brand of anthropomorphism has not been uncommon in children's literature either – one can think of, for example, Richard Adams' *Watership Down* (1972) or E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web* (1952). Aside from old fables, however, metaphoric anthropomorphism is much rarer in literature. George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) is, of course, allegorical, but it does not make much use of the cultural connotations or symbolic values linked to different animals nor does it portray half-human, half-animal hybrids like *Blacksad* and *Maus* do. Also, in literature the dissonance between animal-like looks and human-like behavior is not as manifest as in comics where the contradiction is in plain sight from panel to panel and poses dreamlike visual oddness.

As *Maus* and *Blacksad* illustrate, metaphoric anthropomorphism is an excellent way of making all kinds of stereotypes plainly visible. In other words, in addition to contributing to each character, this device works as a form of cultural criticism. Another at least as popular reason for anthropomorphism has also been mentioned already: it makes the picture content fantastical enough to make censorable themes such as violence seem less explicit. Characters that look like animals are not as relatable and real to the reader as characters that look like humans. Thus, when anthropomorphic characters blow each other up with dynamite or chop each other into pieces, the human viewer feels distanced enough as not to flinch from such acts of violence – a fact that has been discovered long ago by the cartoonists of Warner Bros and Hanna-Barbera, parodied by Itchy and Scratchy in *The Simpsons* and utilized in *Maus* likewise. What is more, an anthropomorphic feature itself can be used as a metaphor for a taboo subject. *Blacksad*'s way of discussing racism could be seen as an instance of this, but even more apposite an example is Yun Kōga's manga series *Loveless* (2002–) where a very slight form of anthropomorphism, cat ears and tails, signify virginity. They are not, however, a mere symbol but viewed as very real physical features within the storyworld – those who possess them are not yet considered adults. Overall, cat ears (Jap. 猫耳, nekomimi) are a fairly common a character design feature in manga, but they are more often used for their visual rather than their symbolic impact.

Suzanne Keen has also argued that anthropomorphism can evoke what she calls ambassadorial strategic empathy. By depicting tragic events from the point of view of human-like animals, she believes, it is possible to "reach readers outside the boundaries of the

depicted social world in an effort to change and even solicit assistance in the real world" (Keen 2011, 136). That is, the reader might find it easier to identify with an animal that possesses some universally humane qualities, like language or recognizable facial expressions, than with human characters of different ethnicity. This does make sense, as few people have hostile feelings or prejudices toward most animal species, while, say, Westerners may automatically presume they have nothing in common with Africans. Thus, depicting a Rwandan child soldier as transforming into a dog, like J.P. Stassen does in his comic *Deogratias: A Tale of Rwanda* (2000) might make him more sympathetic to European and American readers. Even if one, for some reason, does not pity child soldiers, one might pity a starving dog. (Keen 2011.)

Another important thing to note is that anthropomorphism is by no means limited to animals. For example, *The Sandman* pushes the limits of personification by granting human-like consciousness to a city – *Worlds' End* includes a tale of a dreaming city – and even a sentence: "Chantal is having a relationship with a sentence. Just one of those things, a chance meeting that grew into something important for both of them. – – The sentence spent most of last year in Czechoslovakian for political reasons. But it was recently translated back into English." (Gaiman et al. 1990, 184.) Furthermore, one of the most central figures of *The Doll's House* is, in the end, revealed to be Fiddler's Green, a sailors' paradise, ("not a who" but) "where" has taken a form of a person. Less extreme examples would include the Kite-Eating Tree in *Peanuts* or Hobbes in *Calvin and Hobbes*. In comparison to metaphoric anthropomorphism used in *Maus,* anthropomorphism of this kind often functions a bit backwards: the animated objects do not necessarily have any metaphoric value that could be recognized in context of the surrounding narrative or culture, but they turn into new, poetic metaphors in certain characters' minds. That is, their ordinary meanings are substituted by the new, enriched meanings given to them by Charlie Brown and Calvin. Any of these oddities could also be used to prove McCloud's theory of that the simplifying visual devices of comics have the tendency to transform dead objects into something else. The reductiveness of cartoony drawing styles, McCloud believes, allows us to see the ideas, the concepts that lie beyond the physicality of ordinary objects. This makes them to seem as if they had their own "separate identities", as if they "pulse[d] with life". (McCloud 1994, 41.) This could be another reason why anthropomorphism is so popular in comics.

Another very common, very visual characterization device that flirts with metaphor and especially metonymy is *pointers* or *indicators* (Ger. *Anzeichen*). The term has been coined by a German comic book researcher Ulrich Krafft, and while it is not the most

useful tool, due to its hazy definition, there are no competitive alternatives either. Krafft uses pointer as a common name for any clothes, props and other outward signs by which comic book characters are recognized and distinguished from each other – in a manner of speaking, their visual "trademarks". (Herkman 1998, 126.) Because the characters are recognized by these features, they easily become charged with the meanings the characters themselves bear and create in the context of the story, that is, they become synecdoches. This is especially true for the emblems of superheroes, which doubtlessly serve a commercial purpose – they are as convenient a tool for marketing as any company logos – but also several narrative purposes.

Like all pointers, emblems create coherence, perhaps even more effectively than names, because they are more indivisible and unique. While names are composed of several signs – letters or sounds – and are often shared by several people, perhaps even within the same narrative, the physical form of an emblem is self-contained and, usually, designed specifically for that character alone. Bruce or Wayne are both quite common names but the Bat-signal and the alias linked to it can stand for no other than the certain orphaned millionaire who hides behind a bat costume in order to fight crime. Since the metonymic link between the superheroes and their trademarks is so strong, it is often utilized to knit wider semiotic webs: the allies of the hero may assume similar emblems and costumes, as is the case with Batgirl or Nightwing, while the villains are often coded as visual opposites of the heroes. For example, The Joker's colorful presence is an antonym to Batman's all-black attire. In Spider-Man and Venom's case, the relation is similar but reversed.

Of course, in addition to these metonymic functions, many emblems – or other pointers – are metaphoric as well. Even if the reader does not know anything about the character behind the emblem, he or she can usually read some symbolic meaning into it. This is not only by virtue of these sings being parts of a narrative whole, where any sings are potentially designed to point to meaningful directions. In fact, their symbolic load is two-fold: both the author outside the story and the character within the story can be assumed to have chosen the symbols, colors or aliases they have chosen with certain connotations in mind. Granted, not all emblems and costumes are very interesting in this sense. Superman's bold primary colors are mainly a result of the publisher's commercial interest and the limited printing technology of the time. Similarly, his S-logo is merely an abbreviation of his nickname, which, in its turn, is an abbreviation of 'a man with superhuman powers'. Most of his followers, however, have been invested more imagination. The likes of Batman or Catwoman tap into the same culturally determined connotations anthropomorphization does. Spider-Man can be considered as a subversive user of such symbology since spiders are often

considered crafty and evil. Then again, fighting such prejudices suits Peter Parker's underdog profile quite well. Another interesting case is Captain America, whose all-American image was designed to serve utilitarian, patriotic purposes both outside and inside the storyworld – he is used as an encouraging mascot for U.S. troops. At the same time, however, his look is heavy with very culture-specific metaphoric meanings: his stars-and-stripes theme was chosen precisely because it stands for American people and values. Moreover, this extreme patriotism has now come to remind modern day readers of Cold War and the certain Zeitgeist that seemed to have a need for such a character.

Naturally, other kinds of comic book characters – and literary characters – have other kinds of pointers, which often have similar functions as superheroes' emblems. To give a simple example, Donald Duck's sailor's hat is so widely recognized as to be synonymous with Donald himself. It makes him unmistakably different from the other ducks who, without their pointers, would appear quite identical (Herkman 1998, 126–127). It also signifies a kind of rootlessness and love for adventure – the fragmentary, infinite form in which Donald Duck stories are published requires a character who is ready and able to assume different tasks and professions in different settings. As for literature, it can create similar metonymical pointers by purely textual means, by careful repetition of quirks, phrases or details that seem to sum something about the very core of the characters. Oscar Walzel has named such features *decorative motifs*, due to their repetitiveness. Homeric epithets or Dickensian catch phrases are especially verbal examples, but one could also think of such external pointers as Sherlock Holmes' hat and pipe or Captain Ahab's Lichtenberg figure scar. (Holsti 1970, 182–183.) Of course, the effectiveness and memorability of such textually constructed external pointers depend more on the reader's ability to visualize them. In comics, they are more immediate.

Sometimes pointers can even "leak" into the real world, where they usually take slightly different meanings. Mickey Mouse's round ears have basically become more closely associated with Disney companies than their official logos. Even more interesting is the stylized Guy Fawkes mask David Lloyd drew for the protagonist of Alan Moore's dystopian graphic novel *V for Vendetta* (1982–1989). The pale, mustached mask takes various meanings in the graphic novel alone: first and foremost, it is an important pointer of V, the protagonist, whose real face is never shown, but it also refers to the historical figure and life of Guy Fawkes who attempted a terrorist attack against the English government of his time. V, of course, attempts the same thing. Finally, in the final scenes of the graphic novel, where masses of ordinary citizens begin to carry the same mask in order to show and give their support to V's "gunpowder plot", the mask takes a new meaning of peaceful revolution, of

people overthrowing their government. This last meaning has recently been picked up and expanded by a real-life hacker group called Anonymous, who often wear the mask in their protests. Slowly but surely, a character pointer from a 1980s graphic novel is becoming a symbol of free, loosely legislated Internet policy and data sharing.

As for intertextual characters, they seem to have been used very overtly and frequently in graphic novels of past decades. There are several possible reasons for this. First, this particular comic book genre – serious, "higher art" stories for more mature readers – emerged in the late 20th century when intertextual topics were quite prominent in cultural studies. Second, superhero comics had, by then, already established the practice of bringing characters from different comics under one title. DC and Marvel had their superhero universes where the fragmentary, cooperative publishing ethos and centralized copyrights allowed any number and manner of connections between their different franchises, or – in the readers' eyes – different characters. Thereby, it is only natural that graphic novels with high artistic ambitions borrow characters from myths, folktales and canonized literature. Such sources represent a fictional "universe" to which these comics would like to belong. On the other hand, graphic novels published by Vertigo – DC Comics' imprint of "graphic novels for mature readers" – can, and do, intersect each other or the rest of the DC universe just as often as classic literary worlds. For instance, *The Sandman* shares some characters with other popular Vertigo titles, *Books of Magic* and *Hellblazer,* and features several of DC's old superheroes, including Fury (who uses her real name, Hippolyta Hall) and Element Girl (who is the tragic protagonist of *Dream Country*'s final short story, "Facade"). Even Batman and Martian Manhunter visit Morpheus' funeral in *The Wake* – along with, for example, Cain and Abel, Egyptian goddess Bast and nymph Calliope. Third, this might be a self-conscious reaction to two all too common prejudices towards comic books: that comic book characters are necessarily flat and that comics cannot qualify as "high art". Using and recasting esteemed characters from canonized art is a way to seek validation and lure more cultured audiences.

On the other hand, it is most often the flatter, archetypal characters comic artists prefer to borrow. This is not at all surprising, considering how well the simplifying and amplifying tendencies of the medium communicate with and through types. In fact, the typifying tradition of comics is so strong, they could be called modern day mythologies; superhero pantheons could be said to have replaced the ancient divine family trees. After all, both myths and comics operate on the most fundamental roles and problems of human beings and both are meant to entertain as well as to pose ethical dilemmas to the masses. Stories of origin and the end of the world, struggles between good and bad and superhuman beings

intermingling with ordinary people are the basic elements of superhero comics as much as they are of older heroic tales. Borrowing from such a close genre seems a very natural thing to do, and one of the strategies graphic novelists have used, when venturing outside the superhero paradigm, seems to be the widening of the mythological basis from which they borrow. That is, other archetypes have appeared alongside the Herculean hero figures. Adult comics from *Fables*, *The Sandman* and *Nikopol* trilogy to *Hellboy*, *Hellblazer* and *Lucifer* are filled with angels, demons, witches, monsters and gods with familiar names and background stories. Of course, the exciting visual opportunities such creatures offer have probably played some part in this development as well.

Second and perhaps more important reason for the favoring of archetypal intertextual characters is that they, with their few, extremely recognizable traits, are so much easier to transport from medium to medium and story to story than an Emma Bovary or a Raskolnikov. As logic dictates, the less a character has traits and the less they change, the easier they are to pinpoint and replicate (Richardson 2010, 529). Also, these characters provide the borrowing artist with much more creative freedom. Like a reader, who is allowed to fill the blanks of a character with his or her own vision, an artist, too can make the characters rounder by equipping half-empty archetypes with new traits and twists. This is the main concept behind, for example, Bill Willingham's *Fables* (2002–): Willingham can utilize the long and well-known traditions of such story-book characters as Big Bad Wolf or Prince Charming while also taking the credit of making them rounder, more individual characters than they ever were in the original stories. On the other hand, fictional characters of long history and high prestige can be used for comical effect like all archetypes: since people are generally very familiar with the original "version" of the character any unexpected cracks and twists are easily recognized and perceived as comical. For example, Kate Beaton's multiply awarded, now published web comic *Hark! A Vagrant* (2011) utilizes a wide range of historical figures and fictional characters from American presidents to Shakespearean heroes in a brilliantly parodic way.

