The Impossible Definition

THIERRY GROENSTEEN

The definitions of comics that can be found in dictionaries and encyclopedias, and also in the more specialized literature, are, as a general rule, unsatisfactory. It is easy to understand the reasons.

These definitions are of two sorts. The first, often concise, participates in an essentialist approach and looks to lock up some synthetic form of the "essence" of comics. This enterprise is no doubt doomed to failure if one considers that, far from verifying the long assumed poverty of expression and intrinsic infantilism, comics rest on a group of coordinating mechanisms that participate in the representation and the language, and that these mechanisms govern in their movements numerous and disparate parameters, of which the dynamic interaction takes on extremely varied forms from one comic to another. Whatever its successes on the plane of art, one must recognize that any comic:

1) is necessarily (constitutionally) a sophisticated structure
2) only actualizes certain potentialities of the medium, to the detriment of others that are reduced or excluded

Consequently, searching for the essence of comics is to be assured of finding not a shortage but a profusion of responses. In the brilliant essay by Alain Rey entitled *Les Spectres de la bande*, one thus reads that "the essential" of comics is in "the organized space that cheats between the two dimensions of the format and the perceptive suggestion of the world" (102); that "the exchange between the textual and figural values creates the essence of comics" (104); that from now on the medium characterizes above all "a creative battle between figuration and narrativity, not between image and text, this last assumes nothing but the most superficial aspect of the story" (200). These are many different and fertile suggestions, and no doubt it would not be difficult to find in this single book half a dozen other analogous formulas that suggest some part of the truth.

But one also meets definitions of comics that are longer and more articulated, better conforming to the definition of a *definition*: "An enunciation of attributes that distinguish something, that belongs in particular to the exclusion of all others" (Littré). These differing definitions are retained as pertinent for the number and the identity of their

Reprinted by permission from Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics* (University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 12-20.

attributes. Researchers have not failed to butt heads on this point, as one can see by looking at some clarifying examples.

The work of David Kunzle, *The Early Comic Strip*, launched a series intended to cover the entire history of comics. This first book examines the pre-Töpfferian period, from 1450 to 1825, grouping not only anonymous popular imagery but also painting and engraving cycles by artists such as Callot, Rubens, Greuze, and Hogarth, to name but a few. Kunzle formulates "four conditions" under which these stories in images can be considered proto-comics or, if one prefers, assimilated *a posteriori*:

> I would propose a definition in which a "comic strip" of any period, in any country, fulfills the following conditions: 1) There must be a sequence of separate images; 2) There must be a preponderance of image over text; 3) The medium in which the strip appears and for which it was originally intended must be reproductive, that is, in printed form, a mass medium; 4) The sequence must tell a story which is both moral and topical.[1]

Bill Blackbeard, another, and no less eminent, American researcher, is violently opposed to this view. Challenging, and not without some bad faith, each of the conditions proposed by Kunzle, Blackbeard formulated the following definition:

> A serially published, episodic, open-ended dramatic narrative or series of linked anecdotes about recurrent identified characters, told in successive drawings regularly enclosing ballooned dialogue or its equivalent and generally minimal narrative text.[2]

These two definitions are, to my understanding, both unacceptable. They are equally normative and self-interested, each made to measure in order to support an arbitrary slice of history. For example, the third of Kunzle's conditions only serves to justify the fact that he chose the invention of printing as a starting point for *The Early Comic Strip*. While Blackbeard's definition, which defends the thesis of the American origin for comics, applies only to printed comics and is destined to dismiss the entire field of comics that predates the appearance of the Yellow Kid in 1896.

In France, let us recall that Antoine Roux proposed a definition in six points in *La Bande dessinée peut être éducative* (Éd. de l'École 1970), a definition backhandedly swept aside (and, here again, in part unjustly) by Yves Frémion in *L'ABC de la BD*, where one reads: "In ten years, none of these criteria, although a priori serious, has withstood history."[3]

The difficulty of producing a valid definition of comics, a definition that permits discrimination in that which it is not but which excludes none of its historical manifestations, including its marginal or experimental visionaries (I am thinking, for example, of the works of Jean Teulé and of Martin Vaughn-James, where the reception can seem to be problematic), was indicated by Pierre Couperie in 1972:

> Comics would be a story (but it is not necessarily a story . . .) constituted by handmade images from one or several artists (it must eliminate cinema and the photo-novel), fixed images (in difference from animation), multiple (contrary to the cartoon), and

juxtaposed (in difference from illustration and engraved novels . . .). But this definition applies equally well to Trajan's Column and the Bayeux Tapestry.[4]

And Couperie adds that neither the framing of images, nor the use of the balloon, nor the mode of distribution are determining criteria.

