3. Characteristics of the Form

The form of comics has developed primarily within the bounds of the printed page, where it exists today in a variety of different formats ranging from serialised newspaper strips and comic books to longer collected editions and graphic novels. Rather than one all-encompassing comics industry, these formats are the product of an overlapping group of smaller industries, each with their own traditions, audiences and economics. As a result of these complex and multiple origins, "comics" can be a confusing subject topic to discuss. As Cohn notes, associated with the term are ideas about 'the industry that produces comics, the community that embraces them, the content which they represent, and the avenues in which they appear' (2005, 236).

The main focus of my study as set out in my methodology is the form of comics, separate from notions of industry, community, content or format. The study of these formal qualities is a relatively young discipline whose foundation and growth were examined in detail in the previous chapter. While owing its beginnings to a small number of influential practitioner-theorists (Eisner 2003; McCloud 1993), comics scholarship is now a burgeoning field of academic study. However as Priego notes, 'for comics scholarship the term "comics" is both unclear and contested' (2010, 47). During the development of the field, attempts to define comics and distinguish form from format have often proved contentious. Groensteen provides a useful summary of some of the problematic factors in play:

> The rediscovery of comics from the 19th century, whose formats and formulas differ from modern comics, and the flood of comics imported from Asia, which follow different cultural codes, have made defining comics all the more complicated. Finally, recent years have seen the rise of a new standard in western production, the graphic novel. All these factors have contributed to making the "definition" of comics more problematic than ever (Groensteen 2012, 113).

Within this context, definitions that include or exclude specific formats have provoked strong reaction from differently invested sections of the community. Groensteen highlights 'how difficult it is to come up with a definition of comics that everybody agrees with' (ibid) while Cohn describes the subject as 'perhaps the most befuddling and widely debated point in comics scholarship' (2005, 236). Meskin highlights the 'unsatisfactory' nature of existing formal definitions, believing that their 'biggest flaw is their failure to attend to the historical specificity of the medium' (2007, 376). He calls into question whether the act of defining comics is in itself useful, asserting that definition 'looks unnecessary to proper evaluation and interpretation' (ibid).

Hague argues against Meskin's view, observing that in 'defining a comic, the definer specifies the boundaries of the object of study and thereby indicates the ways in which it is possible for her/him to interact with that object' (2014, 12). Hague goes on to adopt a social approach to defining comics, stating that 'a comic is what is produced or consumed as a comic.' (27) He notes the similarity of his approach to that of Beaty, who defines comics as 'objects recognized by the comics world as comics' (2012, 37). Beaty asserts that this institutional definition allows for comics to be 'better understood through the collective activities that constitute their production and circulation' (ibid).

While such social and institutional definitions are useful in some areas of comics scholarship, they are less helpful to my own study and its aim of understanding how the key characteristics of the form are impacted by digital mediality. Priego asserts the importance of identifying these formal characteristics (2010, 74) and states that the study of digital comic depends on 'an agreed understanding of what the phenomenon of comics is' (52). To fully study the impact of digital mediality, it is necessary to first separate form from format and identify the key characteristics by which the form functions.

Through my analysis of the work of the theorists and practitioner-theorists identified in the previous chapter, I have sought to counter the lack of a practical

formal definition of comics by identifying a set of key characteristics of the form. Although areas of overlap exist between these characteristics, each is intended to provide a useful lens through which to examine a distinct aspect of the way comics operate when read. It is this set of characteristics of the way comics operate when read that constitute the form of comics. Expressions of these formal characteristics in different configurations, platforms and media constitute different formats of comic. Rather than attempting to seek 'specificity' (Bouyer 2014, 87) by identifying the single most prominent and defining characteristic of the form, this model acknowledges that different examples and formats of comic may place greater or lesser emphasis on each characteristic.