Of course, this begs the question whether these old stereotypical characters – after layers of modernizing and individualizing – are the same characters at all. In his discussion of transtextual characters, Brian Richardson claims that although characters can be continuous from story to story just as well as from chapter to chapter, no author can reproduce another author's character unless they are given the authorization to do so. From cognitive point of view this thesis takes on character, this proposition seems somewhat impractical and more closely based on copyright issues than literary criticism. Peculiarly enough, Richardson

does acknowledge the same dual nature of character as Baruch Hochman – that the character has both a "mimetic" and "semiotic" aspect, that characters are both "human-like figures" and "verbal artifacts that satisfy specific functions within a narrative economy". Yet, he does not base his claims of transtextuality on this view. (Richardson 2010.) As we have thoroughly discussed, Hochman's view of character dictates that what we perceive as character is ultimately a mental construction – something that cannot really be owned. This renders the author's authorization quite irrelevant. It is ultimately the reader's decision whether he or she is to use the information about a character given in a new story to accommodate the existing schema or whether to create a new schema altogether. Such cognitive processes are not subject to copyright legislation.

To complicate the matter further, many of the intertextual characters in comics are either mythical or so widely known and so widely used as symbols or cultural icons – for example, Frankenstein in *The Unwritten* or Jekyll and Hyde in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* – that they can be considered "common cultural property". Richardson suggests that recreations of such archetypal characters require no authorization and can be considered each other's alternative variants, characters that "cannot provide information about the original", but which can only be understood correctly with some knowledge of the original figure (2010, 539). This does fit the claim made earlier in this chapter, that allusions appear as gaps if the reader is not familiar with the alluded text. Other than that, the proposition seems odd. First, if there are no existing originals of a certain mythical character but all instances of it are variants, as Richardson explicitly suggests, does that render them impossible to be "fully comprehended"? Second, Richardson's thinking is overall too rigid and categorical to answer questions raised by such flexible medium with such diffuse authorial practices as comics. There are not only originals and variants to consider but also different artists and writers, different series and media as well as a multitude of fan-created material. It is doubtful that readers would really classify all these different versions of one character in originals and variants. At the very least, they would have to go to variants' variants.

Richardson does acknowledge that some forms of writing are so cooperative as to make the origins of characters ambiguous. More specifically he talks about television series and "cartoons", but since he uses Superman as a named example I suspect he actually means comics. In Richardson's opinion, continuity of character can be achieved in such instances due to their "weaker mimetic pretention", that is, because the characters are simple enough. (Richardson 2010, 535.) It is hardly necessary to repeat here that not all comic book characters, not even those with several creators, are all that simple.

These issues could be overcome by the realization that intertextual characterization is not about two-dimensional sameness and difference. Indeed, it is entirely possible for a character to have elements from another character in another story without pretending to be that alluded character. Tommy Taylor of *The Unwritten* is not Harry Potter even though the similarities are many and explicit. However, Harry Potter does affect our understanding of Tommy Taylor – and vice versa. Similarly, Death of *The Sandman* is Neil Gaiman's creation and very different from the traditional grim reapers, but she is automatically compared to them. Allusions and borrowings of all manner and extent draw parallels between different characters. Like metaphoric characterization, intertextual characterization is based on comparison, a cognitive process with several possible outcomes. While the way Lucifer is depicted in an array of Vertigo comics does not make the Bible a different book, it can – unlike Richardson believes – affect the reader's understanding of the character by virtue of comparison: if something that applies to one does or does not apply to the other, the reader might come to different conclusions about the two characters and their *degree* of sameness. The relations vary from what the reader may interpret as complete sameness to parody, shared names or analogies of all kinds.

Furthermore, it has to be remembered that characters, semiotic and mental constructions as they are, do not exist in linear time or any specific space. This allows them to be "divided" at will. If I read a web-comic where, say, Hellboy dies a painful and hilarious death, I do not expect him to be dead in the next *Hellboy* issue Dark Horse Comics publishes. Still, on some level, the character who dies in the comic has to be the same character for the joke to work. This is also what enables Marvel to publish two Spider-Man series, one in which Peter Parker is dead and one in which he is not. Of course, as discussed in the previous chapter in regard to alternative storylines, the characters in different stories are never exactly the same, but there is a strong *degree* of sameness. It could, for example, be possible to form temporary schemas for different storylines and versions, which, however, feed to the same, more permanent and original schema of the character. Of course, proving that such mechanism exists would require multidisciplinary research.

Many theorists have suggested that there are always certain core features (Krafft's *Zeichen,* Reicher's *essential properties*) and an indefinite number of other, "optional features" (Krafft's *Anzeichen,* Reicher's *inessential properties*) to characters. The perpetual problem with such theories, however, is that it is near impossible to distinguish one type from the other. It seems safer to simply talk of an indefinite number of features, variation of which occur transtextually as well. Different semiotic entities with their specific sets of features can

then be compared to understand, among other things, their sameness. After all, if one sticks to the cognitive view of character, it is ultimately the reader, who decides where the blurry boundaries of a character should be drawn. What kind of features factor in such decisions is a subject to further research and speculation, but it seems safe enough to claim that characters, once they have reached an audience, become too malleable to be controlled by their author anymore.

4. Case Studies

What is left to do now is to examine how characters are actually treated and created in some of the most skillful and acclaimed graphic novels of the past few decades. *The Sandman* (1989–1991)*,* a 75-issue-long tapestry of horror and modern fantasy was chosen for closer inspection here, because it boasts a very weird and wide gallery of characters. Since the tale is set in a layered, unrestrained fantasy universe, the writer, Neil Gaiman, is able to bend and break many of the rules and conventions described above. What is more, questions of self and identity are central to many minor story arcs as well as to the main one tying the patchy saga together: Morpheus' long, slow and fatal development arguably compares to any *Bildungsroman*.

Watchmen (1986–1987), an antithesis of a regular superhero story, written by Alan Moore and illustrated by Dave Gibbons, also stretches the standards of characterization but in a slightly different way: while Gaiman explores the ontological boundaries of the character, Moore is mostly concerned with reinventing the character conventions of a specific genre, superhero comics. In addition, he employs some exciting comics-specific effects that are near impossible to find in any other works of graphic fiction.

Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980–1991), on the other hand, is probably the best, or at least most renowned, autobiographical work in the field of comic books. It mixes the concepts of private and universal, real and unreal to produce a very unique account of the Holocaust and the effects it has had on the survivors and their offspring. The autobiographical aspect also blurs the lines between the real writer, the narrator and the character, rendering the entire comic exceptionally self-conscious.

4.1 The Sandman: Odds and Ends

The background story of how *The Sandman* made its way into a monthly title – and a popular one at that – is a great example of how commercialism and publishing bureaucracy can play a factor in the creation of characters. From the opposite point of view, the way *The Sandman*'s creators wanted to do things differently exposed some deep-grained comic book conventions, following of which turned out to be less than necessary.

First, Gaiman's Sandman is and is not based on an older character of DC comics: the order was for a new character with the same name, as the older version of Sandman was already appearing in another title being published at the time.[13] This is probably because the name was considered an important marketing point, something that fans would already be familiar with – a rare consideration when choosing a name for a literary character, for example. However, this being the only constraint freed Gaiman from "the baggage of DC continuity", allowing him to break the superhero paradigm the previous versions of Sandman had followed and go for a more literal, mythical interpretation of the name (Bender 1999, 24.) Also, he was able to create an original character whose entire lifespan was, as far as the publishers allowed, in his own hands. This is in stark contrast to the long-published superheroes who are "handed down" from writer to writer and thus, for practical reasons, denied any clear, linear development. Gaiman took this chance to create the kind of round character that had long been applauded in literary classics like *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, *Anna Karenina*, *Madame Bovary* or *Hamlet* but was still quite unheard of in comics, a character whose personal, inner development leads to his (or her) inevitable death.[14]

Second, Gaiman and his cover artist Dave McKean had to argue with the publishers about omitting Morpheus, the protagonist, from issue covers. This only goes to show, how important a role the protagonist has in the visual coherence and marketing of comics of all kind – even outside the superhero genre. Of course, McKean's haunting, half-abstract collage covers are quite a unique sight in the field, not only content-wise, but also technique-wise. Gaiman himself explains:

> DC kept asking, 'But how will readers know that it's a Sandman comic if he's not on the cover?' And we kept answering, 'Because it will say "Sandman" in big letters at the top.' We finally won that battle and it was an extremely important victory. – – Because it meant we were operating outside the paradigm of comics. – – Hero-less covers had been done for miniseries such as Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* but never for a monthly book. (Bender 1999, 24.)

This was a reasonable reformation, considering that Morpheus is, by no means, the protagonist of every issue. For example, *The Doll's House* is solidly centered around Rose Walker and *A Game of You* around Barbie. *Worlds' End* even includes issues where the title character does not appear at all. However, this decentralizing of Morpheus does not render him any less significant. On the contrary, since he is always referenced to – if not by anything

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[13] This kind of avoidance of parallel stories seems to be loosening nowadays, considering that Marvel Comics has decided to publish two different Spider-Mans simultaneously (Bates 2011).

[14] Peter Straub, too, calls Morpheus "Hamlet-like" in his afterword to *Brief Lives*.

else, the big title on the cover – and since most stories concern his dream realm in one way or another, all issues relate to Morpheus' character and tragedy in several paralleling, contrasting and causative ways, giving the reader almost kaleidoscopic, half direct, half indirect vision of him. Even in *Worlds' End,* where Morpheus appears very little, the fact that the plot is built around communal storytelling, in the style of *Decamerone,* works as a link – it is, after all, impossible to tell a story without any connection to Morpheus, often dubbed the Prince of Stories. Barbie's story in *A Game of You* is also somewhat analogous to his, considering that Barbie, in a manner of speaking, is both the protagonist and the antagonist of the story – the mysterious Cuckoo she rises against is revealed to be a younger dream image of herself. Morpheus, too, is his own worst enemy, considering that he brings his fate upon himself very knowingly, as his sister, Death notices in *The Kindly Ones* (Gaiman et al. 1996, ch. 13, 5). He, too, is killed by his younger self, in the sense that he develops so far above that original form he cannot be allowed to be himself, a personification of dream any longer (see below).

Thus, real-world realties definitely influenced the way *The Sandman* was created, but the comic had its impact on the real-world as well – another point *The Sandman* has in common with *The Sorrows of Young Werther.* Namely, the black-and-white appearances of Morpheus and Death have been much admired and copied in the global Goth community. For example, the fact that Death uses an ankh as her sigil – or emblem – increased its popularity in Gothic iconography "exponentially". Wearing a top hat is claimed to be another trend Death introduced to Goths, as it is an iconic part of her look in her own spin-off story *Death: The High Cost of Living.* (Bender 1999, 11.) Such *de se* level of reader involvement is not enjoyed by all comic book characters, certainly not in such extent. The oft-cited fact that *The Sandman* is one of the rare mainstream comics to accumulate about as many female as male readers also implies that there is something about *The Sandman* that makes readers engage with its characters in an exceptional way (Versaci 2007, 32).

One reason might be that there is certainly something, or someone, for everybody in the colorful thousand pages that make up the saga. In addition, many of the characters are quite unconventional. *The Sandman* stretches the human analogy of its characters in various ways: there are plenty of anthropomorphic peculiarities, several violations of Fokkema's biological code, cyclic life spans, blurred boundaries between different identities and fictionalized portrayals of historical figures.

Even the most central characters of the comic, the family of the Endless are ontological oddities. In addition to Morpheus, who is a personification of dream, the family includes, from the eldest to youngest, Destiny, Death, Destruction, Desire, Despair and

Delirium, who was formerly Delight. As Gaiman explains it, they are not really deities, but "functions"; Dream is not a god of dreams but rather the idea of dreaming, compressed in an anthropomorphic form (Bender 1999, e.g. 97). On the surface, they might seem like prime examples of allegoric characters, the kinds of flat types that are basically summarized and laid bare by their very names (Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 88). Indeed, everything about the Endless – their personalities, their actions, their realms, their emblems and, as McCloud also acknowledges, their appearances – are built around their functions, and those functions also function as their names (McCloud 2006, 72). For example, Dream is closely associated with night, inwardness and oddities. He himself is extremely introverted, taciturn and something of a romantic, his black robe, black straight-out-of-bed hair, star-like eyes all connote night time, his eclectic realm is filled with strange, fantastical creatures – dreams and nightmares – and his sigil is a helmet made of a skull and a backbone, the residence of the neural system, that is, consciousness. Even his speech bubbles are black as night and squiggly as a dream image. To give another example, Desire is somewhat exotic, classically beautiful being whose gender is left completely ambiguous, so that it would be able to embody anybody's ideal partner. It is also very capricious and stubborn at the same time, someone who likes to cause confusion in other peoples' – and even in Dream's – lives, because that is the way desires can perceived to work. Its sigil is, of course, a sparkly heart, it talks in an especially rounded, voluptuous art noveau style font and its realm is, of course, its own body, because it is everything anybody could ever want – Desire itself resides in the heart of the body castle, naturally.

The Endless are also very tied to their functions, that is, their will is somewhat limited: Death does not decide who to take to the other side – seeing as she ultimately has to take her own brother – nor does Destiny affect the sequences of events. He merely sees over them. This is well illustrated right in the first story arc, *Preludes and Nocturnes*, where Dream is trapped in a glass cage by a group of occultists. None of his family comes to his aid, because "they aren't a superteam; rushing to the rescue isn't what they are about". "As personifications of things, they are not causative. They're barely reactive", Gaiman adds. (Bender 1999, 33.) Another apt illustration of the way the Endless can and cannot violate their functions is Destruction: he abandons his realm and refuses to act out his function. Instead, he walks the human world and dedicates his life to several art forms, from painting and poetry to cooking. This might seem like he is able to defy the very core of his presence, but the truth of the matter is, he is horrible at any art he tries – while destruction of old might be necessary for the creation of new, Destruction cannot create per se (see *Brief Lives*). This relative lack of

free will goes against the way we understand human-like creatures to function. In Fokkema's terms, normal psychological code does not apply to them completely.

