THE VISUAL LANGUAGE MANIFESTO

RESTRUCTURING THE "COMICS" INDUSTRY AND ITS IDEOLOGY

BY

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About the Author

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1. PREFACE

Lets face it: business has not been good in the comic industry during the last decade or so. However, despite this, there has been a swelling of diversification amongst genres, creators, and publishers, and maybe even a little upswing in the public's perception of comics. And, there is plenty of talent around too – arguably more than there has ever been. At Comic-Con 2004, Scott McCloud quipped, "I'd be willing to debate that there is more talent now concentrated in people named 'Jason' than there were talented people in the entire industry when I entered it twenty years ago." So, if the industry now has a great deal of talent, diversity, and freedom of expression, why are things still only so-so for its status and prosperity, with no legitimate solution in sight?

What is perhaps unique about this piece will be that it addresses the ailments of the comics industry in a "theory" first approach with an eye toward practicality. Every economic boom for the industry has largely been a bubble effect, either riding off the coattails of another type of media exposure (such as movies) or the early nineties craze based on a speculators market. None of these trends offer a legitimate approach toward the establishment of the medium in American society. This "Manifesto" will propose new ways in which the comic industry can expand its readership, diversify genres, reach to new markets, and improve its public perception regardless of being in print or on the web. This is not a manual for business change explicitly, but rather for a whole new conception of the comics medium which thereby leads to change in industry.

Finally, these writings originally appeared as articles on Comixpedia.com, and have been reedited and reformatted for this collection. You'll find that many of my external sources remain web addresses, and I encourage people to seek them out further. While I have done my best to reduce redundancy as much as possible, I hope that what remains serves more as emphasis rather than annoyance.

Also, I am indebted to a number of people for editing on the original versions, including Leigh Cohn, Kelly Cooper, and Frank J. Cormier. Bill Duncan and Xaviar Xerxes must also be thanked for running my essays on the site in the first place. Lastly, all the people who commented on the original essays either on Comixpedia or my own message-boards (forum.emaki.net) provided many insights that have been incorporated into this revision, and must be thanked to those ends.

Neil Cohn
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2. *COMICS VS. VISUAL LANGUAGE*

The primary key to the survival of the industry lies in the unraveling the muddled definition of "comics" itself. McCloud's famous definition of "comics" in *Understanding Comics* was "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence..." (p. 9). As Dylan Horrocks pointed out in his 2001 essay "Inventing Comics"[1] this definition isn't so much what comics actually *are* though, but more what comics aught to be, according to McCloud. He notes that McCloud has rhetorically latched onto the structural features of the comic medium – what Eisner termed "sequential art" – redefining it as "comics" itself. On the other hand, another position is R.C. Harvey's claim that comics are the blending of the text and images themselves. This echoes the attempt to push the term away from its humorous associations and towards Art Spiegelman's usage of "comix" as a "co-mixing" of word and image.

In my book, *Early Writings on Visual Language*, and subsequent writings,[2] I have explored another option for the definition of "comics," which separates the notion of "comics" from the idea of the "comic medium" *and* the blending of word and image. Most often, we think of sequential images and/or text-image relations as being the core components of "comics," but this is only a loose association since there are:

1) Sequential images plus text
2) Wordless comics
   Ex. *Nufonia Must Fall*
3) Single paneled comics
   Ex. *The Far Side, Family Circus*
4) Text dominated comics with only illustrative images
   Ex. The *Cerebus: Reads* volumes
5) Non-comics that contain all of these distributions
   Ex. Eastern philosophy books by Tsai Tsi Chung

"Comics" cannot have a structural definition since all five of these conditions exist. This abandons the idea that comics derive their categorization from the manner of their form; like Horrocks noted, this is to say that the "comic medium" *is not* "comics." Rather, the idea of "comics" encompasses a social sphere – things like the physical books or strips, the industry that creates them, and the social culture(s) that surrounds them. Further, comics have become not only an entertainment venue, but a social identity, a way in which people categorize themselves based on their relationship to the broader community of "comics' culture." By this perspective, a "comic" (the object) is essentially anything we say it is, because it defines a social object belonging to a certain cultural group.

The "comic medium" is something entirely separate from this. My perspective is that conceptually produced sequential images which follow express patterns of combination (what is generally thought of as the "comic medium"), is actually a language

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[1] Horrocks, Dylan. 2001. Inventing Comics: Scott McCloud Defines the Form in *Understanding Comics*. *The Comics Journal* #234

[2] Largely available online at www.emaki.net

– a *visual language* (VL) – on par with any other language, though unique to its visual modality. Note that this does *not* state that, "comics are a language." Rather, comics (the social objects) *contain* two languages: a visual language and a textual (aural) language. The mixing of these two forms is merely a mental process, not some external art form. Embracing this, the comic industry and community can be thought of as the language group that uses these two intermixing languages. Since it is not important for this piece, I will not belabor any structural descriptions of the linguistic properties of visual language, which are available elsewhere. What is important though, is the categorization of comics and visual language as being distinct yet related concepts.

Given this split between the social and structural aspects of what is usually perceived as a singular concept of "comics," a clarification can be made about how they can survive or be expanded. There are thus two questions to be raised:

1) Do we mean that we want to perpetuate and expand the readership of the "comic medium" – the structures of visual and aural languages?

Or…

2) Do we mean that we want to expand the readership of the social comic book culture – i.e. the genres and community already found in the industry?

Only the first truly has a chance for expansion, while the second will remain a steady niche that reflects a matter of taste more than anything else. This, I believe, is also the stance that McCloud has taken, though he uses the term "comics" to describe both visual language and the social venue that uses it.

The knowledge of this split in definitions can go a long way, especially in terms of public perception. The line of thinking goes something like this: if people understood that this medium is actually a language, it does not need to be tied to any specific genre, style, or format. The logic would follow that this language could appear in any place that languages appear, which is just about everywhere. Comics then become just one of the plethora of places that visual language is used, alongside books, magazines, newspapers (in articles – not strips), textbooks, the internet, etc. More so, as a language, it can be embraced as an innate capacity of the human animal. In a sense, visual language is a part of humans' natural cognitive inheritance – so why not embrace and relish in it?

No doubt, in this context, visual language can be construed as simply providing a justification for "comics" legitimacy. This is false, despite the topic of these writings. Rather, the notions of visual language should be able to stand alone as an investigation of human language and the mind, without its ties to the social artifacts of "comics." Secondly, as will be seen throughout, coming to the conclusions of VL has in fact inspired a completely antithetical solution for "comics legitimacy" in that it leads to the dissolving the notion of "comics" altogether. This will become clearer throughout.

Furthermore, though I think such a shift in perception could lead to radical changes in the treatment of the form, I'm not so naïve as to believe that this realization of visual language is the magic bullet that will save the comics industry. In fact, I think that the achievement of this shift in perception will be an extremely difficult task, especially if the comic industry continues as it presently is.

Furthermore, I don't think that there is *any such* magic bullet. The most obvious of these sorts of approaches comes in McCloud's latest push for the growth of online

comics, which is where he perceives the future of comics. While the internet does pose interesting creative possibilities and a greater freedom of accessibility, I am dubious to jump at its potential as the savior for comics' ailments. Indeed, the current print industry is not going away, despite its troubles, and most likely, the internet will be an extension of the current comic industry, though with noticeably expanded variation in commerce and genre (with unique possibilities for creation). Also, lately, the success of *manga* sales have also been heralded as a saving grace for comics' future, though reliance on an external source for rejuvenation seems to me somewhat of a defeatist cop-out. Rather, I think that the solutions to the problems facing the comic industry (and the perpetuation of visual language) can only be illuminated by stepping outside of the "comic industry box" of thinking.