This approach aims to prevent a narrow definition that could risk excluding 'the more minority, atypical or experimental works' from study (Groensteen 2014b, 97). It also helps to avoid previous debates over 'an apparently endless profusion of disputed boundary cases and contradictory counterexamples' (Witek 2009, 149). Instead it will allow debated formats to be examined as comics despite the absence of certain key characteristics. The resultant model that I will present during this chapter is based on seven key characteristics of the form:

1. Space as time
2. Simultaneous juxtaposition of images
3. Closure between images
4. Spatial networks
5. Reader control of pacing
6. Tablodic images
7. Word and image blending

These seven characteristics are not intended as an exhaustive list, but rather to provide a way for the form of comics to be described and therefore discussed. While the operations of these characteristics are often tightly interconnected, this conceptual division of the form serves as a useful analytic aid to discussion.

Priego asserts that when comics exist 'on a different platform other than print, definitions of comics have to be readdressed' (2010, 342). Groensteen similarly states that digital mediation 'is likely to overturn the very definition' of the form (2014b, 100). Although primarily developed in print, these seven characteristics must accordingly be considered within the context of the last thirty years of digital mediation of the form. Digital mediality will be touched on where relevant during this chapter and examined in more detail during the subsequent chapters of this thesis.

Space as time

The form of comics is primarily spatially based and uses arrangements of panels in space to communicate the passage of time within a narrative. Priego asserts that this 'asynchronous' relationship to the passage of time in the real world is an 'essential' characteristic of the form (2010, 238). Groensteen outlines a basic difference between comics and other visual media in this regard, stating that every panel in a comic:

> is incarnated and is displayed in space. The fixed image, contrary to the moving image of cinema […] only exists in a single dimension. Comics panels, situated relationally, are, necessarily, placed in relation to space and operate on a share of space (2007, 21).

In contrast to comics, the moving image of cinema, whether film or animation, is primarily a time-based form. The sequences of images that make up a film are played one after another at speeds fast enough to create the illusion of movement. In comics, sequences of images remain static in time and are instead placed in a spatial relationship to each other. The basis of the relationship between space and time in comics is summed up by McCloud who asserts that 'space does for comics what time does for film' (1993, 7). Within a spatial arrangement of panels, both Groensteen (2014a, 67) and McCloud (1993, 94-97) assert that it is the events

depicted inside the panels that primarily dictate the flow of time within the narrative (94-97). Although in later seeking to capture the essence of comics, McCloud suggests thinking of the form as 'an artist's map of time itself' (2000, 206). This idea of comics as a 'temporal map' (207) is an important aspect of McCloud's early thinking on how the form might adapt to the mediality of the computer screen. The repercussions of this concept on various digital comic formats are explored in Chapters Four and Six of this thesis. However, as a description of the way the passage of time is represented in comics, the temporal map is an idea that has come under some criticism from later scholars.

Cohn views the temporal map as meaning 'not "physical space = fictive time" but rather "physical space = physical reading motion = fictive time"' (2010, 132). This addresses some issues with the concept, such as the way word balloons and textual sound effects distort and shift the relationship between space and time. A panel does not necessarily represent a single moment in time but rather it is our progress through a sequence of panels or moments within a panel from which our sense of time in the comic is constructed. In terms of how this construction process takes place, Cohn believes that rather than operating in a temporal map, the role of panels is to 'direct attention to depictions of "event states" from which a sense of "time" is derived' (134).

Miodrag further challenges the concept of the temporal map, noting that 'it aptly describes certain kinds of transition – and very common ones – but it certainly does not define' the form of comics as a whole (2013, 140). She instead proposes that 'the sequential arrangement of panels pertains to narrative effect, particularly reading time, and not necessarily, or even predominantly, to elapsing story time' (2013, 121). Rather than physical reading motion equating to fictive time, it is the content of a panel 'that indicates story time elapsing, with the layout of panels lending narrative pace and showcasing action, rather than telling the reader how much diegetic time elapses' (124). While arrangements in space to represent the passage of fictive time can be seen as a key characteristic of the form, it is therefore

important to stress the lack of a simple, fixed relationship between spatial positioning and the rate of time's progression.