On the other hand, the Endless are not allegorical at all. Within the storyworld they really, actually embody and control those aspects of human life they represent. Because *The Sandman* is a work of fantasy, the Endless can be considered literal rather than figurative characters, which is not to say that there would not be plenty of metaphors and metonymies used in their portrayal. As the depiction of Dream and Desire above should illustrate, there are plenty of indirect signs at work there. In fact, some, like Death's ankh sigil, are doubly indirect. The reader has to be able to recognize ankh as an Egyptian symbol of life and then, decode the irony and the cultural reference invested in it, that is, how Death is actually the antonym of life and how Egyptian culture was very particular on the mythology and rituals associated with death.

Also, even though each of the Endless is built around a single idea, which Forster gives as the very definition of flatness, they can hardly be considered flat. On the contrary, they are surprisingly multifaceted: everyone sees them slightly differently. This is not just an interesting indicator of visual focalization but also provides visual surprise. The most basic variation is that the Endless modify their clothing and hairstyles according to the culture and era they visit, but their metamorphoses may sometimes go beyond that: for example, when visiting cat goddess Bast in *Brief Lives*, Morpheus' face assumes cat-like features where as his African lover Nada sees him as one of her own tribe, someone with African features and dark skin. Even in *Season of Mists*, where Morpheus fetches her from the depths of Azazel, his hair and features are "Africanized" for the single frame he is seen through Nada's eyes (Gaiman et al. 1992, 187). In addition, the specific, not-so-predictable images and details Gaiman has picked to make each abstract idea into flesh approach iconotextual poetry. The number of details alone seems enough to prevent typicality and superficiality. For example, Delirium is described followingly in the first chapter of *Season of Mists*:

> She smells of sweat, sour wines, late nights and old leather. – – The poet Coleridge claimed to have known her intimately, but the man was a n inveterate liar – – Her shadow's shape and outline has no relationship to that of any body she wears and it is tangible, like old velvet. – – Delirium was once Delight. And although that was long ago now, even today her eyes are badly matched: one eye is a vivid emerald green spattered with silver flecks that move; her other eye is vein blue.
>
> (Gaiman et al. 1992, 22).

These should cover two of the criteria Forster sets for round characters, depth and ability to surprise. The third, ultimate proof is the notable change Morpheus undergoes as the story progresses. He begins as an selfish, unempathetic and moody character who takes swift revenge on sorcerer Burgess for imprisoning him in a glass sphere in *Preludes and Nocturnes*, who condemns her human lover Nada to Hell simply for declining his proposal in *The Doll's House*, who gets scolded by his sister Death for being "the stupidest, most self-centered, appallingest excuse for an anthropomorphic personification – – an infantile, adolescent, pathetic specimen" (Gaiman et al. 1991a, 219). The change starts to show in the fourth album, *Season of Mists*, where he decides to free Nada from Hell, because he realizes he "may have acted hastily" (Gaiman et al. 1992, 43). In the eighth album, *Brief Lives*, Morpheus is once again abandoned by a woman, Thessaly the witch, but takes no revenge on her. Instead, his servants and family members are repeatedly surprised by the kindness and respect peeking through his regal moodiness. Indeed, at the end of the said album, Dream knowingly seals his fate by granting his son's long-time wish – kills him. This spilling of family blood allows the Furies of the Greek mythology to take revenge on him, to kill him in his turn in *The Kindly Ones*. It is strongly implied in the final two albums that Morpheus deemed such fate necessary for himself, for he had changed too much to continue as the same being. In that sense, the Endless are, indeed *supposed* to be flat, allegorical characters: they *should* not change. Thus, it is the real triumph of Morpheus' characterization that he does anyway. He does what Destruction fails to do, transcends his function to become a truly rounded protagonist, an individual in his own right.

Of course, a personification cannot be entirely obliterated. It is only the aspect of Morpheus that has to leave the stage for Daniel, a new aspect of Dream to begin his reign. This is, indeed, puzzling from the point of view of character coherence: in what sense are Morpheus and Daniel the same character and in what sense are they different? Names do not help the reader here as both aspects have their separate names, yet both can be referred to as Dream. The visual rendering is likewise ambiguous: the two Dreams share several key pointers: tall, skinny build as well as similar hair and facial features, for example. Yet, there are alterations: where Morpheus uses rubies as his tools and is predominantly dressed in black, Daniel has emeralds and white robes, as if to symbolize the softening and lightening of nature that brought upon the change. Since the Endless are not human, the question cannot be solved by human analogy either and, perhaps, is not meant to be solved at all. On a further note, *The Doll's House* introduces DC's previous Sandman, superhero Hector Hall, whom just happens to be Daniel's father. As Morpheus' "predecessor" is his successor's father, he is

effectively cut off the DC continuity from both ends while seeming to possess some sort of circular continuity of his own.

Cyclic and pluralistic characters figure elsewhere in the series as well. For example, Abel is repeatedly killed by his brother Cain and always comes back to life again. Also, Dream's former girlfriend Nada is given the option to be born again as human baby after she is freed from Hell (Gaiman et al. 1992, 210–211). As for characters that seem to be simultaneously one and many, the furies, who figure throughout the series as three witches of three different ages, are probably the most extreme example. Not only are the three always together and confuse amongst themselves the many names by which they are called, but their unity is made explicit by occasional visual tricks. For example, when they first appear in *Preludes and Nocturnes,* they are shown lined up next to each other in a succession of three near-identical panels. In each panel, they have changed places, yet it is always the one on the left that seems to be devouring some sort of a creature: in the first panel, the crone holds the creature in her hand, in the second, the mother puts it in her mouth and in the third, the maiden seems to be chewing on it (Image 10). This, of course, violates Fokkema's logical code in the same way many postmodern novels – or even *Wuthering Heights* – do: it should not be possible for a character to also be some other character. Since this logical crack is mostly presented visually, though, the trio is most easily grasped as one, single character that simply has three simultaneous visual forms. Interestingly, their plurality and mutability is enhanced by the multitude of roles they have throughout the story: when they first appear in *Preludes and Nocturnes*, they help Morpheus by giving him information, yet, in *The Kindly Ones* they become his executors.

There are multiple other instances where the boundaries between characters are more or less blurred to the point where it is difficult to tell if they should be treated as one or two characters, as in Barbie and Cuckoo's case mentioned earlier. Also, Rose Walker and her grandmother Unity – who probably is not accidentally named so either – turn out to be interchangeable at the end of *The Doll's House*. As they are both equally capable of filling the function of a dream vortex, a special kind of dreamer who – again, not coincidentally – is able to traverse and break the boundaries between the minds of different dreamers, Morpheus agrees to kill the grandmother instead of the granddaughter.

In addition, the Endless themselves defy coherence with their ever-changing appearances, that is, if one compares them to, for example, superheroes, who always sport the same signature costumes. In practice, however, there are enough pointers by which the Endless family are quite readily identified, the most stable of them being their individualized

speech bubbles. Even Delirium, the most fluid member of the family can instantly be recognized by her multi-colored, chaotically lettered speech bubbles (Image 1). The significance or such coherence devices can hardly be overstated considering that in *Brief Lives* alone Delirium has at least six different looks – even though all visual focalizations of her are uniform in the said album. Another feature that all of the Endless retain in most of their different forms are their eyes: Death has her eye of Horus make-up, Delirium's eyes are always mismatched and so on. This clever use of pointers can be said to turn the visual inconsistency of the characters into an asset: it softens the clash between the differing drawing styles of the dozens of artists who worked for *The Sandman* during its seven years of monthly publication. As long as the readers are accustomed to seeing the characters look different from issue to issue, it does not matter whether the differences are caused by the different artist or, perchance, a different visual focalizer.

Moving on, logical code and coherence are not the only fundamentals that the characters of *The Sandman* shake a bit. Biological code is also stretched by, for example, Morpheus' son Orpheus, who spends the most of his in-frame time as a severed head. He is not referred to as "Orpheus' head" either, just Orpheus or "Lord". Thus, it is the reader's task to accommodate the normal schema of human-like characters to include such a character who does not follow the paradigm of having two legs, two arms or and a torso attached to the head. Gender, too, is an ambiguous biological feature for many of the characters in *The Sandman*, most manifestly Desire, who is of both and neither sex – a notion that does not go well with the logical code either. The same ambiguity figures in slighter extent in such minor characters as Hal Carter the drag queen (*The Doll's House*), Wanda the transvestite (*A Game of You*) and the cross-dressing sailor "Jim" (*Worlds' End*). "Jim", the narrator and protagonist of a short story "Hob's Leviathan", only reveals at the end of her story that her real name is Margaret. Until then, she has to hide his gender from the readers as much as from the other characters – Michael Zulli's drawings are just stylized enough to play the trick convincingly. In addition, the cyclical life spans mentioned above are not too compatible with biological code either.

Another biologically dubious character effect that is pushed close to its limits in *The Sandman* is anthropomorphism. In the dream world, everything is potentially alive, especially if the one who acts or focalizes is capable of any degree of magic. For instance, in *A Game of You,* Thessaly the witch communicates quite successfully with the moon and a puddle of blood alike (Gaiman et al. 1993, 87, 133). As already mentioned in the previous chapter, Gaiman does not hesitate to personify such inhuman things as sentences or cities either. The dreaming city is not the only instance where concepts of character and place are

mixed, however. Desire's fortress, the Threshold is actually its own body and one of the most central characters in *The Doll's House*, Gilbert is revealed to be, not only a dream, but a dream of a place, sailors' fabled paradise, Fiddler's Green. Similarly, Azazel the demon is basically drawn as rough-edged hole to empty, grinning darkness – Dream actually fetches Nada from inside Azazel in *Season of Mists*. Such actions and the visual renderings make the strange spatiality of such characters very tangible, that is, it cannot be treated as figurative characterization. Azazel or Gilbert are no meek metaphors for that every one of us carries worlds within ourselves. Instead, such characters have to be seen as instances of such extreme anthropomorphism they break a good number of Fokkema's codes: places do not have bodies, parents, social statuses, for example. Again, the Endless themselves, embodiments of abstract ideas as they are, are a very good and extreme example of anthropomorphism as well.

At the other extreme there is "A Dream of a Thousand Cats", a short story featured in *Dream Country*. This story aims to portray cats as unanthropomorphically as possible while still conveying the thoughts of the cats accurately to human readers. This is achieved by the use of unconventional speech bubbles. Letterer Todd Klein explains:

> If I'd used word balloons, they would have looked like supernatural talking cats; and if I'd used thought balloons, they would have looked like alien telepathic cats. I decided a good compromise was to combine the two. So I used the tail of a word balloon at the beginning and end, but I put thought balloon bubbles in between the tails. (Bender 1999, 74.)

This idea of taking the tale beyond human sensibilities is further reinforced by the perspective, which is the cats' own: they are shown in the panels from their own, not from humans', eyelevel. The illustrator Colleen Doran also tells she aimed to draw the cats as realistically as possible while still giving every cat an individual look and body language (Bender 1999, 73). In other words, she had to balance between mimesis – the way cats really are – and the anthropocentric character conventions, to create cats that are characters without being human. Indeed, considering that the very definition of character is based on human analogy, "A Dream of a Thousand Cats" is truly at the farthest limits of what the reader is ready to consider a character.

Intertextuality, too, is a major characterization device in *The Sandman*. In addition to the authorized borrowings of the DC characters, of which even Brian Richardson would probably approve, *The Sandman* uses a host of mythological figures. Especially *Season of Mists* is basically a gathering of deities and magical creatures of different cultures, some of which Gaiman created and some of which he borrowed. The borrowed ones include Odin,

Thor and Loki from the Scandinavian circle of gods, Anubis, Bast and Bes from Egyptian mythology, Susanoo-no-Mikoto from Japanese shintō tales as well as Judo-Christian angels and demons, such as Azazel and Remiel (Gaiman et al. 1992, 112–113). Fallen angel Lucifer, who also plays a central role in the said album has, in fact, been so popular with the fans that he has been a star of his own spin-off series *Lucifer* (2000–2006) published by Vertigo. Another very prominent intertextual character is Morpheus' son Orpheus, who is, indeed, posed as the very same Orpheus figuring in Greek mythology. *Fables and Reflections* even features an issue-long retelling of Orpheus and Eurydice's story, with the simple addition that Morpheus is Orpheus' father and all the other Endless his aunts and uncles. Not only are Orpheus' feelings and motivations reflected more deeply in his discussions with Dream, Death and Destruction than in the myth itself, but his mythological background also parallels Morpheus with Apollo, who is named as the father in some versions of the original Greek story. It seems appropriate enough to compare personification of dream to the god of poetry and prophesy, although Apollo's role as the sun god also makes the relation slightly ironic.

Besides comic book and mythological characters there are some historical figures in *The Sandman* as well. Roman emperor Augustus and Marco Polo are both devoted their own short stories in *Fables and Reflections*, for instance ("August" and "Soft places"). The most prominent historical character is, however, William Shakespeare, who appears in two hallmark issues: "A Midsummer Night's Dream", the only comic book that has ever received World Fantasy Award (so far), and "The Tempest", the final issue of the series. The reason Shakespeare has such an important role in the series is that Dream orders the two plays – *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest* – from him.

