RHIZ|COMICS: THE STRUCTURE, SIGN, AND PLAY OF IMAGE AND TEXT

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy
Rhetorics, Communication and Information Design

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation combines Gregory Ulmer's post-criticism with multimodal composition resulting in a work that critiques the medium of comics in comics format. Six traditional text chapters forge a theoretical and practical foundation; punctuated within and without by occasional visual interludes and three comic sections. I advocate teaching multimodal composition through comics' interplay of image and text.

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Introduction: Plexed Artistry

"This book is not a good book."

Lyotard, *DF* 19

uestes erant tenuissimis filis subtili artificio indissolubili materia perfectae,

quas, uti post eadem prodente cognoui, suis manibus ipsa texuerat; quarum

speciem, ueluti fumosas imagines solet, caligo quaedam neglectae uetustatis

obduxerat. harum in extremo margine Π graecum, in supremo uero Θ legebatur

intextum atque inter utrasque litteras in scalarum modum gradus quidam insigniti

uidebantur, quibus ab inferiore ad superius elementum esset ascensus.

Her clothing was wrought of the finest thread by subtle workmanship brought to

an indivisible piece. This had she woven with her own hands, as I afterwards did

learn by her own shewing. Their beauty was somewhat dimmed by the dulness

of long neglect, as is seen in the smoke-grimed masks of our ancestors. On the

border below was inwoven the symbol Π, on that above was to be read a Θ. And

between the two letters there could be marked degrees, by which, as by the rungs

of a ladder, ascent might be made from the lower principle to the higher.

Boethius, *Consilatio* Philosophiae, 1. 3-4

As one of the first texts I read in Latin, Boethius' *Consolatio* has had a great influence

on me. I remember when I first saw Lady Philosophy, decked in her homespun robe. In

my elementary knowledge, I imagined the two letters as the walls of a ladder, the steps

moving back and forth from practical to theoretical knowledge. Comparing my own

translation to others, I realized I had made an error. Practical knowledge lay at the bottom of the garment, waiting to be overcome by one who would climb toward theoretical knowledge. Philosophy banishes those meretricious muses, calling them *scenicas meretriculas* (drama queens), knowing that only philosophy can heal the sick. They are far too base for her higher theoretical knowledge.

I still like my first reading better.

Boethius is much more ambivalent than the informed (and oversimplified) reading presents him. Certainly, he loves philosophy, his consolation, but he also loves poetry and muses. The *Consolatio*'s prosimetrical form offers (in)[decon]struct-able/d binaries, theory and practice, poetry and prose. The steps that join theory and practice are productive (*poesis*).What Aristotle theorized, Boethius practices: knowing, doing, and making.

I took these lessons with me in choosing a graduate program. I loved theory, but I loved making things out of it. I loved teaching, but too many pedagogues tended to fear either thinking about their work or using it to produce anything of worth; far too often they avoid both. Clemson's PhD program in Rhetorics, Communication and Information Design stresses theoretical, practical, and productive knowledge. It offered me at once a place to reflect and learn, while forcing me to teach and reflect, to create and again to reflect. It struck me quickly that the warp of the weave was reflection. Shuttling back and forth from production to practice to theory, reflection made it all work.

This dissertation was produced out of a desire to weave these three. In seeking to theorize multimodal composition, I realized a truly multimodal text would be made of knowing and doing. Comics appeared first as a way of discussing the marriage of words to things, of theory and practice. Whereas much of multimodal composition theory

has stressed one medium over another, I found in comics a medium that operated quite self-consciously on the hypostatic union of semantic and sensory that all media always engage. Rather than offering comics as the supreme medium or a meta-medium or a container medium, I find they perform the same basic operations all other media do, but more obviously, more basically.

It is this obviousness that first presented comics to me as an object of study. On every page of a comic, readers are forced to move rapidly, recursively from text to image. Comic readers consciously and unconsciously read images and see text (and vice-versa). The infinite gulf between plastic and print is routinely bridged in a medium rarely considered beautiful or sublime.

Comics also offer a way of performing post-criticism, Greg Ulmer's term for using the medium to critique the medium. Ulmer advocates working in other media rather than attempting to critique from the outside (text).[1] Previously, I've employed this methodology to create video games, comics, and videos. For the dissertation, comics was an obvious choice. As the only print option that, they seemed the most likely to be accepted by the graduate school.

Early on in my research Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari provided me an opening and a caveat. The notion of Rhiz|comics transports the rhizome into multimodal composition. I firmly believe that comics and composition need the figure of the rhizome desperately. Deleuze and Guattari present the Rhizome in opposition to the classical tree model of the book (exemplified most notably by Peter Ramus, on whom more later). Rather than constantly subdividing or obeying the species-genus-differentiae model of definition, rhizomic writing moves up, left, east, out, down, through, over, against, *et semper cetera*. My students had spent too long internalizing the five-paragraph essay.

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1   *Il n'ya pas de hors-texte*.

It gave them indigestion. Worse, I had to read their five-paragraph essays. A rhizomic model of writing recognizes what composition teachers have known for so long: writing is recursive, communal, fictional, multiple, nonlinear.

To this list I add that composition is always already multimodal. And here we come to Deleuze and Guattari's caveat:

> Each plateau can be read starting anywhere and can be related to any other plateau. To attain the multiple, one must have a method that effectively constructs it; no typographical cleverness, no lexical agility, no blending or creation of words, no syntactical boldness can substitute for it. In fact, these are more often than not merely mimetic procedures used to disseminate or disperse a unity that is retained in a different dimension for an image-book. Technonarcissism. (*A Thousand Plateaus* 22)

A Thousand Plateaus is multimodal only in this philosophical, "always-already" sense I used above. Certainly their text has a sensory nature, appearing as marks on a page or illuminated pixels, but they took very little advantage of this property, almost ignoring it completely. For them, such calls are mere technonarcissism.