Simultaneous juxtaposition of images

The simultaneous juxtaposition of images is a key characteristic of the form that is common to many formats of comic. In *Understanding Comics*, McCloud defines comics as 'juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence' (1993, 9). The concept of juxtaposition in this definition serves to differentiate the sequences of images found in comics from those found in animation. McCloud asserts that the difference between animation and comics is that 'animation is sequential in time but not spatially juxtaposed as comics are' (7). The influence of McCloud's definition can be seen in Priego's thesis, which identifies the 'juxtaposition of sequential images' as a defining quality of the form (2010, 76). Like McCloud, Priego also identifies juxtaposition as an 'essential' difference between comics and animation (239).

The concept of juxtaposition is a common theme in several definitions of the form, although the exact language in which the idea is expressed can vary. Miller observes that comics make 'meaning out of images which are in a sequential relationship, and which co-exist with each other spatially' (2007, 75). Groensteen also references the coexistence of images in his concept of 'iconic solidarity' (2007, 18). He defines this 'central element of comics' as:

> 'interdependent images that, participating in a series, present the double characteristic of being separated… …and which are plastically and semantically over-determined by the fact of their coexistence in praesentia' (ibid).

Groensteen later draws parallels between iconic solidarity and McCloud's concept of juxtaposition. He observes that the two ideas are similar because both rely on a

'coexistence' of images, in which the reader 'can see several images sharing the same space… [and] …relations between these images are displayed' (2012, 113). Miodrag similarly identifies 'the simultaneity of sequential panels on a two-dimensional plane' (2013, 140) as a key characteristic of the form. Simultaneity is a useful term in this context, highlighting that juxtaposed images can be viewed simultaneously by the reader. Like McCloud and Priego, Miodrag draws attention to this characteristic as 'a genuine point of distinction between comics and other narrative media' (114-115) such as film and animation.

Although it provides a common thread to many definitions of the form, the characteristic of simultaneous juxtaposition can be problematic when considering some formats of comic. Harvey takes issue with McCloud's use of juxtaposition in his definition of comics as this excludes single-panel, non-juxtaposed formats such as the political and gag cartoons commonly found in newspapers and magazines (2001, 76). The simultaneous juxtaposition of images is also absent when reading certain formats of digital comic that make use of a 'guided view' approach to display comic pages one panel at a time (Iconology Inc. 2013). While animated transitions between panels may still suggest the spatial juxtaposition of images, the simultaneity of the sequence of panels is no longer as readily apparent. Groensteen cautions that this can result in 'deterritorialized' panels that lack 'the linking threads woven across the surface of a page' (2013, 67). The impact of digital mediation on the characteristic of simultaneous juxtaposition is explored in further detail in Chapter Four of this thesis.

Closure between images

Miodrag asserts that 'time in comics is fictive time' (2013, 118). It is a construction by the reader based on their interpretation of the artwork, panels, words and other symbols laid out by the comic's creator. This process of construction can be usefully summed up under McCloud's use of the term 'closure.' (1993, 63). McCloud identifies closure as 'the agent of change, time and motion' in comics (65),

observing that comic panels 'fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality' (67).

The role that the reader plays in 'observing the parts but perceiving the whole' (63) is central to the participatory nature of comics, with McCloud further asserting that 'in a very real sense, comics is closure' (67). However, closure is not unique to comics and wider connections can be drawn to gestalt theories of visual perception from which the term closure is borrowed (Hatfield 2009, 135). McCloud notes the presence of closure at work in photography, cinema, television and various interactions from everyday life (63-65). Miodrag similarly draws comparisons between the process and 'the way we mentally group broken lines and proximate forms into continuous gestalts, and […] with the way we suture cinematic cuts, understanding fractured film scenes as whole narratives' (2013, 108).

Similar ideas to the concept of closure can be also be seen at work in aspects of Groensteen's iconic solidarity. He notes that the 'discontinuity that is the basis of the language of comics forces the reader to make inferences in order to interpret each new image appropriately' (2013, 36). Groensteen observes that as a comic reader, in order to determine 'whatever is supposed to have taken place between the proceeding image and the one we are reading' we must 'spontaneously' convert the space between panels 'into a temporal interval' (37). The role of the reader in mentally filling in the gaps between panels is clearly an important aspect of the form. However, the exact nature of how this process operates is still somewhat elusive.