3. *THE COMICS INDUSTRY*

To understand the predicament of the comic industry, we must first look at how it is currently structured. To be blunt, *aristocracy* pervades the comic industry, and hierarchies exist where a select few preside higher than, and dictate the fate of, the majority. Quite the opposite, a *democratic* structure would be available to everyone, allowing all participants an equal footing. Throughout this work, the tension between these forces will be stressed, discussing how these aristocratic structures permeate the comic industry, as well as illuminating potential democratic movements in contrast.

•••• *BUSINESS* ••••

The most obvious aristocracy lies in the economic structure of the industry. Between 60 to 70% of the market share is held in dominion by two companies: Marvel and DC.[3] Following this, several other publishers each vie to stake out as much of the industry as is leftover.

The difference between the two dominating companies and the smaller publishers should be fairly clear. The Big Two are corporations: Marvel Enterprises, Inc. is actually an integrated division of the toy company that used to be called Toy Biz. Meanwhile, DC is a tiny faction of the media giant AOL Time Warner.

The corporate nature of the Big Two shows in their products. It is remarkable that in such a strong print culture the most major companies *do not* actually serve as publishers. Put simply, the job of a publisher is to serve as a middleman between a creator and the audience. However, the comic industry's main players do not fit this dynamic. Rather, they *manufacture* company-owned properties (i.e. characters) only for the purpose of turning a profit for the company stockholders. The companies own intellectual properties (comic characters), which they look to propagate through the hiring of a "creative" staff. His own practices aside, this is why Todd McFarlane took to calling them "plantations," because, generally, their business goal is to perpetuate themselves and their products – not to connect an audience to an individual's creative vision (unless of course that vision falls within the boundaries of their products).

As Warren Ellis put it in a past column for Comic Book Resources,[4] "it doesn't matter who creates [the comic], it'll come out next month anyway." Usually the smaller businesses in the industry function in at least *some* capacity as real publishers, by distributing and marketing works owned by creators to the financial benefits of both author and publisher.

The bottom-line is one of the reasons that pamphlet style comics far outstrip square bound collections and graphic novels in the industry at large – lengthy single book works do not generate consistent and repeated sales. Since they are pushing corporate properties, the major businesses want consumers to have a regular "fix" of whatever property they're hooked on, with constant exposure of that property to the public. No doubt, this practice has antecedents in newspaper strips, and is very different from standard book publishing, where an author produces their books independently of the

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[3] Monthly reports at: www.diamondcomics.com/market_share.html

[4] Come in Alone by Warren Ellis. August 11, 2000. www.comicbookresources.com

intents of the company, which then markets and distributes it.

This style of industry holds back both freedom of ownership from the producers of the works, as well as stymies the potential avenues for creative growth beyond what properties the companies already hold. Further, this method creates a sort of inbreeding with regard to both genre-type and creative methodology, where everything within the industry follows the lead of the larger influential companies.

In many ways, the formation of Image Comics in the early nineties symbolized a rebellion against the established hierarchy. While independent publishers had always existed, the breaking away of the Image creators proved that popular artists were a bigger draw than the properties they worked on. For instance, the staggering amount of copies sold of the first issues of *Spawn* and *Youngblood* and Rob Liefeld's star-status elevation in the early nineties (to the point of jean advertisements) had nothing to do with the characters they were creating for their fledgling company, but with their status as popular creators. While the collectors market no doubt inflated these sales numbers, their popularity still revolved around the individuals making them – with that popularity then bleeding out to all within their creative sphere – no matter what characters they drew or wrote (or, arguably, the quality of those books).

Despite this revolutionary promise, many of the Image partners did little to break the mold, and many wound up merely imitating the manufacturing methods they left behind, only with themselves at the top. The difference was that they were now able to turn their *own creations* into licensable franchises. For example, *Spawn*, *WildCATs*, and *The Savage Dragon* all expanded to multiple licensing venues such as cartoons and the ever-lucrative toy market. In the case of *Spawn*, which also begat a movie, McFarlane began the comic series doing most all the graphic and writing chores himself, though he has occupied only a co-writer status for over 60 issues while employing others to do the rest of the work.

Perhaps the Big Two learned their lesson from this experience as well, as many of the Image founders have in some way been wooed back to work on corporate properties, such as the *Heroes Reborn* revamps done by Jim Lee and Rob Liefeld for Marvel, Erik Larsen's prodigious work-for-hire projects in addition to his own *The Savage Dragon*, and the recent Lee *Batman* and *Superman* runs which spiked recent sales for DC (which bought Lee's Wildstorm Studios). Marvel, recognizing the importance of creator's voices even went so far as to hire Joe Quesada, who had his own creator owned title *Ash*, as its presiding editor-in-chief.

Indeed, comics are not even the most lucrative market for the Big Two, as licensing makes up the majority of their revenues. This can be seen at any major comic convention with the growing percentage of floor space dedicated to things other than actual comic books. Indeed, without such major licensing, both companies would most likely have dropped their comic lines by the early 1970s. In fact, one could say that comics for these companies serve merely as cheap promotional tools used to develop and sustain their properties. Marvel's vice president Peter Cueno validated this in a recent interview stating,[5]

> Well, most of the money for Marvel comes from our licensing programs ... licensing around major motion pictures that have a broad demographic appeal. …

[5] "How Marvel Makes Money," Jan. 25, 2005. www.fool.com

> From a profitability point of view, about 20%, 15-20% of our earnings come from the comic book business. … But also this is our R&D function. This is where we try out new characters, where we ... rework, re-cosmetize, if you will, other older characters, and try to see what kind of story lines work and so on. The nice thing about the comic book business is, and we publish over 60 titles every month, is we can experiment here and really actually lose very little or no money.

Ellis reinforced this in another column by showing documentation from Marvel that essentially describes the role of comics publishing as providing a library and development program for the toy division. With regard to actual comic sales, he states also that "In 1999, …Marvel made as much money out of its internal ads [within comics] as it did out of [comic sales from] **newsstands, convenience stores, drug stores, supermarkets, mass merchandise and national bookstore chains**" combined (emphasis in original).[6]

Using comics in such a way highlights why so many start-up comic companies (Tekno, Malibu's Ultraverse, CrossGen, etc.) have folded by imitating this model. They are not publishing comics as a means to connect writer to audience (and thus creating quality *reading* material), but with the primary hope that they can create marketable properties to sell off to other lucrative licensing deals such as toys, movies, etc. This is most evident in that these companies work to create *characters*, as opposed to develop or seek out stories. Most likely, because they do not command the same level of product familiarity, they struggle both to secure a solid base of readership and interest as well as demanding high advertising rates. In a market that often banks on nostalgia and familiarity, establishing new properties with hopes that they will consistently flourish without the pull of creators working on them is an extremely hard sell.

Granted, popular licensing emerges from book publishers' works as well. However, for example, Harry Potter was first intended only for exposure as a book, and spread to other forms as determined by the author – who owns at least some share of the rights and produces the original stories – not by a publisher dictating both. Also, Harry Potter entered film *because* of its success as a book, whereas how well comics do before becoming other media is virtually irrelevant.

A revolution against this form of "comics manufacturing" has been going on for quite a while. As it stands, many smaller publishers do actually serve as legitimate publishers – though they have to face extremely limited distribution. However, no matter how monumental the growth of small press in the industry, comics in America are by and large still perceived by the public through the lens provided by the largest companies, and thus by the products they manufacture and market.

Additionally, very few creators have the financial means with which to publish and distribute their work successfully, and are thereby forced to sell their labor to the major companies. On the economic front, the Internet provides the most democratic structure in contrast to the aristocracy of the print industry because, by and large, everyone on the Internet has a fair shot at success. Granted, audiences still need to *find* authors' sites in the vast digital sea of material, but there are no measures preventing this such as they exist in print, like 1) the necessity of a publisher and distributor (even if its one's self), 2) printing costs, 3) a limited distribution system, 4) a limited network of

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[6] Come in Alone by Warren Ellis. Sept. 1, 2000. www.comicbookresources.com

available outlets (i.e. comic and book stores), 5) marketing costs, etc.