So great is the diversity of what has been claimed as comics, or what is claimed today under diverse latitudes, that it has become almost impossible to retain any definitive criteria that is universally held to be true. I want to demonstrate this for two of the pertinent traits often erected as doctrinal elements:

1) the insertion, in the image, of verbal enunciations
2) the permanence, within the panels, of at least one identifiable character (a criterion notably insisted upon by Blackbeard)

Although used overwhelmingly, these elements must be seen to be contingent characteristics, suffering a number of exceptions. It follows that they can only produce reductive definitions.

Here, first of all, are some authors who have produced "mute" comics, that is to say, devoid of verbal enunciations, without dialogue or the narrational text (captions). Coming from Germany, this particular narrative form was widespread at the end of the nineteenth century with the pantomines of Caran d'Ache, K-Hito, or A. B. Frost, to mention not a single French, Spanish, or American artist. One later finds works "without words" in every category of comics: the daily comic strip and/or independent pages (*Adamson* by Oscar Jacobsson [1920]; *The Little King* by Otto Soglow [1931]; *Vater und Sohn* by e.o. plauen [1934]; *Henry* by Carl Anderson [1934]; *Globi* by J. K. Schiefe and R. Lips [1934]; *Professeur Nimbus* by André Daix [1934]; *M. Subito* by Robert Velter [1935]; *Max l'explorateur* by Guy Bara [1955]; etc.); complete stories published in the illustrated press (here the examples abound, recall only, among the successes, *Allô! il est vivant* by Raymond Poïvet [1964]; *Sanguine* by Philippe Caza [1976]; many episodes of *Ken Parker* by Milazzo and Berardi [mid-1980s]; *Magic Glasses* by Keko [1986]; or again the sketches of the German artist Sperzel, such as those that can be found in recent years in *U-Comix* and *Kowalski*); finally, in books, from Milt Gross (*He Done Her Wrong* [1930]) to Thierry Robin (*La Teigne* [1998]), passing through Moebius (*Arzach* [1975]), Crepax (*La Lanterne Magique* [1979]), Ana Juan (*Requiem*, with Gordillo [1985]), Avril and Petit-Roulet (*Soirs de Paris* [1989]), Hendrik Dorgathen (*Space Dog* [1993]), Alberto Breccia (*Dracula, Dracul, Vlad?, bah . . .* [1993]), Fabio (*L'Oeil du Chat* [1995]), Lewis Trondheim (*La Mouche* [1995]), Anna Sommer (*Remue-ménage* [1996]), and Peter Kuper (*The System* [1997]), and this list has no pretence to completeness.

The permanence—and the present vitality—of this tradition does not prevent some researchers from asserting that "what distinguishes a comic from a cycle of frescoes is the fact that the written words are essential to the understanding of the story."[5] An amusing detail—and indicative of his blindness—the author next produced, in support of this observation, a *Krazy Kat* page in which the texts were masked, without seeming to notice that, unfortunately for him, the narration, developed in eleven images, remained perfectly intelligible despite the verbal amputation!

As for the presence of a recurrent character, there are diverse ways to bypass this. I will note six:

1) The first is radical: it is sufficient that no human being is depicted in the story; in this case, these works have the unique motor of a metamorphosis of a place or of a population of objects. Examples: *The Cage* by Martin Vaughn James (1975), *Intérieurs* by Regis Franc (1979), *A Short History of America* by Robert Crumb (1979).
2) The second case can be considered as an attenuation of the first. Although the recurrent character is not shown, his presence is suggested "in absentia" by the use of a verbal narration in the first person, and/or a focus of perception assumed by the images (a practice in cinema that is known by the expression "subjective camera"). André Juillard's contribution to the collective anthology *Le Violon et l'archer* (1990) illustrates this second case. One might also remember the famous page by McCay, in *Dreams of a Rarebit Fiend*, where the protagonist assists in his burial at the bottom of his coffin. (The series was published from 1904 to 1911, then restarted in 1913; the precise date of the particular page is not, to my knowledge, mentioned in any edition.) A neighboring case is one where the character is simply held permanently off-screen—one can hear him speak without seeing him—as in *Calma chicha* (1985), a short story by the Spanish artist Marti.
3) There is also, while present in the image, the character that is not physically identifiable, because the elements that form his identity (and, in the first instance, his face) are systematically evaded. The book *Carpets' bazaar* by Francois Mutterer and Martine Van (1983) rises to this challenge. A slightly different example would be *Unflip coca* by Edmond Baudoin (1984), where the features of the heroine are not revealed to the reader except in the last three pages of the book. (She is, until that point, depicted from the back or with her face covered by her hair.)
4) The "stability" of the character can also be given a pounding by incessant mutations of the corporeal envelope or by the graphic treatment that is reserved for him. An experimental book such as *John et Betty* by Didier Eberoni (1985) proposed an approximation of this practice. René Petillon used it in a humorous mode in depicting the "head of directory enquiries of Terra . . . one of these unstable class B14 mutants, which constantly change their heads" (*Bienvenue aux terriens* [1982], 25).
5) The character as a recognizable individual dissolves when all the characters resemble each other, ruining the very idea of identity. Within a population such as that of the Smurfs, the physical marks of individuation are extremely rare (initially reserved for Papa Smurf, Brainy Smurf, and, of course, Smurfette). Here, the process of naming (under a form of qualified epithet: Grouchy Smurf, Poet Smurf, Jokey Smurf, etc.) allows the story to adapt to the state that Bruno Lecigne has precisely baptized hypertwinhood (*hypergemellite*). Certain stories by Francis Masse or by Florence Cestac have also come close to the total indifferentiation of the body.
6) Moreover the case of comics where the "actors" renew themselves from panel to panel, each seeing his role limited to a single, unique appearance. Several works by the Bazooka Group illustrate this tendency, as well as the five pages by Crumb entitled *City of the Future* (1967). The first chapter of *C'était la guerre des tranchées* by Jacques

Tardi (published in *[A suivre]* no. 50 [March 1982]) is not very far removed from this; its polyphonic structure attests to the collective nature of an outlook (the absurdity of war) that is not suitable to personalization, and which is under pains to reduce it.

Thus, two dogmatic criteria, retained for the most part in current definitions of comics, must be dismissed. The difficulty encountered here is not particular to comics. It arises in almost identical terms for the most part, if not completely, in forms of modern art, like the cinema, and for forms where the evolution over the course of a century has smashed the traditional definition (novel, painting, music) into pieces. For example, Roger Odin shows clearly that it is almost impossible to express a definition of cinema that also applies to animated films and to all the forms of experimental or "widened" cinema. The aporia that the semiotician necessarily unblocks is thus described:

> By what right do we exclude from cinema these productions when their authors present them explicitly as "films"? The fact that these productions do not enter into our definition of the "cinema," is that a sufficient justification for this exclusion? If not, must we revise our definition of cinema in a more generalizable manner in order to integrate these counter-examples? But if so, where do we stop this generalization: at the absence of the film? At the absence of the screen? At the absence of the projector? Won't we arrive at a sort of definition that tells us nothing about its object?[6]

Roger Odin suggests that it is necessary to surpass this immanent approach to cinema in order to take into account its social uses. No longer considering the "cinematic object" but the "cinematic field," he concludes (57) that "cinematic objects are definable objects, but variable objects in space and time."

ICONIC SOLIDARITY

If one wishes to provide the basis of a reasonable definition for the totality of historical manifestations of the medium, and also for all of the other productions unrealized at this time but theoretically conceivable, one must recognize the relational play of a plurality of interdependent images as the unique ontological foundation of comics. The relationship established between these images admits several degrees and combines several operations, which I will distinguish later. But their common denominator and, therefore, the central element of comics, the first criteria in the foundational order, is iconic solidarity. I define this as interdependent images that, participating in a series, present the double characteristic of being separated—this specification dismisses unique enclosed images within a profusion of patterns or anecdotes—and which are plastically and semantically overdetermined by the fact of their coexistence *in praesentia.*