McCloud examines closure in terms of the transitions that can occur between panels, noting that different types of transition can require differing amounts of work on behalf of the reader in the construction of meaning (1993, 70-72). Cohn attempts to unpick the process of closure and analyse how readers derive meaning through interpreting all the panels in a given narrative sequence (2013, 67-89). Groensteen examines and classifies the difference between which elements are

shown, intervened or signified within a given sequence (2013, 36-41). Hatfield approaches the subject from a different perspective, drawing an interesting link between closure and the comic artist's process of "breaking down" a page. He observes that:

> In fact "breakdown" and "closure" are complementary terms […] the author's task is to evoke an imagined sequence by creating a visual series (breakdown), whereas the reader's task is to translate a given series into a narrative sequence by achieving closure (2009, 135).

Eisner similarly stresses the role of the artist in arranging 'the sequence of events (pictures) so as to bridge gaps in action' (2003, 38). He states that if the artist is successful in this, then the reader should be able to 'fill in the intervening events from [their own] experiences' (ibid). Hatfield identifies the role of the reader as being crucial, noting that it in comics closure requires 'the invocation of learned competencies; the relationship between pictures are a matter of convention, not inherent connectedness' (2009, 135).

The different attempts made at analysing the nature and operation of closure in comics reveal some of the complexity inherent in the process. However, establishing the precise nature of its operation remains outside the primary focus of this study. For the purpose of the model proposed in this chapter, the term serves as a useful descriptor for the process by which the reader derives time, meaning and motion out of static, juxtaposed images. In this respect, closure can be said to operate as a key characteristic of the form of comics.

Spatial networks

While comics are often described as consisting of sequences of images (Sabin 1993, 5; Miller 2007, 75; Priego 2010, 76), these sequences can be better understood in terms of the larger spatial network of which they form part. Eisner's description of

comics as a type of 'sequential art' (2003, 5) foregrounds the importance of sequence to the form. The influence of Eisner is acknowledged by McCloud (1993, 7), who places a similar emphasis on sequence in his own definition (9). Rather than focus primarily on sequence, Groensteen takes a more holistic view of the form, arguing that the organising principle of comics is 'not that of the strip, nor that of the chain, but that of the network' (2007, 146). He asserts that panels operate not just in terms of their position in a narrative sequence but also 'in a dechronologized mode, that of the collection, of the panoptical spread and of coexistence, considering the possibility of translinear relations and plurivectoral courses' (147).

This network of connections exists not only between panels viewed in simultaneous juxtaposition, but across all the panels and pages in a multipage narrative. While linear sequences of panels present the usual progression of narrative and fictional time within a comic, the reader is always free to stray from this sequence and view the arrangement of panels in the comic in an atemporal or dechronologized mode. In observing the spread of panels outside of the usual flow of narrative, new relationships between their content and spatial characteristics may become apparent. Miodrag supports Groensteen's position and argues in favour of viewing comics as 'a network of connections rather than privileging linear sequential progression' (2013, 128). She asserts that 'panels can participate in webs of interrelationship that violate narrative sequence, and it is these non-linear relations that truly distinguish comics from other forms of narrative sequence' (2013, 111).

Groensteen describes the process of 'plurivectoral narration' in which the reader absorbs the content of individual panels in a sequence while at the same time being aware of the spatial network of which these panels form a part (2007, 108). Hatfield identifies a tension at work in this process that 'lies at the heart of comics design' (2009, 140). He asserts that in the pages of a comic there is a 'tug of war' between panels operating in sequence and as 'a graphic element in an atemporal design' (139). He observes that many comics encourage 'a near-simultaneous apprehension of the single image as both momentum-sequence and design element… [the page]

…functions both as sequence and as object, to be seen and read in both linear and nonlinear, holistic fashion' (139-40).

