Class Notes from Day 4, to accompany October 3, 2011 session

RECAP from Last time (in brief!)
- Origin Story – a brief history of comics (check this out: http://www.comic-art.com/history.htm)
  - The history of comics is in fact a **retroactive** one – the history of things called "comics" is short, but in looking to the past we are able to trace a **lineage** of sorts and thereby establish a **legitimacy**.
  - Also want to suggest in looking back, there was a time when art and language weren't so **far apart** – and that perhaps comics today are **not** something new, but a return to a kind of **wholeness** of expression
  - SO, this history of comics is perhaps better described as a **history of visual narrative or perhaps visual language**. And here we go...


- Looked at Visual narratives through the ages: Lascaux, Bayeux, etc.
  - With the advent of print technology – mass media moved off the walls into people's hands...
  - Rodolphe Töpffer (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rodolphe_Töpffer) - considered to be the father of modern comics

- "**Comics**" – stuck with a name of negative connotations
  - Cartoon from "**cartones**" – cardboard-like material upon which Italian muralists sketched in charcoal – the name stuck to all such things...

- These transformed into New Yorker-like, commentary/**comical** cartoons – eventually called "comics" – but created for ADULTS
- One prominent outlet for such material as called the **Comics Weekly**
- In the 1890s, Outcault produced **The Yellow Kid**
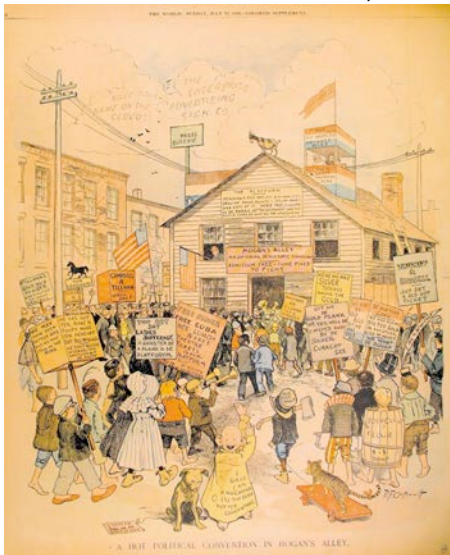
- Comics strips are **repackaged** in books – the printers need something to print to keep their presses running
- This leads to the creation of **original material** created for this longer book form – Famous Funnies 1934 – the first Comic Book.
- AND THEN… **SUPERMAN – 1938** – explosion of characters, medium
  - **Genre hijacks the medium** – preventing a critical look at the potential for narrative in this visual language


- 1950s – **decline** – TV/Fredrick Wertham
- 1960s – **underground commix** – R. Crumb and many others
- **Harvey Pekar** – American Splendor 1976
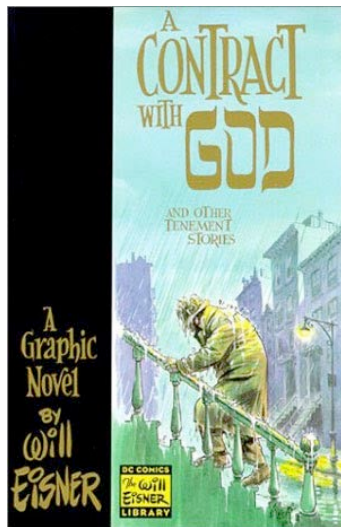
- o **Will Eisner** returns!
    - 1978, he creates "A Contract with God" has it published by non-comics publisher and sold in bookstores, and to help that along attaches the (likely existing) name **Graphic Novel** to it.

- o Lynd Ward – a novel in woodcuts in the 1920s – helpful again to look back to see lineage
- 1986 – trifecta of important works in comics and now considered graphic novels (though note, none of them came out as stand alone books initially):
    - o **Frank Miller's** genre-transcending take on Batman *The Dark Knight Returns*
- o the first collected installment of **Art Spiegelman's** Pulitzer prize-winning *Maus*
- o **Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's** *Watchmen,* the only graphic novel on Time Magazine's 2005 list of "ALL-TIME 100 greatest novels."
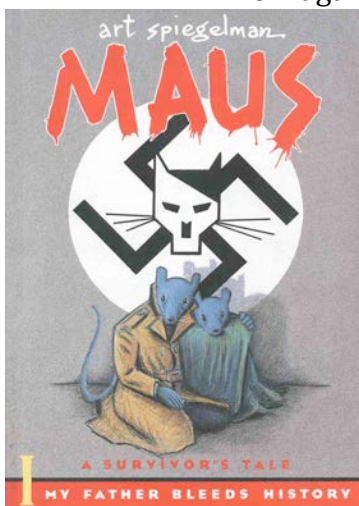
- 1993 **Scott McCloud**'s *Understanding Comics* – a comic on comics – opened the doors wide for legitimate discourse about the medium and what it might take on within its pages.