Multimodal composition seems to draw technonarcissists. I'm probably the chief offender. I love making my students download the latest open-source software and create something new and exciting. I worry that I sometimes use Photoshop just because I've got it. I fight against those who think that writing must always be (or ever was) just words on paper. Technology is neither an end to itself or a destructive force.

Flipping the quote around we get the strange claim that their book may be read out of order, for it is rhizomatic. Jean-François Lyotard made the same claim about his *Discours, figure*. He called such a book, "a good book." This is not such a book. It has an order. It has rhizomic moments, but it is for the most part a traditional dissertation (albeit

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a multimodally technonarcissistic one).

The dissertation is divided into three sections: knowing, doing, and making. Part one, knowing, takes up the first three chapters. Part two, doing, consists of chapters four through six. Making twists across the entirety. Three comic excurses punctuate my overall argument, acting as notes toward a supreme composition (borrowing their titles from Wallace Stevens).

With its focus on theory, the first half may feel a bit heavier than the second. Chapter one, "The Structure of Comics: *Ut Poesis Pictura*," begins by querying Derrida's infamous *hors-texte*. It offers possible outsides while attempting to avoid the inside|outside binary. In contrast to current definitions of comics, based either on the movement across the gutter or on historical/generic contexts, I decenter comics around the image-text binary. This focal point allows an expansion of comic theory into other media and fields such as hypermedia.

Excursus one, "It Must Be Abstract," advocates a return to dialogue in composition. It attempts to show rather than tell the advantages of a multimodal composition always in conversation with itself.

Chapter two, "Signs of the Times: Figure, Discourse," repeatedly deconstructs the sign searching for a third way between discourse and figure. Close readings provides ample evidence that the categories of image and text refuse to stabilize. Texts are seen and images read. For the first time comics become the objects of criticism, but artifacts traditionally considered texts leap alongside them to complicate the medium.

Chapter three, "Playing It Cool: Reflexive Multimodal Composition," interrogates possible syntheses for discourse, figure, finally finding the synthesis in the reader. The reader's participatory synthesis of modes remediates hot media towards cold. The chapter itself relies heavily on a reader's synthesis of multiple texts: both the main text and that

of three tangents on Greek philosophical terms. Finally, I advocate a reflexive multimodal composition, the focus of the second half of the dissertation.

Splitting the two halves we have the second excursus, "It Must Change." This comic triangulates a future for composition based on design. The iterative design model (design, test, analyze) offers old ways of new writing and vice versa. From the first excursus' dualism, we move towards possible third ways.

With the second half, the heady theories of the first half are brought to ground in practical application. Chapter four, "Restructuring Reading: Hypermedia and Rhiz|Comics," begins the second half by examining the structure of games. I will rely here upon various game and hypermedia theorists and show how games (digital and textual) perform Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome. All the while, I keep in mind Deleuze's critique of technonarcissism. My post-criticism does not free me from logocentism, instead I construct the rhizome across media.

Chapter five, "Signatures of Rhiz|comics: Anti-mimetic Praxis and Comics" looks back at previous examples of rhiz|comics. Though I earlier situated mimetic theories historically, I will here perform an anachronism. My argument here is that what Deleuze, Derrida, Ulmer, and even I discuss is, strictly speaking, nothing new. The undoing of the image|text binary has persisted since the earliest marks on cave walls. Andre Leroi-Gourhan's work becomes informed by Bruno Latour and Mark Tansey.

The final excursus, "It Must Give Pleasure," calls play back in from recess. The prescription for student narcolepsy is playful pedagogy. We as scholars and teachers have forgotten Sidney's twofold use of poesy: to instruct and to delight. If we are to join poesis to praxis and theoria, play must provide the glue.

Chapter six, "Playing with You: Rhizcomics in the Classroom," refocuses my argument on composition, explaining how comic composition teaches electracy and

rhizomatic thought in productive ways. Reflecting on various teaching experiences in my Technical Writing classroom, I show the resistance to new thought and the breakthroughs that Rhiz|comics can offer. Two compositionists in particular, George Hillocks and Tom Rickert, provide the theoretical basis for my pedagogy. Hillocks outlines the possibility of a reflexive pedagogy, a pedagogy unconsciously employed by many compositionists already. Rickert dissects the pedagogy of cynical resistance, endorsing its use as he complicates its methods. I add to this a final tool for pedagogical self-awareness and for constructing a multimodal classroom: augmented pedagogy.

The critical reader may already have noticed patterns in the organization of the chapters and in their titles. These patterns will continue throughout the dissertation, especially as I multiply modes in subsequent chapters. This weaving across chapters follows the general arthrology first termed by Thierry Groensteen, and most notably used in Vladimir Nabokov's prosimetrical *Pale Fire*. In *Pale Fire* the weaving of prose and poetry, text and commentary, reader and writer, constructs a single object, a multiplexed text. At one point a character seems to discover the text around him and the artist who has constructed it:

But all at once it dawned on me that *this*

Was the real point, the contrapuntal theme;

Just this: not text, but texture; not the dream

But topsy-turvical coincidence,

Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense.