Innovative creative possibilities aside, *this* is the real power of the Internet: a level playing field for distribution and exposure, accessible to any person bold enough to post their work online for public consumption. Start-up costs for web-publication are miniscule in comparison to print, even including the cost of a computer. This is also the enticing promise of micropayments[7] – it allows democratic distribution the capacity for a democratic system of financial reward. If successful, the Internet does not have to serve as a vast promotional tool for the licensing of physical properties (or advertising) when it can produce revenue by its own creative content.

However, this is not ground for giving up on the print industry. While it might not be to the same degree as the web, a democratization of the print genre is still possible, though significantly more difficult to implement. It requires a greater shift toward the establishment of real publishers as opposed to corporate plantations, where the company serves to unite an author to their audience as opposed to manufacturing corporate products. While publishers such as Top Shelf and Fantagraphics have been more prominent in the last few years, a complete restructuring of the print genre might not be able to happen in an industry structured the way that it currently is. Hope for the print industry can also come in the form of established book publishers making forays into the market, especially evident nowadays with the push in the graphic novel market. Again though, this sidesteps the "comic industry" proper, expanding into a separate market through different channels which are still controlled by "gatekeepers" of some sort.

•••• *"PUBLISHING" STRATEGY* ••••

This leads to another aristocratic system: the domination of the market's genres by superheroes. While some other themes have been emerging strongly in recent years, the American comic industry is still very clearly centered on the superhero genre – as is the public's perception of it. And, even when genre changes, the same basic formula of adolescent power fantasies prevails.

Because of their positions in the industry, the largest companies do not seek a vast diversification of genre outside the established industry. They conservatively hold onto their seat of power without needing to expand in meaningful ways, perhaps in fear that it could disrupt their advantageous positions. Since the bottom line always rules for the Big Two, they will even saturate the market with low quality books just to maintain a higher percentage of industry share. Many of these books are taken at a loss to profit, in hopes that one might end up a big winner.

Making forays into untested waters is not a standard practice among these businesses because they rely on the use of established properties (such as superheroes) to reliably create revenue. As a result, the broader comics community suffers because the most powerful voices in the industry stymie the possibility of associating "comics" beyond their cultural stereotype – which is based largely around the properties of those major companies. And, it is of far greater risk for the smaller companies to venture out of

[7] The ability to pay a small amount of money on the internet in a simple and easy manner. For instance, a comic could be sold off of a website for 25¢ and the buyer would only have to click in order to pay.

the mold, because more of their revenue (and success as a company) is determined by the sales of every book, and, again, they cannot demand high prices for ad rates.

Furthermore, the audience that those comic companies market to is fairly limited in scope. There seem to be two major strategies that comic companies take in reaching out to readers. The first perception looks at who previous buyers were, and tries to market further to them. For instance, with their "Ultimate" line a few years back, Marvel knew that children have classically been an audience for comics, so they created that line to bring *more* children into comics. This is echoed every time nostalgia is sold as well, such as the latest throwback to 1980's titles such as *G.I. Joe* and *The Transformers*. The other tactic is like what CrossGen seemed to do from the get go. They saw the comic market as a good place to make money, so they figured out the most consistent selling genres and then came out with more of the same.

The problem with both of these approaches is that they do not create new readers in new markets, but only attempt to bring new readers into an old market (or to draw in buyers from within the existing readership). In terms of the previous partitions, these strategies are attempting to perpetuate the second type – the genres and culture(s) that comics currently represent.

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"Small press" publishers (who *are* actually publishers) seem to be taking a generally different tactic. Generally, these look to further the equation of "comics as literature" by marketing to broader bases through bookstores and extending beyond the reach of the "status quo" mainstream market. While targeting bookstores signifies a good step towards furthering the market, this approach is merely a small step towards perpetuation of the form. However, the same kinds of people are reading comics that always have. To truly bring in new readers would be to appeal to markets that do not know that they would even enjoy reading this form.

•••• *DISTRIBUTION* ••••

To expand readership, comics must cater to tastes beyond the scant topics prevalently written about, and must reach people in places other than the inclusive sphere of comic shops. Keeping the product in limited locations promotes an elitist distribution that excludes those "outside the club" without incentive to enter it. Nor *should they want to,* especially if the content being written about does not cater to their tastes or interests. Not everybody does or should want to read superhero, science fiction, fantasy, or the other minimal genres dominating comics. People have diverse interests and tastes, all of which can be fair game for comics. New readers should not be expected to be brought in to the club of comics membership. The product must be *brought to them,* in places that they go, with content that will suit their interests.

Perhaps a hypothetical situation can illustrate this best. Having grown up in coastal Southern California, I have always been surrounded by a fairly rich surf culture. Most of the surfers I knew did not read comics. This is not to say that the two cultures are

diametrically opposed; only that the two don't stereotypically mesh as well as say, comics readers and video game players. The lack of readership from surfers was not because they didn't know how "great and wonderful" comics were, or were on some "I'm too cool for comics" high horse. Indeed, when I gave them books to read that I thought they'd like, they did enjoy them.

For a long time, I had wanted to do just that – create a surfing comic that would do the culture justice. Now, lets suppose that I actually did write this comic. And, for the sake of argument, lets say that it was *utterly fantastic* – a masterpiece that would be loved by virtually every single surfer that would read it. And who knows, maybe some non-surfers would like it too. Now, there still remains the big problem of getting it into the right hands.

Currently, the main place to get comics is at a comic shop, and some bookstores. However, business-wise, it would make a lot more sense for my *surf comic* to be sold in *surf shops* if I want *surfers* to read it than if it was sold in comic shops. And, it could be advertised in surf magazines and other avenues within surf culture, with easier and more direct retail access to its intended audience than a comic shop would have. Comic shops, by and large, are another symbol of comics' social standing as a niche community. This is most exemplified by the monopolistic "Direct Market" of distributing non-returnable comics and related merchandise straight to specialty stores.[8]

An additional point should be made about the example illustrated above. Not only does the creation of a surf comic bring in new readers, it also potentially leads to *new creators*. Given time and inspiration, perhaps those new readers would either turn into or breed people who would want to create *their own* surf comics.

This strategy does not bring new readers into existing comic genres, and there are no guarantees that these hypothetical readers would want to buy more comics of different types of genres. This is the key: *rather than trying to draw a larger populace into the smaller niche comics culture, it dissolves the boundaries of that enclosed industry into the larger populace*. Indeed, as I see it, this is the only true type of integration possible: dissolving the boundaries of comics into the other print cultures.

However, this type of approach *does* fulfill the first type of expansion: it expands and propagates the readership of visual language. It brings the "comic medium" to a new audience *on their level,* and even leads to the possibility that there would be the creation of more surf comics from within the community itself. To think that outsiders should for some reason magically become interested in comics without actually branching out to what those other markets might themselves enjoy reading about is simply pretentious and bad business.

This expansion of genres can go in any number of directions. A short list could include sports (basketball, baseball, football, skateboarding, surfing, rodeo, etc.), music genres (rock, punk, indie, country, hip hop, etc.), religion (pick any – they all have built in stories), non-fiction (politics, self-help, any academic field, etc.) and just about any literary genre imaginable. There are so many things in this world capable of writing about!

There are a myriad of hobbies, lifestyles, and activities out there, each with their own lifestyle and culture, all of which can make for great comics. This, perhaps, has been

[8] The annual reports for the industry are particularly telling for the aristocratic structure of the industry and the restrictive distribution system, available at: www.comtrac.net. See especially the 2003 report.

the problem with previous sports comics done in this country. Rather than create a gripping story about a sports team and their struggles, or about the trials and tribulations that an athlete undergoes (such as the approach taken on ESPN's drama *Playmakers*), sports comics have generally tried to take a recognized celebrity athlete and turn them into a superhero. This does nothing to adapt to a new audience – only to perpetuate the same superhero genre mold, trying to pull new readers into an old market (with a gimmick no less). The same goes for any other genre. Making a comic about a music genre does not mean giving a popular band super powers – only creating a story that is accessible as a reflection of that culture, *for that culture*.

