Sabbatical Report on Visual Culture and Graphic Storytelling

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When preparing this sabbatical report, I asked myself where I should begin with graphic storytelling. It's hard to reduce what I've been researching to a 15-minute presentation.

Some might say to begin in the 1960s and 70s with Robert Crumb and Art Spiegelman.

Robert Crumb's bohemian and counter-cultural style, emphasizing free expression, is foundational to the American underground comics movement, and I think it'd be fair to say that he finds an audience in Eugene, Oregon.

I have to be honest, however, and say that while I recognize the importance of Crumb and his challenges to social convention, I don't really consider myself a fan. I'm less clear, for

example on the merits of output like the character Angelfood McSpade and the strip "When the Niggers Take Over America" or the comic book "Crumb versus the Sisterhood."

Meanwhile, Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, rendering his father's Holocaust narrative in comic book form, is arguably the first graphic novel to achieve literary canonization.

At the time of its release, some criticized Spiegelman's unconventional choice of using caricature, presenting Germans as cats, Jews as mice, and the Polish as pigs, the consensus over time is that this is a watershed work that achieves literary status for graphic storytelling.

Yoshihiro Tatsumi, however, precedes both Crumb and Spiegelman. While reading his works in *Good-Bye,* I watched the film *Tatsumi*. This animated documentary looks at the social push-back against Tatsumi's approach to manga and its more mature themes confronting issues pertaining to alienation, ethical pitfalls, sex, and death. Tatsumi's decision to coin the term *gekiga* in 1957 was borne out of a violation of social convention, whereby his work did not conform to the regularity Japanese readers were expecting from what was in that instance in

time known as *manga*. Indeed, *manga* at the time can in some ways be best exemplified by Machiko Hasegawa's long running work, Sazae-san. Hasegawa was as popular in Japan as Charles Schulz was in the U.S. She operated in the *manga* form known as *yonkoma*, a four-panel strip with a generally light tone and friendly subject matter. For example:

Kamo River's so pretty!

かも川のながめ
すてきねー！

Excooze me! Could you crouch down?

スミマしぇん
かがんで下さい

CLICK!

ハチリ

Thanks.

Not at all.

ありがとう

いいえ

Typical of the *yonkoma* form, the strip's central character experiences a humorous turn in the fourth panel when she discovers she is not the intended subject of the American photographer. This isn't to say that Sazae-san is insubstantial, because it does over the course of its life offer interesting commentary on U.S. and foreign presences in post-WWII Japan.

By contract, however, *gekiga* was unrestrained by tone, form, and subject-matter. Tatsumi delved into much darker subject matter like an alienated protagonist with a shoe fetish who dreams of dying by setting a theater on fire and lying down before the fleeing stampede of panicked theater-goers.

Gekiga represented an innovation in what manga and graphic narratives could become some years before the likes of Crumb and Spiegelman would help build the underground comics scene in the U.S.