What Comics are and how they work
- **Alternative** definitions:
  - David Kunzle:
    - There **must** be a sequence of separate images
    - There **must** be a preponderance of image over text
    - The medium in which the strip appears and for which it is originally intended **must** be reproductive; that is in printed form, a mass medium
    - The sequence **must** tell a story that is both moral and topical [deal with contemporary society]
- (The Maker's definitions vs the scholar's definitions)
- **Eisner** from **Sequential Art** (1985)
  - "I found that I was involved with an 'art of communication' more than simply an application of art." (Illustration vs. storytelling…)
- McCloud's definition from *Understanding Comics* (1993):
  - **"Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (p. 9).**
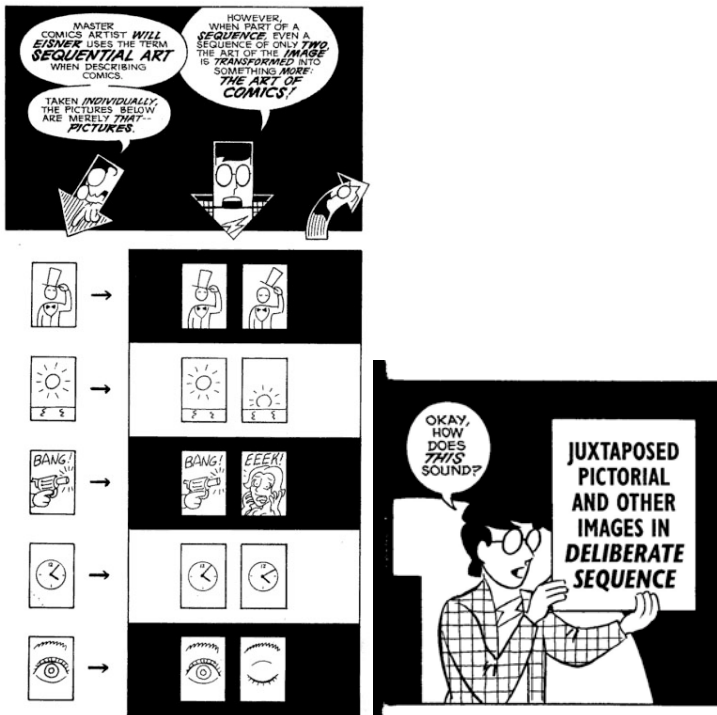
- Abel/Madden Definition from "Drawing Words and Writing Pictures"
  - Are there multiple images that are intended to be read in a certain order?

- - If there's only a single image, does it have a kind of narrative to it?
    - Is there a combination of both text and images?
  - RC Harvey – comics depend on **visual-verbal blending**… (Revisit McCloud's intentional omission of the verbal at a later time.)
- What **McCloud's definition does** is open wide the field of comics – about ALL that they can be. And is useful in what enables and ways that it demonstrates what comics can do similarly to other media (say film) and what powers it possesses and thus what it can **handle uniquely**. And where it's headed.
- It says nothing of genre, of drawing style, of balance of image/text – it's a definition that broadens our thinking and the future of comics – with ONE exception…
  - McCloud P. 20 – **the Single panel**…. (which Abel/Madden's definition takes pains to include)
    - Juxtaposition of another sort?