McCloud talks about this same sort of expansion in *Reinventing Comics*, though the problem he faces lies in his keeping the unity of the comics' social sphere with its medium. His vision is for comic shops to have a wide and diverse selection of genres to appeal to everyone, and that is a fine goal. However, I would prefer to see a bookstore without a "comics" section at all. Rather, in an act of complete non-discrimination, comics would find their places amongst the books in whatever genre section they belong. Write a history comic? It goes in the history section. Write a science fiction comic? It belongs in the sci-fi section. How about a comic on politics (like the one I recently had published)? Politics section. Notice a trend?

Thus far, comics have pursued a "separate but equal" style claim of legitimacy both in specialty stores and sections of bookstores. It claims that "comics are just as worthy of attention as literature/art/entertainment as any other field, but keep us in our own section of consideration." The irony for "separate but equal" really shines through here, because quite simply *it isn't equal*! By maintaining these separations, comics pigeon-holes itself into a separate category that will always be sub-par to "real books." By maintaining segregation of comics from other types of books, all the while espousing their equality, the comics industry and culture merely perpetuates the difficulties that they face.

This diversification can be extended further by throwing further marketing into the mix. Why not create sports comics and sell them in sports stores and at sporting events? Why not create comics about music culture and sell them at music stores and concerts? The easiest way to create readers would be to bring them *their* product at places they will be.

It should come as no surprise that the Japanese comic market taps into just these same ideas. Comics, or *manga,* in Japan spread into all sorts of genres, are published by real publishers, are discussed often and prevalently on television (and not just through coinciding *anime*), and are consequently read by everyone from old ladies to overworked salarymen. This is not a collectors market either: every week you can see stacks of phonebook sized *manga* out on the curb ready for recycling, because space does not permit keeping them. Further, they are sold all over the place (though in bookstores they have their own sections – even if it is about half the store). There is even a current trend now for *manga* rental shops, where people can come, sit down, and hang out while reading the store owned *manga*. It's no wonder that *manga* have enjoyed so much success in Japan! And that success has led to even higher quality, which is now pervading the American markets as well.

It is telling that amongst the whole "manga craze" of the last few years, that the major companies have *not* done the sensible thing and mimic the manga business model,

but instead have treated it as they would any other fad: by creating hollow imitations of it. So, rather than diversifying genre and expanding distribution, they have instead opted to create "American manga" by aping the stereotypic style and themes of Japanese comics. Of course, this should be expected, since the major companies' assets are in corporately owned properties, which cannot necessarily expand to other genres, but can be given a "manga makeover."

Democratizing comics economically means making the topics in them appeal to a wide range of people, making them available for purchase in easy and accessible ways and places, with affordable costs that place the focus on communicative content rather than investment or object durability. Such a status would sponsor the language of comics to reach its potential as a human communicative ability across a diverse populace, rather than pigeonholed to an entertainment genre driven by economic gain.

•••• *PRICE* ••••

Furthermore, prices of comics must become affordable on a mass scale. Over the last twenty years, costs have risen so much that it is hardly economical for a consumer to buy many comics. In contrast, manga in Japan are printed in black and white on lower quality paper with vastly higher page counts. The average monthly American comic costs somewhere around three dollars at 30 pages, while weekly manga compilations sell at roughly three American dollars for often over 200 pages! This same price gap runs true of textual paperback books in America opposed to graphic novels. By and large, graphic novels cost significantly more than the standard book of the same genre and page length. Meanwhile, the Japanese paperback collections that are published after the story's initial run in weekly anthologies remains far more affordable at around six dollars for over 200 pages. Across the board, manga cost a miniscule amount in comparison to American comics, and they sell significantly higher numbers – in the millions rather than the thousands.

This price comparison could stem from treating the medium as an Art rather than a Language. With higher quality paper and coloring, emphasis gets placed on the images (and the print object) to be appreciated aesthetically, as opposed to stressing the communicative capacity of the medium as a language to convey the ideas of the author to the reader.

The issue of paper quality might also run deeper, to factors of accessibility versus durability. In Japan, after each week's worth of reading, stacks of manga compilations will end up curbside ready for recycling, as opposed to American comics which are kept for preservation, no doubt sponsored by a collector's market. Indeed, the perception of comics tied to collecting inherently stresses the economic value of the object, rather than the communicative value of the insides.

If prices of comics were lower, it would allow more people to become casual buyers, without the need to make a major investment. However, this relies on the two other major factors just discussed: reading content and distribution.

Idealistically, by integrating comics (the social objects) indiscriminately amongst other books and printed matter, the very concept of their being "comics" dissolves as well. They simply become another type of book, written in two languages instead of one.

While this might seem scary to most in the current industry, it harkens back to deciding what we are trying to propagate: the social culture ("comics") or the visual language? If what we truly care about is the latter, then letting go of its attachment to the former is hardly a price to pay for the gains of expanding the medium itself.

Altering the American comic industry like this would be no small feat. Quite apparently, the result of such changes would radically alter the way in which comics are considered throughout America, as well as the very industry itself. In some sense, this plan would require the dissipation of the broader sense of the industry in order to further the form itself. Unless the comics industry truly considers what its place, and its future, should be, it will remain hobbling along as a marginalized niche community, inaccessible to the vast populace, though with a language burgeoning with the potential to do so much more.

4. *PUBLIC PERCEPTION*

More than just economics, the business tactics of the industry described above do no good towards progressing the public opinion of "comics" beyond the stereotypes inherited from over four decades ago. Perpetuation of stereotypical genres and niche markets does no use in changing the public's perception of comics.

Indeed, comics have a bit of an identity crisis. Because our culture cannot decide what they really are, leaving them to pay the price with poor financial status and legal quagmires brought by prosecutors belief of comics' corrupting ability.[9] A common remedy for this is the insistence that comics are "art," which is probably the number one expression used to justify their worth as a medium. This statement abounds in comics literature, most evident as an overt part of Eisner's term "sequential art." However, is the quest to claim "comics as art" really worth doing in the first place? In this section, I will examine the problems found in claiming "comics are art," and how "comics as language" is a more beneficial perspective.

This is not to imply that the clear success of comics breaking into nationwide MOMA exhibits and establishing their own art museums is for naught. Indeed, these strides mark great progress towards the public perception of the medium. Granted, various comics (the objects) can rightfully have cultural value as art. However, broader problems arise when stating that the "comics medium" is art.

•••• *CLARIFYING OUR TERMS* ••••

Designating "comics as art" most likely arises from the perception of the medium as a synthesis of two "traditional" art forms – literature (textual writing) and picture making (painting, drawing, etc). However, just as splitting the social "comics" from structural "visual language" means we no longer need to treat one as essentially part of the other, the same sort of dissection of terminology can help us to understand "art."

Generally, "art" is an expression applied on top of the nature and creation of some object or action. This might be a response to some evocative aesthetic, or a commentary about the creator's vision or methods, or any number of things that the term "art" brings up. However, what it does not refer to is the avenue of expression itself. "Art" has become applied to painting, sculpture, dancing, drawing, and a myriad of other activities. However, these actions and their resulting products are not necessarily "art" by inherent definition. The result of the act of sculpture isn't art, it's the creation of a statue, just as the result of painting (the action) is to produce a painting (the object). Likewise, not all statues and things painted are considered "art" by definition, only the ones that meet certain individual and cultural qualifications to be included in that category. Thus, like the divide between "comics" and the "comics medium," "art" can be understood as a social term applied *interpretively* to varying actions and objects.

In America, comics (and the community that surrounds them) do not get much respect in the public eye, are repeatedly stereotyped negatively, and are even persecuted legally with dire consequences. As a tactic to combat this, raising the banner for artistic

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[9] Read about these (and make a donation!) at www.cbldf.org

appreciation is unsurprising. But, by trying to change public perception by using "art" as justification, the "nature" of the medium remains unaddressed, while one social category (comics) is attempted to be equated with another (art).