This tension brings to the fore the fact that spatial arrangement in comics serves as more than just a method for the establishment of fictional time. Miodrag asserts that space 'can also be used for dramatic and aesthetic ends: emphasizing action, dramatizing a spectacle, or assisting in creating a certain mood' (2013, 140). Witek notes that 'panels on the page always create narrative meaning both as sequence and as spatial arrangements' (2009, 153). Witek asserts that this quality of the spatial network is implicit in all comic formats (ibid). It is however important to note that the role of the spatial network is greatly diminished in some popular formats of digital comic that favour the display of individual panels over whole page arrangements. Conversely, digital comics built around the principle of the 'infinite canvas' (McCloud 2000, 222) can be seen to embrace and extend the role of the spatial network as a key characteristic of the form. The impact on spatial networks of these different approaches to digital mediation will be explored in detail in Chapter Four of this thesis.

Reader control of pacing

Priego observes that existing definitions of comics are often 'constrained' by having 'taken for granted comic books' printed format' (2010, 23). The reader's control over the pacing of a comic is a characteristic of the form that has perhaps been overlooked in print, but becomes more significant in the context of digital mediation. Comparisons between comics and film have similarly taken on a new significance in this context. While discussing the difference between storytelling in the two forms, film director and comic creator Guillermo del Toro observes the following:

> Who controls the pace in a comicbook page? […] Ultimately how fast a
> reader turns a page, how he goes back and forth between pieces in the

layout is completely controlled by the reader. We can assume he goes left to right, we can assume he goes up to down but ultimately he's in charge (Levine and Murdoch 2011).

The line between comics and film has become increasingly blurred by the migration of comics to digital display. Miodrag notes that in film, the moving image controls 'the pace at which work is consumed absolutely, while comics' static printed images must use other means to guide and influence' the reader's control of pacing (2013, 111-112). However in a digital comic images are neither printed, nor necessarily static. Instead it is possible to directly incorporate time-based tropes such as animation and audible sound into the form. This change in mediality places an increased emphasis on the nature of the reader's relationship to the form of comics. Digital comic pioneer John Barber asserts that when reading, 'the reader controls the rate at which information is absorbed. This is inherent in comics; this is what separates comics from film' (2002).

The importance of the reader and the act of reading is further emphasised by comic creators Waid and Bigerel. Waid asserts that 'what makes comic, comics' is that, like in other forms of reading, the reader 'is in control of the pace at which… [they] …absorb the story' (O'Reilly Media 2013). Bigerel stresses the importance of placing control over the creation of fictional time 'in the reader's hands' (2009). In his digital comics manifesto he cautions that the over-use of animated elements in the delivery of a comic can result in the reader being forced into becoming an observer of the animation rather than a reader of the comic. Waid similarly states that the addition of such time-based elements risk changing comics into a form of 'cheap animation' (O'Reilly Media 2013).

Bigerel suggests that the key to making a digital comic operate as a comic is to make sure that it is always the reader who 'clicks to see what's next, with no fancy gimmicks coming from the temporal world to ruin the experience' (2009). Priego asserts that comics are a form intended 'to be read' and that while a comic's spatial arrangement may suggest the 'tempo' of that reading, the pace of reading is

ultimately 'decided by the reader' (2010, 239). He observes that in a digital comic, reader interactions like clicking to progress are 'essential for the narrative flow, in the same way that the reader needs to flip pages when reading a printed document' (311). The nature of these reader interactions in comics and the impact of digital mediation are explored in detail in Chapter Four of this thesis.

To summarise, as del Toro makes clear, the reader of a printed comic controls the pace of the story via their own pace of reading. They interrogate the spatial network of the comic, looking at panels both in and out of sequence and turning pages to progress further through the narrative. In a digitally mediated comic, for that comic to still operate like a comic, the rate at which information is absorbed must still be set by the reader. Just as in a print comic, this is determined by a combination of reading pace and the digital equivalent of the page turn, whether that be a click, a scroll or a swipe. In this way the key characteristic of reader control is maintained in both print and digital comic formats.

Tablodic images

Comics are a visual form and the artwork contained within each comic panel is a prominent aspect of this visual nature. Although both Eisner (2003, 5) and McCloud (1993, 8) acknowledge this in their definitions of the form, identifying a unified characteristic of the artwork found in comics is a more difficult proposition. Cohn examines the systematic use of common illustrative elements within comics, but these 'graphic schema' (2013, 26) are typically tied to specifics of genre, culture, tradition or production process. As such, it is difficult to say something meaningful on the subject without also being unnecessarily exclusionary. Groensteen attempts to define 'narrative drawing' (2007, 161) but the specifics of this definition find too heavily in the favour of traditional cartooning and doesn't fit as well for fumetti (photographic comics), more abstracted or digitally-derived styles.