- **CLOSURE** – McCloud's big idea from **GESTALT** theory
- Comics are composed of individual fragments – these include the separate panels ("frames" that contain the images), word or dialogue balloons (emanating from a speaker), and text boxes (narrative voiceovers). KEY: **YOU hold FRAGMENTS together!**
  - We ANIMATE the work!
  - The negative space between panels is termed the "gutters," and it is here that McCloud suggests comics derive their lifeblood, for, "In the limbo of the gutter, human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea" (p. 66).
  - Comics are thus an active, participatory experience for the reader – a "cool" medium in Marshall McLuhan's terminology
- The participatory nature of comics is further compounded by the simplified (but not simplistic) drawing styles employed, which allow the reader to live within & inhabit characters on the page.
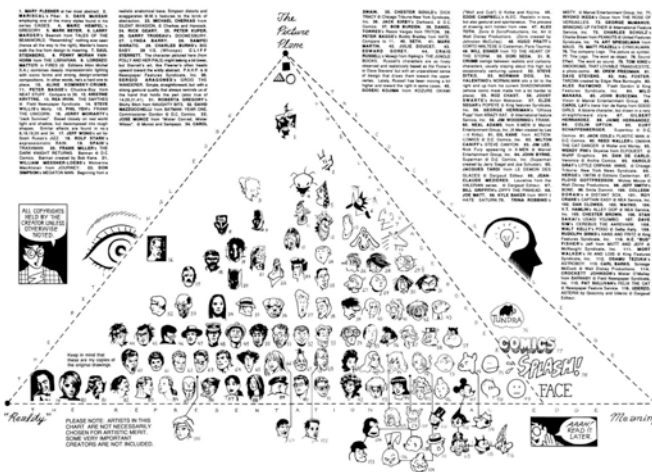
- o McCloud (p 30-1) suggests that the Cartoon us a stand-in for YOU – maybe... BUT,
  - ▪ Consider instead the cartoon as being akin to a cardboard box that a child first transforms into a spaceship and then a castle – the cartoon is a space for imagination (as Calvino wrote)
- o David Carrier writes on Caricature in Heer and Worcester p. 107:
  - ▪ discusses the idea of PROJECTION ... Artist tries to convey intent through image, connects back to thinking about gesture again.
- o The success of superheroes and funny animals and manga Wordless comics perhaps need more caricature/gesture/moment-to-moment work to convey meaning
  - ▪ Eisner on Gesture – a visual language
  - ▪ Eric Drooker's "Flood" and Peter Kuper's "The System"
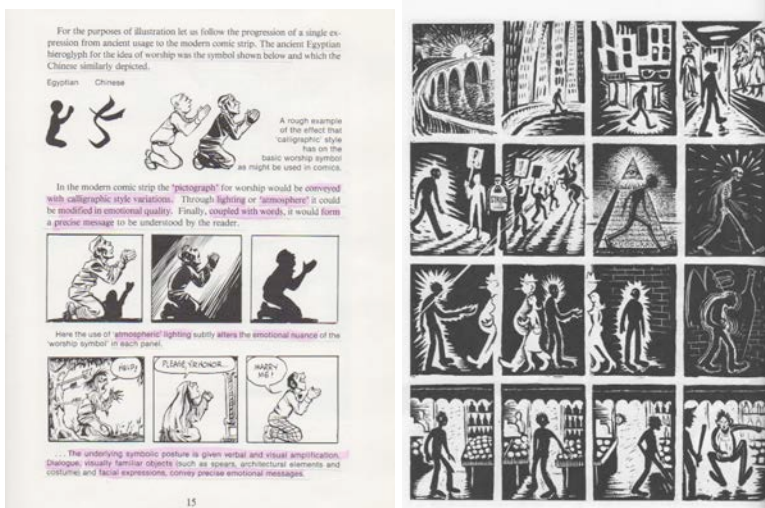
- • McCloud's **Triangle of Abstraction** (p. 51-3)
  - o Important to think about what type of imagery is being used to convey meaning and how that is working. Sure, **Alex Ross's** hyperrealistic superhero work is something to behold – but – does it contain the same sort of impact as say Frank Miller's Dark Knight Returns drawings?

- **Time in comics** (quite unlike film), transpires in space. (This has broader implications going forward)
    - BUT for now, talk about the **transitions – the juxtapositions from which we derive meaning...**
    - McCloud identifies SIX types of Panel to Panel Transitions (Abel&Madden suggest a seventh). These are akin to GRAMMAR of comics, and we can find similar transitions (Cuts) in FILM. The ordering, as pointed out by Abel/Madden moves from requiring the least amount of closure to the most.
    - The Six Types (Plus One):
        - Moment-to-Moment
        - Action-to-action
        - Subject-to-subject
        - Scene-to-scene
        - Aspect-to-aspect
        - Abel/Madden: (44) Symbolic transition
        - Non-sequitur

    - Abel/Madden point out that it is the **Author who creates transitions** – and **the reader who makes closure**
- What is **most important** in all of this – is not parsing which type of transition is which within a particular comic, but WHAT an author chooses to put in **frame** and WHY, and HOW to get from point A to point B in a story. It's a matter of choosing what's most important to the tale one's telling, and what can be left out, and as McCloud points out, **comics are a medium of absences** – and it is through acts of closure, the reader can follow along.
- Consider moments within a frame **SIGN POSTS** of a sort – **guides** to move your reader along a path, and connect to panels before and to come.