Characters like these are, of course, ontologically problematical, especially considering that Gaiman has depicted Shakespeare's family and career with considerable historical accuracy. On the other hand, the historical figures barely stick out in the company of all the other code-breaking oddities. What is more, their real "historical" selves have already been hazed by decades of oblivion, speculation and admiration. This is especially true for Shakespeare, who is barely less fictional in history writing than he is in *The Sandman* – historians are not even sure what he looked like! If one also considers how fantastical a context *The Sandman* is, it seems reasonable to treat these characters as full-blooded fictional entities with particular intertextual features. As Gaiman or any of his artists hardly new such ancient figures personally, the only referents they can accurately represent in their works are, in fact, characters of historical texts. What the historical texts refer to, is another field of study altogether, so it seems reasonable to bundle historical figures with intertextual characters here.

In other words, when we recognize that the president appearing in short story "The Golden Boy" bears great visual resemblance to Richard Nixon, we can, by virtue of the historical reference, assume what kind of a personality and political standing he might have – despite the fact that the character is never explicitly named and can hardly be considered a completely and utterly true depiction of Nixon and his actions.

It would be wrong to assume, however, that *The Sandman* merely plays with the concept of character to produce a host of non-mimetic, inhuman, postmodern characters the readers struggle to wrap their head around. The psychological complexity of Morpheus' character has already been discussed, but the series displays solid, medium-appropriate characterization across the board. It is not an overstatement to say that almost everything within the frames can, and often are, used to reflect the characters' personality and point of view. Indeed, the frames themselves are often used as well. For example, in *A Game of You*, there is a scene where Wanda opposes Thessaly's authority over the strange crisis they and their neighbors have wound up in. As the argument culminates, the frames around Thessaly are omitted; her black background flows seamlessly to the black gutters of the page. This depicts almost subliminally her otherworldliness and control of the situation as opposed to the narrow, restricting frames within which Wanda is trapped. (Gaiman et al. 1993, 78.) *Preludes and Nocturnes* offers a simpler example: in the sequence where Morpheus is trapped within a spherical class cage by an occultist group, many of the frames are circular. Occasionally, these circle-frames are also tinted blue and distorted slightly as to mimic the way Morpheus sees the situation from inside the glass (e.g. Gaiman et al. 1991a, 24). Speech bubbles and fonts are also utilized to a great extent: the more than thirty styles letterer Todd Klein uses across the series are great coherence-building character pointers as well as interesting vessels for figurative characterization and synaesthesia (Bender 1999, 245). Also, the distinct realms of each Endless give exciting possibilities for characterizing the master of each realm through the milieu. The way Despair is always surrounded by the gray fogs of her domain and the colorful shapelessness of Delirium's realm almost read as parodies of the expressive backgrounds used in manga. Indeed, when it rains in the Dreaming, it does not have to be understood as an analogy of Morpheus' bad mood, but it is, in fact, a direct result of his current state of angst (Gaiman et al. 1994b, ch. 2).

All in all, *The Sandman* is an example of inventive and versatile characterization – which resonates excellently with the series' overall stress on the questions of identity and self. Morpheus – as well as Lucifer, Rose Walker, Wanda and Destruction, to name a few others – wrestle with the two character issues that are possibly the most fundamental of all,

continuity and individuality. The Endless are confusing characters in many ways: stable beings built around single concepts on one hand and extremely complex, fluid and human on the other hand. Similarly, Lucifer began as *an* angel, ended up as *the* devil and finally aspires to be *an* anonymous pianist and night club owner in Los Angeles. Rose, as a dream vortex, stands for diffusion of different identities while she is trying to find her own place in the world, in spite and with the help of her mother and grandmother, the manifestations of genetic continuity. Wanda is caught between two genders, Destruction between his function and the antithesis of that function, creation – the list goes on. The pinnacle of these problems is, however, Morpheus himself, whose complex and gradually humanizing personality overtakes his stable, duty-bound nature as a personification of dream, disjointing his immortal existence. Of course, viewed side by side with other mainstream comics, a medium and genre that has mostly resisted character development, it is no wonder that Morpheus' personal growth is destined to end badly.[15] Still, in *The Sandman,* too, it is the recurring characters that bring the fragmentary structure of the series together – even though the protagonist does not appear on every cover or even in every issue. It is the characters that make and tell the dozens of stories of which *The Sandman* consists.

4.2 Watchmen: Heroes We Deserve

If there is only one thing one knows about Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon's highly acclaimed masterpiece called *Watchmen*, chances are that one thing is the blood-stained smiley-face, which is not only a weighty motif within the work but has, indeed, become a widely recognized metonymy for it. No doubt this has partly been caused by the simple fact that the symbol fills the first of the twelve issue covers, none of which depict any of the protagonists or, to beat the omissions *The Sandman* covers make by a notch, any parts of any characters at all.[16] Regardless, many of them have a peculiar amount of humanness invested in them. The smiley face itself Moore and Gibbons found appropriate due to the universal significance behavioral psychologist found in it:

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[15] Mike Mignola's *Hellboy* offers an interesting counterpoint for this. It is said that were Hellboy's horns ever to grow out, the world would end.
[16] That is, if one does not count the photograph of Jon Osterman and Janie Slater on the cover of chapter IV. Paired with the footsteps in the sand, however, the photo seems to signify absence of character at least as much as it does presence of character. After all, there is no Jon Osterman anymore, just Dr. Manhattan.

They tried to find the simplest abstraction that would make a baby smile. Eventually they got it down to a circle, two dots and a little arc. In some ways that's a symbol of complete innocence. Putting a blood splash over the eye changes its meaning. (Eno & Csawza 1988.)

In simpler terms, the grimy smile points towards one of the main themes of the work, the deromanticization of superheroes. In *Watchmen*'s world, superhumans and vigilantes are no longer the innocent archetype they appear in the superhero comics of the previous decades. Instead, the sometimes irreconcilable differences between the laws of the society and one's personal moral codes are made explicit: which the heroes should follow and how far is it possible to go in the name of greater good? The different answers different characters give to these questions make the blood on their hands as plainly visible as it is on the face of the smiley pin. In other words, despite being inhuman, this famous cover motif is a visual metaphor for the reinventive perspective *Watchmen* applies to the hero, the corner stone of all ages-old character archetypes. Thus, in a roundabout way, it represents all of the main characters – which is only appropriate, seeing that *Watchmen* has no clear protagonist.

In fact, Scott McCloud is ready to give the smiley an even more universal meaning: for him, two dots and a line do not only represent innocence or any other human aspect of the kind, but the humanity itself. He uses it as an example of the ultimate cartoon, the simplest, most universal and, hence, the most powerful visual representation of a human being we cannot help but see in anything and everything. (McCloud 1994 30–33.) In this light, it is peculiar that Scott McCloud should label symmetry, another of *Watchmen*'s most persistent motifs, as unmistakably human feature as well. To be more exact, McCloud identifies bilateral symmetry "where left and right are mirror images" as "life's calling card". (McCloud 2006, 59–60.) On *Watchmen* covers, however, symmetry is mostly applied to lifeless things: the cover of chapter VII depicts a reflection of a neon sign including a stylized skull and crossbones and chapter VIII depicts a Rorschach test card, for example. Excluding the blood spatter, the smiley face is, obviously, symmetrical as well. It is doubtful whether the very presence of symmetry is able to bring some humanness to these covers, however. Instead, Chapter II's cover is clearly a visual personification: it features a face of a graveyard statue that, due to the rain drops falling on it, appears to be crying.

On the other hand, notions of humanity in general are hardly necessary here, as both symmetry and the smiley face also function as the "calling cards" of specific characters in *Watchmen.* Symmetry, of course, refers to Rorschach, who wears an ever-changing but ever-symmetrical inkblot mask over his face, while the smiley button pin is The Comedian's

emblem: he wears it on his lapel till his dying moment – hence the blood drop. Thus, even though *Watchmen* does not feature its protagonists on its covers as a traditional superhero comic "should", it does feature the next best thing, metonymical signs that are synonymous with the characters. Especially the Rorschach test card on the cover of chapter VIII might as well be Rorschach's face. However, as one of the main goals of *Watchmen* is to twist the superhero genre conventions to a new direction, it is important that to have another, anonymous inkblot in Rorschach's place – like in the case of *The Sandman*, these omissions signal that Moore and Gibbons make their own heroes outside the existing "comic book paradigm". Still, the covers are able to refer to the characters through their emblems, confirming their central role in the story.

Since some of the character emblems are used as motifs, they and, by association, the characters to which they refer, accumulate an overwhelming number of layers. The coherence of the characters mixes with the coherence of the narrative and the characterization mixes with the overall themes of the work. The smiley face is simultaneously symbolic of all the corrupted superheroes *Watchmen* portrays and an index of The Comedian's death. As these two meanings collide in the one and the same image, The Comedian is positioned as the poster boy of this corruption. On the surface he is the culmination of superhero as we know it: he is extremely strong, wise-cracking and masculine, solves everything by violence and is more confident with his womanizing than any other "hero" we see in *Watchmen,* and since he is patriotic – parts of his costume actually bear great resemblance to Captain America's stars and stripes – his actions are sanctified by the government even after Keene Act that outlawed other superheroes. However, the reader quickly discovers how he misuses this power, attempting a rape, killing a Vietnamese woman who is pregnant with his baby and so on. Ironically, he also becomes a victim of the similar corruption in Ozymandias: it is revealed in the end that The Comedian is murdered by his fellow costumed hero.

Similarly, Rorschach, whose emblem and life-philosophy are based on symmetry – "there is good and there is evil, and evil must be punished", preferably eye for an eye – becomes the victim of the asymmetrical workings of the story (ch. I, 24). This disruption of symmetry is already manifest in the imperfection the blood spatter brings to the symmetrical smiley face on the first cover and is later mirrored in the asymmetry of Rorschach's own face after he is captured by the police: his symmetrical mask is removed and he is imprisoned with a bruise on his left cheekbone and a cut on the right side of his forehead – notably, both injuries are relatively close to his eyes, reminiscent of the way the blood

splatter cuts across the smiley's eye. On a more conceptual level, of course, the entire graphic novel is set in the age of asymmetry, that of Cold War. The war is finally "won", by Ozymandias, who fabricates an "alien invasion" in order to unite the Earth against a common threat. Sadly, this feat can only be accomplished by lop-sided ethics: Ozymandias single-handedly sacrifices millions for greater good and suffers no punishment for it. Since Rorschach cannot possibly adapt to a "new world" built on such moral, he has to die in the end – leaving a symmetrical blood stain to the snow as a testament of lost, symmetrical values he championed to the very end.

Both the smiley and the symmetry motif surface and resurface in countless visual variations throughout the story as well. Not only does the smiley pin recur in dozens of panels in itself but its shapes and colors are echoed in a handful of other background objects: a rock formation on the surface of Mars (ch. IX, 27), the cloud-covered moon in Nite Owl's window (ch. VIII, 18), the lit-up entrance to Ozymandias' lair (ch. 12, 24) and round yellow power plugs appearing around New York City (e.g. ch. III, 18) all remind the reader of the same motif and the meanings it carries. Lines crossing the eyes of the actual characters – in the same way the blood stain crosses the pin's eyes – is a very frequently and purposefully repeated image as well: the pirate-themed sub-story *Tales of the Black Freighter* features a figurehead that is "blindfolded by seaweed" (ch. III, 3), a magazine cover featuring Dr. Manhattan happens to have a string wrapped around it on the same exact level where his eyes are (ch. III, 18) and when he pours a glass of water for the younger Silk Spectre on Mars, it is depicted so that the stream of water covers her right eye (ch. IX, 10). Different characters also tend to have a strand of hair crossing their right eye on moments of terror or rage: the older Nite Owl on his dying moment (ch. VIII, 28), the younger Silk Spectre when he snaps at his father (ch. IX, 21) or the nameless protagonist of *The Black Freighter* when he realizes he is losing his mind (ch. V, 12) and commits each murder (ch. X, 12; ch. XI, 6) are all great examples. Coincidentally, *The Sandman* also plays with the eye motif – or to be more exact, eye injury motif – quite a lot. Gaiman explains its centrality by declaring that since "comics is an entirely visual medium – – it's perfectly natural that an 'injury to eye' theme would develop in horror comics" (Bender 1999, 255).

The images of the forward-running clock and the spreading puddle of blood that precede the cover of each chapter could also be read as a pun on the same motif: a clock counts down the minutes to when its *face* is, likewise, stained by blood. Of course, for Rorschach, the other motif, symmetrical inkblots, also mean, first and foremost, face. The symmetry and absolute dichotomy between black and white, right or wrong that Rorschach

and his mask represent also figure in the comic in various ways. The most common variant is, perhaps, reflections: covers of the fifth and the seventh chapter both depict reflections, although the latter, a reflection of Nite Owl's owlship Archie is also a play on the smiley motif. The former, the reflection of the flashing neon-sign with a symmetrical skull and crossbones logo is further underlined by the coloring of the following panels: the flashing of the sign causes every other panel to be dim and cold-colored while every other panel is tinged with the warm reds and yellows of the lit-up sign – a very Rorschachian division to black and white, light and dark, "not mixing, no gray" (ch. VI, 10). In fact, like Rorschach, the entire fifth chapter could be claimed to be built around the symmetry theme. Not only is the chapter named after William Blake's poem "Tyger" – "Fearful Symmetry" – and ends in a mention about karma, about how "everything evens out eventually", but the frame layouts of the entire chapter follow bilateral symmetry: there could be a mirror in the middle of the middle spread and the frames would still be sized and situated similarly on both sides (Whitson 2007). This brings something about Rorschach, in fact, his most defining characteristic, even in the gutters, which, ironically, are the gray areas, in-betweens that Rorschach's philosophy refuses to recognize. Then again, his famous comment on gutters on the opening page of the entire story makes this unusual devise strangely appropriate: "The streets are extended gutters and the gutters are full of blood and when the drains finally scab over, all the vermin will drown (ch. I, 1)."