Yes! It sufficed that I in life could find

Some kind of link-and-bobolink, some kind
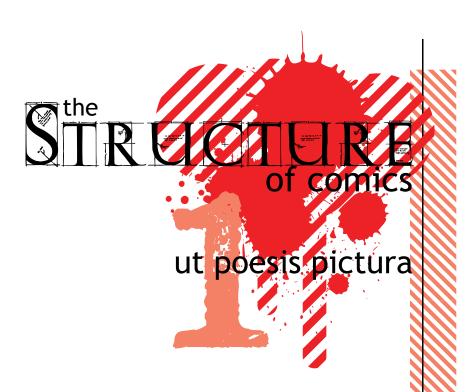
Of correlated pattern in the game,

Plexed artistry, and something of the same

Pleasure in it as they who played it found. (ll. 806-15)

Plexed artistry, then. There can be no more beautiful term for the reflexive, multimodal composition I advocate. I offer it then as an homage to its greatest practitioner since Boethius. May this work offer you the same pleasure as I found in playing it.

For now, abide these three: *theoria*, *praxis*, *poesis*, but the greatest of these is *poesis*.

the STRUCTURE

of comics

ut poesis pictura

1

Eye am become a transparent I

I begin then with the eye, and all will spread from this initial insistence. There are two aspects of the eye's physiology with which I will erect a structure for the playing out of interconnections.

First, there is peripheral vision. The distribution of rods and cones on the back of the eye makes peripheral vision more acute at seeing difference—black and white—and narrow vision more acute at seeing continuity—the range of color. While looking at stars, for example, the periphery is far more able to distinguish these small balls of light against the dark sky, and every stargazer must learn to look near but not directly at.

Second, there is the parallax view. Three dimensional space is a mental construction based upon two conflicting interpretations of the world—those of the left and right eye.

Keeping these two figures in mind, I will proceed to discuss comics, through the two lenses of philosophy and art, but also as a center I must walk around.

This first chapter then may seem to have little to do with comics per se, but recognize that they are evident in each assertion I make.

If we are to discuss the eye, we must

begin with its story's teller, George Bataille:

The point of view I adopt is one that reveals the coordination of these potentialities. I do not seek to identify them with each other but I endeavor to find the point where they may converge beyond their mutual exclusiveness. (*Erotism* 7)

Bataille's figure of sex and death is at once parallax and peripheral, combinatory and superficial. My task concerns concepts no less important to a unified description of being: image and text, coupled with perception and action.

The discipline of optics takes the actual object and the virtual image as its starting-points and shows in what circumstances that object becomes virtual, that image actual, and then how both object and image become either actual or virtual.

(Deleuze, "The Actual and the Virtual" nt. 9)

We are told everywhere that there is a change underway. The digital revolution, the advent of visual literacy, it is called by many names. Sometimes it is a technological renaissance, other times a paradigm shift. I however am interested not in defining this change, in finding its limits, but rather in decentering it, both laying down and (re)moving its center. As may seem obvious, the center lies in the middle, between; not with a finis on each side, the limits waiting to be defined, but between other, older centers.
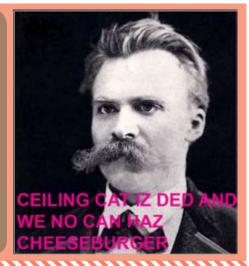
I will choose two centers and watch them move: visual and verbal. These are not chosen at random, but as a means of approaching the question sidelong. This division may indeed be hardwired into our brains, the verbal left hemisphere coupled to the visual right hemisphere by the corpus callosum. Thought exists in the communication across this fissure. Neuroscience teaches us that ideas are not localizable within the brain but are created by neural connections (Damassio). Similarly, words are almost meaningless without context. Meaning is created through connections. New media make this more explicit as context becomes removable.

Just as context and text are no longer easily separable, visual and verbal modes have become inextricable—rather have been revealed to have always been the same thing. I am not the first to argue this. W. J. T Mitchell implies that the division between image and text has always been illusory (46). Each new medium uses these two modes in one way or another. Film and television greet us with moving images coupled to an audio track. The average magazine today contains more space devoted to images than text, and page layout itself has always been a visual mode. Digital media marry image and text throughout. The DJ spins in front of old kung fu and blaxploitation flicks. If there is a new paradigm, it is not a stable position but a method: interconnectivity of various modes. This interconnectivity must embrace its own inherent reflexivity.

Lol Cats

For example, there is the contextless lolcat meme. Originally a look inside the dubiously grammatical world of cats, the meme has circled the internets subsuming culture and creating its own context along the way. The context of the greater meme of imitation lolcats becomes inseparable from the original. Context itself becomes inseparable from the text, in which case it is not context. In new media context is (re)producible.

CEILING CAT IZ DED AND WE NO CAN HAZ CHEESEBURGER

From defining to decentering

If it is everywhere, why start with comics? One measures a circle starting anywhere (Charles Fort or Alan Moore, I can never remember[1]) so we might as well start there, at the periphery, in that marginalized medium. However, they also seem to evidence this multimodality more explicitly than any other medium. The metatextuality of multimodal texts forces self-reflection, and this is a good thing. Before we continue then, allow me a digression on the indefinability of comics, bringing us closer to decentering.

We must start where every scholarly work on comics starts, with Will Eisner and Scott McCloud. Eisner pioneered comic theory, beginning with comic strips, creating the Graphic Novel, and finally offering book length treatises on what he called "sequential art." This term is important for Eisner and for the field because it set in stone a specific definition for comics: the interrelationship of panels to create a narrative. Between one panel and the next, the reader[2] creates closure, a sense of narrative and connection. Art Spiegelman calls this "time mapped across space" and he too recognizes it as the quintessential comic moment. Marshall McLuhan saw in this moment comics' participatory power—the reader is forced to interact with the comic more consciously than with a traditional text. This then is Eisner's definition of comics: sequential art.
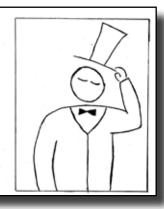
1   Don't listen to him, it's Fort.
2   I realize the problems inherent in the term Reader, but I will complicate it in later chapters to the degree that it is applicable to comics.