- Authors use transitions to create a RHYTHM to the reading – and they do it in many different ways and those are continuing to evolve always – borrowing on past comics and other mediums (film, video games, etc)
  - Signposts can be frames, composition of page, within panels, balloons
- AS we saw Before, Time in comics – happens in SPACE
  - McCloud 97, 100-102 – how we frame it – is what matters

Comics are **Sequential** like TEXT, BUT ALSO **Simultaneous** – Like ART!
- We read individual panels in sequential fashion like text, but we also take in the composition of the whole page all-at-once, much as we would a painting. This "all-at-onceness" – or simultaneity – speaks to our ability to see the whole and the parts at the same time.
- Passage from Watchmen
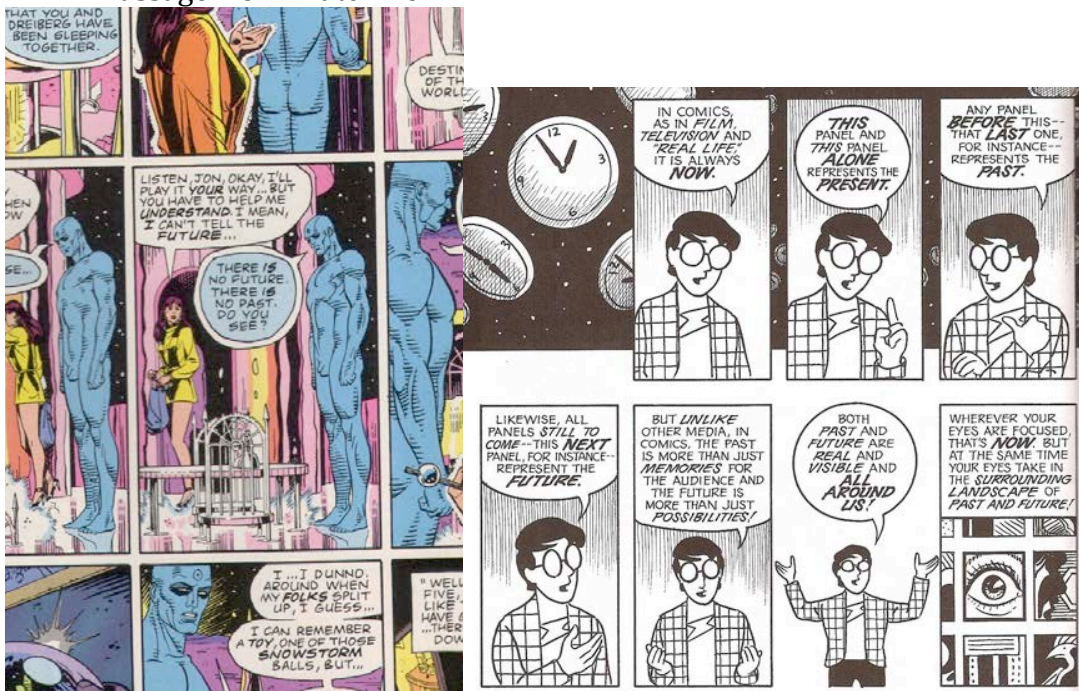
  - 104 – time happens all around us (Watchmen)
  - 105 Cynicalman!