Notice also that the same sort of problems arise from the social connotations evoked in the term "sequential art" as do in "comics medium." As a term, it also conflates cultural aspects into an intended structural term. A more beneficial approach would be to educate the populace on the actual nature of the form, divorced from these sorts of associations, and then let them derive their own (social) interpretations of that structure's usage. In this way, the notion of VL only lends *more* possibility for the form to be accepted as worthwhile art or literature, not less. Promoting this notion of the comics medium as a language – *visual language* – can aid in gaining the respect desired by previously fighting under the banner of "art."

•••• *ART VS. LANGUAGE* ••••

Let's look at some ways in which the conception of visual language differs from that of "comics as art."

First off, humans have a basic biological inheritance to language. Everyone has the inborn capacity for language – it's just a question of learning. Visual language is no different: *everyone* has the capacity to make pictures; it's just a matter of acquiring the grammar of putting them in sequence coherently – both for the ability to read and to produce them. In comics, we simply have the production of two languages being written at once, a visual one and an aural/textual one.[10]

Notice also that language implicitly emerges from an individual source. Though writing can be tempered by various people, it ultimately comes from a person's mind – a very personal and individualistic process. The notion of visual language is foremost a democratizing force because Language is automatically assumed to emerge from an individual source. Though it has the potential to be tempered by several people (as in a true editing process), language is produced from the mind of an individual person, which is in stark contrast to the assembly-line methods of "creative teams." Individual creators of this type has been evident throughout the history of comics, in what are now oppressively named "writer-artists." Such a term treats authors as if they are somehow exceptions to the "normal" practice of the "shop style," because they write both words and images. Indeed, creators who take on both roles should not be considered abnormal at all, as it is natural for humans to communicate in more than one "modality" at once (just as is done with co-speech gesture).

This type of individualized creation is in stark contrast to the predominant "shop style" of manufacturing comics, which distributes the jobs amongst a variety of specialized workers. Here, an aristocracy extends into the methods by which comics are made. The "shop style" of comic manufacturing was designed with productivity in mind, breaking up the workload into manageable portions in an assembly-line division of labor, which is also hierarchically organized top-down, with a controlling editor at the helm. A comic editor is more of a "manager" with creative input throughout the entire process. The editor presides over the whole process, first with a writer and penciler who perform

[10] See my book *Early Writings on Visual Language* and writings online at www.emaki.net for details.

the craftwork of primary "creative" significance, after which inkers, letterers, and colorists clean and finish the work.[11]

In this assembly-line method of making comics, the productively fluent VL person is usually the penciler. However, they often must deal with "translating" a textual script written by a non-fluent writer who indicates what to draw. Most often, the writer holds the second most primary role, as their script is the first level of creation, though the penciler might take liberties in their visual translation of the writer's work (all of which might be changed by the editor). Authority runs top-down, with the overall aim to finish the product so that the paying public can consume it at a timely and regular frequency.

While these might seem good qualities for a business set up, the authoritarian editor model is in great contrast to that of authorship where an individual strives to express their own creative vision based on their own ideas. In fact, the editor is also a subordinate too, since legally the corporation is the author of the work.[12] This factory-like set up came in the mid-1930s, with companies transitioning from reprinting collections of newspaper comic strips into producing new material expressly for comic books. It is somewhat ironic that Will Eisner is credited as one of the strongest forces in bringing the assembly-line to comics, which in its era was a widespread innovation for manufacturing of all types. Perhaps he should be praised even more for breaking with it.

In light of the notion of VL, isn't this whole system a bit backwards? Shouldn't a final *visual* product be written *visually* from the start by a person capable in that form, not dictated by a person without such fluency? In an idealistic sense, acceptance of the notion of visual language is an acknowledgment of those fluent in it, elevating the status of the diminishingly named "writer-artists" to be considered the norm – *not* the exception.

Heightening the awareness of the medium as a language will elevate the status of the individual creator. It democratizes the potential for creativity amongst "speakers" of the language, and away from company executives and so-called editors who might not have any real productive fluency in VL at all. It comes as no surprise that so many independently published creators work autonomously, either in print or on the web, rather than as "creative teams."

Most likely, hierarchic assembly-line creation has been accepted because of the cultural perception of the "comic medium" as an Art rather than as a Language. Culturally, Art empowers a select few with "skill" while others must suffer at being "unskilled" in their craft – with learning based largely on practice modified by some sort of innate "talent." Language on the other hand is biologically imbued in everybody, only requiring the nourishment of being exposed to an external language to bring it out. Granted, the inherency of language to humans says nothing about *craftsmanship* – being a "good" or "bad" image or words-smith – which only has to do with *how* those abilities are used. However, the cultural conceptions we hold towards image-making begin with our considerations of their creation first. If a democratic perspective is gained with regard to creation, a democratic usage can arise from it.

In addition to the individualistic role that language plays, it also binds members of a community together through its shared use. In contrast, art is almost wholly associated with an individual's style, expression, and message. The social aspect of VL is evident

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[11] A good report on this can be found at: http://phonogram.us/comics/style/style_guide.htm

[12] See again, Come in Alone by Warren Ellis. August 11, 2000. www.comicbookresources.com

throughout comic culture, where a group of people share this common visual language and gather around its usage.

By and large, users of language are expected to be both producers and receivers. In a print culture such as comics, promoting such a perspective would encourage everyone not only to be readers of works, but also be able to create their own works, which they could share. Creating mass fluency in this way would also lend towards a broader base of creativity, most likely leading to a larger quantity of higher quality works. (Hypothetically, if 10% of the population creates high quality work, then when population increases, the number of quality creators rises as well.)

The social aspect to VL is especially honed in the webcomic community, which features a relatively identifiable social group organized around a common avenue of VL use: internet comics. Indeed, with the power of web distribution, such mass usage is readily a possibility. Part of the usefulness of a publishing venue without the restrictions of companies is the lack of constraints on quality. Indeed, by and large, the quality of webcomics is much lower than in print, simply because there are no limits put on who can post their work online. While some may view this disparagingly by taking an aristocratic perspective of Art or publishing, viewing it in terms of VL acknowledges that quality of "artistry" should not matter so long as people are employing the language *en masse*.

However, though the Internet does not place restrictions on distribution and economics, web publishing still does not equate to the usage of the medium as a language. In a past column for Comixpedia[13], John Barber stated that the Internet allows for comics to break free of their "ivory tower" and become "a true form of communication." Here, Barber is commingling the web's distributive power with the social factors of democratization. Though the web allows for the employment of the medium to enter a level playing field of distribution, the Internet does not determine *how* people use that language. That is, the Internet does not free visual language from "comic culture" itself. Truly, a socially prevalent use of VL would not restrict it to the inclusive comic industry.

Potentially, such a perspective change could help in the legal battles fought over comics as well. It is easier to make the argument that a language is not inherently subversive, rather than to argue for the validity of the medium to be considered socially as "art." If you are just claiming something is an "art form" (i.e. "a medium") you have no grounding evidence except as a battle of opinion. It is easy to say something is not art, because that is defined subjectively. Language has qualifications and requirements that can be argued for defining it structurally, art does not.

Indeed, society conceives of language as being more democratic than art, most likely because of language's social aspect. People are generally more suspicious of the subversive potential of art than of language. They trust language more, even though its use has every potential to be as manipulating or divisive as "art" (as a century worth of prevalent propaganda is testament to).

Such judgments tap into the most important difference between these positions, which I raised early on: language is only a *process* that begets a product, while art usually defines the resulting outcome of a process. That is, language is the means by which

[13] Form is Function by John Barber, Feb. 15, 2004. www.comixpedia.com

people make expressions, not the expressions themselves. Indeed, imagine dictionary and grammar book burnings where people backlash against English itself. The construal of something as art is applied *on top of* its medium of creation.