If Eisner is the Plato of comics, McCloud is the Aristotle. He took Eisner's definition and systematized it. His definition of comics follows Eisner's, becoming more explicit as it does: pictorial and other images placed in deliberate sequence. McCloud also notes a productive inconsistency in this definition: it applies to things we would never think of as comics. McCloud finds sequential art in the Bayeux Tapestry, Trajan's Column, a Mayan Codex, even cave paintings. And herein lies the problem. Scholars have since tried desperately to pin down the *finis*, the limit of comics, in their definitions, mostly with little success.

Aaron Meskin's 2007 article, "Defining Comics?" provides an erudite description of the issue. Meskin's problem with most definitions is that they offer an ahistorical account of comics, which leaves their account open to plausible counterexamples from the prehistory of comics. . . . One obvious response to this problem would be to incorporate a historical condi-

tion into the proposed definition. (369) The problem could be put more succinctly: we all know what we are referring to when we say comics, and it has nothing to do with cave paintings. By defining comics historically, Meskin evades this problem elegantly.

The art of comics, which began in the middle of the nineteenth century and developed largely out of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century caricature and mid-nineteenth-century British humor magazines such as Punch, can and should be understood on its own terms and by reference to its own history. (376)

However, this definition obliterates comics' uniqueness and potency. If comics are defined solely historically, they can only be studied through historical modes and have little to say to contemporary issues across disciplines. Meskin recognizes this flaw and seeks to evade it by questioning whether we actually need a definition.

I follow Meskin to a certain degree but am unable to avoid defining comics by the same means. I have no definition I could give that would surpass the efforts of scholars who have come before me, yet I cannot leave the term hanging and build an entire structure on it. Rather than defining, I seek to decenter comics. The *de* of *define* entails *laying down*, in this case a *limit*. Here decentering takes on this meaning as well as the more traditional meaning of destabilizing. On the one hand, laying down the center entails focusing on what comics do more explicitly than other media; for me this is the combination of the visual and the virtual. On the other hand, moving this center means moving terms, from comics to rhiz|comics. Throughout the rest of this chapter I will attempt this first move, laying down a center and leave the decentering until the next chapter.
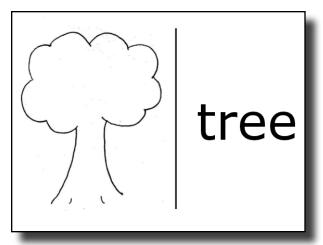
The Center which is no Center
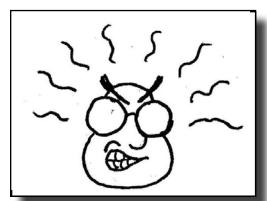
Image and text, visual and verbal have been separated for as long as there has been language. Saussure's sign itself speaks to this division, on one side an image of a tree, on the other, the word "tree" itself. Homer signifies a distinct moment in the history of this division. While the original *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were presented multimodally through oral presentation (gesture at this moment inextricably tied to speech), the moment it is written down it becomes something else. Homeric scholarship has since been an archaeology of what was lost in translation from speech to writing. The division has existed since the birth

of ekphrasis and the notion of *ut pictura poesis*, echoing down through the history of art. W. J. T. Mitchell's *Iconography* provides a

route in to art criticism for those of us who are on the outside. The second half of his book provides a historical overview of the imagetext division through four major critics. First, we have Edmund Burke's distinction between sublime and beautiful. The sublime always signifies a depth of feeling greater than signification can signify. It could be viewed as the love and fear wrapped up in the supplement. For Burke it exists only in language, for painting cannot signify more than what it is. Instead, its worth lies in beauty, in designating rather than signifying. Kant's aesthetic theory depends heavily upon Burke.

Gotthold Lessing built upon Burke's work, further elucidating the relationship between painting and poetry. For Lessing, the relationship comes down to space and time: painting is atemporal representation within space; poetry is temporal representation divorced from space. Lessing abhors (a la Burke) any mixing between the two. His simplistic definition is complicated through various examples. Keats' "Ode upon a Grecian Urn" is the classic refutation of Lessing, but comics work just as well. Like Keats' ode, comics signify and designate simultaneously. On every page the visual and the verbal invert each other, from the onomatopoeias delivered in textured fonts to the designation of movement and emotions in emminata.

Ernst Gombrich known for his embrace of the Nature/Convention binary. Gombrich wishes to erect a strict barrier between art and literature on the basis of this distinction—art is natural, literature is conventional—but finds that the binary deconstructs itself before his eyes. For Mitchell, Gombrich lacks the naivety of his predecessors to think he could ever maintain this distinction, but he has inherited their desire to do so. Gombrich, at once enamored by nature and skeptical of its universality, chooses a Platonic dialectic between *phusis* and *nomos*.

Nelson Goodman reacts to Gombrich's omphaloskepsis with an almost scientific rigor. He divides between picture and paragraph but allows that the distinction is relative to interpretation. One may read a picture and see a paragraph. However, our readings are preconditioned. Contrary to his predecessors, "Hybrid texts are not only possible but are entirely describable in his system . . . The only question is whether the results are interesting" (Mitchell 70).