I had an intention here to keep going back and back. For example, next I was going to look at Bernard Krigstein, who precedes Spiegelman in presenting a Holocaust narrative in comic form via the 1955 "Master Race":
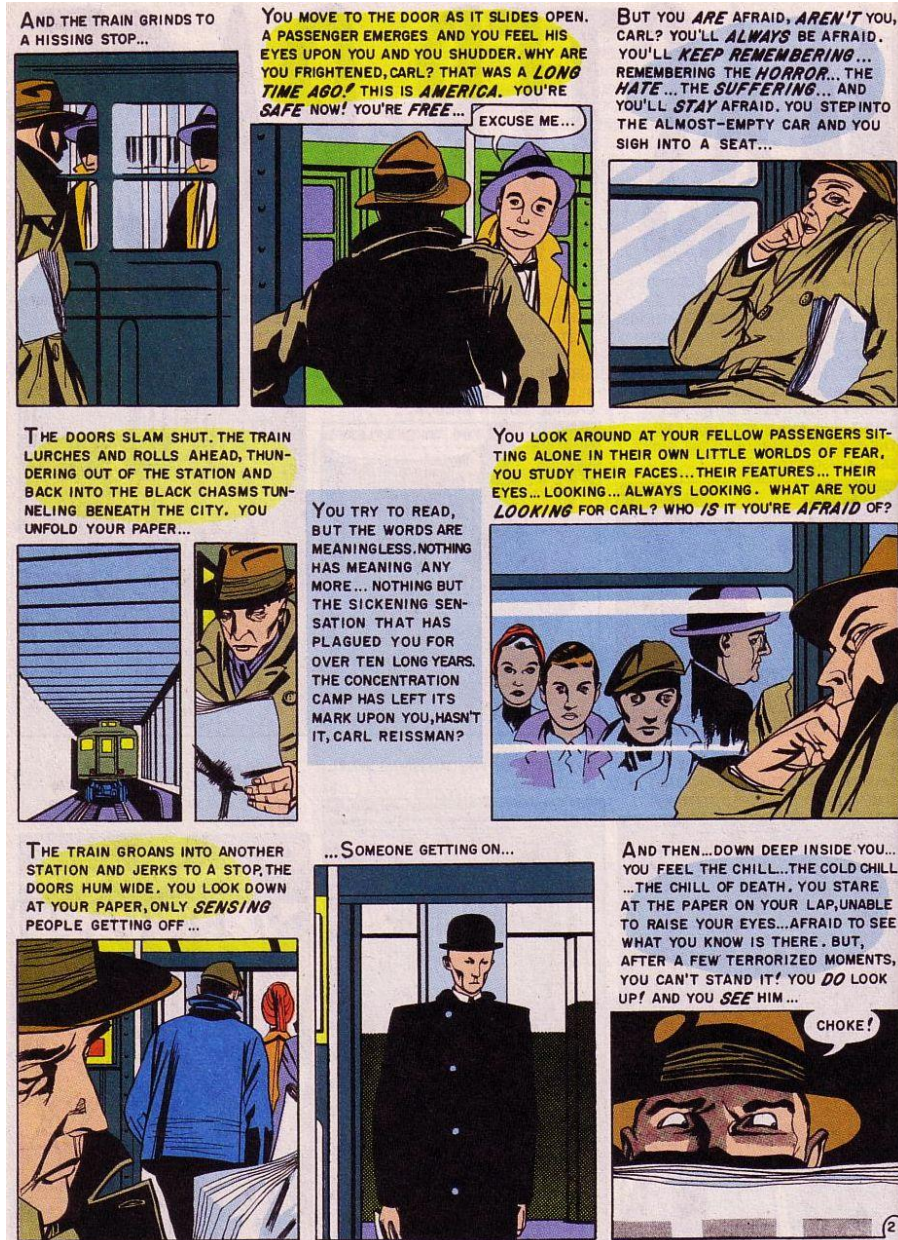
It's an intriguing narrative that presents a man on the subway relishing the freedom of being in America whilst fearing the past horrors he witnessed in the concentration camps, only to see a haunting figure from his past in a black hat and black overcoat. The surprising twist in the narrative is not uncommon in comics of the era, but it nonetheless stands out as an early example of a comic book taking on serious subject matter.

Then I was going to talk about Carl Barks and the way in which an anonymous Disney comic book artist's work in the 1940s and 1950s was so aesthetically distinct that readers began