In this way, the "comic medium" cannot be defined as "art" any more than we can define English as *being* literature. Visual language can be used to write any variety of topics, artistic or not, just as textual language is employed to write an uncountable array of expressions. Language itself is not considered art – only the interpretable product of its process.

When we acknowledge the linguistic status of visual language, its *use as a language* beyond the constraints of "comics" can then follow. Indeed, the most powerful democratizing force that visual language offers is in its potential *against* the notion of "comics" themselves. "Comics" can also be considered an aristocratic institution with regard to its relationship to visual language, because "comics" is a small culture, which (partially because of the economic hierarchy) dominates the usage, perception, and exposure of the language associated to it.

There is no *a priori* reason why VL should be associated *only* with the production of entertainment and the genres enclosed within a single pop-cultural identity of comics. If VL is truly to be treated as a language, then usage of it can occur in any place language can – which is just about in *any* print material. And, nothing restricts visual language to just narrative purposes, as it can be successfully used for non-fiction exposition as well.

In order for the medium – visual language – to become democratized, it must leave behind the constrictions of limited "comics" usage. To *truly* become a "form of communication," visual language must be free for employment in ways outside the culture with which it is stereotyped. Since language places no restrictions on how it is utilized, such treatment could give rise to a boom of diverse content, any of which can be determined as art or not, uninfluenced by the associations immediately drawn up by "comics." And, most importantly, such a designation would not make or break the inherent identity of the medium itself.

Widespread usage of visual language would render the sports page with articles written in visual/textual language that actually show the game *as* its discussed, or textbooks that integrate image and word more than a distant figure vaguely referred to in the text. Real usage of VL as a language would have no boundaries of use, not just the status quo confined to the limited avenues of comics culture. In order to truly allow the *medium* to expand successfully, the social notion of comics must be allowed to dissolve into a broader usage, rather than trying to pull outside readership or genres into the already stereotyped "comics culture."

Freeing visual language from the hegemony of "comics" cannot come simply from some technological revolution. The democratization of visual language is a battle for minds that must come from education and a widespread usage that breaks the stereotypes placed on VL by the notions that "comics" has perpetuated.

Similar to any meaningful political change, resistance against the aristocratic institutions of comics must come from bottom-up. We cannot expect real change to occur top-down from the large comic corporations to the benefit of the average reader/creator. Individuals can actively make the choice not to buy or support corporate owned products, urging them to produce diversified content catering to more markets. If the voice of the

pocket-book is the only one these companies responds to, speak out with it loud and clear. Bookstores and libraries are already expanding their graphic novel collections, and people can lobby their local stores to carry more titles that cater to interests beyond the pigeonholed "comic" market.

Moreover, with the Internet, anyone can begin posting their work online, with both stereotypic and non-standard content. Visual language does not have to only be used online for writing short humor strips and creative fiction. Creative and talented individuals can join together to publish compilations of their works united by topic, both online and in print, networking and advertising across lines of common interest *outside of the inclusive comics community*. For instance, if someone works on a liberal political themed comic (which doesn't have to be satire or humor, by the way), they can join the many others who write on this topic to publish collections of their works. Such a collection can occur in print, or people can share a portal website that runs all newly updated works while linking back to individuals' homepages. They can link to each other's websites and seek advertising on the myriad of politically oriented media, websites, or publications, which range from radio stations (both webradio and not) to Internet news sites to blogs and more. Strength can be found in numbers, and in the diversity itself – not in spite of it.

Inherent in this though, is the importance to stress that any non-standard usage of the medium is *not a novel exception to the rule*, but is the expected way in which visual language *should* be put to use. This lends to the larger fight against the stereotypes perpetuating negative perceptions of the medium. People can publicly reinforce that *visual language is not tied to any specific type of content* by speaking out when people insinuate otherwise, by blogging, writing letters-to-the-editor in newspapers to oppose the coverage given to books, and generally working to break down the stereotypes that perpetuate the aristocracies relegating this language to minority status. However, as always, the best way to prove this is through action and not words.

Active change can come from a myriad of different sources, but it relies on people demanding that it happen, not just sitting and waiting for someone to do it for them. Promoting the power of the web and visual language is a choice for individual voices against creative teams, personal visions versus corporate properties, economic opportunity for anyone rather than a select few, and the expanded usage for the medium beyond limited genres and a constrained comics culture. The option is for democracy rather than elitism, and the choice is *ours*.

5. *REFRAMING "COMICS"*

Change cannot flow top-down from corporations controlling the industry or from technological innovation, but rather from a reorientation about the conceptions of the medium. This section explores one way that we as individuals can potentially alter the perception and organization associated with this medium: Vocabulary. People associate with the world greatly through the words we use, and different expressions can largely determine the way in which we relate to those concepts. Thus, by reframing the vocabulary associated to "comics" we can alter the perceptions and considerations that they create in our culture. This issue is by no means new to comics, though the approach taken here will develop a deeper and more expansive solution than those taken in the past.

In his recent books, *Moral Politics* and *Don't Think of an Elephant,* linguist George Lakoff[14] discusses how language contributes to peoples' political understandings. For instance, he points out that a term like "tax relief" inherently connotes that taxes are somehow burdensome and thereby negative. So long as this term is used in discussion of the topic, it implicitly frames all debate in ways that are preferable to those against taxes -- usually conservatives. In response to this, he advocates changing the debate to talk about "tax investments" to heighten the beneficial aspects of taxes, like the fact that they give back to the community by helping to pay for things like infrastructure, education, fire and police departments, etc. Indeed, if the government does not have enough money to pay for those things, they become ceded out to corporations and lost from the ownership of the citizens. In this way, taxes contribute to the common good, and are thereby a patriotic and essential part of living in a democracy.

Lakoff asserts that vocabulary both contributes to and draws from underlying cognitive "schemas" in the mind. These can be thought of as conceptual networks oriented towards a particular categorization of the world. Thus, whenever certain terms are used, they activate certain broader understandings in the mind, and continual usage of them solidifies the preference for one framework over another.

While the vocabulary used in the comic industry has not necessarily been manufactured by Think Tanks in the same way political terms have, it still plays a critical role in defining the way we in the industry, and the broader public, relate to and treat the medium. Thus, one way to incite progress towards a better perception and treatment of the medium is to effectively change our vocabulary, which thereby changes the overall cognitive frame in which the material is engaged.

This sort of movement has been undertaken successfully before, outside the context of partisanship, most notably with regards to gender equality. Terms such as "stewardess" and "chairman" are commonly replaced by "flight attendant" and "chairperson," as has the prevalent alteration of pronoun usage to gender neutral or equal forms such as "they" or "him/her." With a concerted effort, making similar changes for "comics" should not be an impossible feat.

So, what's so bad about the vocabulary of comics as it is? Let us now turn to examine various pernicious terms that subtly pervade our industry and culture.

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[14] Resources for Lakoff's political work can be found online at: http://www.rockridgeinstitute.org

•••• *WORDS, WORDS, WORDS* ••••

At the forefront of this problem is the word ***comics*** itself. In addition to the general belief that they are for children, the word suggests that the objects are somehow funny or comical. According to historian Roger Sabin, evidence for the origin of the term lies in humorous prints sold at public events in the 1700s (like executions), which were known as "comicals" and abbreviated sometimes to "the comics."

This framing might just be an English problem though, since in other countries what we call "comics" conjure up entirely different meanings. For instance, in Italian *Fumetti* means "little clouds of smoke" – referring to the shapes of speech balloons and in French, *Bande Dessinée* means "drawn strip." Meanwhile, the Chinese characters used in *manga* consist of *man* – "involuntary, in spite of oneself, corrupt" and *ga* – "pictures." Each of these languages brings a certain framing to their terms. Though their affects might not be overt, the general orientation to them has affects on the general categorization of the issues.