However, preceding all of this historical narrative, the first half of Mitchell's book begins with definitions of image and text. Mitchell's definitions suffer from the same problems that we have seen in definitions of comics. We all know the difference between image and text, but in attempting to clarify this distinction we realize it is no nearly as stable as we assume. Mitchell ends this first section of his book with a summary,

Perhaps the redemption of the imagination lies in accepting the fact that we create much of our world out of the dialogue between verbal and pictorial representations, and that our task is not to renounce this dialogue in favor of a direct assault on nature but to see that nature already

informs both sides of the conversation. (46) This interplay between image and word comprises our experience with the world, and we cannot evade it in some attempt to access the real, but instead must look at the conversation going on between the real, image, and word. While Mitchell insinuates that Structuralism may provide a way around this binary (47), I will now elucidated my reasons for thinking that poststructuralism can provide a form of indirect assault on nature through a peripheral parallax, around and through, both and always another.

Mitchell, it should be noted, does not come down on the side of the structuralists but rather hypothesizes that this binary will continue to resist our theories. Zizek would remind us that this resistance proves the center's reality. It is the no which says yes, the repressed continually reasserting its power. Perhaps the peripheral and the parallax of poststructuralism can bring us closer to the decentering I have promised.

The Outside is the Inside

We move now to Jacques Derrida and to a proviso: I cannot wholly embrace Derrida's theories of language but I must utilize his methodologies of research and theory. My issue with Derrida's theory of language may actually be illusory, but I think it worth stating. In *Of Grammatology* Derrida explicates the differences between speech and writing, arguing brilliantly and against common sense that the latter may precede the former. The entire argument depends upon the play of presence and absence, explicated in a truncated form in "*Différance.*" Finally he brings us to his boldest and most controversial move: "There is no outside-text" (158). Much ink has been spilled in the argument over exactly what this may mean. It certainly argues for an immanence which recognizes that there is no metalinguistic position while maintaining an interest in metatextuality. However, the battle depends more upon what is meant by text in this formulation. Derrida has already complicated its definition throughout this work (and others). Suffice to say, I am uncomfortable with the word because I fear it might return us to a kind of logocentrism; however, I also embrace its evocation of textile weaving, folding compli-

Etymology Fun

This network of word descends from the Latin *plectō*, meaning "to plait, braid." Its sister, *plicō*, means "to fold," and descends from the same Greek verb: πλεκω, which means, "to plait, twine, twist, weave, braid…metaph[orically] to plan, devise, contrive." The original Greek verb, πλεκω, split into two distinct meanings in Latin, but rather than differentiating the metaphorical from the literal, each word retained both aspects. From *plectō* we get "plexus" and "complex", whereas *plicō* yields both "explicate" and "explicit." This particular lexical node entails the concepts of planning and folding. When a critic explicates a passage the author's original complex plans are unraveled before the reader—the latently metatextual becomes patent. All future puns may be inferred by the reader with the author's willing consent.

cations. An easy way to answer my fears is to exclude it by following Foucault's formulation instead: "There is no outside" (*Discipline and Punish* 35); this act of cowardice on my part is not wholly respectable and when we get to Lyotard I may become more gallant. My proviso given, I will proceed with Derrida.
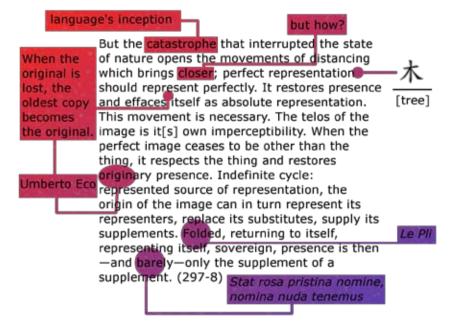
The initial concept I must take from Grammatology is of course the *grammè*. The *grammè* is the mark, writing, the trace. It is the moment of *différance* and its effects become what is called text.

Derrida's notion of the figural, at least within *Of Grammatology*, is illusory, elusive (note the puns on the latin word for play, *ludo, lusus,* which will continue). The image is for the most part presented as a moment of the *grammè*: a moment between speechlessness and alphabet, a hypothetical unreachable origin:

> Like the first word, the first pictogram is therefore an image, both in the sense of imitative representation and of metaphoric displacement. The interval between the thing itself and its reproduction, however faithful, is traversed only by transference. The first sign is determined as an image. The idea has an essential relationship to the sign, the representative substitution of sensation. (282)

We saw this in Saussure's sign. The signifier and signified are divided by an insurmountable gap. As we move to accept Derrida's play along the chain of signification we find that the gap itself is where his interest lies. *Différance* is not *in* the gap but rather *is* the gap.

One more example from *Of Grammatology* before continuing with *différance*:

language's inception

but how?

When the original is lost, the oldest copy becomes the original.

Umberto Eco

But the catastrophe that interrupted the state of nature opens the movements of distancing which brings closer; perfect representation should represent perfectly. It restores presence and effaces itself as absolute representation. This movement is necessary. The telos of the image is it[s] own imperceptibility. When the perfect image ceases to be other than the thing, it respects the thing and restores originary presence. Indefinite cycle: represented source of representation, the origin of the image can in turn represent its representers, replace its substitutes, supply its supplements. Folded, returning to itself, representing itself, sovereign, presence is then —and barely—only the supplement of a supplement. (297-8)

木
[tree]

Le Pli

Stat rosa pristina nomine, nomina nuda tenemus

Here we see *différance*, the differentia-tion that is at once a schism and a defer-ral. The difference of *différance* becomes entwined with the dual eyes of the par-allax, while the constructed absent real-ity present within the mind figures deferral. We also have the notion of a center which is no center. This center cannot be seen directly, but only peripherally. The structure depends upon it. The sign gives it meaning (so long as we forget the play along the chain of significa-tion). Play swirls us back toward this center, at times moving the center itself. This mode of pe-riphery, of a center which is no center may be seen in the trace, the origin which is no origin:

The gap is crucial to deconstructive thought and to comics. We saw that Mc-Cloud and Eisner wish to fix the gap as the gutter, the area between panels. I however try to fix it as the gap between sense and sign, visual and verbal. Put in the language of comics, the difference is between interpanel and intrapanel gaps. McCloud and Eisner's focus on interpanel gaps reduces comics to time stretched across space. Intrap-anel participation forces its own deconstruction at each viewing.