No doubt giving the word "comics" such an extensive meaning is not without inconveniences. This is the danger noted by Pierre Couperie. From the steles, frescoes, and the ancient Egyptian books of the dead to the predellas of medieval painting, and from the Bayeux Tapestry to the polyptychs of every age, all the way to the pre-Colombian codex, the stations of the cross, the Emakimono (Japanese picture scrolls), storyboards for films and modern photo-novels, there are probably too many of these works of art that can find refuge in this potluck collection.[7]

Comics will encounter a problem similar to that which has long concerned the world of literature. Everyone admits that it is not sufficient to simply align words in order to make a literary work, for the reason that "of all the materials that humanity can utilize among others in the fine arts, language is perhaps the least specific, the least closely reserved to this end."[8] Resuming a debate begun in the time of Aristotle, Gerard Genette struggles to define the criteria of literarity, that is to say the conditions by which a text can be recognized as literary. I concede in the same way to the "essentialists" that it is not sufficient to simply align images, even interdependently, to produce a comic. Many other conditions can be legitimately debated, which would touch in priority, initially the "nature" of these images (their substance, their mode of production, their formal characteristics), followed by their mode(s) of articulation, eventually even the published form that they take, their distribution and the conditions of their reception—in short, everything that inscribes them in the specific process of communication.[9] But it is improbable that unanimity will be reached on any of these conditions.

In reality, research on the essence of comics is not quite on the same order as that of a definition of literarity. The point is, in the second case, to separate the literary discourse from all the other forms of discourse, starting with day-to-day language. Literature is characterized by "a rupture with the ordinary regime of the language." The clearly posed question from then on is to define "that which makes a verbal message a work of art," according to the formulation of Roman Jakobson recalled by Genette. For the latter, the rupture can be analyzed in terms of *fiction* (in so far as a work of fiction develops in the reader an "aesthetic attitude" and a relative "disinterest" with regard to the real world), or perhaps in terms of *diction,* that is to say by the observation of formal traits that are "facts of style." This opposition stretches to coincide with the division of the field of literature to "two great types: on the one hand fiction (dramatic or narrative), on the other lyric poetry, more and more often designated by the term poetry all told."[10]

Comics rest on a device that is not known from familiar usage. It is not noted that everything can be expressed by this means—even if the practice of comics is, technically and financially speaking, available to everyone, as is confirmed by the aptitude of those children who devote themselves to it. One cannot help but compare it with other forms of creation (those, notably, that we have enumerated above) that participate with complete rights in the domains of art or fiction. The comics are not based on a particular usage of a language, there is no place to define them in terms of diction. But neither are they bound exclusively with fictional forms, since there are examples of publicity or propagandistic comics, political and pedagogical comics, and, occasionally, comics journalism, where the concern is to inform or to testify. We can also add that the proliferation of autobiographical comics is a remarkable phenomenon of recent years, stemming from America, where the works of Robert Crumb, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar, notably, have opened the door. This plasticity of comics, which allows them to put in place messages of every order and narrations other than the fictional, demonstrates that before being an art, comics are well and truly a language.

But it is not necessary, at this stage of reflection, to push the concern for the delimitation of the medium further ahead. It will be enough for us that one cannot conceptualize

comics without verifying the general rule, that of iconic solidarity. The necessary, if not sufficient, condition required to speak of comics is that the images will be multiple and correlated in some fashion.

This fact is empirically verified by whoever leafs through a comic book or comics magazine. What is put on view is always a space that has been divided up, compartmentalized, a collection of juxtaposed frames, where, to cite the fine formula of Henri Van Lier, a "multi-framed aircraft" sails in suspension, "in the white nothingness of the printed page."[11] A page of comics is offered at first to a synthetic global vision, but that cannot be satisfactory. It demands to be traversed, crossed, glanced at, and analytically deciphered. This moment-to-moment reading does not take a lesser account of the totality of the panoptic field that constitutes the page (or the double page), since the focal vision never ceases to be enriched by peripheral vision.