The problems extending out from "comics" leads right into its uses as an adjective. The intrinsic implication of comedy should be obvious, and shine since ***comic strips*** is synonymous with "the funnies" for many people.

More problematic issues arise with regard for format, like in ***comic book***. Of main concern here is that they aren't usually books at all, but magazines (or conceivably, pamphlets). In colloquial usage, related back to the humorous connotations, the term "comic book" has been extended to mean a simplification of something, or a watered down, simplistic, intellectually void, and immature thing.

Degrading implications also emerge in the terms ***cartoon*** and ***cartoonist***, which associate the drawing style with abstract and "funny" images. The term originally derived from an Italian word for the preparatory sketches done on pasteboard for paintings and other art works. However, like "comics," following the 1843 publication of the British Magazine "Punch," it began to designate graphic satire and humorous drawings.

"Cartoon" also poses problems for the natural association to animated movies, which are also referred to as "cartoons." Again, the biggest problem with this is that it then leads toward the connotations of being aimed at children, despite the massive amounts of adults who watch animated movies and TV shows.

The poor framing of ***comic book*** has led to the now popular term ***graphic novel,*** which by many standards aren't actually novels. Rather, they are books – of which "novels" would be a specific subset. While this may not seem to be a serious issue, at the very least "novel" connotes fiction, which leaves out non-fiction works such as Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* and Tsai Chi Chung's philosophy series, among others. Indeed, as its popularity rises, "graphic novel" is growing to include trade paperbacks and illustrated books as well, simply because of the nouveau marketability of the term.

Relatedly, issues arise in the identification of the "medium" as well. ***Comic medium*** or ***comic form*** implies that the medium used in the objects of comics (sequential images interacting with or without text) is not separate from the social objects that it is associated to. This subverts the potential of the here-undefined "medium" as being attached to the social stereotypes connoted by "comics." The same is true of using "Comics" as a term for the medium – such as McCloud does – and perhaps is even more

subversive, because it doesn't even allow for a separation at all. What McCloud really tries to promote (among other things) is the idea of the *comics medium* as a *language*, though he tries to do it by redefining *comics* to be that language. By maintaining the term "comic medium," it places the dominant focus on "comics," making the notion of the "medium" dependent on it.

Similar problems arise with Will Eisner's term ***sequential art*** (or the proposed shortened version "sequart"). Again the phrase does not explicitly define what the medium *is*, banking on the culturally fuzzy and subjectively defined "art," which itself is bound to social not structural implications. Of course, this was partially why Eisner created it, as linking the structure to "art" could potentially gain it some respectability in contrast to the inherently soiled "comics."

Additional troubles arise in the implications given to those producing these works. For instance, ***writer-artist*** implies that the separation of these two jobs is the norm, rather than having an individual who "writes in pictures." (Many authors including Osamu Tezuka and Eisner have expressed that this is more accurately the way they think of the process.) Notice this in contrast to the commonly used manufacturing terms: ***writer, penciler, inker, colorist***, etc. While each of these terms do accurately match the acts of those they describe, that they are the norm further insinuates a division of labor in the making of any work.

Also oriented towards the business frame of mind is the term ***creator***. While it may not seem harmful, it implicitly connotes a sense of property manufacturing and ownership as opposed to "a person who produces a piece of (visual) writing." This locks in a framing that those who produce this medium belong explicitly to a form of industry. It thereby carries a whole connotation of business and property, as opposed to authorship and expression, which is ironic, because being "creative" does not necessarily get invoked in *creator*.

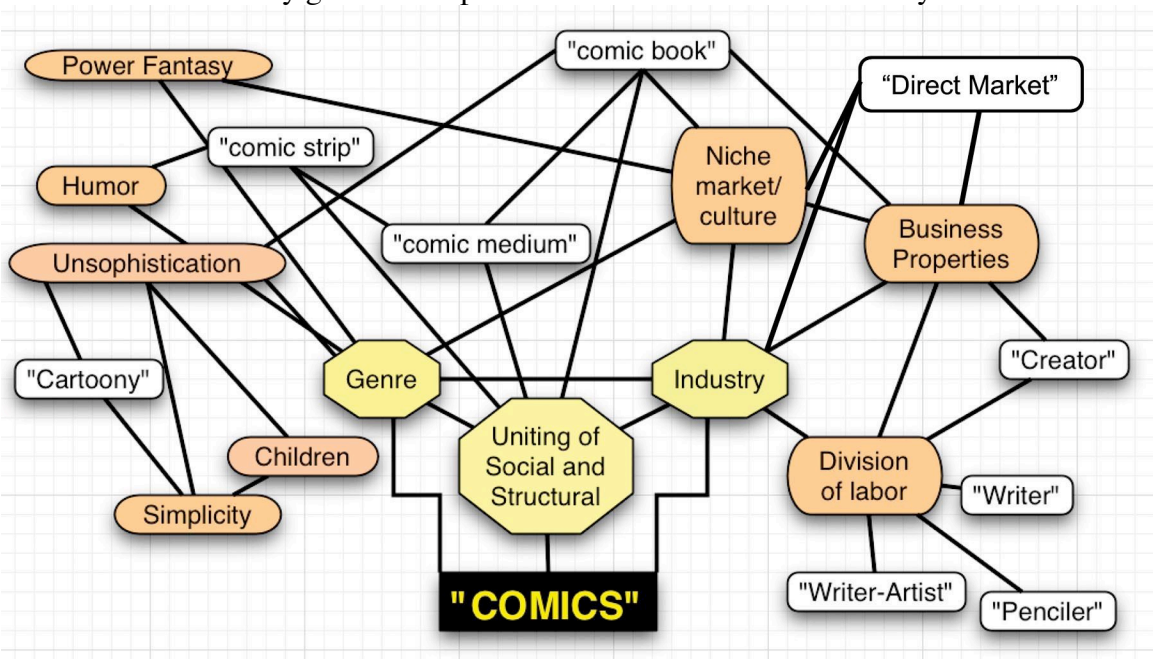
Also exemplifying the insular and business focused aspects of comics is the term ***Direct Market***. Developed over the past thirty years, the term refers to the system that sells comics and related merchandise on a non-returnable policy straight to the specialty comics retailers that had emerged out of the "underground" scene. The term on its own reflects the industry's emphasis on remaining turned toward those *within* the comics culture since the market sells *direct* to comic stores, as opposed to out bringing in non-comics culture readership.

•••• *A Frame of Mind* ••••

The network of concepts described above will be referred to as the "Comics-Frame," since its basic frame is **Sequential images are comics**. As will be shown, identifying an acceptable root concept for the underlined portion of this formula will be key in reframing the understanding of this medium.

Based on the terms described, what sort of salient framework is created by the Comics-Frame? It views the medium and the product of it as inseparable. That conglomeration is in turn interpreted as inherently simplistic and humorous (and thus child focused), manufactured by groups of individual "skilled" workers, and tied to a

specific economically based print culture dominated by escapist fantasies or childish entertainment – mainly genres of superheroes and science fiction/fantasy.



Bearing this generated perspective in mind it is not surprising that creations not resembling this mold fight an uphill battle. Indeed, the corporations and businesses at the head of this industry would have no motivation for changing the perspective or the terms, because the current framework is oriented towards their product. They have a vested interest in the consideration of "comics" in one way as opposed to another because maintaining the status quo seems more "safe" in terms of a business model. By reframing the issues, new business models must work to accommodate those terms. This is already being seen, as the "graphic novel craze" has already led publishers and comic companies to match demands of "sophisticated comics" by supplying product along those lines (or to create demand through supply, in some cases). However, "graphic novels" have not become a substitute for the frame of "comics," but merely an upscale synonym.

This becomes very apparent in Eddie Campbell's recent "A Graphic Novelist's Manifesto,"[15] which states outright that GNs should be a movement that disowns the problems with the term and takes "the form of the comic book, which has become an embarrassment, and [raises] it up to a more ambitious and meaningful level." While Campbell wants to let "comics" stand as a phrase to represent its associated concepts, "graphic novels" should strike out to form its own cultural conception. Many of these sentiments can be compatible to the aims of this work. However, this rallying cry does not ever directly address the issue of reframing the medium itself.