It could be concluded that the recurring smiley faces help to carry the shadow of The Comedian and his death throughout the entire narrative. As the hero himself is absent – or more so, dead – such subliminal visual cues prevent the reader from forgetting him and his influence on the events – his death is, after all, what drives Rorschach to take action, to activate his retired friends and, finally, to reveal the entire plot that led to the murder in the first place. The symmetry motif is slightly more restricted, as it is mostly focused on the two chapters – V and VI – that reveal Rorschach's past and ideology. On the other hand, those two chapters are positively saturated with what he finds most important and beautiful of all, symmetry. Hardly any device is left unused there: composition, coloring (due to the blinking light) and imagery (abundant Rorschach blots and close-ups straight from the front) all scream symmetry. Even the epigraphs, Blake's "Tyger" and the Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche quote at the end of chapter IV aptly reflect Rorschach's past and present: "Battle not with monsters, lest ye become a monster and if you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you." Not only does this intertextual link cast Rorschach as Nietzsche's fellow nihilist but it poetically recounts his tragic development. He himself has become cruel because he has been

a victim and witness to so much cruelty – again, an example of symmetry come to flesh. In this sense, Rorschach comes close to allegorical characters or even such personifications of abstract concepts as the Endless of *The Sandman*.

Of course, the other characters are also figuratively and intertextually defined by their emblems and names. However, they are not equally prominent for a good reason: the younger Nite Owl and Silk Spectre have simply inherited the semiotic sets of their predecessors while Dr. Manhattan's superpowers are a result of a scientific accident and his image is largely shaped by the government. Thus, unlike Rorschach, Comedian and Ozymandias, their superhero identities can hardly be read as a form of self-expression. Still, some indirect messages can be detected: Silk Spectre's yellow and black clothes echo the color-scheme of Comedian's smiley emblem, which seems to foreshadow the revelation that she is, in fact, his daughter. Nite Owl's brown clothing, on the other hand, corresponds well with his down-to-earth demeanor and mundane civilian life. Also, as the owl is easily associated with Pallas Athene, who was, among other things, goddess of law and justice, it is an appropriate totem animal for a superhero. The novel even includes an ornithological essay by Nite Owl himself, titled "Blood from the Shoulder of Pallas". In comparison, Dr. Manhattan's name and logo – a diagrammatic representation of a hydrogen atom – are a much more overt reference to the infamous Manhattan project, with which the United States tampered during the Cold War. In *Watchmen* universe, Dr. Manhattan replaces the atom bomb as America's ultimate weapon. Like a nuclear bomb, he is able to disintegrate matter into atoms. Indeed, he is even called an "H-bomb" by his "mother-in-law", the older Silk Spectre (ch. II, 8). This gives him an exceptionally ominous aura, which is only diluted when the reader learns more about the person he used to be, Jon Osterman. It is, however, an unresolved dilemma, whether Dr. Manhattan and Jon Osterman should be treated as one and the same character. Dr. Manhattan himself does not seem to think so, since he refers to his former self with a name rather than first-person pronoun – that is, he separates the two by surprising use of Fokkema's denotative code: "Restructuring myself after the subtraction of my intrinsic field was the first trick I learned. It didn't kill Osterman... Did you think it would kill me?" (ch. XII, 18.) Alternately, his hydrogen logo could be read ironically. Having only one electron, hydrogen is extremely reactive, where as Dr. Manhattan is the most passive of all the *Watchmen* heroes: in his reluctance to resolve anything, he leaves the Earth.

As for Ozymandias, he makes the source of his superhero name and signature colors perfectly clear by giving an entire speech about his attempt to follow in his idol's, Alexander the Great's footprints – a pilgrimage that ultimately led him to admire ancient

pharaohs (ch. XI, 10–11). This blatantly explains the royal gold and purple in his clothing as well as his superhero name, Ozymandias, which is the Greek alias of Ramesses II. He wants to be associated with the greatest leaders that ever lived. Since they were royalty, Ozymandias, too, has to wear royal symbols. This self-imposed analogy also gives him the psychological motivation for his megalomaniac plan: did he not think of himself as at least an equal to the greatest kings and conquerors of all time, he would never have the confidence or arrogance to scare the world to peace all on his own. Indeed, Percy Shelley's poem that is placed as an epigraph to the end of chapter XI, where Ozymandias explains and executes his alien invasion scam, loses its original irony in the context and becomes a literal description of its namesake's bravado: "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: Look on my works, ye mighty and despair!"

In short, Ozymandias is an epitome of the self-made hero. He gave his heritage money to charity when he was seventeen and, starting from nothing, built his physical, mental and financial capabilities to their maximum potential. In addition, like Rorschach and Comedian, he dresses, acts and names himself according to what he aspires to be, thus, effectively lowering the walls between his inward and outward features. Their superhero identities are self-crafted facades that directly – albeit figuratively – reflect their ideal self-images. To some extent, this is also true for the younger Nite Owl, who admired his predecessor greatly enough to assume his superhero alias (ch. VII, 8). The younger Silk Spectre, however, remains slightly more mysterious, or perhaps slightly empty, behind the image she involuntarily inherited from her mother (ch. 1, 25). Her outward appearance does not reflect her inwardness except for the fact that she allows others to define her: it wells less from her ego and more from her superego, so to say. She has always played out the roles of a daughter and a girlfriend, until, during the course of the story, both of these statuses are pulled from under her feet: she discovers the identity of her father and breaks up with Dr. Manhattan. For her, *Watchmen* is about personal growth, where as others – especially Ozymandias and Rorschach – keep clinging to their respectively extreme beliefs as tightly as ever.

All in all, there are plenty of contrastive analogies between the characters. Van Ness argues with length, that Rorschach and Ozymandias are each other's "polar opposites" and has, indeed, much to back her claim. Ozymandias is at the very top of the society, rich, famous, well-liked and well-groomed whereas Rorschach has a background as an institutionalized son of a prostitute, is utterly penniless, infamous and thus forced to live in unsanitary conditions as a wanted man. Ozymandias is dubbed as the only overtly "left-wing" superhero where as Rorschach ridicules "communists" and "liberals" in his very first

monologue (ch. 11, 32; ch. 1, 1). As Van Ness aptly observes, even their speech patterns are completely dissimilar: Ozymandias talks in lengthy sentences with plenty of long and formal words while Rorschach talks little and in incomplete sentences, omitting pronouns and other function words. (Van Ness 2010, 121–127.) Even though both do act outside the law, believing that ends justify the means – be it millions of people or a couple of fingers that need to be sacrificed – their morals are quite different as well: Ozymandias believes he is above the bigger picture, able to solve the world's problems on his own, whereas Rorschach acts out a principle that is greater than himself, retribution. In the end, the reader is asked to side with either one: whether to stay quiet about Ozymandias' hoax and hope for peace or to tell the world the truth and punish the mass-murder?

The Comedian, too, could be seen as Ozymandias' antithesis: as his name suggests, everything, including the world and himself, is a joke to him – as opposed to Ozymandias, who takes himself and world seriously enough to perfect them, regardless of the cost. Ozymandias' initial, idealistic plans for world-peace evoke only cynical amusement in Comedian, who firmly believes in the imminence of nuclear holocaust, but "does not care" (ch. II, 11; ch. IV, 19). He simply jokes about how Ozymandias, often referred to as "the world's smartest man", will end up as "the smartest man on the cinder" (ch. II, 11).

Another notable analogy, although a parallel rather than contrasting one, can be found in the sub-story, the comic within a comic, *Tales of the Black Freighter*. A minor character, a teenager named Bernard reads this gruesome pirate comic issue by issue by a newsstand as the main storyline, unbeknownst to him, unfolds elsewhere in New York. The comic tells the story of an unnamed sea captain who is marooned as a result of a fateful battle with a feared, apparently supernatural pirate ship called the Black Freighter. Terrified of what the pirates might do to his family and townspeople, the man slips into madness in his desperate attempt to get home and warn his people before the ship arrives. By the time he reaches his destination, the man is so distraught and paranoid he mistakes his family for the hated pirates and slaughters them himself. The story has generally been regarded as an allegory for *Watchmen*'s bleak world-view or the kind of people that succeed in such a world, the kind of man the heroes admire (Soikkeli 1996, 134). Several parallels can also be drawn to individual characters: like the protagonist of *The Black Freighter*, Ozymandias and Rorschach are prepared to kill in order to attain greater good. The man even builds a raft of the bodies of his former ship crew in his desperate attempt to reach his village in time – an apt metaphor for Ozymandias' course of action, a "utopia" founded on human bodies, as Rorschach phrases it

(ch. XII, 24). Then again, the savage ways of the marooned captain do not seem entirely incongruous with Rorschach and Comedian's ruthlessness either.

More parallels can be found in the other texts, to which *Watchmen* alludes. Some of the chapter-closing epigraphs – Blake's "Tyger", Shelley's "Ozymandias" and the Nietzsche quote – have already been mentioned. Chapter IV, which tells Dr. Manhattan's – or, rather, Jon Osterman's – life-story also has an interesting epigraph by Albert Einstein: "The release of atom power has changed everything except our way of thinking... The solution to this problem lies in the heart of mankind. If only I had known, I should have become a watchmaker." This parallels Dr. Manhattan – the walking atom bomb whose father actually was a watchmaker – with Einstein, the unfortunate inventor of the atom bomb. A further parallel is drawn to god. The biblical epigraph at the end of chapter III, placed directly under a large picture of pensive Dr. Manhattan, asks: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?"[17] Moreover, Manhattan is regularly called "god" by the other characters, even though he does not think there is a god, that the world is a "clock without a craftsman" (ch. IV, 11; ch. IV, 28). Through these parallels, the reader can see Dr. Manhattan's real tragedy, which, due to his enormous power, also becomes a tragedy for the entire world: there is no craftsman to make the clock, but there are plenty of beings, plenty of atom bombs that are able to destroy it. Although, in the end of the comic, Dr. Manhattan aspires to find a simpler galaxy and create life, he is only viewed as a destructive power throughout the story. Like Destruction in *The Sandman*, he decides to leave rather than to fulfill his function.

The most important intertext for *Watchmen* is, however, the entire genre of superhero comics. Like The Sandman, *Watchmen* heroes were originally designed to be revamps of existing, albeit forgotten, comic book heroes: especially Dr. Manhattan, Rorschach and The Comedian's progenitors – Captain Atom, The Question and Peacemaker – are still quite easy to detect from among the superhero selection of Charlton Comics, a publication house that went out of business around the time *Watchmen* was written. Although Moore was insistent of depicting the superhero world from an entirely new, "grimmer, perhaps more realistic" perspective, he wanted to use characters with whom the readers would already have some sort of a relationship. He felt that would have brought deeper "emotional resonance" to the work. However, the planned storyline was rough and dramatic enough to have too long-lasting effects on the characters, and the publisher refused to hand them over to Moore. Again, like in the case of *The Sandman*, what resulted were original characters that,

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[17] This also raises the question about who "the Judge of all the earth" is – who watches the watchmen. In the end, it is Ozymandias, not Dr. Manhattan, who appoints himself the judge.

unstrained by continuity issues, were able to reach new extremes, such as political ones, far outside the comic book standards. (Cooke 2000.)

As uniform and convention-ridden as the entire superhero genre is, it is equally possible to see connections and parallels to such superheroes that did not inspire Moore as directly. For example, Nite Owl could be read as a parody of Batman or Ironman, the rich, gadget-loving hero type that could well live a decent life without masks, were he not so bored. Rorschach represents the other extreme: he is even poorer that Spider-Man and even more "compelled", even more emotionally driven and, possibly, even more questionable in his methods than The Punisher. The Comedian is a patriotic hero, a national symbol in the same sense as Captain America, and Dr. Manhattan is even explicitly compared to Superman. Even though he is not an alien, like Superman, he develops into one: feeling alienated from people, he escapes further and further into space. He is also easily paralleled to any other hero who accidentally receives a supernatural ability that makes his life frustratingly complicated, such as the Incredible Hulk. In short, *Watchmen* comments on the multitude of motivations that lead to masked adventuring and vigilantism as well as reflects on the various ways the public might respond to such figures. It takes a whole array of familiar genre elements and, indeed, sheds "grimmer, perhaps more realistic" light on them (Cooke 2000).

Even without the intertextual links, however, *Watchmen* is amazingly polyphonic, in a way that is perhaps more often expected from high-end literature, rather than lowly comic books. In discussing the differences between Ozymandias and Rorschach, it was already exemplified how distinct discourses individual characters can produce. One could also compare Dr. Manhattan's exact, matter-of-fact speech, mostly devoid of emotive words and exclamation marks, ("Believe me, I fully understand the seriousness of our circumstances, the gravity of the situation." (ch. IX, 9)) to The Comedian's slangy, colorful, overtly informal expressions ("It don't matter *squat*. *Here* – – lemme show ya why it don't matter...it don't matter squat because inside *thirty years* the *nukes* are gonna be flyin' like *maybugs*..." (ch. II, 11)). These idiolects are strong enough as to function as verbally constructed character pointers.