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Erscheinung

...differences appear among the elements or rather produce them, make them emerge as such and constitute the texts, the chains, and the systems of traces. These chains and systems cannot be outlined except in the fabric of this trace or imprint.

textile

The unheard difference between the appearing and the appearance (between the "world" and "lived experience") is the condition of all other differences, of all other traces, and it is already a trace. This last concept is thus absolutely and by rights "anterior" to all physiological problematics concerning the nature of the engramme [the unit of engraving], or metaphysical problematics concerning the meaning of absolute presence whose trace is thus opened to deciphering. The trace is in fact the absolute origin of sense in general. Which amounts to saying once again that there is no origin of sense in general. The trace is the différance which opens appearance and signification. (65)

but how can the trace be anterior to the traced?

And with the trace we come to comics. I too am merely a tracer, adding depth to the work of one who has gone before me. I have here traced he who traced the trace. Derrida's methodol-ogy then comprises periphery and parallax, but it also gives me a more practical mode:

If the simulacrum is ever going to occur, its writing must be in the interval between several styles. And the insinuation of the woman (of) Nietzsche is that, if there is going to be style,

there can only be more than one. (*Spurs* 139)

This simulacrum, the forgotten umbrella, calls for an interplay of styles and modes, of image and text, I would argue.

The Given Is Not a Text

Jean-François Lyotard's figure looms large here, as does his discourse. His frustratingly untranslated *Discours, Figure* offers a much more sustained deconstruction of image and text than Derrida. Individual chapters have been translated, and Geoffrey Bennington's colossal chapter on *Discours, Figure* in *Lyotard: Writing the Event* provides a complex reading of the entire work, a reading upon which I depend.

In the first chapter of *Discours, Figure*, Lyotard lays out the stakes of his argument:

> This book protests: the given is not a text, there is a density to it, or rather a difference, a constitutive difference which is not to be read, but to be seen, this difference, and the immobile mobility which reveals it, is what is continually forgotten in signifying it. ("Taking the Side of the Figural" 34)

Such is the **imaginary**: to possess both this side and the other. Such is sin and pride: possessing both the **text** and the **illustration** ("Taking the Side of the Figural" 35).

Here my reasons for not completely siding with Derrida become evident. The given is not a text. The (originary) act is not reading but seeing, of which reading is only an aspect. Think of reading as a fold of seeing, one of the folds of which earlier Derrida spoke and of which Deleuze would soon speak. The fold however has grown strong while the THIS out of which it folded has been left to atrophy. We see this particularly in the way images are now read while text is rarely seen.

When referring to "originary" thus far, consider it to have been placed between paranthe-

ses, bracketed from sense. This is presaged by Derrida and by Lyotard's extensive discussion of the *arche*:

> **αρχη**
>
> **Phenomenology**
>
> **Psychoanlysis**
>
> it is time for philosophers to renounce the production of a unitary theory as the last word upon things. There is no arche, but nor does the Good appear as an unitary horizon. We never touch the thing itself except metaphorically, but this laterality is not, as Merleau-Ponty believed, that of existence, which is much too close to the unity of the subject, as he finally recognised; rather, it is that of the unconscious or of expression, which in one and the same movement opens and reserves all content. This laterality is difference or depth. ("Taking the Side of the Figural" 42)

One advantage of this quote is that it at once displays the difficulty of Discourse, Figure and its basic organization. Lyotard walks back and forth from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis. The multivocality of the origin is the hinge upon which these two turn. In a later chapter, he calls this THIS by the name of matrix-figure, that from out of which all discourse and figure erupts, yet itself having neither form nor sense:

> To establish the matrix-figure in a textual, *a fortiori* systematic space would be to imagine it as an *arche*, to entertain a double phantasy: first that of an origin, and then that of an utterable origin. Far from being an origin, the phantasmatic matrix demonstrates to the contrary, that our origin is an absence of origin and that everything that appears as the object of a primal discourse is an hallucinatory image-figure, located precisely in this initial non-locus. ("The Connivances of Desire with the Figural" 293)

The question of origin returns elusively. The matrix-figure certainly occupies the non-locus of an origin, yet can be no univocal, utterable origin. The matrixfigure takes the side of the figural, while not being a figure itself. What then of my earlier implications that the origin is somehow figural? Lyotard responds in the very next chapter: "The figure cannot lie, since it has no pretensions toward univocality" ("The Dream-Work Does Not Think" 50).