Groensteen also calls attention to the French-language work of Philippe Marion and his theory of 'graphiation' (2013, 117). The first in-depth, English-language analysis of Marion's work is provided by Baetens, who gives a definition of graphiation as 'the graphic and narrative enunciation of the comics' and then in expanding on this definition, states that graphiation exists in:

> the aspects of the image where one can read and discover something of the idiosyncratic gesture which produced the drawing. Every drawing bears the traces of "graphiation," or the specific enunciative act uttered by the author or agent when he or she makes the drawings and does the lettering of the panels (2001, 147).

Marion's focus on 'the trace left in the drawings by the artist' (Groensteen 2013, 118) could be seen to align to aspects of Cohn's more systematic graphic schema and as such suffers from the same limiting factors outlined above. Like Groensteen's narrative drawing, the focus in graphiation on the act of drawing excludes fumetti and other illustrative practices that preference digital image creation over traditional drawing techniques. However, the idea of linking the creation of comic artwork to the conveyance of narrative is significant and provides a useful thread towards a unifying aspect of comic artwork.

A different approach to the subject is provided by Miodrag, who highlights the similarity between the composition and framing of the art in comics and the shots in a film (2013, 212). Terminology that originates in film making is commonly used in comics, such as the use of 'establishing shot' to describe the contents of a panel that establishes a scene's location (McCloud 2006, 22; Delwiche 2015). Mutard makes a connection between the 'basic visual storytelling' of comics and film, observing that both give priority to showing an event over its written or verbal description (2013, 285). He describes comics as consisting of 'narrative images' that when read in juxtaposition 'invoke the illusion of occurrence' (285). Miodrag, in observing the key differences between comics and film, notes that the static nature of comics 'yields narratives broken down into a staggered chain of key

representations, experienced differently to film's mimetic flow of action' (2013, 212).

The concept of comic panels as 'key representations' is particularly useful when combined with the idea of illustration focussed on the conveyance of narrative. To draw these threads together into a single definition, we can say that the artwork in a comic is something deliberately composed, framed and illustrated to represent key moments of narrative meaning. A useful term to contain these ideas can be found in the concept of the tableau that is commonly used in photography and the theatre. Returning to Marion's concept of graphiation, we can identify the trace of the artist as existing in the composition, framing and illustration of these tableaux. Comics can accordingly be described as consisting of "images with the quality of the tableau" or "tablodic" images.

Word and image blending

The importance of words to the form of comics is a subject of some debate. Eisner describes comics as a form with an 'image-word mix' (2003 ,7). He states that comic books feature both an 'interplay' and 'montage' of word and image (8), but also notes the possibility of telling wordless stories that rely on images alone (16). In his own definition of the form focussed on sequence and juxtaposition, McCloud asserts that comics don't 'have to contain words to be comics' (1993, 8). Groensteen discusses the interaction of word and image within his broader concept of arthrology (2007, 127-134) but asserts that comics do not necessarily have to include words in order to operate as comics. He identifies several examples of 'silent comics' (2014b, 107) that are 'devoid of verbal enunciations, without dialogue or the narrational text (captions)' (2007, 14).

Despite the existence of such examples, the majority of comics do incorporate words via the use of common tropes such as speech balloons, thought bubbles, captions and written sound effects (Cohn 2013, 36; Baetens and Lefèvre 2014, 184;

Lacassin 2014, 39). Harvey asserts the importance of words to the images in comics, stating that together the two 'achieve a meaning that neither conveys alone without the other'' (2001, 75-76). In direct criticism of McCloud's sequence-focused definition of comics, he identifies word and image blending as 'the essential characteristic of "comics" – the thing that distinguishes it from other kinds of pictorial narratives' (75). Hatfield acknowledges the existence of wordless comics (2009, 133) but still identifies the interplay of word and image as one of the 'fundamental tensions' at work in the form of comics (132). He states that by not considering 'verbal/visual interplay crucial to the form, [McCloud] neglects just how much the interaction of images and words can inform, indeed enable; the reading of sequences' (137-138).