This textual multitude is further complimented by the use of different visual points of view. Most of the time, *Watchmen* retains the eye-level third-person perspective that is the genre norm. However, occasional shifts to first-person view do occur for different reasons. Before Rorschach's civilian identity is revealed upon his arrest at the end of chapter V, his off-mask scenes are pictured in first-person, through his own eyes, as to keep the secret from the reader a bit longer while still offering an intimate peek to his normal, day-to-day life

(ch. V, 11, 18). The same effect is employed in the first chapter, in the panels where The Comedian is killed: showing these recurring panels from first-person perspective conceals the identity of the killer perfectly, but the all-important murder can still be shown to the readers (ch. I, 2–4). These panels also utilize another visual trick whose main purpose is to convey the mental state of both the viewed and the viewer: the unrealistically red coloring of the panels could reflect either the rage of the focalizing attacker or the pain of the focalized victim.

In chapter IX, on the other hand, the frames occasionally assume Silk Spectre's first-person perspective when she is having a flashback, as if the only way to retrieve information from past times was through her head. There, first-person view is not used to conceal anything but to underline the fact that the images shown are formed in the head of the focalizing character – they do not belong to the present of the narrative, except as mental images, memories. In contrast, Dr. Manhattan's past in chapter IV is recounted through regular third-person view. Because he perceives time simultaneously, his perspective, through which the chapter is told, allows the reader, too, to "be present" in long-gone events.

Different character-centered focalizations aside, *Watchmen* is able to complicate the spectrum of its characterization by employing several genres. *The Sandman* uses similar effect: its world and characters are viewed through the lenses of pulp horror (*Preludes and Nocturnes*), myth ("Orpheus" in *Fables and Reflections*), alternative history (several stories of *Fables and Reflections*), sailor story ("Hob's Leviathan" in *Worlds' End*) and so on. *Watchmen* manages the same in much less space with the help of more explicit breaks between the genres. This, of course, refers to the expository materials attached to the end of each chapter, excluding the very last one. While they are a clever way of proving how the visual, material aspect is inherent and important in all types of texts, not just comics, they also force the reader to step outside the conventions of the superhero genre and perceive the heroes through the generic conventions of these other text types: a memoir (ch. I, II &, III), a professional essay or article (ch. IV, V & VII), criminal and medical documents (ch. V), a newspaper article (ch. VIII & IX), a personal letter (ch. IX & X) and an interview (ch. IX & XI). In some cases, these documents offer the reader another perspective to the very same issues and events shown and told in the surrounding panels. In chapter IV, Dr. Manhattan tells what his transformation into a superhuman being meant to him personally, with an emphasis on relationships and specific events, while the expository article at the end of the chapter gives the reader the larger, less personal picture of the same thing. Similarly, young Rorschach's disturbed drawing and essay at the end of chapter VI add emotional stakes to the traumatic memories told in the same chapter. It is also interesting to compare the polished, personable

image Ozymandias puts forward in the interview placed at the end of chapter XI to the revelations he makes in the panels just preceding it. For instance, he has just confessed murdering The Comedian first-hand, while in the interview he wishes his fellow crime fighters, especially The Comedian, "nothing but luck in the years that lie ahead" (24–26, 32).

Simply put, the degree of sympathy the reader is likely to feel towards any character is a matter of perspective, much dependent on the way the character is portrayed. Thus, it is a great merit for *Watchmen* to show its characters from such multitude of angles. This also adds to *Watchmen*'s overall thematic structure: it reads like one of Rorschach's inkblots. Both Rorschach and Ozymandias are portrayed in both negative and positive light and both can justify their clashing views effectively enough. It is impossible to decide which one is right – unless the reader is able to make the choice, to impose his or her own moral pattern on the unsolvable, to stop the perspectives from shifting back and forth like Rorschach's bizarre mask.

Yet, despite all these inventive techniques, *Watchmen* is hardly known for its round, believable characters. No, *Watchmen* is, first and foremost, seen as a story of patterns, of causes and effects, a structure where everything is connected to everything. Moore himself calls it "a lovely Swiss watch piece, a mechanism" (Cooke 2000). Where does this leave the characters? If the story does not exist to tell about the characters, do the characters not exist to serve the story? Dr. Manhattan says it himself: "We're all puppets, Laurie. I'm just a puppet who can see the strings" (ch. IX, 5). After reading the novel, the reader, too, is able to see the strings: many of the characters play very specific roles in the narrative. Ozymandias, being the mastermind behind many of the story's events, is the beginning and end of it all. He pushes The Comedian – the motif – out of the window, which motivates Rorschach's – the tragic antihero's – entire storyline. He, in his turn, pushes the other heroes in motion – especially Silk Spectre, the coming-of-age heroine, who proceeds to drive her contrastive love interests Nite Owl and Dr. Manhattan – until he winds back to his polar opposite who is, of course, his antagonist as well. Van Ness has also managed to map the moral codes of the characters in a way that proves their schematic constrastiveness (Van Ness 2010, 106).

Yet, it seems unreasonable to call any of the main characters in *Watchmen* ficelles or even flat. They all have psychological motivations and inner conflicts – Silk Spectre is torn between her mother's and her own expectations, Dr. Manhattan between his human and superhuman side, for example – or show some degree of development, if not during the main storyline, at least within the flashbacks. For instance, Rorschach could be claimed to be built around one concept alone, symmetry, but as the flashbacks of his

childhood are shown, it becomes clear to the reader that this principle is self-imposed – not just a transparent part of the story's surface – and there is, thus, something beyond it. Then, the only possible conclusion seems to be, that a dominating plot does not necessarily run on function-like characters. Why could the puppets not be carefully crafted? That is, even complex characters can be used as gears, if only the mechanism itself is complex enough – or supported by a solid set of other functional elements, such as motifs.

4.3 Maus: Of Mice and Men

There are two substantial points that set *Maus* apart from the other two graphic novels discussed here. Firstly, it is the only one planned and executed by one, single artist – the work is not divided between the writer and the illustrator, nor is there a superhero continuum directing the creation of the characters. In fact, the characters in Spiegelman's story have partly "created themselves", because, secondly, his work is autobiographical. Although this combination is a powerful one in terms of self-expression and, consequently, deep-resounding characterization, it is a phenomenon of independent rather than mainstream comics. It is an ever-growing genre, nevertheless, and several such works have broken into the spotlight of late, *Maus* being the pioneer and probably the starting shot of the trend. At least Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000), Craig Thompson's *Blankets* (2003) and Alison Bechdel's *The Fun Home* (2006) and Guy Delisle's travel diaries follow suit in regard to extremely simplified, black-and-white style of drawing and brutally honest style of writing. The popularity of this genre alone makes its character dynamics worth studying.

From the perspective of characterization, the most central issue of these stories is the fusing of the real-life artist, the more or less personalized narrative voice and the actual protagonist. Naturally, the latter two are ontologically different from the first one: they are constructed things, "abstract objects", one or both of which must share some qualities with the real artist in order for the work to be autobiographical (Reicher 2010). Which qualities and to what extent are true to life is somewhat irrelevant, considering that the reader rarely knows the artist very personally, if at all. Also, the question is almost impossible to answer, considering that no one can perceive the artist in the exact same way he or she perceives him- or herself. Thus, whether a work is to be considered autobiographical or not, is a matter of institutional norm, an implicit contract between the artist and the readership, and it is

sufficient to note here that *Maus* claims autobiographical quality both in its marketing and within the narrative itself. Art Spiegelman the character is constantly striving for "fair" portrayal of his father and his work is in various occasions validated by the other characters (e.g. I, 104, 133). What is more, it is a historical fact that the Art Spiegelman who drew the comic is a son of two Auschwitz survivors.

In contrast, the distance between the narrator and the protagonist is something any avid reader can decipher from the text. In *Maus*, the distance is minimal: everything that is narrated is either heard, seen, experienced or imagined by Art the protagonist. Indeed, even though most of the narrative depicts the horrors of the Second World War, something that none of the three Art Spiegelmans born in 1948, cannot have experienced, these depictions are ultimately focalized and rendered by him. They are his reconstruction of his father's story. The father, Vladek, acts as the protagonist and focalizer only within Art's focalization. Similar constructive action allows the real-life Art to draw – and the narrator Art to view – the character Art from outside, despite the fact that he must have experienced the situations from inside his body. In other words, the only obvious gap between the character and the narrator is a visual one: all characters are constantly shown in "third person", not through the eyes of any specific character. In textual terms, the narrative voice is rather taciturn: it mostly sets the scene by announcing the time and the place. A couple of these brief scene-openings are, however long enough to include first person: "Summer vacation. Francoise and I were staying with friends in Vermont..." (I, 11). This suggests that the verbal narrator is, in fact, a character narrator, which brings the three Arts even closer together.

If the relationship between the artist and the narrator is analogous to the relationship between the narrator and the character – that is, Spiegelman simply views his narrator-self from outside the narrative, knowing everything it knows and thinking everything it thinks – then the three are so close to each other everything about *Maus* reflects, in one way or another, its protagonist. An independently produced autobiographical comic is a very extreme form of self-expression: not just every word or every scene, but every single line is created by the author's hand (Versaci 2007, 44). No matter how closely the story follows real-life events, Spiegelman reveals his understanding of these events by choosing what to include or exclude, deciding on the framings, angles, shadings and letterings or, of course, by depicting everything in such a simplified and allegorical mode. If we assume the character Spiegelman to be very similar to the real Spiegelman, it is likely that the character would make the very same artistic choices that are already realized around him.

This gives the reader an enormous amount of information about the character's inner world – in one way or another he views himself as a cartoony mouse, for instance. We know that even the character Art is not *really* a mouse, since the animalistic features are occasionally depicted as masks. Furthermore, Art's wife Francoise – real-life Spiegelman is married to a fellow artist, Françoise Mouly – is even given a chance to debate which animal she would like to be (II, 11). In this sense, the focalization of the comic is very subjective, but seeing as the narrator is almost identical with the protagonist, the mouse metaphor might as well be imposed by the former. That is, it is not necessarily a sign of character-centered focalization – in fact, it seems unlikely considering how consistently the visual point of view differs from that of any character in purely spatial terms.

Even if one should have doubts about the unity of the artist and the protagonist, there are four pages in the comic that are explicitly attributed to the character Art, that can undisputedly and comprehensively be viewed as his self-expression. This is, of course, *Prisoner on the Hell Planet: A Case History* (I, 100–103). This earlier Holocaust and family themed comic by Art Spiegelman is included in *Maus* in its entirety because the characters browse and discuss it. It is, of course, an important subtext for the story, but also a very expressive, confessional and – according to the character Art's stepmother Mala – very accurate account of Art's mother's recent suicide and how Art experienced it. If the animal metaphor and the claustrophobically small panels of the main story can be considered expressive of the characters' – or more specifically, Art's – feelings, *Prisoner on the Hell Planet* takes the expressionism to another level: in its most dramatic panels – when the body is found, when Art hears about the suicide or escapes the funeral – the perspectives and human figures are twisted to the point of horrifying, even nauseating. Beneath these effects, however, the sub-comic shows human, more detailed visualizations of the main characters, Art and his parents. Like the handful of real photographs superimposed on the pages, this underlines the fact they are real, unique individuals, not just generic members of the Jewish mouse community.

Spiegelman's choice to draw his characters in such a cartoony style has, indeed, drawn plenty of attention from the scholars and regular readers alike. Considering that the characters are based on real human beings makes the choice even more peculiar: if one compares the artwork of *Maus* to that of *The Sandman*, for example, it is hard to believe that it is the *latter* whose protagonists are not humans at all, but mere embodiments of ideas. Originally, Spiegelman had planned a much more detailed style with more expressive, human-like facial features. After a three-page draft drawn in this style, however, he decided to

change for a far simpler style that effectively fulfils all the claims McCloud has made of deliberately cartoonish characters. Since the simplicity of the characters' appearances is underlined by the more detailed, shaded and realistic backgrounds – as well as the vastly different style of *Prisoner on the Hell Planet* – the characters seem to stand out and claim the foreground. Also, as the reader is not overwhelmed by the artwork, such as specific renderings of their facial expressions, he or she can really concentrate on the story content and read the characters' ambiguous faces in the way that feels appropriate to the scene. Moreover, as McCloud notes, the more detailed the drawing style, the more objectifying it is: drawing in every whisker of Vladek Spiegelman's trembling snout would only make him appear a static aesthetic artifact – which he, by all means, is not. (Versaci 2007, 102.) Instead, it is easy to imagine that behind the simple, relatively blank mask, there is a real, relatable human being. To wrap all these effects in one sentence, the simplified visuals ensure that nothing else outshines the characters. It is what truly makes *Maus* a story of personal history, not another hair-raising horror story about World War II.

On the other hand, the simple style, combined with the fantastical quality of anthropomorphism, has an estranging effect. Straight-forward depiction of such atrocities as the Holocaust requires some aesthetic distance from the subject matter (Herkman 1998, 36; Versaci 2007, 98). That is, surviving Auschwitz is something so extreme that anyone who has not personally experienced it cannot begin to understand it. Thus, bringing the concrete reality closer to the level of abstract ideas – by images that fall somewhere in between the two – helps a great deal, when the reader is trying to understand and relate to a character with such experiences. The other major theme of *Maus*, Art's relationship to his parents, also seems a loaded subject for him. Cartooning his family and himself probably helps him to step outside the most personal area of the topic – in terms of visual vocalization, very concretely so – and examine them in a more objective, universal manner.