We are finally approaching the THIS: Anaximander's *apeiron*, the ur-stuff out of which existence exists. The boundless, apeiron can be made to dance with Lyotard's figural, and out of this dance we may begin to see. The *apeiron* signifies that which is perceived in the parallax view, but that which is also constructed. We might look to Lacan's triangle of Imaginary, Sym-

bolic, and Real. In my example the imaginary and the symbolic occupy the places of each eye, while the real is that which is perceived and constructed through their mediation. Image and text in conversation with the *apeiron*.
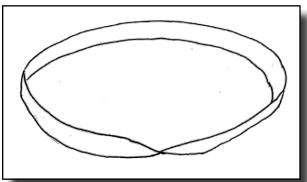
The interplay of figural and discourse leads us toward Lyotard's later development of the libidinal band. The libidinal band is a single surface, like a Moebius strip. We might imagine this as an origin, but only a hypothetical and impossible one. One of the interesting things about the Moebius strip is that when cut it does two different things. First, if we cut it along the middle, we get one very long strip with two sides. Second, if we instead cut it along an imaginary line a third of the way from the edge, we get two new strips, one with two sides and one new moebius strip, both strips being interlocked. This second cut signifies Lyotard's formulation of the relationship between the disjunctive bar and the libidinal band. It also signifies the relationship between discourse

and figure. Discourse is two sided, binary, predicated by *différance* as Derrida has shown us. The figural, however could be likened more closely to this libidinal band.
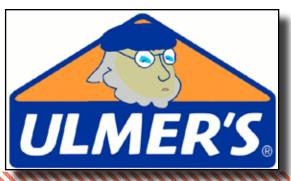
Finally we have Lyotard's Differend: an imagined conversation across languages. My own panmodal rhetoric signifies bearing witness to new idioms. Parallax and periphery finally come into conversation in Lyotard, resulting in something new which is always something old.

Visual Illiteracy

Gregory Ulmer has hovered behind and above this dissertation since its inception. His concept of post-criticism birthed my rhiz|comics. Now he can provide the glue (Ulmer's Glue™) between grammatology and hypermedia. In some ways, the glue exists between books. *Applied Grammatology* asks the question of how a deconstructive pedagogy would proceed. That question is answered by the rest of Ulmer's canon: hypermedia.

Ulmer devises new rhetorics and new logics based not upon the word but upon new media. Parataxis becomes the new movement, always "and/and/and" rather than "or." Concepts from disparate levels of our logocen-

tric hierarchy become parallel. How does he accomplish this? Through a grammatology of hypermedia; said another way, through Derrida. But this is still not enough, "Not to follow in the footsteps of the masters, but to seek what

they sought." Ulmer takes Derrida's concepts and applies them in new ways. Something old, something new, something borrowed, something true. Sampling the old, folding it in on the current, revealing our now in the currents of the ancients. Here my earlier claims at reflexivity and metatextuality begin to come into focus:

> The *mise an abyme* [sic] is a reflexive structuration, by means of which a text shows what it is telling, does what it says, displays its own making, reflects its own action. My hypothesis is that a discourse of immanent critique may be constructed for an electronic rhetoric (for use in video, computer, and interactive practice) by combining the mise en abyme with the two compositional modes that have dominated audio-visual texts—montage and mise en scene. The result would be a deconstructive writing, deconstruction as an inventio (rather than as a style of book criticism). ("Grammatology Hypermedia" 4)

The notion of metatextuality, of a text which is concerned with its own textuality, its own metaphoricity, belongs not just to hypermedia and postmodern metafiction, but to comics. Here we replace the mise en scene/abyme with the mise en panel. "To count as an abyss, resemblance must be literally manifested across the levels of the text. In short, one part of the text must literally (at least in part) as well as metaphorically reproduce the other" (*Heuretics* 147). This comes very close to McCloud's description of the interrelationship of image and text in comics. They may reproduce each other or merely converse with each other. Both acts point towards an outside of the text (here used as the woven object that is comics) and towards the question of that outside's validity, leading us readers to question the gap between, on the one hand, ourselves and the text and, on the other, ourselves and our own metanarratives. It is also important to note that comics cannot become merely a new type of writing, but must move beyond. The goal is not to create a hypertextcentrism to answer logocentrism (or logo centrism), but rather to move backwards, to intervene. Writing speaks to comics and comics speak back to writing, each to each. Comics occupy this combination of grammatology and hypermedia, but rely upon interventions for their dissemination.

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Ulmer returned us to the metatextuality I referred to in my opening. That comics tend toward self-referentiality has been noted before (cf. Thierry Groensteen, 1990), but the importance of this fact has been overlooked. Comics tend toward self-referentiality because

of their multimodality. Hence, McCloud's straightforward Understanding Comics belies its postmodern presentation. McCloud appears throughout the book, often standing in one panel and referencing another panel. This is crucial. He references, not the ideas or contents of another panel but another actual panel.

The importance of such metatextuality reveals itself through the theorists I have mentioned, Derrida, Lyotard, and Ulmer. Working backwards, Ulmer stresses reflexivity most explicitly, calling for a *mise en scene* that would always already be a *mise en abyme*. Remember, Ulmer is speaking of the composition classroom here. The purpose of such reflexivity would be to cause students to reflect on their own process, to become aware of the available means of persuasion they utilize, rather than just utilizing them. Metatextuality makes rhetoric patent.

Stepping out of order, Derrida introduces metatextuality as inherent to text. All text is always already about metaphoricity, textuality. But if there is no outside-text, what are we left with? What is the point? In the cramped *abyme* of Derrida's grammatology, we find no space for reflexivity to reflect.

Lyotard offers us this space, this density and difference that enables reflexivity and gives it purpose. Reflexivity is the ultimate taboo in the text. Text presupposes a transparency without which reading would be too laborious: one would have to reflect on the shape and appearance of each individual letter. Derrida does not deny this by stressing text's inherent concern with metaphoricity. Rather, Derrida points us towards something like the return of the repressed. Figure provides a way out of this over-oedipalized cycle. Figure demands opacity. When looking at an image, one may indeed see through it, to the signified, but one's attention is also rapt by the signifier itself. This is the strength of figure, and its weakness. Figure demands reflection and seems almost abused when forced into the textual preferences of clarity brevity and sincerity.