It is observable that the words for the French term *bandes dessinées* (drawn strips) itself implies a restrictive perception of the field that it is supposed to cover. The epithet, specifically assuming that the image will be the product of a drawing (*dessin*), seems to remove a priori all recourse to the photo, to typography, and even to painting. More seriously, the notion of the strip (*bande*) abusively privileges one of the components of the medium, the horizontal segment that sometimes constitutes a micro-story, sometimes nothing other than an ongoing continuing story, or only a portion of a page. If one believes Jean-Claude Glasser, the reign of this term is historically justified:

> It is truly in the buildings of the Agence Opera Mundi that the expression *bande dessinee* was formed [in the 1930s], then progressively imposed itself. . . . It remained to designate the daily strips . . . which explains why it is not found in the illustrated magazines (*illustrés*) of the age where the Sunday pages predominated. . . . It is only in the 1950s that it ceased to apply only to daily strips.[12]

But what was formerly nothing but a lexical generalization has become a veritable impropriety. Now that the book [*album*] is, in Europe, the preponderant vehicle for comics, it follows that the page is the technical unit, market and aesthetic reference.[13]

Iconic solidarity is only the necessary condition so that visual messages can, in first approximation, be assimilated within a comic. As a physical object, every comic can be described as a collection of separate icons and interdependent images. If one considers any given production, one quickly notices that comics that satisfy this minimal condition are naturally longer, but also that they do not all obey the same intentions and do not mobilize the same mechanisms. All theoretical generalizations are cognizant of the trap of dogmatism. Far from wanting to defend a school of thought, an era or a standard against others, or again to prescribe any recipes, I want to force myself to note the diversity of *all forms* of comics and spare my reflections from any normative character.

That is why I have chosen the notion of the system, which defines an ideal, as emblematic of this reflection. The comics system will be a conceptual frame in which all of the actualizations of the "ninth art" can find their place and be thought of in relation to each other, taking into account their differences and their commonalities within the same medium. In this meaning, the notion of the system, "an ensemble of things that are held" (Littré), advances the fundamental concept of *solidarity*.

NOTES

1. Paris: Minuit, "Critique," 1978.
2. David Kunzle, *The Early Comic Strip: Narrative Strips and Picture Stories in the European Broadsheet from c. 1450 to 1825* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 2.
3. Bill Blackbeard, "Mislabeled Books," *Funny World* 16, Michigan, 1974, 41.,
4. Casterman, "E3" *Tournai*, 1983, 36. The third and fourth criteria advanced by Antoine Roux, "comics are a chain of images" and "comics are a rhythmic story," have not lost their pertinence in my eyes.
5. Cf. David Carrier, "Comics and the Art of Moving Pictures: Piero della Francesca, Herge and George Herriman," *Word & Image* 13: 4 (October–December 1997), 317.
6. Roger Odin, *Cinema et production de sense* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1990), 49–50.
7. I have intentionally mentioned only the forms where narrative is a natural slope or a possible application. There exists other series of fixed interdependent images that obey the principles of specific correlation. Thus, architectural drawings represent the same building, for which it is important that the outline, section, and elevation are in agreement. The images of a comic are not subjected to a referential solidarity of this order, except when the author makes this specific choice, with a concern for realism.
8. Gerard Genette, *Fiction et diction* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1991), 11–12.
9. Once again it must be seen that this is situated at the intersection of two distinct logics. Thus, to retain as a criterion of definition the fact that comics can be entrusted to printing creates the challenge of the original page, or its projection on a screen. It follows from this end, for me—but not, as we have seen, for David Kunzle—that an unprinted comic itself does not cease to be a comic. The system that I propose pays attention to the language of comics, not the institution.
10. This paragraph summarizes very schematically the first pages (7–21) of *Fiction et diction*, op cit, where all the citations are located.
11. Henri Van Lier, "La bande dessinee, une cosmogonie dure," in *Bande dessinee, recit et modernite*, ed. Thierry Groensteen (Paris: Futuropolis-CNBDI, 1988), 5.
12. Letter published in *Les Cahiers de la bande dessinee*, no. 80 (March 1988), 8.
13. Translator's note [Bart Beaty]: The situation that the author describes finds an analogue in the English language. The term "comics" originates in the early twentieth century as a description of daily or weekly strips in newspapers, the majority of which were humorous, and is akin to "funnies." The term has outlived its original meaning and is now used to encompass the entire range of expression in the medium. A cognitive dissonance can occur in instances where the term "comics" is used to describe works that take part in a variety of genres, such as tragedy, romance, or the epic. Similarly, the term "comic book" seems to refer to a collection of funny stories, but in fact describes all types of publications containing comics, most often in magazine, rather than book format.

A COMICS STUDIES READER

EDITED BY JEET HEER AND KENT WORCESTER

University Press of Mississippi
Jackson