identifying him as the Good Duck Artist, until fans eventually identified Carl Banks as the artist they preferred reading.
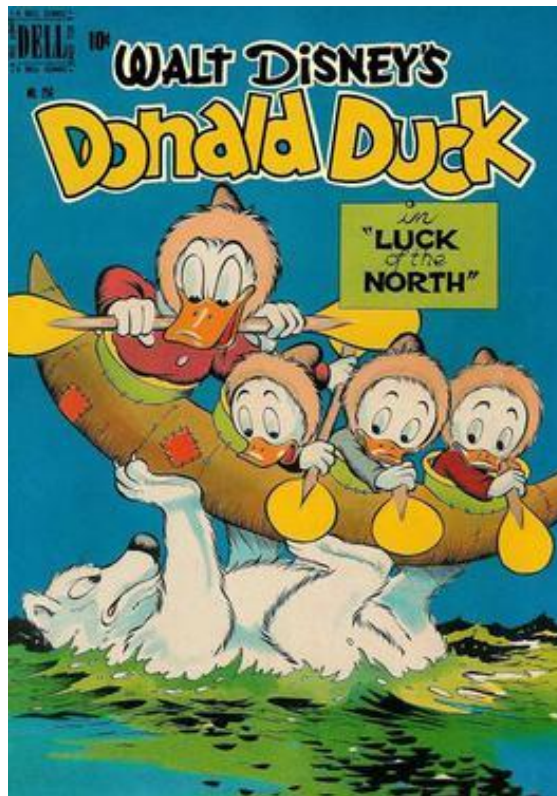
Then I was going to go back further and consider *The Yellow Kid*, first appearing in 1895, and the way in which some writers have tried to claim comics as a distinctly American creation.

However, that kind of claim seems to fly in the face of the work of 19th Century Swiss cartoonist Rodolphe Topffer, who worked in panel form and was perhaps the first to use musical notes to represent music in comic form.
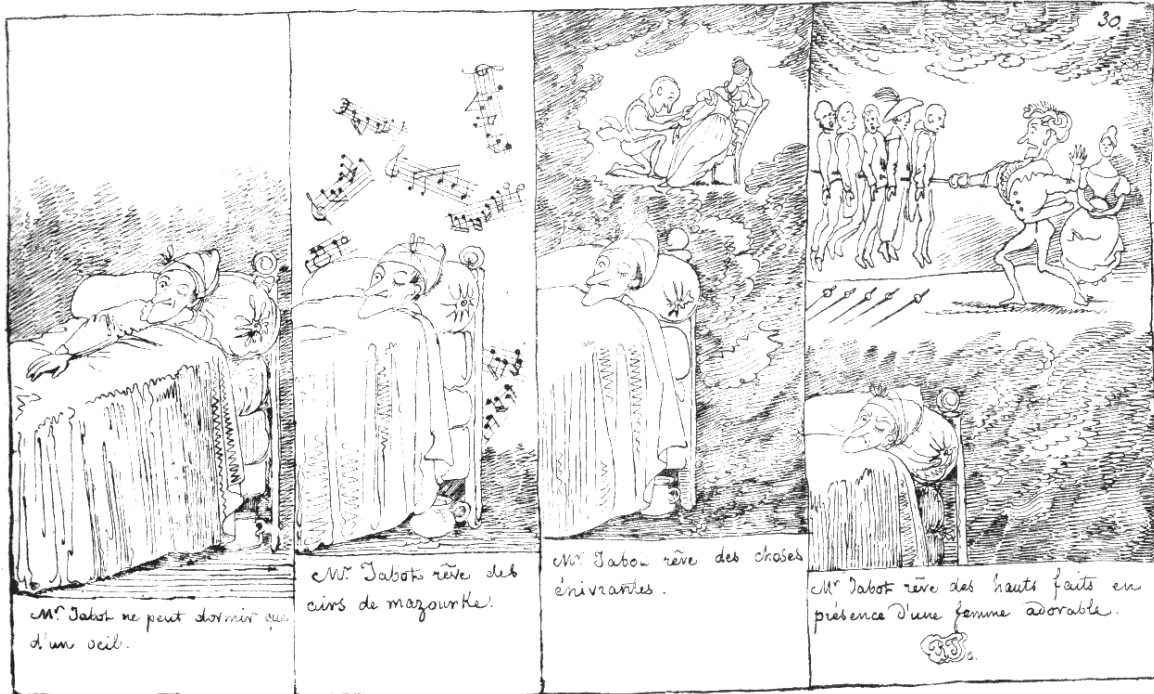
But even here, Topffer acknowledged a predecessor in the influence of William Hogarth, whose *A Rake's Progress* begins to look like a comic strip when placed in panel format:


And yet we could go back even to Medieval works like the Bayeaux Tapestry referenced by Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics*, which would allow me to introduce the following

image of a tapestry, Christ is Born as Man's Redeemer (1500-1520), which I visited in the

Cloisters while I was in NY to research visual culture at the Columbia archives:

The idea was to go back far enough to something that looks like it bears little

resemblance to a comic, but then to show the accompanying graphic,
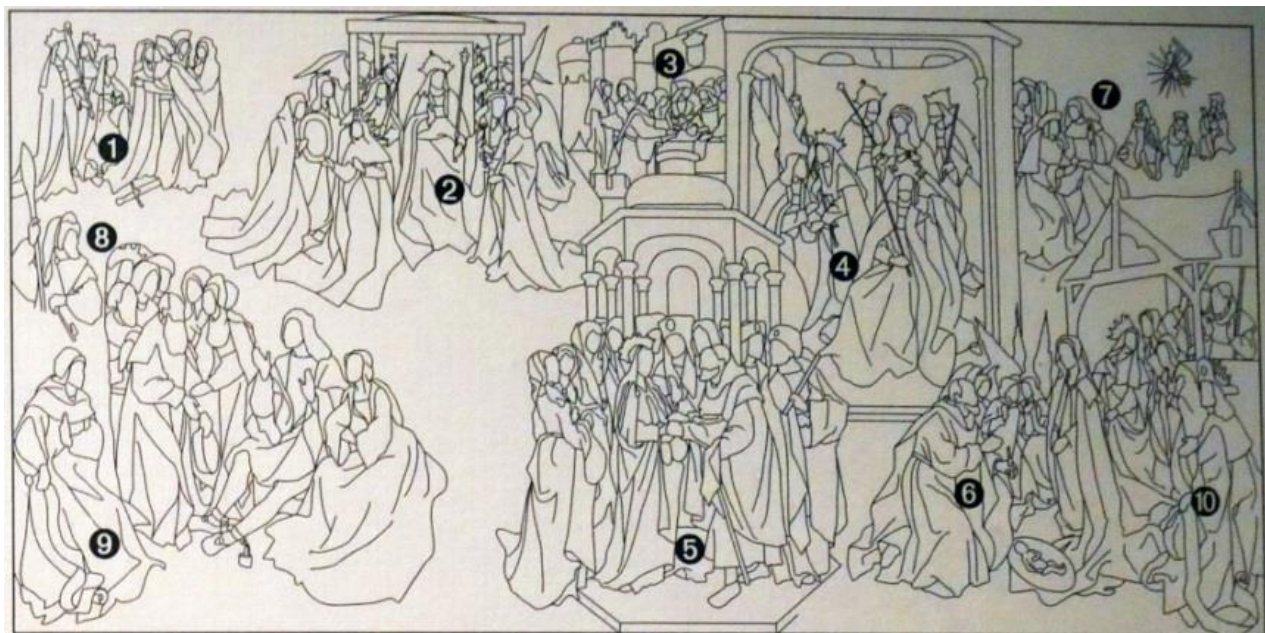
which reveals an organization that is very panel like, even if the panels are not rectangular. In

fact, the "panel" structure is not so unlike that of Amy Kurzweil in *Flying Couch*:

However, before my time is up, I'd like to spend some time with Spiegelman's ideas. In his 1979 interview with Alfred Bergdoll for *Cascade Comix*, Art Spiegelman refers to comics

a "fugitive medium," saying that "it's born of the sawdust, you know, rather than the fertile soil." He goes on to observe,