In his later writing, Groensteen cites this observation by Hatfield in asserting that 'the viewpoints championed respectively by McCloud and Harvey seem […] complementary' rather than antagonistic (2014b, 107). Cohn asserts the importance of words to the form, noting that 'visual language most often occurs in conjunction with written language in the creation of meaning' (2013, 13). Smolderen similarly views the form of comics as a hybrid of word and image that operates as 'an audiovisual stage on paper' (2014, 47). Miodrag states that 'it is indisputable that words and images interact in producing comics narratives' (2013, 83). While providing a useful analysis of the diverse range of text-image interactions found in the form (83-107), she is careful to highlight the complexity and variety of these interrelationships, observing that 'though the mutual exchange between the visual and verbal is pertinent to any examination of comics, the nature of that exchange cannot be defined for the form as a whole' (89).

Despite minimising the definitional importance of words, even McCloud later asserts that comics operate best when words and pictures work in tandem, taking turns to lead 'and support each other's strengths' (1993, 156). Due to the inclusive nature of the model proposed in this chapter, such contradictions are less problematic than they might initially appear. The blend of word and image can be seen as a key characteristic that operates in complement with the simultaneous

juxtaposition of images, but that is occasionally absent in some examples of the form.

Miller points the way towards this compromise, including in her definition of comics the qualifier that sequences in comics may operate 'with or without text' (Miller 2007, 75). Sabin similarly defines the form as operating 'usually, but not always, with text' (1993, 5) while Priego asserts that comics 'optionally but frequently' incorporate words into their narrative (2010, 76). As these flexible and inclusive definitions show, it is possible to acknowledge the essential "comicness" of wordless comics while at the same time recognising the prevalence of word and image blending within the form. In the same way that film can operate as a silent form and yet is usually enhanced by the addition of a soundtrack, the blend of word and image remains a powerful and key characteristic of the form of comics.

Conclusion

This chapter has established a model for the operation of the form of comics based on seven key characteristics. This model identifies comics as a form which uses arrangements of panels in space to communicate the passage of time within a narrative. These panels are arranged in simultaneous juxtaposition, forming spatial networks that contain linear narrative sequences and foster other less linear narrative and aesthetic interrelations. As the reader progresses through this spatial network, they control the pace of their own reading. The passage of time and motion displayed in the panels within the network is constructed by the reader through the process of closure. The images displayed are tablodic in nature, and often operate in a hybrid blend with written words.

Taken together, these characteristics could potentially be used as indicators of the relative "comicness" of a specific media artefact. However, the purpose of this model is not to reach a rigid definition of the form. Instead it aims to enable an examination of the impact of different kinds of mediation and hybridisation on the

form of comics. As such the model allows for the study of comic formats that do not demonstrate all of the seven characteristics identified in this chapter. It also allows for different examples of the form to display greater or lesser emphasis on each characteristic.

For example, in a typical comic book or graphic novel, all seven key characteristics of the form can be observed in operation. However in 'mute' (Groensteen 2007, 14) or 'pantomime' (Hatfield 2009, 133) comic books and graphic novels that feature no written words, the form of comics can be seen to operate without the characteristic of word and image blending. In most comic strip formats all seven characteristics are again on display, although the role of the spatial network may be more limited in its expression. In single panel newspaper cartoons, only the characteristics of reader control, tablodic images and word and image blending may be observed in operation.

The chapter has also considered some aspects of the impact of digital mediation on the key characteristics of the form. The incorporation of animation and sound into digital comic formats can present challenges to the reader's control of pacing and the establishment of fictional time through the spatial arrangement of panels. Digital comics that either operate a guided view or use similar techniques that focus on displaying panels one at a time can limit or eliminate the use of simultaneous juxtaposition and the spatial network. Conversely, digital comics that follow an infinite canvas format can strengthen and extend the characteristic of the spatial network. A more detailed examination of the impact of digital mediation on the form of comics will be provided in the subsequent chapters of this thesis.

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