If we take these two axes then, discursive and figural, and multiply them by themselves,

we get a table which might describe four ways in which these paradigms greet us.

	Figural	Discursive
Figure	Rothko	Safety Manual
Discourse	Nabokov	Kant

First there is the figural figure in which the surface becomes focal, think of the paintings of Mark Rothko or any painter interested in the flatness of the canvas. In the discursive figural, we find figure in the service of discourse: the airplane safety manual being the classic example. In the figural discourse, Nabokov's *Pale Fire* presents a plot dependent upon its own reflexivity. In the discursive discourse we are left with the zero-degree writing of Immanuel Kant or Lyotard's style in *The Differend*.

Lyotard's concepts of discourse and figure provide us with a way of having our cake and eating it too. We live in the world of the disjunctive bar where signifier and signified are always already separated by a vast chasm. But, we are not completely without access to the libidinal band. Reflexivity allows us to move from one side to the other, moves us through the band and around until we realize that discourse and figure have always been one sides of the same coin.

1

IT MUST BE ABSTRACT

o be realized because not to
en, not to be loved nor hated be-

o be realized.Weather by Franz Hals,

ned up by brushy winds in brushy
ls,
ed by blue, colder for whi
oken to, without a roof, withou

fruits, without the virginal of b
ark-bl
quished
s, gay was, the gay forsyt

yellow, yellow thins the Northern

ut a name and nothing to be de-

y imag... but imagined well.

ous... anged a little in the
r... moli... mus
... flic... orm, fal...

st be visible or invisible,
ble or visible or both:
eing and unseeing in the eye.

The weather and the giant of the weather,
Say the weather, the mere weather, the mere air:
An abstraction blooded, as a man by though.

It feels good as it is without the giant,
A thinker of the first idea. **Perhaps**
The truth depends on a walk around a lake,

A composing as the body tires, a stop
To see hepatica, a stop to watch
definition growing certain and

A wait within that certainty, a rest
In the swags of pine-trees bordering the lake.
Perhaps there are times of inherent ex-... Hence,

...hen th... ows o...
...n, inca... balance
...hich a... iss perfe... comes

And a familiar music of the machine
Sets up its Schwarmerei, not balances
That we achieve but balances that hap-

As a man and woman meet and l... forthwith.
Perhaps there are moments of aw...
Extreme, fortuitous, personal, in...

We more than awaken, sit on the... sleep,
As on an elevation, and behold
The academies like structures in...

Can we compose a castle-fortres...
Even with the help of Viollet-le-D...
And see the MacCullough there... man?

The first idea is an imagined thin...
The pensive giant prone in viole...
May be the MacCullough, an exp...

...and logic, crystal...
...pe... the w...
...the w...
...angl... but... lloug... MacCullough.
It does not follow that major man...
If MacCullough himself lay loung... the sea,

A Roman god. Two faces.
Also the word for door in Latin.

What does that have
to do with anything?

The original hypocrite.
Also an opening …

Why does Janus mean door?

I don't know. Perhaps because chess is
so closed. It's all abstract. There is no
board. We could use old cigarette butts
for pieces if we wanted, or no pieces
at all, and do it all in our minds.

No, nothing's truly closed. We would still each
create a board, visualize it while we play. We
could play over the internet from across the
world and still not escape physicality.

That's the thing. You
theorize everything.
Translate it to philosophese.

What's wrong with philosophies?

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Nothing, but you seem to think that they created this world around us. That it's all part of your theory. But the reverse is true. Theory is part of the world.

Immanence.

You and your eminence.

It's a plane. All these things around us, the given. It's a single surface, out of which there are folds. One fold might be theory, another cigarette. The trick is to use some of the folds to describe the folding.

All this separation then, it's space. The space between me and you, between thing and idea.

But that space is also time. Look at our reflection. You're looking back in time. That's us but a moment ago.

And that's Janice? Space and time?

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That's one binary Janus can envelop. But there are others. Man and Woman. Before and after. Image and text. Word and thing.

So this opening, it's when we switch the two? When man becomes Woman?

That's part of it. That's negative deconstruction. But there is an affirmative deconstruction as Well that maintains each, and maintains separation and différance while recognizing that each exists on the basis of the other.

Hm. Difference. That's all we have, our differences. So the goal is conversation so we can sort them out into some bland malaise?

Absolutely not. Why Would I want to have a conversation with myself? That's dialectic. Thesis antithesis synthesis. What I'm looking for is not dialectic, but

Dialogue?

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Yes, the dialogic. Bakhtin speaks of this. Think of our conversation now. Some might say that there are different ways of describing what is going on, words, people, images, physics, biology, etc.

But all of those things come down to the physical. There can be no words without the gift you mentioned earlier.

The given, yes.

Es gibt.

Who is S. Gibbs?

Exactly. The comic artist engages in these interplays more consciously than perhaps in any other medium. That is comics' uniqueness and strength.

The comic artist?

Who is the Es? That's a wonderful way of putting it. The universe? God? Moebius?

So you reject the notion of comics as sequential art.

Of course not. Comics are dialogic, that is perhaps the best way of saying it. Looking at them as sequential art privileges the dialogue of space with time.

Privileges our lived experience.

And image and text privileges what exactly? Isn't this still our lived experience? Words and things? Right and left brain?

What then of the schizo?

Split mind. Hm. Would this be Janice's opening?

Some kind of schizo frenetic composition?

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