> There's a funny thing about comics which is that you've got to simplify your drawings because you're working with, more often than not, sharp black and white. You can't even too successfully, usually, work in grey tones. So you have to simplify drawings for that reason. You also have the fact that most panels are very small so even if you're drawing twice as large, you're still working in an area that would be considered a very small etching, let's say, with a maximum of five or six inches high. And you also have the fact that you have to simplify the gesture to make it communicate quickly because it's a kind of picture writing. And you have the fact that you can't fit that much text into any one panel, so you have to simplify your text and therefore, to do something really potent you have to suggest much, much more than you can actually state. And in that sense, maybe comics have more in common with poetry than with prose. And that's merely a limitation that the medium presents …

While his "fugitive medium" comment could be read as an expressing understanding of the limitations of comics as a medium, I think Spiegelman goes on to clarify that by adding "born of sawdust" he's also talking about the audience expectations of comics at the time:

> … but every medium has its limitations and it's incumbent on the artist to deal with those and make the most of it. Limitations can be turned to an advantage. And on the other hand, one of the problems with comics is, well, for one thing, they're called comic strips so they're expected to give you a boffo laugh, or I guess at most they're expected to give you some escapist super hero entertainment or something, but they're not really expected to do more than be a vehicle for mass medium entertainment. So it doesn't really attract artists to come along and grapple with the material because that's not what it's billed as. And it doesn't attract an audience who's serious for the most part. Serious audiences are probably at least as important as serious artists.

After Bergdoll points out that "there are not many more serious comics fans than there are comic artists, Spiegelman continues, "I think that the problem of audience is a major

one. It's very important for people to be willing to stretch themselves to meet the work rather than to have the work poured down their sleeping, open gullets."

Later, in his 1980 interview with Dean Mullaney for *Comics Feature*, Spiegelman discusses how prominent segments of the underground comics culture had begun to ossify, due in large part in his estimation to publishers responding to audience expectations that alternative comics were largely about sex, violence, and drugs. With first *Arcade* and then the much larger format *RAW*, he and Françoise Mouly try to break away from historic expectations about graphic storytelling to foster a new audience and perhaps a fertile soil:

> It's just that we wanted to see a new context for the material. And that's *RAW*. I think it exudes a certain kind of class and elegance. I think it's an interesting tension because comics, in America at least, are considered this real gutter medium. To have that tension between an elegant format and a medium we're used to thinking of as junk literature makes you look at the work in a different way. The risk it runs is seeming pretentious. The risk is worth it because it asks for an involvement on the part of an audience that's much more intense than the audience is used to giving a comic. That makes a different kind of work happen. It's one possibility of what we want to see happen to comics in the future, and we certainly want to explore it.

The supposition that fostering a new and differently engaged audience would foster and make more possible different kinds of work from comic and graphic artists is an interesting one. After a back and forth with Mullaney, Spiegelman continues:

> An important part of the equation that's usually left out is that the audience is as important as the artist. The audience determines what's possible, and right now the audience expects and receives this stuff that you're supposed to lean back and let hit you for a second, and then go away somewhere else. Nothing is asked of you as an audience; you're not asked to participate in a piece of work and give it your attention, give it your energy and thereby reap a far richer reward than you would from the kind of material that doesn't require any effort. Hopefully, we'll find that kind of an audience. We'd like to do real art that has an audience.

I found these quotes by Spiegelman interesting, because in *Comics Versus Art* Bart Beaty makes the argument that for comics to be accepted as a form of art the medium will need to have a corresponding art world. This argument led me to make an examination of the archives at Columbia and review Comic Con programs from the 1960s and 1970s, as well as examine the cosplay materials of graphic artist Wendy Pini, who created Elfquest and co-founded Warp Comics. I think a large part of my future research will involve examining the community surrounding graphic storytelling and its consumption, and so I'd like to conclude with the following video I shot and edited on cosplay community, which constitutes a large part of the contemporary Comic Con culture:

For more on my research, please visit: https://unnaturalsight.wordpress.com/

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