Many Holocaust survivors who have written about their experiences say that words, even metaphors fail them (Versaci 2007, 91). Even so, figurative expressions, such as the animal figures Spiegelman uses, add to this estrangement and abstraction process. In addition, they make the depicted issues appear in a new light, waking up the readers who have already been numbed by the previous Holocaust stories they have been told. Sure, they have heard a Holocaust story, but they have not heard a Holocaust story told by mice. Paradoxically, though, the deep-lying allegoric figures of a cat and a mouse give the characters a universal quality that stretches beyond Art and Vladek Spiegelman, beyond Jews and Nazis, even beyond war and genocide. A blank-faced mouse hiding from a pack of blood-

thirsty cats is an archetypal image of a victim of any kind of crime or persecution. Thus, *Maus*, despite being so very personal, has a level where it does not matter, whether there really was a man like Vladek, who he was or what he did to survive. The core is that he survived extreme, underserved persecution; the mouse, against all odds, escaped the cat. The anthropomorphism is so archetypal it bypasses all the flaws Vladek might have – greed and parsimony – and makes him relatable to almost anyone. Thus, *Maus* could be considered a prime example of Keen's ambassadorial strategic empathy: the anthropomorphic device clearly expands the potentially empathetic audience (Keen 2011).

There are plenty of other fable-like animal figures in *Maus* as well. Some are quite straight-forward, even humorous national stereotypes: a French prisoner is portrayed as a frog and Swedes as reindeer (II, 93–94, 124–125). Americans are dogs, which is an extension of the central cat and mouse dichotomy: the mice are killed by the cats, but the cats are, eventually, killed by the dogs. The Polish are depicted as pigs, which is slightly more mysterious. Perhaps Spiegelman simply wanted an animal that could not be mixed in the mouse–cat–dog paradigm and did not evoke too positive connotations. After all, many Poles were very hostile towards Jews, despite being their fellow victims of war. Alternately, Spiegelman might have wanted to underline that most Poles were ordinary, simple country folk.

Art and Vladek also talk about caricatures and stereotypes at one point of the story. Art worries that even though he strives to depict his father as accurately as possible, he seems like a "racist caricature of the miserly old Jew" (I, 131). Vladek's new wife simply replies that it is the truth, that he really is a walking stereotype and, sure enough, the most prominent topic outside Vladek's memoir is his penny-pinching tips. Whether Vladek really is fairly portrayed in *Maus* or not, these metatextual ponderings prove that stereotypes are not necessarily as unrealistic as one might think. Not only are they based on a common, although generalizing perception of real life, but due to their general nature, they necessarily apply to a number of people, just like the simplistic visuals of *Maus* and many others comics do. To put it in Forster's terms, it is not only the flat characters that have potential to rotundity, but most round characters include, or at least have potential to, several flat ones as well. Thus, the two are not as mutually exclusive as one might think but, rather, two alternative ways of reading or depicting one and the same character.

What makes the scene even more intriguing, though, is that Vladek, who only enters the room after the caricature comment above, hits his son with another stereotype: Vladek, whose knowledge of comic book industry is clearly quite scarce, notes that Art might

become famous like Walt Disney (I, 133). Disney is, of course, a stereotype of a cartoonist, someone who produces happy, schematic and commercialized animal tales for children. This implicitly points out the vast differences between such stereotypical view of comics and *Maus* itself, sketching out the wide outlines of the medium's potential. Also, Vladek unwittingly draws an ironic parallel between Walt Disney's mouse characters and himself. Although Mickey is also a mouse, he is no victim but a hero, a picaresque hero who stumbles from one adventure to another without a scratch.

This immediately begs the question: is Vladek a hero? Most readers would probably answer yes, but his "adventure" has clearly left him severely scarred. Art even discusses the topic with his therapist, who claims that "*every* little boy when he's little, looks up to his father". This suggests that Vladek should be viewed as a superior figure, a kind of hero, simply by comparison to Art, who is even depicted as a small, child-sized figure as this discussion takes place – an effective figurative visualization of his feelings of inferiority and helplessness (Image 9). On the other hand, the same therapist argues that mere survival does not make anyone a winner, because "– – it wasn't the *best* people who survived, nor did the best ones die". The dead never get to tell their tales, no matter how heroic deeds they might have accomplished. Thus, they are lopsidedly depicted as victims, losers that could not overcome the ordeal. Still, one could argue, as Art does, that Vladek's success should partly be attributed to his resourcefulness. (II, 44–45.) Is that not heroic? In the archetypal terms he is, in any case, a hero, a mouse who outwitted and outran a stronger predator, that is, escaped the fate to which he was destined from birth.

From this perspective, the entire animal metaphor might seem fatalistic and depressing. However, these anthropomorphic roles are ultimately revealed to be social constructions in *Maus*. Of course, in the context of a work of art, the reader naturally recognizes such animal allegory as a sign-game: as Jews, in fact, look very similar to regular Poles, depicting them as mice could be considered little more than a convenient gimmick that facilitates the reading process. That is, if persecution of Jews is a central theme in the novel, it is reasonable to employ clear signals that reveal who is one and who is not, especially considering that the cartoonish drawing style is quite devoid of other visual cues of the sort. Simultaneously, however, such clear sign-posting resonates tragically with the real events: Germans, too, refused to play a guessing game and ordered all Jews to identify themselves by wearing Stars of David. In this sense, Spiegelman's use of animal masks are simply a new alternative for the star patches, only with different connotations. This means that the sign games are very real within the narrative world – and within the real world as well. Sings are

not always just amusing narrative devices that toy with meanings, but they can also have real-life consequences. One of them is the way they build identity.

The protagonists of *Maus* are not inherently and irrevocably mice. Just like being a Jew is not necessarily a matter of genes but, rather, a matter of tradition or choice – just another social role or identity based on specific conventionalized signs and discourses. This idea of identity as an interpersonal construction – as a product of Harvey's human context – is cleverly conveyed by Spiegelman's use of animal masks rather than (diegetically) "real" anthropomorphism. For example, in book I, we see Vladek attempting a defection to the German side of Poland (64). He is wearing a pig mask in these panels, not because he has disguised himself in any way, but because he simply does not reveal his Jewish heritage by words or visual signs. The Polish conductor sees what he expects to see, a fellow Pole, and Vladek's plan is successful. Another great example is the aforementioned discussion about Françoise's "species". On one hand she should be a frog like the other Frenchman appearing in the comic, but since she has "converted", she wants to be drawn as a mouse (II, 11).

The power of these typifying constructions is underlined perhaps most forcefully by the epigraph of the novel, which is a quotation from Adolf Hitler: "The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human." Assertions like this were apparently perceived to give the atrocities of the Holocaust some kind of a justification: once the Jews are symbolically excluded from humankind, they are perceived to lose their claim to all human rights. Spiegelman strikes back by depicting none of the characters as entirely human, thus nullifying Hitler's words. It is, after all, impossible for Germans to identify Jews as inferior prey without identifying themselves as beasts.

Both *Watchmen* and *Maus* prove that the appearances of comic book characters are more than ornate, marketable skins: while the heroes of *Watchmen* express themselves through their hero images, the characters of *Maus* reflect the expectations of the other characters around them. In short, the images are able to convey both internal and external features of characters, of both the perceiver and the perceived. Conversely, the appearances of different characters are mostly distinguished and elaborated by the textual content. Since all the mice actually look pretty much the same, it is worth repeating verbally that young Vladek was exceptionally handsome (e. g. I, 12–13; II 33–34) or that his wife Anja was exceptionally frail (e.g. I, 30; II, 53, 56).

While textual elements are hardly restricted to the interiority and image content to the exteriority of the characters, they can each be dedicated to different temporal versions of the same character instead. During the sequences where the present-day Vladek tells his

story of survival, he remains strictly within the narrative text boxes. By contrast, everything outside those boxes – images and speech bubbles – depict the younger Vladek's person and perception. This keeps the two different versions more separate and coherent than similarly time-divided literary figures (Versaci 2007 39–41). This possibility to assign different temporal dimensions to different narrative elements might well be one reason for the recent popularity of autobiographical comics.

It is, then, fair to conclude that Spiegelman is able to utilize his medium much closer to its full potential than most of his contemporaries. His radical visual choices may still raise some eyebrows in mainstream contexts, but they serve his character-driven story content extremely well. His combination of apparent anthropomorphism, cartoony style and actual documents – most notably family photographs – amount to multiple layers of meaning, from archetypal to extremely personal. Like a good cartoon should, *Maus* "evoke[s] rather than record[s] the human form" (Dorethy 1996, 74). Rather than imposing something as objective, accurate information or trying to document something he or his readers did not witness first-hand, Spiegelman invites his audience to empathize and identify, to try on the different masks and see right through them.

5. Conclusion

While the preceding ramble might have been wide-ranging and meandering, one thing can be deduced from every single chapter: that there is much to say about the much overlooked topic of comic book characters. Indeed, there are still vast gray areas in both character theory and comics theory in general. It has also been proven that even though the four literary character theories presented here seem surprisingly applicable to comic book characters, by virtue of their highly abstract perspectives, the differences between comics' heroes and their literary forefathers are many.

Obviously, the image content of comics poses some inevitable changes. It has been widely assumed that the visuality of comics would stress the physical aspect of characters at the expense of deep and credible inner worlds. In fact, one of the initial hypotheses of this thesis was that the image content would mostly be reserved for the depiction of the outward features while the interiority of characters would mostly be constructed through the textual elements. It was, however, discovered that even in the case of literary characters, the interiority and the exteriority of the character are in close interaction with each other. As evidenced by the further considerations of comics' characterization devices as well as the case studies, the interiority and exteriority of a comic book character blend into each other even more thoroughly. While it is very natural to depict concrete things visually, through iconic signs, and abstract things verbally, through symbolic signs, the differences between the types of signs are anything but clear-cut in comics. The different abstraction levels of the images, combined with the workings of focalization and metaphor allow comics to show, through complex visual semiotics, something that cannot normally be seen – personality traits or socially constructed roles, for example. Despite this close collaboration between the verbal and the pictorial, the two can also diverge: mismatching the writing style with the drawing style can produce powerful or, at the very least, surprising effects that may illuminate characters or entire character types in a new way.

These blendings and incongruences are not even as disrupting as one might think, since the "double-coding" of words and images can be used to build exceptionally coherent, stable and unique characters. Since comic book characters are constructed by more than syntactical subject positions, deconstructing and denying them would be a difficult task to even the most enthusiastic postmodernists. The visual bodies form such firm bases for the

interpretants that many comic book characters seem to traverse from creator to creator and story to story, even from medium to medium, quite effortlessly.

A level of coherence that is strong enough to endure great flexibility is essential for comic book characters even within a single comic, because the narratives themselves are full of gaps the characters must survive. A comic book character may not be shattered into subject positions, but it is readily available only in fragments, separate frames and issues. This state of dispersion can, however, be overcome with the aid of readers' cognitions: the multifold gaps and imperfections comics present to its audience are an invitation to fruitful interaction. As the panels and gutters alternate, the reader and the comic take turns in creating one coherent, unique character. This, combined with the extended spaces serialized publication provides and the masking effect introduced by Scott McCloud, equals characters that engage readers in a more powerful – or at least completely different – manner than their literary counterparts.

In any case, it is certain that comic book characters do not stand for "the other" to the same extent characters in film do, nor are they restricted to the textual devices that have built so many magnificent literary personalities. They are a tribe of their own, albeit an indefinitely mysterious one. What is for sure is that they will remain that way unless no one ventures deeper into the semiotic jungles to study their ways. Obviously, the discoveries of comic book scholars are very much dependent on the innovations made by comic book artists, but the relationship could, and should, work both ways. In a world where communication, especially communication through pictures, is becoming more and more vital, the exploration and reinvention of the expressive potential of comics is anybody's game. Since the sign systems comics have at its disposal are many and flexible, it seems a plausible testing arena for the very essence and limits of what a fictional character – or its closest analogy, a human being – is. On the other hand, the strong, active relationship comics seem to be able to establish between the character and the reader might have surprising practical value: how could this effect be utilized in education, for example? Other specific, unexplored topics that have only been touched upon in this thesis include intertextuality, transmediality and focalization in comics. Of course, since all the findings of this thesis have been made from the point of view of cognitive character theory, even the simple application of a different conception of character would probably yield entirely different, yet equally intriguing results.