- Hillary Chute (2009) observes Spiegelman's integration of past and present in *Maus* through this spatiality of the comics page, **"He thus represents the accreted, shifting 'layers' of historical apprehension not only through language but also through the literal, spatial layering of comics, enabling the presence of the past to become radically legible on the page"** (p. 351).
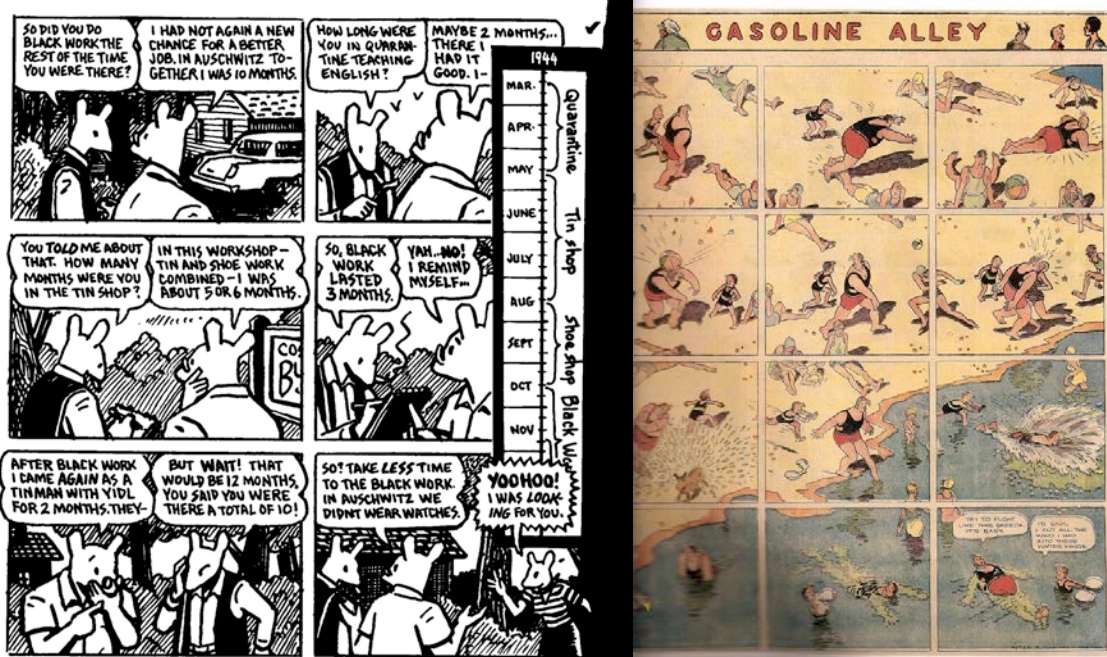
Another perspective on Comics by Thierry Groensteen, in his "The System of Comics"

- Fragmented medium (10): P 11: "The **story is possibly full of holes, but it projects me into a world that is portrayed as consistent, and it is in the continuity attributed to the fictional world that allows me to effortlessly fill in the gaps of the narration**."
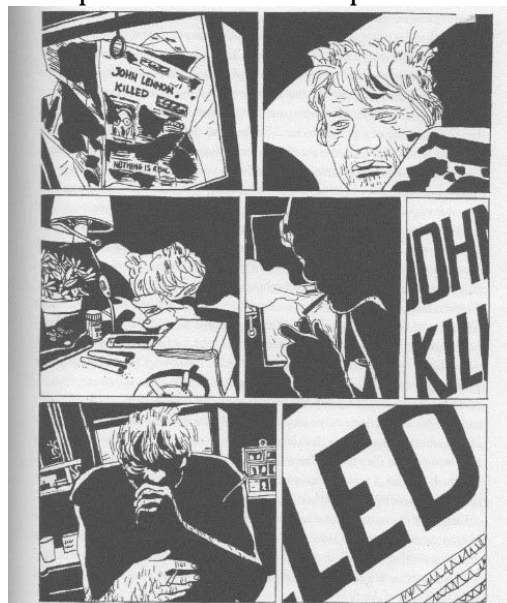- 108 non-closure example – make sense of panels – context before & AFTER...

Fig. 10. From *Alack Sinner: Rencontres* (1984), by José Muñoz and Carlos Sampayo. © Casterman.

- 117 – **narrative continuity is assured by contiguity of images – not side-by-side** [juxtaposition]
  - o **IMPLICATIONS:** 21: "Spatio-Topia" system (spatial and topological relations): "widespread opinion [holds that] in comics, spatial organization will be totally pledged to the narrative strategies, and commanded by them." "I believe on the contrary that, from the instant that an author begins the comics story that he undertakes, he thinks of this story, and his work still to be born, within a given mental form with which he must negotiate. This form is precisely the spatio-topical apparatus…."
  - o "From the moment of sketching the first panel of a comic, the author has always already taken, as for the behavior of engaging with the medium, some large strategic options … which concern the distribution of spaces and the occupation of places"
  - o Asserts that most comics artists "neglect the technique of page layout and breakdown that are specific to it" (23) KEY
- My piece "**Mind the Gaps**"
  - o 146 – Braiding – every panel exists potentially if not actually in RELATIONship to each of the others – at a distance as well. Not a CHAIN but a NETWORK. Series not sequence
- Spatio-Topia: His definition – comics as a system… a network
  - o Comics are a network/SYSTEM – ASSOCIATIVE – panels far apart may communicate closely…

[NEXT TIME – In the RECAP – we will Spend a little more TIME with this whole NOTION, work on ARTICULATING it better]
- Influence of film, games on time space in comics
- Look through comics – pick out how they use transitions, framing
  - o Examples Below: Detective Comics #27 (1939), Dark Knight Returns, All Star Superman, Eisner, Blankets
  - o Flash #1 EXAMPLES
- WE 3 and time:
- http://peiratikos.net/archives/2005/02/10/time-and-motion/

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