•••• *SOLUTIONS* ••••

The idea to change the term "comics" is hardly new, and is largely the reason why terms such as "graphic novel" or "sequential art" have emerged in the first place. Indeed,

[15] *The Comics Journal #263*

the accelerated sales of "graphic novels" and "manga" in recent years can most likely trace in part to virtue of the fact that they are *not* called "comics." However, there are two main problems with these approaches. First, by only changing the terms for "comics," the larger systemic problems associated with them remain the same.

Changing to "graphic novel" does little overtly to move away from the industry-line creative method as being the norm, or the maintenance of an industry over individuals, nor does it address the primary concern of what the medium is identified as (though it makes steps closer). The second problem relates to this further: these terms do not reframe the deeper implications conjured up by the systemic network of terms associated to the frame of "comics." Shifting to the frame **Sequential images are Art** through "sequential art" (or literature through "graphic novel") maintains many of the same terms as the Comics-Frame, while opening up many more issues associated to it.

This is the same problem faced by the changing of "comics" to "comix." The intention was for the word to change from its previous comical meaning to one insinuating the co-mixing of words and images. Again though, this failed because it did not address the deeper frame based on the previous usage, and resulted almost like the changing of "women" to "womyn." To the masses it seemed like an odd insignificant change, while within a small circle signified a particular subgroup (in these cases, "underground" comics and feminists respectively).

To successfully alter the way in which this medium is considered, we must change our vocabulary relating to it by appealing wholeheartedly to a different network of concepts. That is, changing vocabulary is not just a matter of coming up with new terms, but as Lakoff teaches, it is a matter of invoking an alternative perspective with which to engage the issues.

"Visual language" provides precisely the type of new frame to confront the issue of considering the medium, and can provide an alternative framework to the existing one that poses problems. The biggest advantage of the "VL-Frame" is that people already have a predisposition for it. Most people have some sense that the creation of graphic images is in some way a language, whether or not the reasoning behind those feelings are theoretically accurate. This should come as no surprise, since those intuitions stem from the biological capacity that all people have for image making. The only reason a full acceptance of this intuition has not come to full fruition is that social terms such as "art" and "comics" have stood in the way of accurately identifying such a visual linguistic ability.

Thus, recasting the issue in the VL-Frame will not be the imposition of a new point of view unfamiliar to people. Rather, it is a matter of creating vocabulary that nurtures *an understanding that people already have*.

In deriving a new vocabulary we must bear in mind the pragmatism of the effort. The change cannot be overly radical ("women" to "womyn") or superficial ("comics" to "comix"), and must reflect a broader conception of the medium. In this case, that means replacing the entailment "sequential images are comics which are childish entertainment/superhero fare" framework with the view that "The 'comics medium' is actually a Language." In fact, this becomes the first term that becomes restructured: a "comics medium" no longer exists, because it inherently invokes "comics." Rather, it simply becomes "visual language," and thus provides the core concept from which the further network of terms can follow.

Note also that simply saying the phrase “the language of comics” is also problematic in that it is ambiguous between two meanings. In the first, it means “the language that is *used in* comics”– essentially VL – and is comparable to saying “the language of novels.” However, the second meaning implies that “comics *is* the language,” similar to “the language of English,” thereby upholding the Comics-Frame. In order to reframe the issue entirely, “comics” cannot remain in the actual phrasing of the medium.

Granted, some of the terms above are not all that pernicious, just merely inaccurate. For instance, “graphic novel” retains an air of respectability and impartiality with regard to a notion of visual language, and can work perfectly fine in concert with the VL-Frame, despite its imprecise extension of “novel” for “book.” However, "graphic novel" lately has been appropriated by the major companies — and much of the public — simply as an upscale synonym for "comics," which returns us to the problem of not invoking a new frame.

Similarly, a term such as “writer-artist” *does* actually describe what those people do within the current frames of understanding, though it inherently implies that it is an exception to the rule of separating those jobs (not to mention invoking a certain frame with “art”). Using the common “author” in its stead would in many ways heighten the aspect of it being an individual creator, or if more uniqueness is needed, a “visual author.” More so, works that have more than one person creating them can have an overt title of “co-authors” while inside the division of labor can be further divided. For instance, regarding my recent book *We the People*, I usually say that Thom Hartmann is the author, while I am the “visual co-author,” since my job was to adapt his text with visual language.

Note that by focusing the creative aspects into a term like “visual author,” we immediately invoke the VL-Frame. Automatically, the role becomes “one who produces a type of language,” as opposed to “one who fills some sort of utilitarian role of production.” It also stymies the humorous, potentially childish, and loaded connotations carried by “cartoonist.” Furthermore, if “visual author” becomes the standard, then it reorients “authorship” to be the norm, pushing the industry-line model of division of labor as the exception. Simply by this one phrase, the entire structuring of perceptions related to the medium and industry becomes recast. From this base, the "visual" can be eventually dropped altogether, leaving just "authors" who happen to write in pictures. The less sepratism we have in our vocabulary, the more integrated this visual language will become in society.

The same sort of effect can be gained by using the verb “write” to describe the process of creating sequential images, as opposed to “draw.” “Draw” implies the creation of a static image, while “write” carries an overt connotation of it being a linguistic act. Visual language authors don’t “draw comics,” they “write their books in pictures.”

Perhaps this whole terminology game has been played wrongly. If you want to get across this different viewpoint — which truly does give an alternative network of ideas — then what we *don't* need is an alternative term to talk about different works of "sequential images." Any time that a new term is created it will just be a synonym for "comics" with a little different flavor, be it "graphic novels," "comix," "sequart," or "strip lit."

Really what we need is not a noun, but an *all-purpose adjective*. And, that

adjective should be common parlance — not something new that is made up. Personally, I like "graphic", since this visual language is inherently graphic representation, and "visual" is a little soft on its utility (despite being better when paired with "language"). So, while "graphic novels" might stand, instead of "comics", etc. you get:

Graphic books	*Graphic stories*	*Graphic essays*
Graphic fiction	*Graphic non-fiction*	*Graphic humor*
Graphic short story	*Graphic short*	*etc.*

Rather than trying to identify both medium and form wrapped up into one term (and thus also subculture, etc), you just get an overarching description of the manner in which that form is written (graphically, instead of just text). Not only does this fix the terminology issues, but it also puts these things on equal footing to text. It's not "comics" vs. "books": "graphic books" are just another type of book.

Whatever new terms could be arrived at, these are the types of issues that must be dealt with in order to reframe the perception of this medium and the works that use it. They must effectively restructure the speakers to a different cognitive base with which they can relate to the visual language and its products.

The difficulty in establishing a new vocabulary to reframe these issues is the most obvious: getting people to change the words they use. New language must both be effective and concise enough to accurately express the change in conception without seeming forced *and* it must be utilitarian enough for actual usage: they have to be terms that are readily intuitive and accessible. This means that our endeavor should not be to *create* new words (like “sequart”), but to redeploy existing terms into new uses appropriate to the frame we want to promote. There is nothing new about the words in “graphic book" or “visual language” but by juxtaposing them, a new meaning is created out of the combination of the old ones. Of course, this is partially the key to it all -- by drawing on existing words, those meanings can be redistributed to create another new conception.

While the invocation of the VL-Frame is the most important aspect to this vision, certain specific jargon can go a long way, especially since the term “comics” is so pervasive. So long as the current vocabulary remains in use, *it will always implicitly reinforce the Comic-Frame*. To be more direct: as long as they’re called “comics” they will always limp along behind other culturally accepted media simply because of the network of concepts associated to that term.

This is not meant to be discouraging. Change *is possible*, it just requires the proper frame of mind to enact it.