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Appendix: Illustrative illustrations
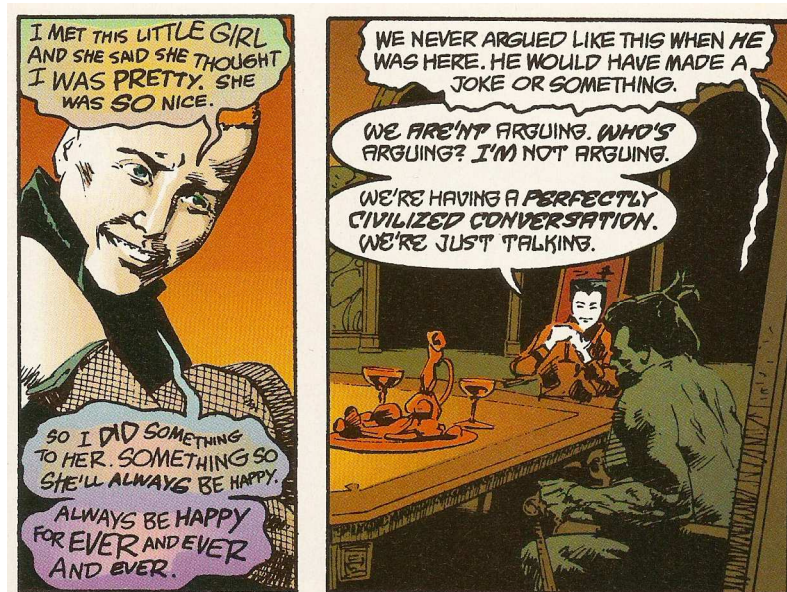
Image 1: Signature speech bubbles of Delirium, Despair and Desire as pictured in *The Season of Mists* by artist Mike Dringenberg, letterer Todd Klein and colorist Steve Oliff (Gaiman et al. 1993, 29).
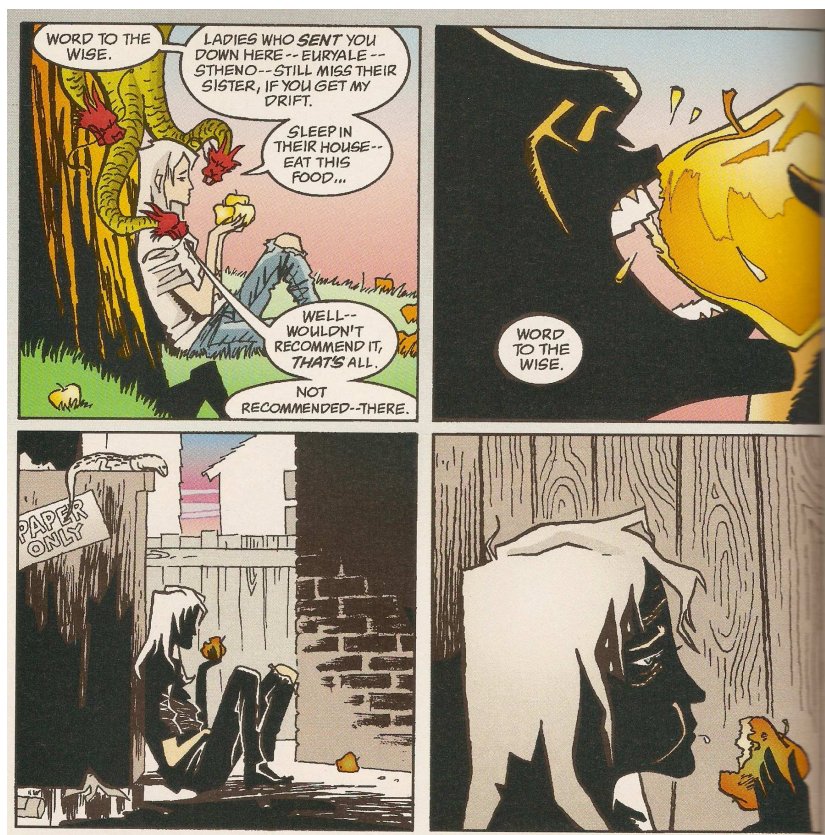
Image 2: Hippolyta Hall's slide to insanity in *The Kindly Ones* is well illustrated through her wildly distortive focalization of her surroundings. Artist Marc Hempel starts indicating the change more subtly, with uneven linework and lack of color, but Lyta's visions finally develop into a full-blown parallel fantasy world. (Gaiman et al. 1996, ch. 4, 19.)
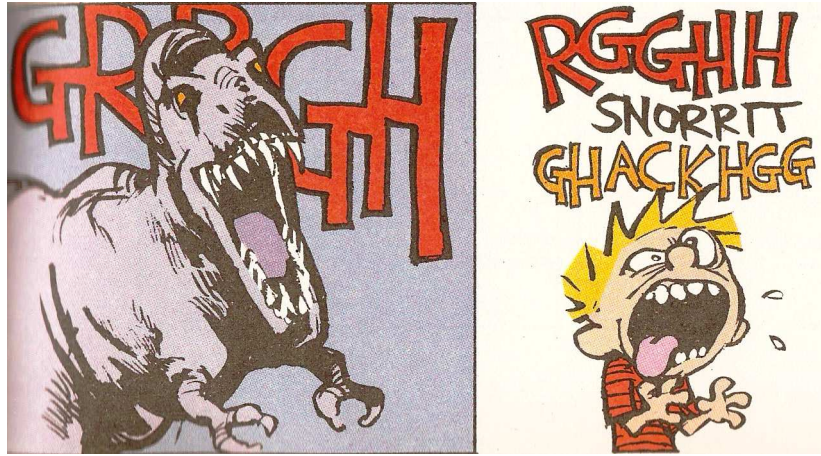
Image 3: Many *Calvin and Hobbes* strips are based on the mismatch between the fantastical worlds and creatures Calvin sees in his hyperactive imagination and what actually transpires around him. He frequently sees himself as well as the characters around him in a way that is both figurative and reflective of his rich inner world. Calvin's strong visual focalization even allows the artist, Bill Watterson to experiment with vastly different drawing styles. All in all, few comic book artists have used the technique as effectively as him. (Watterson 1995, 151.)

Image 4: Hiroaki Samura's *Blade of the Immortal* (1994–) is one of the many manga series that repeatedly hide parts of their characters' faces when it would be the most crucial for the reader to see them in their entirety. This frame from *The Gathering* storyline invites the reader to add the eyes and the emotion they could convey. The fragment-like image and the strong words in the speech bubble merely point towards possible directions. (Samura 2000, 18.)
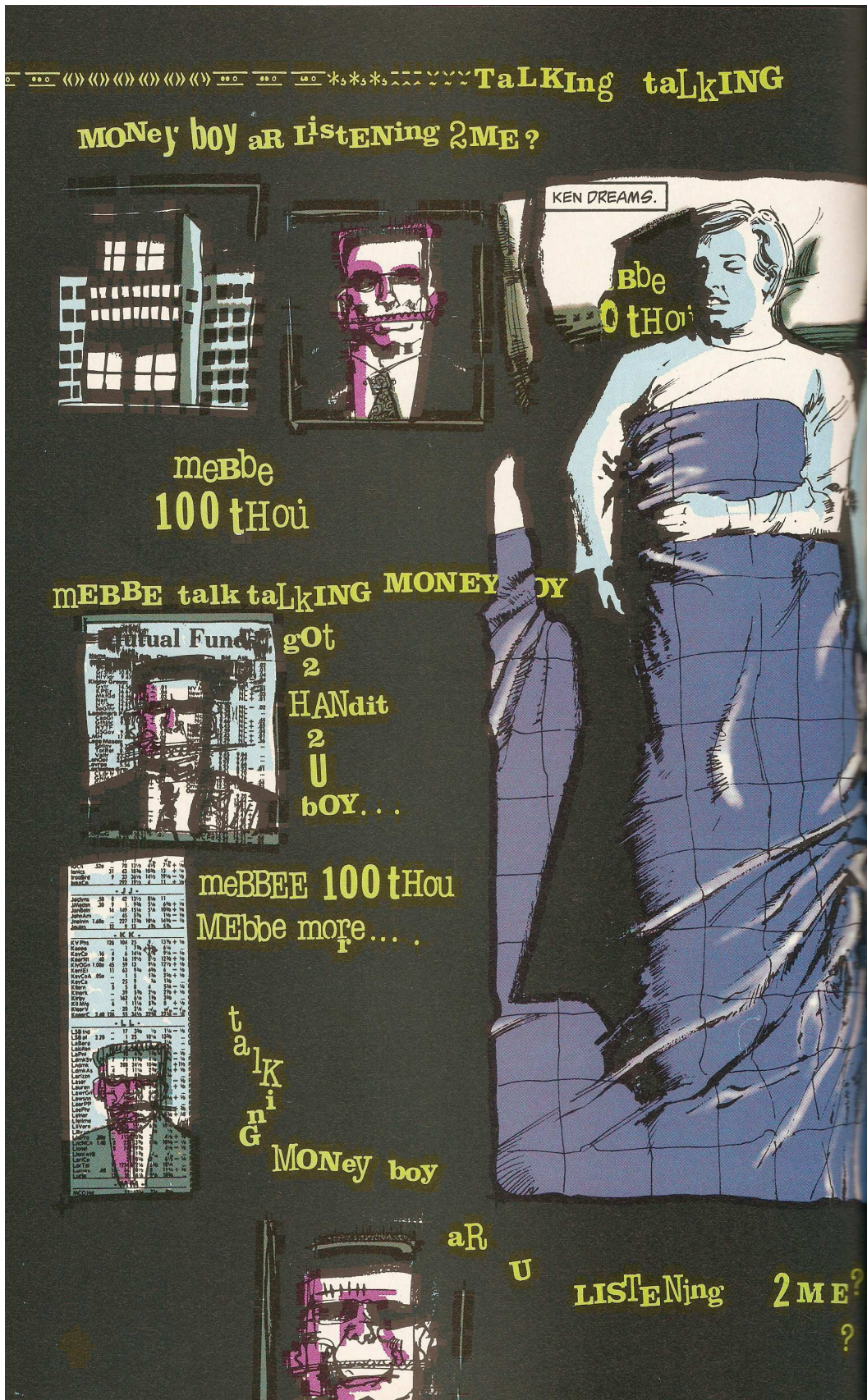
Image 5: *The Doll's House* features a good number of dreams, the contents and visual styles of which vary significantly from character to character. Here, artist Mike Dringenberg has achieved the dream-like quality through collage. (Gaiman et al. 1990, 182).

Image 6: This is just one example of the sinisterly humorous overlappings *Watchmen* bursts with. The emotional states and types of heroics different characters personify in these two scenes appear starkly contrastive due to their structural closeness. (Moore & Gibbons 1986–87, ch. III, 12.)
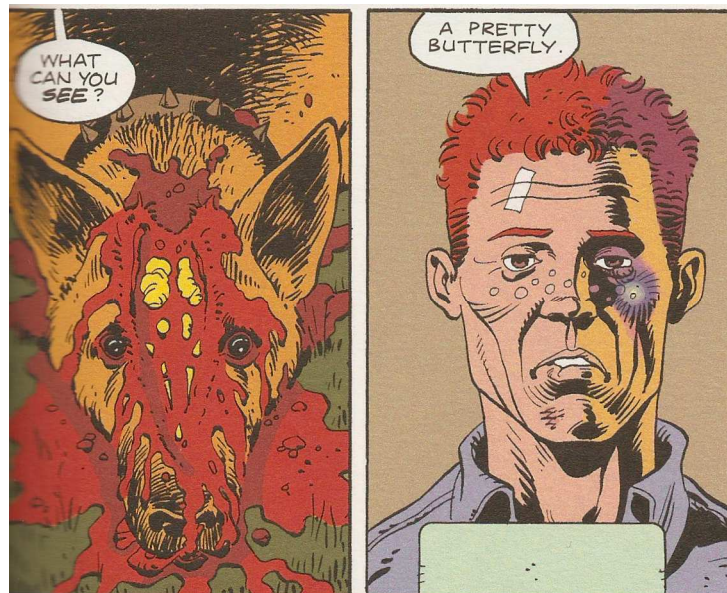
Image 7: Just one gutter is enough to shift the point of view from the subjective vision of Rorschach to the objective perception of Dr. Malcolm Long who interviews him. Few techniques in any medium could give the reader as immediate understanding of a dishonest character. (Moore & Gibbons 1986–87 ch. VI, 1.)
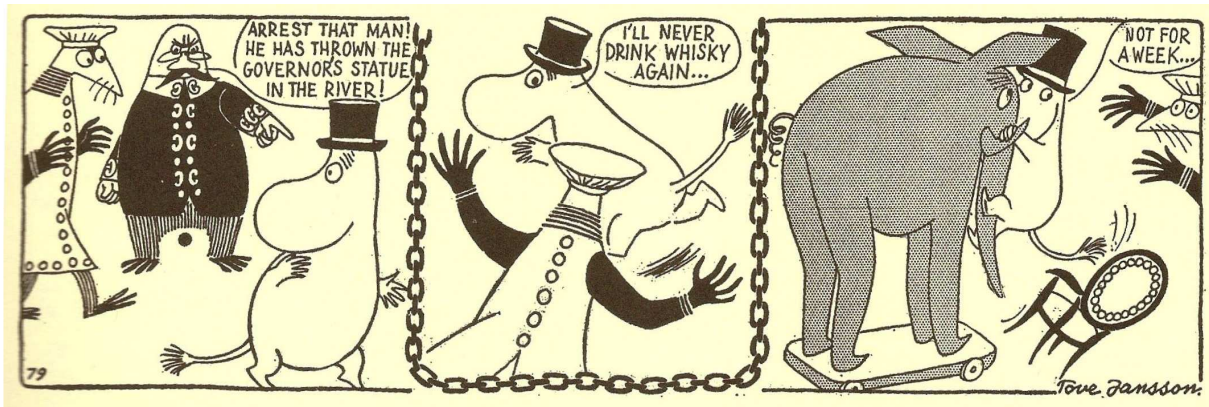
Image 8: Moominpappa's fear of being captured as well as the other characters' intention to capture him are well visualized by the chain-shaped gutters (Jansson 2006, 73).

Image 9: Art Spiegelman's mouse-self shrinks into a child for a few pages. This underlines his role as a son but also visualizes the feelings of powerlessness and inadequacy he describes to his therapist in the scene. (Spiegelman 1991, II, 43)

Image 10: The three witches, portrayed by Sam Kieth, change places – or faces – in *Preludes and Nocturnes* (Gaiman et al. 1991a, 74).